

Service
Sunday, October 21, 2007
Third Unitarian Church

Opening Words

There was a time when the unofficial motto of Third Church was “Peace to the shacks! War on the palaces!”—right from the French Revolution. As activists, we’ve fought the Iraq War, and we’re tired. Isn’t true that it’s as Gerry Adams of the IRA says that “making **peace**, I have found, is much harder than making war”?

Reading

A poem by Mary Oliver, who was the Ware Lecturer at our General Assembly in St. Louis last year. It’s entitled, “Hum”:

What is this dark hum among the roses?
The bees have gone simple, sipping,
that's all. What did you expect? Sophistication?
They're small creatures and they are
filling their bodies with sweetness, how could they not
moan in happiness? The little
worker bee lives, I have read, about three weeks.
Is that long? Long enough, I suppose, to understand
that life is a blessing. I have found them-haven't you?—
stopped in the very cups of the flowers, their wings
a little tattered-so much flying about, to the hive,
then out into the world, then back, and perhaps dancing,
should the task be to be a scout-sweet, dancing bee.
I think there isn't anything in this world I don't
admire. If there is, I don't know what it is. I
haven't met it yet. Nor expect to.

The bee is small,
 and since I wear glasses, so I can see the traffic and
 read books, I have to
 take them off and bend close to study and
 understand what is happening. It's not hard, it's in fact
 as instructive as anything I have ever studied. Plus, too,
 it's love almost too fierce to endure, the bee
 nuzzling like that into the blouse
 of the rose. And the fragrance, and the honey, and of course
 the sun, the purely pure sun, shining, all the while, over
 all of us.

Spoken Meditation

I have lived in a world where the most comfortable emotion for men to express is anger. Having lived in that world, I myself have succumbed to the same temptation. Righteous indignation that is really just rage at a perceived slight; physical violence let loose on the vulnerable, women and children—you've seen it.

Discipline, normally seen a desirable trait, can also be a long, slow manifestation of rage, anger that feeds itself in the form of restraining the spontaneous need for fun; frustration released when a distant goal isn't reached. If anger is desire unrealized, it can be an almost constant state of existence. And I have seen that existence.

Ben Holden was a former diplomat whose movement into retirement was slowed by his being a president at a small college. I suspect that as a result of his earlier professional life, he was privy to government intrigue on a broad scale. This is not to say that he was a spy, or had to disguise crimes, which he might have done; but just to say was familiar with the perils and ethical dilemmas familiar to those who hold the reins of power.

But “austere, secretive diplomat” does not describe him. Warm, solicitous of others, generous in his assessments, even of people when they were at their worst, but still a person of principle when the occasion demanded it—that describes him. A colleague said of him, “He confronted the outrageous and despicable in his work, but never was he seen responding in rage.”

I overheard him say once, “It takes great courage just to deal with everyday life. It took me a while to believe this, but this is a cardinal truth.” I suspect this informed his perspective, for even though he was a product of significant privilege, he had, as I was to learn later, seen tremendous pain and suffering in his personal life.

He was a person with varied and deep loves. A dabbler in photography and architecture, he was also fluent in several languages. A similarly-gifted woman I knew up in Wisconsin, when she was becoming blind and instead of becoming bitter, dictated her bread recipes on tape for her granddaughter. There was a story behind every loaf, who made it first and why, that was often better, she said, than the bread itself. “And I want Jennifer to know how much I loved being in the kitchen, and how much that love made my life worth living.”

Over and beyond the banal coping mechanisms, and the denial people practice to make existence bearable, you see somebody every so often whose loves, often in something simple, completely animate them, like the bee in the poem. They can be bastards or miserable in other parts of their lives, but that’s not who I mean.

For most of us, there are objects worthy of intense observation and affection that inspire in *some of us* a gentle, and still even hopeful, reverence for life, which pervades the whole person, and who they are with others, almost all of the time. This can happen to anyone, it seems, regardless of for whom you vote.

Ben Holden is such a person. It matters nothing to me that he is the uncle of the current President of the United States.

Reading

This is an excerpt from an article in the April 2, 2007, edition of *the Nation*, about a group called "Farms Not Arms," and it reads, "Farmers make up a tiny portion of the population. But Farms Not Arms organizers believe that despite their small numbers, they can have an outsized influence on the debate. They say there are natural cultural links between farmers and soldiers--a shared belief in hard work, discipline and collective effort--and that these similarities can be used to connect with rural soldiers and their families and convince them that it's time to end the war.

"I think there's a lot of unhappiness about this war," says George Naylor, an Iowa corn and soy grower and president of the National Family Farm Coalition. "A lot of farmers who might be Republicans, but who aren't right-wing Republicans, have changed their views on the war."

"I feel like as farmers we don't have a lot of political baggage," says Michael O'Gorman, a co-founder of Farms Not Arms. O'Gorman says he started thinking about how to oppose the war after his son enlisted. "I think we're expounding pretty American ideals here, Jeffersonian ideals.... Maybe this is a wake-up call for America, that we can't be the country we set out to be and have more soldiers than farmers. Maybe we can bring the country together."

Sermon:**“At Peace with Perpetual War?”**

Last week was the birthday of short-story writer Katherine Mansfield. She was, it was reported, a rebellious young woman who had affairs with men and women, lived with indigenous people in New Zealand. She wrote scandalous stories, all under a variety of pseudonyms. In a letter to a publisher she wrote, "[I have] a rapacious appetite for everything and principles as light as my purse."

To preserve the family name, Mansfield's family gave her an allowance so she could move to London, and she began to live so freely in the bohemian scene there that her mother came to visit and threatened to throw her into a convent. Mansfield said, "How idiotic civilization is! Why be given a body if you have to keep it shut up in a case like a rare, rare fiddle?"

Then, in the summer of 1915, her younger brother came to visit. They had long talks about growing up in New Zealand, and Mansfield found herself remembering things she hadn't thought about in years. Her brother left that fall to serve in World War I, and Mansfield learned two months later that he had been killed while demonstrating how to throw a grenade.

She was devastated. The shock inspired her to write a series short stories about her childhood. One was called "The Garden Party," about a lavish party that wasn't cancelled on account of a neighbor's death. At the end of the story, a young woman gathers some leftovers and takes them to the dead man's house, where she views his body and his grieving family. Mansfield said the story was about, "The diversity of life and how we try to fit in everything. Death included."

I can't take credit for that opening. It was written mostly by Garrison Keillor on the "Writer's Almanac," a program I read or listen to every day. Kathleen Mansfield hit just described what religion tries to do, what I try to do on Sundays, by covering the "diversity of life," about fitting everything in, death included."

I'm not taking, nor do you, received wisdom as gospel. Most of us, even the people who live simple lives and who want everyone else to think they are complex, are indeed complicated. Often, I have found in listening to folks in my ministry, and in my personal experience, we can't talk about what *really* drives us. The British spy writer John Le Carré has said, "Most of us live in a condition of secrecy: secret desires, secret appetites, secret hatreds and relationships with institutions which is extremely intense and uncomfortable. These are, to me, a part of the ordinary human condition."

It's the "secret hatreds with institutions" part I'm talking about this morning. You might be bracing for a political sermon, but that's not my whole point. I mentioned Katherine Mansfield because she lived primarily to be stimulated and was shocked into a more grave reality when the war hit home. Only then did she speak out. She became what Bill Coffin called his favorite and most trusted kind of activist: a reluctant one.

Anyone who pays more than passing attention to the news has some idea of what's going on in Iraq, even though the information we get is hugely incomplete or scrubbed clean of bad news. Despite the attempts of the government, and even the mainline press, to paper it over, Iraq is a mess with an endless timeline. The military's efforts to help install and then stabilize an Iraqi national government based on democratic principles, with popular support of the citizens of the country, are unrealizable failures. Period.

And like the Iowa farmer said in the reading, more and more Republicans in the small towns know it, and aren't standing for it.

Generally I enjoy having fun at the expense of professional activists, as Mr. Neale will gleefully attest, and I will get back to doing this tomorrow--but not today. Just about everyone is sick and tired of this fraudulently-conceived and miserably executed war, even those who once supported it. Even those who still support it are beleaguered! They're sick of being on the defensive!

My first "answer" to this is to agree with the consistently anti-war contingent among us who are against all wars to start with. We should speak out; should be attending marches, like the one on October 27th downtown. Our Social Action Committee is arranging to meet here at TUC next Saturday at 12:30 p.m., to get up to the Green Line "El," get off at Union Park, and then join the thousands at Federal Plaza. I'll be with them.

And I agree that we have to stay visible—to attend rallies, and to keep the pressure on elected officials who in some cases used the war as a pretext to get elected, and now, once they in a position of influence, have waffled over the point of an immediate withdrawal of our troops.

I read the same magazines and newspapers you do. I appreciate it when you send me stories on line, or buy books for me. Not to sound like Bush the father, who art in Kennebunkport, please read my lips: *I read what you send me!* Really, I do! And I am outraged, like you: about Blackwater; about the army's papering over of Abu Graihb; about our exacerbation of the internecine religious and tribal war in the country we used to know as Iraq.

An article link sent to me last night by one of you said it well. It was on *Counterpunch*. The Buddhist author said, “Afghanistan has turned into Iraq; Palestine and Israel is in no way resolved; Vietnam lasted more than a decade, and if you’re a “Baby Boomer,” most of your life has been lived under the cloud of wars either covert or overt.” How have you coped with it?

When has this not been the case in the history of humanity? “O I know they make war because they want peace; they hate so that they may live; and they destroy the present to make the world safe for the future. When have they not done and said they did it for that?” That was written by Elizabeth Smart, a Canadian activist, in 1941!

Not many of us here are at peace with perpetual war. That’s one reason we’re here—because we see TUC as a kind of alternative oasis against a culture that’s blind, bored, or too preoccupied with getting up and getting on to care about the secrets and lies about the war machine; social injustice and the rest.

So we take care of ourselves, as best we can. We stand close to the people who believe as we do. We take yoga; meditate, go to pilates. We see our analysts. We influence policy makers, or try to. If no one listens, we try again.

And we should, but we’ve been there, and done that. How about something new? I appreciate a note I received this week from John Cabral. He asked, in effect, “Do you know anyone who’s interested, not in haranguing some suit in a congressman’s office, but listening to their side of the story.”

Those in Congress vote the way they do for a reason, and although we might not agree with it, we need to understand their rationale *before* we suggest an alternative.

This is what I like about Farms Not Arms. Red America is paying the cost in lives, for the war, more than the big cities. Rural kids often do not have the resources to attend college. These are the kids that Jason Tenbrink and others have ministered to at Great Lakes Naval Station. They don't want necessarily to fight in war they don't completely understand, but it seemed cool, and, really, what were the other options?

Farms Not Arms is small. But it's now, at least, incrementally, getting farmers who might have supported the war to talk about what the war costs them, in money and in human terms. This is what I'm trying to do in my neighborhood, with the five or so families that have kids in the military.

It doesn't always work. More often than not, I am converted than I convert. The circumstances that have led these kids into the service are complicated, and the parents are not always happy with their choices.

So, when the occasion arises, and someone is willing to talk to you about the war, even though she or he doesn't stand exactly where you are, will you engage them? Can you listen and respond without writing them off? This is what I mean. A writer in the *New York Review of Books* wrote last June, "Iraq after an American defeat will look very much like Iraq today—a land divided along ethnic lines into Arab and Kurdish states with a civil war being fought within its Arab part. Defeat is defined by America's failure to accomplish its objective of a self-sustaining, democratic, and unified Iraq. And that failure has already taken place, along with the increase of Iranian power in the region."

What do you say to the person who says, "The U.S. needs to end the occupation. But how do we protect the people in Iraq who have been loyal to us. And what happens to U.S. interests when we leave?"

Shouldn't we, for example, keep a moderate force over there, to disrupt al-Qaeda, preserve Kurdistan's democracy, and limit Iran's increasing domination?" Will you discuss this with them, or reject their ideas out of hand?

"If the Americans leave right now, there is going to be a massacre in Iraq," a twenty-seven-year-old music student told the *Washington Post* last year, in a typical comment. "But if they don't leave, there will be more problems." "There will be lakes of blood," another young man said. "Of course we want the Americans to leave, but if they do, it will be a great disaster for us." And what do we say to that? Is anyone seriously asking the Iraqis what *they* want?

Go on taking care of yourselves, but it seems to me that much of what it means to come to terms with perpetual war is trying to figure out how we can make the best of a horrible situation, and advocate for as much peace as we can. I don't have that solution, but I am willing to learn more, with your help and guidance, to try to find one. And part of that, for me, is listening to and taking seriously someone who doesn't march entirely to the same beat I do.

Do you want a Unitarianism, much less a minister, who doesn't listen, and is that democracy?

Closing Words

"Making peace, I have found, is much harder than making war." May that be our discipline, and eventually the root of our greatness, when we work to make that peace.