

United Nations Sunday: Creating a Culture of Peace and Non-violence

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[The Unitarian Church in Summit](#)
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More than half a century ago the United Nations rose up, by the power of an immense idealism, phoenix-like from the very ashes of a civilization at war with itself. The disaster of two world wars in this century had been endured. A third world war might not be endured -- or survived -- as the advent of the nuclear age was forcing us to realize. Many of us here have lived our entire adult lives in the aftermath of World War II -- in truth, a war that never ended, but simply changed players and alliances as the Cold War emerged, splitting East against West. James Joyce's figure, Stephen Daedalus, said, "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake." That is the way we must often feel about the history of our times. We have struggled under the burdens of the decades-long nuclear nightmare -- from which only now can we feel that we have begun to awaken. This is not ancient history. This is the story of our own life and times.

Being raised Unitarian, in Richmond and in Cleveland, I identified with the UN. In the West Shore Unitarian Universalist Church, we always had an American flag on one side of the platform and a United Nations flag on the other. This suburban Cleveland church was founded shortly after World War II, by liberal-minded, international-minded, idealistic people -- not so different from right here, I suspect, in the era when Jacob Trapp was writing hymns like "Let Freedom Ring both East and West." We felt no contradiction between the two flags. We believed they belonged side by side. As Pablo Casals said, "To love one's country is a splendid thing, but why should love stop at the border?"

So it seems fantastic that we should find ourselves today in the tightening grip of an America-first neo-isolationism: withholding our rightful dues payments to the United Nations, to the point of bankrupting the UN; threatening to ban foreign officers commanding American troops; warning President Clinton that "the people" won't support sending U.S. troops into any foreign land (so instead, when it came to Kosovo, we rained bombs far and wide). And now the disastrous and shameful rejection by the U.S. Senate of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.

We are familiar with the slogan "Think globally, act locally." I have been through a few United Nations Sundays during my years in ministry, and I know that it tends to be greeted as, well, a ho-hum event. Not that we have any problem with thinking globally. It's just that we don't see all that much we can do about it, locally. Mulling this over, I picked up the latest issue of "Window on the World," the newsletter of our Unitarian Universalist UN Office -- an NGO with a Manhattan office but a stone's throw from here.

Perhaps you'd like to be the UN envoy, linking this church to their cause, and make it *our cause*.

Our UU-UNO asks us to attend to "Manifesto 2000: Towards a Culture of Peace." The UN is asking people from around the world to pledge themselves -- locally and globally! -- to work for "a culture of peace and non-violence." They note: "The pledge is at one and the same time both a personal and a public commitment." I have read the basic document this morning. If this "manifesto" entered widely into public consciousness, if it were put to use in schools, in churches, in governments, and yes, in businesses, what far-reaching effect it could have! Suppose this were *your* pledge, *your* solemn commitment: "In my daily life, in my family, my work, my community, my country, and my region," I will ... "respect all life, reject violence, share with others, listen to understand, preserve the planet, rediscover solidarity." How would you alter your life? How would you ask others to alter theirs? For instance, would it make you or me think, next time, before giving in to the temptation to indulge in a little "aggressive driving"? (So we've found a way not only to act locally, but to act personally.)

The phrase names something that would otherwise remain invisible. "The poets are the unrecognized legislators of the world," said Shelley -- because they name things. We did not know that "aggressive driving" existed until we named it, but now everybody knows what it is.

By the simple act of calling for "a culture of peace and non-violence," the UN has named something powerful. Ever since Columbine -- one of those names that instantly communicates the terror of heavily armed children killing children *en masse* -- ever since Columbine I have been wondering: What on earth can we say about this phenomenon -- to make sense of it, to be able to have any idea what we can do to cure the nation of this murderous sickness? Actually, it began well before Columbine and has continued afterward, in repeated cases of mass murder and hate crime. To explain the phenomenon and prescribe a cure, dozens of commentaries have been offered, teasing out the strands of understanding. The failure of our society to enact sensible gun control is one major thread. The radical alienation of individualistic youth in the face of an oppressively conformist youth culture is another.

Recently I was in Florida speaking to the Unitarian Universalist Ministers' Association chapter, and heard a powerful sermon by a colleague, Joseph Kiofsky of Miami. He started from his reaction to the widely reiterated assertion that the two killers at Columbine were "losers." It is meant, of course, as a decisive put-down, a way of casting shame upon the perpetrators and anyone who might imitate them. But it is also a reflection of our "I win -- you lose" mentality, our "winner-takes-all" culture. The TV auto commercial ending with "I'm better than you are," and a car rocketing down the road, appeals to this culture. Where there are winners (as for instance in the "game" of aggressive driving), there must also be losers.

Murderous hatred was perhaps the last desperate cry of those two teenage boys: "We're not losers -- *you* lose!" The plain fact is, the dead and the injured lost. Their families and

schoolmates lost. The police who failed to rescue the wounded lost. All of us were scarred, and in truth, we are all losers. To call only the killers “losers,” after the fact, is so much gratuitous name-calling. It invites us to despise them in death, as they felt despised in life.

Well, I’d like to explore all that at much greater depth. For now, it’s just one awful example of a much larger phenomenon. Can we name it -- and thus bring it into public consciousness? I call it *the culture of violence*. You cannot kill it. Hatred does not at any time cease by hatred, says the ancient Buddhist scripture. Hatred ceases by non-hatred. The culture of violence ceases by the culture of peace.

Therefore, we must delegitimize the culture of violence. Think of cigarettes. We as a society have shifted our norms. We have effectively delegitimized marketing cigarettes to minors, and in a great many public spaces, delegitimized smoking by adults as well. I know. I used to smoke. I’d rather switch than fight, so I switched to a pipe. But of course you can’t smoke a pipe everywhere, either. So one time I put my pipe (thinking the ashes were dead) in my sport coat pocket. You know what happened. I had to embarrass myself before I would quit.

We are more creatures of public perception than we like to admit. If violence became unfashionable ... But of course our culture is suffused with it: in the movies and the TV hot-wheels shows, in the video games and in the most stylish rap music. In our sports and on our highways. And guns, guns, hidden everywhere. As with cigarettes, have we now begun to delegitimize guns? Perhaps so, when Colt’s Manufacturing Co., after making guns for generations of gun-totin’, God-fearin’, hundred-percent Americans, announces it will no longer market handguns to private citizens. This was an immense moral victory for the cause -- not just of “gun control,” but of something much broader and deeper. It acknowledged responsibility in the culture of violence, and (ever so slightly) delegitimized it.

I believe in the social utility of shame. When the purveyors of mindless violence -- entertainment violence, violence divorced from real pain, real blood and real tragedy, violence glorified and fantasized, in all its stupefying stupidity -- when they are made ashamed of what they are doing, when it is recognized as another form of the seduction of innocents and pandering to infantile adults, then and only then will we see a change. A change from the culture of violence (legitimized as “freedom of artistic expression” and “free enterprise”) that we have created to the culture of peace and non-violence that we long for.

“Manifesto 2000,” the UN’s charter for a new millennium, gave my thought the positive turn it needed. I will not cease saying: Let us delegitimize the culture of violence. Only now I will add: Let us embrace a culture of peace and non-violence.

It means “respecting all life,” not “putting down,” not “dissing,” not “bashing.” It means “sharing with others,” not “he wins who dies with the most toys.” It means “listening to understand,” not shouting down, not defaming, not pre-judging any person or

stereotyping any human group. It means “preserving the planet,” not trashing it, polluting it, pillaging it. It means “rediscovering solidarity,” not “lookin’ out for Numero Uno” and “let the Devil take the hindmost.” In all, it means “rejecting violence” in all these forms, by giving violence no place in our culture, and building in its place a culture of non-violence and peace. I believe this is what our social action forum, this afternoon, is all about: creating a culture of racial and ethnic diversity, locally, right here.

At our 1995 convocation of UU ministers in Hot Springs, Ark., the keynote speaker was William Sloan Coffin. He is not a Unitarian Universalist, but he calls himself a religious liberal. Coffin said: “I believe in the church’s mission. [And so must we, or we will wither away.] ... I’m not interested in ‘church work,’ but I am interested in the work of the church.” He was saying that the religious community has a vocation, a calling that redeems “church work” from mere busy-ness, something small that reminds us we are part of something great, a global struggle that is as local to us as our own city, and even as near as our own hearts. Coffin names the vocation of the church -- precisely -- and this vocation has everything to do with the United Nations:

I believe the primary religious task, for the faithful of many faiths, is to build a world community. The primary religious question is no longer -- if it ever was - “What must I do to be saved?” but “What must we all do to save God’s creation?” ... The ancient prophetic vision of human unity has today become an urgent pragmatic necessity. Today it’s the world as a whole that has to be managed, not just its parts. That’s why we have the United Nations -- to bring some modicum of order and decency to an interdependent world of unequal states.”

To build a world community: It does not sound so grandiose or impossible when you start right here, with your own community, your own family, your own school, and church, and workplace. Neither is it something weak and small. When you say, *We are delegitimizing the culture of violence, and building in its place a culture of peace and non-violence*, you are naming something powerful and large, perhaps the strongest and greatest idea in the world.