

This past Thursday, you probably know, was Veterans Day. As I've spoken about here before, I am a veteran. I was active duty in the navy from '90-'94, during the time of the first Gulf War, though I was never in the Gulf, and never in combat. I certainly participated in the greater "war effort", though. And I did many things as part of my navy experience that were anything but peaceful. Those are stories for another day. Once I got out of the navy, I slowly let it all sink in. I've been through several years where I essentially integrated my experiences in the military, as a psychologist might say. The result is that I have become, in more recent times, a peace activist, working in recent years with an organization called Veterans for Peace. VFP is a non-profit organization made up of veterans who feel a responsibility to work toward the abolishment of war. Seeing the commitment of these dedicated peace activists has been contagious. Some of them have been peace activists all of my life. And it's made my own commitment to peace stronger.

Somehow, on some peace activist listserv (or email list) that I got onto last year, I saw an announcement about a National Peace Academy that had formed and was having its first training – a week-long Peacebuilding Peacelearning Intensive – in August of 2010. (This is a "Peace Academy" for people from all walks of life, not just for veterans, by the way.) August is part of my summer "study period", so I thought, why not? It might be really useful training to work for peace. But I must admit that when I went off to the National Peace Academy this past August, "working for peace" was synonymous in my mind with "stopping the wars". I went off to the National Peace Academy expecting to get training – skills and strategies – to aid me in anti-war efforts. You know – I thought I'd get the *weapons* I needed to *fight* these endless wars! (Something sounds not-quite-right about that, no?) I wasn't that stereotypical "angry peace activist" who spews rants and hatred in the name of peace... but I was a toned down version of that, sort of a tastefully irritated peace activist with sublimated elements of rage and anger. But that's just my personal style, really.

After a week at the National Peace Academy, I did get training that will aid in anti-war efforts... but not in the way I had been thinking about it before I went. My week reminded me, powerfully, that being at peace is much more than simply being "not at war". What people call "the Peace Movement" is often really "the Anti-War Movement", and I still am a part of that. But what I learned about at the National Peace Academy was "the other peace movement" – "the Positive Peace Movement". The Positive Peace Movement asks some important questions. For instance, if we get rid of wars, then what? There will be a huge void, and what "peace" will fill it? Will peace be sustainable if we end wars, but do not work on peace at a deeper level?

The positive peace movement acknowledges that everything is interconnected, and that the only way to bring peace is to *be* peace. As Gandhi said, "There is no way to peace; peace is the way." Or, we go back even further, to the 6th century BCE, thinking of this morning's opening words by Lao Tzu: "If there is to be peace in the world... there must be peace in the heart." In more modern times, Peace Pilgrim also spoke to this. Peace Pilgrim is the American woman who walked 25,000 miles in the name of peace from 1953 until 1981 with no possessions other than what was in her pockets. She said, "All of us can work for peace. We can work right where we

are, right within ourselves, because the more peace we have in our own lives, the more we can reflect into the outer situation... primarily” [she said] “my [focus] is peace within ourselves as a step toward peace in our world.”¹

And so, at the National Peace Academy we studied peace in the personal, social, political and ecological spheres – and we will look at each of these before the year is over. At each level, it’s really about right relationship. When we are talking about the personal sphere, we are talking about “establish right relationship with our self.”² If you’re not in right relationship with yourself, how can you be in right relationship with others? And so today we begin, as we must, to “let peace begin with me”.

If you’ve been reared on the negative peace movement, the movement focusing almost exclusively on ending war, it might be hard to take seriously this focus on inner peace and the personal sphere. It reminds me of a funny quotation by none other than Helen Keller, who said, “I do not want the peace which passeth understanding, I want the understanding which bringeth peace”!³ But what I’m proposing today is that the understanding which bringeth peace *is*, ultimately, the peace which passeth understanding in the broader sense.

So, how will you recognize the peace which passeth understanding when you find it? Put another way, how will you know when you’ve achieved inner peace? According to inner peace activist Saskia Davis, there are symptoms of inner peace. The “Signs & Symptoms of Inner Peace” are:

- “A tendency to think and act spontaneously rather than on fears based on past experiences
- An unmistakable ability to enjoy each moment
- A loss of interest in judging other people
- A loss of interest in judging self
- A loss of interest in interpreting the actions of others
- A loss of interest in conflict
- A loss of ability to worry
- Frequent, overwhelming episodes of appreciation
- Contented feelings of connectedness with others & nature
- Frequent attacks of smiling
- An increasing tendency to let things happen rather than make them happen
- An increased susceptibility to love extended by others and the uncontrollable urge to extend it”⁴

Sounds like a lovely syndrome to have, doesn’t it? Now, as a matter of full disclosure, I exhibit few of these symptoms, and even those I exhibit sporadically. So in many ways I have a lot of

¹ Peace Pilgrim, *Steps Toward Inner Peace* (pamphlet put out by Friends of Peace Pilgrim, www.peacepilgrim.org, no copyright), pp. 4-5.

² http://www.nationalpeaceacademy.us/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=220&Itemid=49

³ This is a reference to Paul’s letter to the Philippians 4:7.

⁴ http://www.symptomsofinnerpeace.net/Authors_Website/Home.html

gall to stand up hear speaking about any of this! But this is a journey that we can take together, I hope.

Also, I must tell you, I *did* experience most of these symptoms during the week that I was at the National Peace Academy. So I do know that it is possible. It helps to be surrounded by others who are committed to the positive peace movement, starting with their own self. And we can be that for each other, too, if we want to be. The single most remarkable part of my Peace Academy experience was the lack of cynicism among participants. And when I had a lapse and wanted to slip back to a cynical place, I quickly found myself pulled back toward the positive light by those around me – their positivity kept pulling me back in, like a mafia for peace? We can be that for each other if we want to be.

I want to share a few tips for finding peace in the personal sphere. I became committed to this only recently, this past summer. I trust that over time, I will experience more and more symptoms of inner peace. Let me start with some basic tips.

In our seventh Unitarian Universalist principle, we talk about affirming the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. What better way to affirm it than to actually, you know, experience it now and then, vividly? Connectedness with others and nature is easy and fun, if you commit time to it every week. Commit time each week, working up to committing time each day, to spending quality time with people you love and to being in nature. That's it. All you have to do is do it. It will work its magic if you give it the time. One extra tip I draw from Eugene Peterson, who recommends to busy pastors (but it would work for any busy person) to put time with loved ones and nature right into your calendar – block off the time for it, and consider it as firm as you would a committee meeting here at the UUCiA, for instance. When you are asked to do something less life-affirming during that time slot, you can simply look at your calendar and say, in all good conscience, "I'm sorry, but my calendar does not permit it". And yes, that includes requests of your time from your minister. If you get nothing else out of my remarks, I hope that you will use this tip!⁵

So that's one part of inner peace. Connection. Making time for connection with others, with nature... also connection in the form of meaningful avocations such as creating art, or enjoying art. Ultimately, you're looking for communion or yoga with all that is Divine in the world and the universe. That's one of the two cornerstones of inner peace: connection. What is the second cornerstone of peace in the personal sphere? Letting go. Letting go of worries. Letting go of judgments of others. Letting go of judgments of yourself, perhaps most of all. Forgiving others, forgiving self, perhaps not in that order. Letting go of fear.

Sounds good, right? How do you sign up? Well, I have some good news. You are in control. The Buddha said, "It is your mind that creates this world." That's a pretty deep concept. Perhaps the snippet that can help us now are the words of meditation expert Ruth Fishel, who says, "Our thoughts create our feelings. When we truly understand the implications of this, we

⁵ I am paraphrasing from memory, so this quotation might not be word-for-word. I am referring to the book *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993) by Eugene Peterson.

can experience tremendous freedom.... As we grow in our ability to be mindful of how we speak to ourselves, we discover that we are being judges, critics, friends, or cheerleaders. This takes practice, and it is important to remember that we are moving toward progress, not perfection.”⁶

What’s one of the most time-tested ways for letting go? Connecting with yourself. Really taking the time to be aware of what your inner voice is saying and speaking to you. And this requires finding some time for solitude each day, really carving it out and putting it on your daily planner. Take time for solitude each day to learn what it is that you are creating with your thoughts. Are you being harsh in there, inside your head and thoughts? Thinking negative things about others and yourself? If so, you are hardly alone. Most of us have been trained in the ways of critical thinking – not just academically, but emotionally! Our inner critic is often, as Fishel reminds us, the loudest voice in our head.⁷ But it doesn’t have to be that way.

Realistically, you will never be completely free of negative thoughts. And there are even times when negative thoughts can lead you to an important truth, so I don’t mean to say that they don’t have a place. But dwelling in negative thoughts is not going to help you. The good news, again, is that you can be in control. If you notice a negative thought that isn’t helping you, you can just gently say hello to it, trying not to judge yourself for having negative thoughts... and then just as gently replace it with a thought that is more positive. I’m not suggesting that you police your thoughts – I don’t want a little “thought police officer” up there in your head. I just want a thought cheerleader in your head – and no, I don’t mean a little voice in your head that spells out words like “victory” or “varsity”. I mean, more like a little friend in your head that cheers you on. A little friend in your head who hears a negative thought and says, That’s okay... it’s understandable that you’d be thinking that negative thought... but take a deep breath... let it go... think of something in your life that makes you smile with gratitude, even if it’s the sunshine. If you make this your spiritual practice, really commit to it, you will notice a change in your life.

Before I close, I want to acknowledge that there are many practices to help us find inner peace, to help us be in right relationship in the personal sphere. Many of them revolve around special breathing practices, or special musical practices (such as kirtan or devotional singing or chanting), or they revolve around practices of body motion such as walking meditation or yoga or tai chi. And of course there’s journaling and good old fashioned prayer and meditation. And they can all help you on your journey to inner peace. Do you feel self-conscious talking about this? Do you feel like you’re being self-indulgent to do this much work on inner peace? I know sometimes Unitarian Universalists are lovers of science and books. I was raised as a humanistic UU, and I know that this spiritual practice stuff is the sort of thing that can make some of us feel uncomfortable. But I have come to believe that this sort of stuff is absolutely essential. Left-brained knowledge and books will not be enough to make the journey toward inner peace.

There’s a Sufi saying that I like: “A donkey with a load of holy books is still a donkey.” Replace “donkey” with “ass” and it becomes even more clear. You won’t know someone who’s

⁶ Ruth Fishel, *Peace in Our Hearts, Peace in the World* (Sterling, 2008), p. 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*

found inner peace by the books on their shelf, even if they've actually read them. You'll know them because they'll exhibit the symptoms of inner peace I noted earlier.

The good news is, you can do this. You can work toward creating sustainable peace in the world by working on peace in your own heart. And take heart. As the Peace Pilgrim herself said, "Few find inner peace but this is not because they try and fail, but because they do not try."⁸ Together, we can try. Together, we can go on a journey of peace. May we learn to be the peace. Amen, and blessed be.

⁸ Peace Pilgrim, *Peace Pilgrim: Her Life and Work in Her Own Words* (Ocean Tree Books, 1992), p. 93.