

“Reflection on Peacemaking”

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I remember when I started to study peace with more intention.

I was in seminary...often sitting in the most serene of environments...light streaming in through beautiful windows...quiet nooks in libraries where I read books of ancient wisdom.

At some point it occurred to me that it's easy to contemplate peace and non-violence when you're feeling peaceful...when you're not experiencing any form of conflict.

And out of that came a song:

*Happiness looks easy when you're happy
When everything feels effortless and free
Every way you look at life, you're laughing
When life's the way that you like life to be.*

*Happiness looks easy when you're happy
Satisfied with everything you've got
Happiness looks easy when you're happy
It's anything but easy, when you're not.¹*

¹ Lynn Harrison, “Happiness Looks Easy (When You're Happy)” from *The Conversation* (2016).

The song goes on to include the line
“peace is effortless unless you’re angry”.

I don’t know about you, but that is certainly true for me...

...even though I’ve become a minister
and in some ways, peacemaking has become my life’s work.

As the Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield writes:

“We must look at ourselves over and over again in order to learn to love, to discover what has kept our hearts closed, and what it means to allow our hearts to open.”²

Spiritual growth is not about ridding ourselves of difficult emotions, but, rather, learning how to handle them more skillfully.

It is, needless to say, lifelong work.

Carl Jung also said something helpful, when he said:

“One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.”³

² Jack Kornfield, *A Path With Heart: A Guide Through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life*

³ Carl G. Jung in *Psychology and Alchemy*: “People will do anything, no matter how absurd, in order to avoid facing their own souls. One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.”

In any life, we find ourselves in situations that bring us into conflict with others: everything from mild differences of opinion to violent conflict.

With intention, understanding, and practice, we can learn to become more skillful during these times...understanding our own responses and becoming more respectful and compassionate with those with whom we disagree.

This is a huge subject, and there are many people who are much better versed in conflict resolution than I am.

But in the few minutes we have, I'd like to share a few insights that have been helpful for me.

I frame them under the general heading "getting over myself."

Looking through the lens of spiritual growth, I find several meanings in that familiar phrase.

In order to grow, or gain in wisdom, I must let go of my previous, less-mature self...

And I need to "get over" my own perspective, my own self-interest, even briefly, in order to begin to understand a different point-of-view.

So, here are a few things I've found useful recently.

The first “getting over myself” has to do with tapping into something larger, zooming out if you will...to glimpse my place in the cosmic scheme of things...

To gain a bit of humility and to open my mind.

At the “Awakenings” drop-in group last Tuesday, we looked at the Unitarian 4th Principle: “The free and responsible search for truth and meaning”

And we read a poem by Janet Hutchinson, called “Of Course.”

“Look how big the sky is,
the deep distances between stars.

Little speck, that’s you;
laughable speck, that’s me.

How could we contain The Truth,
all that overwhelming light?

Our truth is just a pinprick
in mystery’s velvet curtain.

Even so, see how we struggle
to fix an eyeball to that—
peepshow’s tiny window.”⁴

⁴ Janet Hutchinson, “Of Course” in *Becoming: A Spiritual Guide to Navigating Adulthood*, Kayla Parker, ed. <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/poetry/course>

I think, too, of the well-known Gaelic blessing found in our hymnbook:

“Deep peace of the shining stars to you...
Deep peace of the running wave to you...”

When I’m experiencing conflict,
either within myself or with another person,

It helps to reach toward that Deep Peace...

To sink down into silence, even briefly,
To consider the billions and billions of stars
in the Universe...

To lose myself in music or poetry or art...
or to simply breathe in the peace of Nature.

These are all ways of finding freedom,
from the cage of my own small, judging self...

which can be very easily threatened
and can behave in ways that do not maintain peace.

Something else that I’ve found helpful is to study
the way I respond and other people respond,
when asked to change our behavior in ways
we find uncomfortable...

That is, in ways that spark our fear or anxiety.

Recently in doing some work for pastoral care,
I came across a helpful list of four ways that people

sometimes respond when asked to change in ways that they don't want to.

The first is comply. Simply do the thing being asked, perhaps to avoid conflict.

The second is attack. I think we all know what that means! We can do it in many ways.

The third is rebel. Deliberately do the thing we were asked not to do, perhaps in a big or dramatic way.

And the last is cut off.

Walk away, escape, stop talking or shut down.⁵

Now these are very short descriptions and, again, we have limited time ...but on this Remembrance Day Sunday, perhaps they can be helpful as we look back on conflicts we may have experienced in our lives.

Have there been patterns in the ways we respond?

Have we tended to comply, attack, rebel, cut off...or some combination of those?

Once we bring these into the light of awareness, as Jung recommends, can we choose a different response in the service of peacemaking?

It takes courage to do so.

⁵ Excerpted from the book *Family Ties That Bind* by Ronald W. Richardson (2011)

Can we turn to the Deep Peace to support us in doing that?

Can we get over those habitual ways of responding...even briefly...and can we see that others may be responding in these habitual ways, too...so that we might meet them with more compassion?

I can say for myself that this is a work-in-progress.

“Peace is effortless unless you’re angry
And insight’s simple...don’t you understand?”

The uncomfortable truth is that life—this interdependent web of existence—contains many apparently opposing elements.

Being able to hold them all with equanimity and peace is not something humans find easy.

Indeed, significant growth or in fact evolution may be necessary for us to gain the skills we need to maintain peace in this world.

This is the profound “getting over ourselves” which is the process of transformation.

We’ve been talking about transformation for many weeks now...cocooning in our homes and experiencing profound changes in ourselves...many of which will take years to come to light...that is, to fully understand.

In the meantime, we'll find ourselves encountering challenges and differences that call us toward that change... and it may be uncomfortable...in fact, it's sure to be.

And yet, we can have faith that the creative work underway in the world is underway in us at all times.

We are fully alive and growing,
intertwined within this magnificent evolving life
of sorrow and joy.

May we have the courage to grow,
getting over the parts of ourselves that need to be let go...

to make more room for compassion,
for love,
and for peace.

May it be so.