

A CULTURE OF PEACE: Sabbatical Reflections

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Happy New Year!

The New Year review shows are over. We are back to the daily explosions of suicide bombers in Turkey and Pakistan instead of reviewing all the images of families killed in Haditha. Britney Spears is the hospital. Joe Biden and Chris Dodd have dropped out of the 2008 election race, but Ron Paul appears to be in it for the long haul!

Yup, Happy New Year!

Don't you think a break from it all at some point would be a good idea? "Stop the World! I want to get off!" Who amongst us hasn't had at least a fleeting thought that way, a chance to get some distance on our lives, like that space ship that took that shot of the earth as a blue dot in the sky, a view which has revolutionized our view of ourselves in the universe.

One of the new items in the calendar for this New Year is the Sabbatical I will be taking, starting the end of this month. From the end of January through the end of May, I will not be engaged in the affairs of the congregation.

It's called a sabbatical, from the traditional Jewish idea of Sabbath. The first time I began to hear about the depth of the Jewish sabbatical was in a biology lab lecture in college. Our instructor, Jerry Lettvin, told stories about his work as a psychiatrist in World War II. Lettvin's Wikipedia's entry relates he is the "author of "["What the frog's eye tells the frog's brain"](#)", (1959) one of the most cited papers in the [Science Citation Index](#)." It goes on to say that he practiced medicine during the Battle of The Bulge.

The war story he told that I recall was of the time Jerry the army psychiatrist was brought a Jewish patient. The alleged patient had lived in a shtetl and told the Americans that he had over fifty children and only worked on the Sabbath. Knowing he was Jewish, the American soldiers thought he was nuts and took him to the psychiatrist. Jerry talked with him, knowing that any shtetl had to have someone who lighted the stoves on the Sabbath and did other things, as Orthodox Jews could not. He had so many children, as not having children was a great shame and economic burden in the shtetl, and he sort of helped out if a couple were barren.

This brought home to me just how seriously Jews could take the commandment to honor the Sabbath and keep it holy.

As Wayne Muller said in our reading this morning, Sabbath time is a time of peace; Sabbath time is a time away from the violence of day to day life:

If busyness can become a kind of violence, we do not have to stretch our perception very far to see that Sabbath time – effortless, nourishing rest – can

invite a healing of this violence. When we consecrate a time to listen to the still, small voices, we remember the root of inner wisdom that makes work fruitful.

We remember from where we are most deeply nourished, and see more clearly the shape and texture of the people and things before us. [SABBATH, page 5]

This then is Sabbath time. Whether it is a brief break at the water cooler, a day in the week, or several months: an opportunity to renew oneself at the sources of one's being.

As I've been thinking about taking this time away from the regime of day to day email, phone calls, planning, sermon preparation, I think I am most looking forward to having the time to focus on more than just keeping my head above water. Vacation time and Study Leave time really don't give a big break away. There's a chance for me to slow down a bit, catch up on things around the house, read a little bit more and get some distance on things. But no time for intensive study and reflection.

For many years Unitarian Universalists held up the image of the minister as scholar. For that reason and others, we Unitarian Universalist ministers have been in the lead amongst American clergy developing resources for clergy sabbaticals. It is not uncommon for a Methodist or Presbyterian minister to ask us about it. And we can refer them to our Ministerial Association website where they can purchase our Sabbatical book

Cliff Shisler and the Sabbatical Committee, which also includes Carol Fencl, Bruce Beisner and Judy Buxton as well as myself, have purchased two copies and you may borrow one from the office.

We have set about looking at a wide variety of issues. Who will lead worship while your minister is on Sabbatical? Bruce Besiner with the Worship and Liturgy Committee, working with the Program Staff, have developed a list of excellent Sunday 11:00 AM morning services.

Who will be the lead facilitator of the Chalice Groups while I am away? Judy Strong.

Who will be available for pastoral Care while your pastor is out of sight? Our wonderful Caring Circle with chair Kathy Lauffman will continue its good work. In the unfortunate case of a death in the congregation, the family can contact Board president Cliff Shisler who will know of the several arrangements that have been made.

Your Sabbatical Committee has been meeting since last Spring to discuss and work out these details. I am very grateful that they are taking this up. As it says in the brochure:

❖ **What is the purpose of a sabbatical?**

The purpose of a ministerial sabbatical is to provide a period of refreshment and professional renewal for the Minister and a time of exploration and leadership development for the congregation.

You have in your hands the Sabbatical brochure. It was included in the Order of Worship and will also be mailed out in the REPORTER. Look it over before you leave today. If you have questions, ask one of us on the committee.

What could be more appropriate, since Sabbath time is about peace, than I am focusing on Peacemaking for the four months of my Sabbatical time?

As Howard Tolley pointed out during the Invitation to social Justice, "At the 2006 UUA General Assembly, delegates approved a four year Congregational Study/Action on Peacemaking. In response, the St. Johns Social Action Coordinating Committee created a task force to address the question: "Should the Unitarian Universalist Association reject the use of any and all kinds of violence and war to resolve disputes between peoples and nations and adopt a principle of seeking just peace through nonviolent means?" Earlier we referred to the Principles and Purposes of the UUA in our RESPONSIVE READING. How are these reflected in our understanding of making peace?

The lead team on the Study Action issue has moved beyond this GA resolution, clarifying:

The Study/Action Issue adopted at the 2006 General Assembly started with the question: "...should the UUA reject the use of any and all kinds of violence and war and adopt a principle of seeking just peace through nonviolent means." Although some interpreted this as a call for debate between just war and pacifist perspectives, the Peacemaking CSAI Core Team believes that the heart of peacemaking is seeking to understand the seeds of truth on all sides, and finding solutions that encompass all those truths, rather than creating a competitive battle between two positions.

Therefore, the Core Team is following the spirit of the rest of the text of the SAI in inviting congregations to engage in a full exploration of violence and peacemaking on all levels. Physical, psychological, and institutionalized violence permeate many aspects of our lives. For example, every congregation has experienced poorly handled conflicts and the pain that results, and we all participate in an economy that at times does violence to the environment and to workers.

The process of disengaging from all forms of violence is no simple matter. But both just war advocates and pacifists would agree that we need to work with all possible speed to reduce the hatred, fear, injustice, and mistrust that give rise to violence and war throughout the world. [email: Judy Morgan January 5, 2008]

I will be devoting my Sabbatical to this initiative. Indeed, I already have become involved in it. Yesterday, I had a conference phone call with the UUA's CORE team which is leading this effort, and tomorrow I will have a conference phone call with the working Group that I chair on developing congregational resources.

The Congregational Resource Working Group is developing a collection of case studies of peacemaking in local UU congregations. I'll be showing at the District Annual Meeting in Louisville with this. During my time I'll be in touch with congregations about what they are doing. One of the stories which I added to the collection was the time two years ago when a number of us attended a meeting in Krolfifier with the Muslim Mothers Against Violence. This was the first time they met with another religious group and allowed them to say to other congregations, 'we've done it with the Unitarians, what about you?' Another of our success stories is the policy on Congregational Initiatives which St. John's Peacemakers is following. Howard's remarks were framed around this and you can find out more Tuesday evening.

Another area which I find exciting is the working group on science and peacemaking. This hasn't gotten much beyond beginning to get a bibliography together. We hear a lot of biological determinism towards violence. I recently watched Craig Venter, the decipherer of the human genome. He was asked a question about the genetics of eye color. Venter said that he uses that question as an illustration of what genes do, because we have no idea how our genetic DNA determines our eye color. It's much too complex a question to simply point and say, there are the eye color genes. It seems to me that if eye color is so complex then human behavior will not fall readily into genetic boxes. Saying violence is genetically determined is even more simplistic.

What is very interesting is the Statement of Conscience, or Pledge, under discussion. Should St. John's make a pledge to be a peace church, to foment a culture of peace? Should the UUA be a peace church? As UU's we're sort of agin' but then we sort of unclear about it too.

To address this, the UUA's peacemaking Initiative is developing a process for congregational input on several areas of peacemaking. They are, as Howard said, "International and Inter-Community peacemaking, Environment and Peacemaking, Societal peacemaking, Congregational peacemaking, Interpersonal Peacemaking, and Inward peacemaking. Each area has a number of statements under it. These were passed out in the Order of Service early last month and you can ask for them from Howard or me. They are rather lengthy and rather than go into each and all, I'll just focus on one of them to give you the general idea, Congregational peacemaking.

As I read these to you, ask yourself if you think these are important in making a pledge for St. John's to be a culture of peace?

___1) We are committed to having our congregations be a model of clear, honest, respectful communication, and peaceful handling of differences

___2) We establish guidelines for how we treat each other and establish trust and harmony in our church community, through written behavioral covenants or other approaches

___3) We emphasize the importance of congregants being in right relationship with each other (meaning relating in a fair and mutually respectful way). We maintain an ongoing focus on this through mechanisms such as establishing right relationship teams, resource teams of individuals trained in conflict resolution, and providing continuing education on communication and conflict resolution approaches for congregants.

___4) We use decision-making processes that ensure that all perspectives are heard and respected.

___5) We seek to build in our congregations a sense of deep connection, trust, mutual understanding, that empowers us to extend that quality of peaceful relationship to others in the wider community.

___6) We establish effective procedures for handling situations of conflict or where one person feels harmed by another, and educate our congregations about how to use these procedures.

In our Affirmation earlier we read St. John's mission statement as a congregation. We read, "St. John's is committed to creating a safe and caring community..." Can we not say that we, here at St. John's are seeking to build a culture of peace? Is that not what a safe and caring community is?

Peace, building a culture of peace. Being at peace. Sabbatical, honoring Sabbath and keeping it holy. As a flower with many petals, I have been talking about one thing. Its name is surely peace.

The Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote

There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence ... [and that is] activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its inner violence. [SABBATH 3]

From this ceaseless effort to be productive, leading us from the sources of our being, we turn to Sabbath time. As I am away, taking my Sabbatical, I invite you to take my absence as a reminder for you to take Sabbath time, a time of peace, in your lives.