

Silence, Peace, and War

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

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Reflection on the Theme by Emily Layfield

Growing up, my school curriculum was heavily influenced by experiences of oppression and violence. I vividly remember in my 6th grade social studies class, which was called “Struggles,” watching graphic historical footage from the Holocaust, and I had many years of English literature classes full of books like *Farewell to Manzanar*, and *Night*, and *Things Fall Apart*, and poetry from the Armenian Genocide, among many others. There were also many different stories of oppression and privilege and class disparities among my classmates. Although I’m deeply grateful for this education, one impact of growing up immersed in these kinds of stories was an overall sense that the world was full of horrible atrocities going on all the time, and that even though I had a generally safe and secure upbringing, that was mostly due to luck, and it wouldn’t really be surprising if it all got upended at any moment. I was in high school when 9/11 happened, and I remember my instinctive response being, “something like that was bound to happen sooner or later”

That thought and my lack of an immediate emotional response really disturbed me at the time, and I confided in my music teacher, who was a kind of mother figure to me in those years, about my lack of feelings. She assured me that I was normal and my experience was ok, but I couldn’t get past the idea that I had a responsibility to feel something. I think what I couldn’t articulate then was the fear that my desensitization was a form of acceptance, and that if I believed this was the way the world was bound to work, that I wouldn’t have any hope in a normal that was free from atrocities and oppression. Activist Mariame Kaba famously said, “Hope is a discipline.” The stories I tell myself about the way the world works and what is normal and what is possible make a big difference to what actions I take.

In this world where despair and violence are so frequently in the spotlight, and where politics, media, and internet algorithms are optimized for stoking fear and anger to a fever pitch, there’s a lot of inner work and intentional storytelling required to be able to walk a path where on the one hand, it feels ok and maybe even good to be alive here and now and day to day, and on the other hand, I’m actively contributing to solving problems, righting wrongs, and alleviating suffering. I often don’t get the balance right, either sliding too far towards inaction born of despair or overwhelm, or sliding too far towards inaction born of avoidance or desensitization. I don’t think there’s a way to *always* get it right, and I don’t even think one “right” way really exists, but I do know that for me, making intentional space to do that inner work goes hand in hand with speaking out and acting. For me, in silence is the place where my thoughts and feelings can be clarified and aligned with my values, it’s also the place of vigil and remembrance and empathy, and it’s the place where space can be created to allow for the next experience to come in without getting overwhelmed. But most importantly, it’s the place where I can practice hope.

Silence, Peace, and War© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

Aldous Huxley, in *Music at Night and Other Essays*, said that “after silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music.” Thank you for that music.

Theology, for me, is often about trying to express the inexpressible, and so often I find myself struggling to articulate the ineffable – or, in other words, facing writer’s block on the day I sit down to write my sermons. But I rarely despair because it is the music which carries the worship service, not the sermon, though they are inextricably linked.

Silence is our theme this month, and I have been thinking about the pauses between the notes of music, the pauses between the words of poetry, the pauses between thought and action and the silence which is the pause.

I’ve been thinking about Tai Chi and how it is to be done slowly. You’re probably familiar with the practice, even if you’ve never taken a class – popular in China, it has become popular in this country as well. I can think of many of movie that features an outdoor tai chi class in the park of a major city like New York or London – the final scene of *Notting Hill*, for example, where a group of people are standing together moving their arms slowly up and down and to the side, or the opening scene to *Calendar Girls* – both movies over 20 years old, sorry, that’s my reference point, but I suspect the practice has seeped into our common cultural understanding even more since then. The slowness is central to this martial art as it gives you time to access how your mind, body, and energy work. It can be a moving meditation practiced for health benefits, but is also a real form of self-defence.

I really did not intend to preach on the polyvagal theory once again this morning, but it showed up in the reading. The polyvagal theory explains the role of the vagus nerve (really, a bundle of nerves) in emotion regulation, social connection and fear response. The US Army Chaplain Major General George Tyger referenced how he can talk for hours about “how the ‘body keeps the score;’ about vagus nerve response; about the flight, fight, or freeze mechanism.” – and of course, since I did intend to talk about war, this theory which explains our experience of trauma was bound to come up.

And Martial Arts are on my mind, I think, because they can be a form of self-defense – the idea is that if you can practice your response to an attack, you can remain grounded in the ventral vagal state – that physical state we can inhabit where we see the ‘big picture’ and connect to the world and those in it. We are both connected to our experience and able to reach out to others, with a healthy heart, regulated blood pressure, good immunity and digestion and an overall sense of well-being. That is generally not how most of us respond to an attack, whether it be emotional or physical. Most of us drop down into our sympathetic branch of the nervous system and are activated where fight or flight happens. Our heart rate speeds up, our breath is short and shallow, we look out for danger and are “on the move.”

The ongoing and repeated practice of martial arts can help us remain or return to the regulated state where far more choices are available to us because we are still able to see the ‘big picture.’ And there is something there about the pauses, about the slowness, about the openings of silence that allow for us to widen the gap between thought and action, so that our actions might be more aligned with our intentions.

I briefly logged onto a meeting of the Beloved Community Working Group on Friday night and witnessed them add an intentional pause into their meeting – taken from Japanese, this pause, the space between, called Ma in Japanese, gives the speaker a pause, but also the listener a chance to digest what the speaker has said. The kanji – the Han characters, (Chinese symbols used in Japanese) – the pictograph is of a gate, an opening, with the sun coming through to provide light – the combined pictographs create ma, this space between, the pause for contemplation.

Many of us don't pause because our sympathetic nervous system is activated and we're "on the move" – turning to the next thing. It gives us a sense of "doing something" – which is highly valued in our American impatient and "get it done" culture. And sometimes we don't pause because we don't wish to feel the feelings in our bodies brought about by the horrors and violence of this world.

I fully related to Emily's reflection this morning. Raised as a Unitarian Universalist, I was well exposed to an understanding, if not the experience, of oppression and violence, and a sense of responsibility, too, as Eleanor Roosevelt said, "with freedom comes responsibility." I grew up with tremendous freedoms and privileges that I sometimes felt quite guilty about as I knew they were undeserved, unearned privileges of birth and circumstance. It led me to join the Peace Corps because I felt I owed something to people whose circumstances seemed much bleaker than my own.

In the wake of the 2016 Presidential election in this country, many of us who weren't specifically targeted with violence could still see how our friends and neighbors were. The hateful rhetoric of the then president-elect had opened the door to abuse that had before been considered out of bounds in a civil society. It was at that point that once again, I underwent more training in nonviolence offered on the campus of Michigan State University. I had been trained before – before a protest at the underground nuclear test site in the late '80's, but this training was specifically to interrupt violence targeted at people under attack because of their race, cultural heritage, dress, perceived gender identity or sexual orientation. It was both bystander intervention training and violence de-escalation skills training offered by the Meta Peace Team. Meta Peace Team (MPT) is made up of ordinary citizens creating a nonviolent alternative to militarism through empowered peacemaking. Originally founded in 1993 as Michigan Peace Team, Meta Peace Team has expanded over the last 28 years to offer its services around the globe. MPT recognizes violence is a complex system, and only by addressing it on multiple fronts will peace be possible. I was deployed a few times in Michigan on that team, but each time I've been asked since, it's not been a good time for me to travel.

This war in Gaza has me thinking about the last time Peter Dougherty- co-founder of the MPT - called me, it was to see if I would serve on the international peace team being sent to Palestine – but it was in my first year of ministry with you, and I couldn't see how I could make that happen.

So, I've been thinking a lot about my commitment to nonviolence and these wars raging in the Ukraine and Gaza, not to mention Ethiopia, Syria, and Yemen, Afghanistan, the list is pretty long -though not reported nightly on the news such as this violence in Gaza.

I've been thinking about how my commitment to nonviolence doesn't mean I don't understand why others turn to violence in response to ongoing injustice. As I've indicated, I've lived in pretty fortunate circumstances and haven't had to face what most on this planet face with regard to hunger, oppression and violence. I do not know what my position would be if I had been born to such circumstances. We

humans are complex -if the polyvagal theory teaches me anything, it is that. We are so complex we barely understand our own bodies, much less our interactions with other bodies.

But regardless of your position on violence, whether you advocate it as a method of last resort to prevent injustice or believe it injures the soul, as I do, one thing we can agree upon, probably, is the benefit of silence, of the pause, of ma – of the value of silence in preparing ourselves for the intense work of confronting evil. The most successful nonviolent movements on the planet – the Salt March in India (leading to Indian Independence), the Civil Rights Movement in this country – happened only with a lot of planning, strategy, and training – personal work that prepared the participants.

The stark image that immediately comes to my mind is Bloody Sunday March 7, 1965. I was only 9 months old, so don't remember it, but have been to the bridge on pilgrimage since. And I have seen the footage of that walk across the Edmund Pettus bridge. Protestors responding to the murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson days earlier in Marion, planned to march from Selma to Montgomery to take their cause to Governor George Wallace. At this bridge, named after a Confederate General and grand dragon of the Alabama Ku Klux Klan, the state troopers lined up on the base, with white helmets, clubs, deputies on horseback, and dozens of white spectators waving Confederate flags watching. They knocked down the protestors, struck them with billy clubs, gassing them with tear gas- the deputies on horseback chased the gasping protestors back over the bridge as they swung clubs, whips and rubber tubing wrapped in barbed wire. Although forced back, the protestors did not fight back. The protestors did not fight back. And the rest, as they say, is history. The fact that the American public (the white American public) saw this violence on the television news changed the course of the movement because they finally understood an injustice which before was mostly removed from their experience.

What, you might ask, has this to do with the War in Gaza currently and furthermore what we might do?

It is a reminder of the power of collective action, especially spiritually grounded and strategic action. I highly recommend the vigils that have been produced by DRUMM – Unitarian Universalism's oldest and largest Black, Indigenous and people of color collective. You can watch recordings of past vigils online and there is another one this afternoon at 3pm. You have to register in advance, online, in order to get the link. The vigil this afternoon is to honor the spiritual work toward ending the violence. We are calling for a permanent ceasefire and end to the indiscriminate bombing of Gaza, a release of all hostages/prisoners, humanitarian aid, and an accountability process that is not rooted in revenge. We deeply honor the worth and dignity of all Palestinians and all Israelis. The aim this afternoon is to be present with one another and deepen our attention to the crises in Gaza as Unitarian Universalists. We are mindful of the deep and complex roots in the minds and hearts of Westerners.

We held an interfaith Thanksgiving worship service recently, one that I had skipped last year. I had delegated it to our intern, Jennifer, and then her schedule prevented her from involvement and so we – UUCV - weren't represented in 2022, the first interfaith service locally since we had all shut down in the pandemic. But this year, just after Hamas attacked Israel on October 7th, Rabbi Dunkser of Congregation Kol Ami, reached out to her interfaith colleagues [slide], needing support as the impact of this war on her congregation is tremendous and she knew that building relationships and coming together is needed in a time of war. It was a very moving service. [slide] Dr. Kahlil Kahn shared from the Koran – you may have met him years ago at my installation, and Rabbi Dunsker shared from the Jewish tradition. Just having the two of them in a worship service together in the midst of this war was healing. We prayed

and sang songs and many others of us from different traditions shared as well [slide]. It was an impactful service, defiant of war and violence, proof that humans can appreciate difference and get along.

It was a pause in the incessant news of violence and terror, a pause that helped participants ground themselves again in the act of being human, so that we might recover our humanity and move forward with integrity and love. I think that's my message this morning: That we need to do all we can to maintain our humanity in the midst of war. That's our work. To maintain our humanity to keep up our spiritual practices, be it meditation or tai chi or music – whatever practice affords us the opportunity to rehearse staying in a regulated state where more choices are available to us because we are able to see the 'big picture.' Incorporate pauses and silence into our day so that we can widen the gap between thought and action, so that we align our actions with our values.

When, in those pauses, we find ourselves struggling because the feelings that come up are uncomfortable – that too is an opportunity to grow spiritually. Don't just do something, stand there.

I confess to feeling like this sermon is short of the prophetic call to action I'd like it to be. I mean, "don't just do something, stand there" ... on the other hand, I have to wonder if all the wars we see around the world don't start because people want to "do something" about whatever cause, including righting injustice, and haven't really taken the necessary pause between thought and action to consider what would *really* improve the situation and the world.

As Emily said this morning, "For me, in silence is the place where my thoughts and feelings can be clarified and aligned with my values, it's also the place of vigil and remembrance and empathy, and it's the place where space can be created to allow for the next experience to come in without getting overwhelmed. But most importantly, it's the place where I can practice hope."

The reading that Emily shared by the US Army chaplain was longer than the excerpt we shared this morning. It ended with a prayer: "Gracious God, Living Spirit of Love, give to me compassion steeled with commitment, that I might become your peace given in loving sacrifice to our troubled world."

To Tyger's prayer, let me add my own: Creative Spirit of the Universe, as we grieve and cry out against the violence in Gaza and around the world, for the children and the hostages and the families of the dead, we seek clarity of mind and heart, that we might discover what it is we can do when there is so much beyond our control. We garner our strength and our hope for what is next as we listen deeply to our bodies and those of our neighbors. Grant us patience and peace, a lasting peace to which we can contribute, each of us in our own way. Amen.

