

LEAPING FROM OUR SPHERES: UU WOMEN AND PEACE

Rev. Kit Ketcham, May 13, 2007

In May of 1990, my son Michael was looking forward to graduation from Wheat Ridge High School in the suburban Denver area. It had been a long haul getting him through school, as he was an indifferent student and had some learning quirks that complicated his approach to the books.

I was more than ready for him to begin a new phase of his life, increasing his independence to the point where he would move out, perhaps attend college, and come into his own.

But I was not prepared to have him come home one afternoon from school to tell me that he had signed up with the military recruiters at his high school for the Early Entrance program into military service. He would take the ASVAB, the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery, in a few days, which would determine which military vocation he might enter. And then, after graduation, he would be assigned to a military unit, attend boot camp, and become a soldier.

He was starry-eyed. He saw this as a chance to learn a trade, to leave traditional education behind, to earn some money, and to leave home. His dad and I gulped, rationalized that there seemed to be no solid reason to object, since he was already 18, and our country was in peacetime. We expected he would have some easy, perhaps state-side duty and be out in 4 years, ready for college and matured by the experience.

After he took the ASVAB test, he was even more enthused, for its results showed that he had high aptitude in intelligence work and he chose this area of specialization when he visited the recruiter to schedule his physical exam a few days later.

On the morning of the physical, he was up and about earlier than I had ever seen him---without my help. He drove his battered Plymouth Duster to Buckley Field where he was to have the physical exam. I was a bit numb all day, waiting for him to come home, unready for my only child to be removed from my care so precipitously. I wasn't sure how I felt, but I did believe that he had to make these decisions for himself.

We had not talked much with him about the military in those days. VietNam was behind us; for Mike it was only a subject skimmed over in history class. There were no major conflicts in the offing, that we knew about, and the military seemed like a reasonable next step for a young man who had been unhappy in school and needed independence.

Mike came home later that day with mixed news. They really wanted him to be a soldier, but surgery in his early years to correct a malformation of both Achilles tendons had meant that plastic inserts had been placed in his ankles to substitute for bone and cartilage that had not grown properly. The surgeon had told us that as he grew, the inserts would be superfluous and could be removed. The military recruiter said he could not be a soldier with any foreign object in his body.

Mike wanted to know if we would help him get the inserts removed by the doctor who had implanted them when he was nine years old. His dad and I agreed, and the removal procedure went smoothly. Mike returned to the military recruiter in July to complete his registration for boot camp and military school, but after all he had done to comply with their requirements, he was denied entrance to military service.

On Aug. 2, 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait and the run-up to the Gulf War began. Julia Ward Howe's Mother's Day Proclamation took on new meaning for me on that day in 1990.

In the 19th century, the United States had just emerged from the carnage of the American Civil War, leaving families all over the country grieving the loss of sons and fathers and husbands and brothers and wondering if there wasn't some better way to resolve conflicts.

When the Franco-Prussian war devastated Europe a scant five years later, Unitarian woman Julia Ward Howe, abolitionist, suffragist, and author of the Battle Hymn of the Republic, thought:

"Why do not the mothers of mankind interfere in these matters, to prevent the waste of that human life of which they alone bear and know the cost?"

In her passion and concern, she drew up the Mother's Day Proclamation, imploring women to awake "to the knowledge of the sacred right vested in them as mothers, to protect the human life which costs them so many pangs."

And she instituted the celebration of the first Mother's Day, which was not originally designed as a Hallmark card occasion but to advocate for peace and activism by mothers to bring about peace and to end the mindless slaughter of human life during war.

In her Mother's Day Proclamation, Howe urges women to unite, saying "Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause."

Over two millennia ago, Aristophanes, the Greek poet and playwright, had a similar idea, when he wrote Lysistrata, a play set in the year 411 BCE, when the Peloponnesian war was in its 21st year, with little hope of peace.

In the play, the women of Athens, led by Lysistrata and supported by women from all over Greece, determine to take matters into their own hands and force the men to stop the war. They meet in solemn conclave, and Lysistrata proposes her scheme, the denial to husbands and lovers of all sexual favors, until the men have agreed to end the war.

This plan of action is adopted and the women take a solemn oath to carry out their idea faithfully. When the old men of the city attempt to rout them from the Acropolis, which the women have seized, they are repulsed by "the terrible regiment" of women. Soon the strategy of the bold Lysistrata is effective, and peace is achieved.

Oh, would that we could beseech the wives and lovers of those who carry our country into war, to enlist their aid in ending the mindless conflicts that wreak such havoc upon the families of our soldiers. Where are you, Laura and your sisters?

There have been many women in Unitarian Universalist history who have advocated, marched, demonstrated, gone to jail for peace.

Universalist Mary Livermore was one of those women; during the Civil War, she served as one of the coordinators of the Sanitary Commission, a precursor of the Red Cross, founded by our ancestor Clara Barton. She made many trips to the battlefield, visited hospitals, raised money, helped injured soldiers, and experienced firsthand the horrors of war.

In one of her popular lectures, for she was known as the Queen of the Platform and her speeches filled every lecture hall, she said:

“We are approaching the era when war shall be no more....When a handful of men can blow up a navy, and another handful can annihilate an army, war ceases to be war, and becomes assassination...The billions of dollars now wrung annually from the people for military purposes...would increase the resources of the masses and would add to their comfort. How the certainty that war had ceased forever would loosen the brakes now held down on the wheels of the world’s progress!”

During the Spanish American war, Unitarian Frances Watkins Harper wrote a poetic response to that conflict: this is part of that longer work.

“Do not cheer, for men are dying from the distant homes in pain;
And the restless sea is darkened by a flood of crimson rain.
Do not cheer, for anxious mothers wait and watch in lonely dread;
Vainly waiting for the footsteps nevermore their paths to tread...
Do not cheer while maid and matron in this strife must bear a part;
While the blow that strikes a soldier reaches to some woman’s heart...
Do not cheer until the nation shall more wise and thoughtful grow
Than to staunch a stream of sorrow by an avalanche of woe.”

The International Council of Women adopted a resolution committing its members to peace and arbitration as the means for resolving disputes. So when the First World War began, a meeting was called at the Hague in 1915. This remarkable gathering of over 1500 women included representatives from many countries, some of whom were already at war with each other. The women struggled to overcome their differences and agreed upon a plan to bring about peace by instituting continuous mediation.

Unitarian and Quaker Emily Greene Balch was one of the envoys chosen to carry out this plan. She traveled widely, conferring with national leaders, though this cost her her job as a professor at Wellesley College. Emily Balch, in 1946, became the second woman in history to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. Emily Balch said, in her messages to foreign leaders:

“Please try to forgive America for being so powerful. We cannot help it. We are neither to be prized nor blamed for it. It is the inevitable result of causes, geographical and historical, which just happen to be so. We are not worthy of this power. We have not the experience and wisdom and goodness that it calls for. Condemn our wrongdoings, make clear our blunders and do not condone our shortcomings. Help us. We so need help, but be realistic and generous in understanding the strange situation in which we find ourselves, like an inexperienced young man who awakens one morning to find himself heir to a large share of an immensely tangled and complicated estate.”

The Rev. Olympia Brown began her ordained ministry during the Civil War. Toward the end of her career, she became concerned about the problem of increased militarism, a trend she believed could destroy the full democracy she had been working for so many years to achieve. During her 30 year ministry, she was instrumental in gaining suffrage for women, and she preached many a sermon on peace. Here is a part of her sermon entitled “Permanent Peace”, which she preached at the end of WWI:

“President Wilson called upon our men to fight to make the world safe for Democracy and it made every man of them a hero. But Democracy can never be “safe” until the doctrine of the worth of all human beings is understood. War is not possible where people recognize that all are God’s Children. Can we teach this great lesson to the people of the warring world?....Now is the time to begin, when men are tired of war, when women are heart-sick, when the nations are impoverished and overburdened, when all the people everywhere are wishing for something better. What a glorious opportunity for any denomination to be the exponent of a new civilization which should express itself in love for humanity! To make a new work in which people can dwell together in peace!”

These women are our religious ancestors, our foremothers, women who leapt from their spheres, challenging the mores of their time, to take bold steps for peace, communicating their anguish as women and mothers and sisters and wives and lovers, at the conflicts that had claimed so many lives and broken so many hearts.

But there are Unitarian Universalist women today who are active in the peace movement, faithful to the call which rings down the centuries from ancient Greece to modern day America, passing through the hearts of Lysistrata, of Julia Ward Howe, Mary Livermore, Frances Harper, Emily Greene Balch, Olympia Brown, and others unnamed but appreciated.

In this room, we know there are women who have marched and sung and demonstrated during the many conflicts our country has fought in, women who have stood in silence, wearing black in mourning for the soldiers and civilians who have died in war. If you are one of those women, who during your life has spoken out for peace in any way, we thank you. It does not matter if your action was small or large; every voice, every act counts.

And if you are a man who has stood alongside a woman, singing and marching and demonstrating with her and other women, supporting and understanding her special grief at the loss of life during war, sorrowing over the many children whose lives were ended by a bomb or bullet, we thank you as well.

No matter what the political forces are which involve our nation in war, we all have an awareness of the terrible human toll war exacts. We have friends and family whose work is with the military; we know that a strong defense for our country is necessary and appropriate. Yet we all fear for the lives of our brave young men and women who volunteer for military duty; we understand, as they may not, that life is fragile, that we humans are not immortal, and that when we are trained to kill, we risk a great deal---our lives, our minds, our bodies, our hearts. We are changed.

Women's wisdom has been suppressed in many ways over the centuries, but it has a way of popping up and changing its environment. We did not realize the damage done to the earth and the human community when women were considered to exist for the purposes of men. *Androcentrism*, the attitude that women were genetically deficient, intellectually inadequate, inherently seductive and immoral, has caused females to be murdered, mutilated, enslaved, and used as currency, over the centuries.

But as women have asserted their strength and power, in a variety of ways, from Lysistrata's refusing her husband's demands to the power displayed these days by a multitude of women in business, in religious matters, and in the community. And all this time, there has been a steady drumbeat for the cessation of violence, born out of the love of a mother for a child, the love of a wife for her husband, the love of a sister for her brother, the love of a daughter for her father.

One of those powerful women, the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, a Unitarian Universalist, president of Starr King School for the Ministry, has spoken of this love, and it is with this I will close:

“Our hope...is in the creative activity of love. Love is the active, creative force that repairs life's injuries and brings new possibilities into being. Love speaks out in the face of injustice and oppression, calling leaders to account when policies and practices are injuring people. Love tends the wounds created by injustice and evil and offers compassion in the presence of life's suffering. Love builds communities of inclusion and friendship that break through the boundaries of prejudice and enmity.

“Love embraces the goodness of this world and seeks paradise on earth, a heaven of mutual respect. Love generates life — from the first moment of conception of a child, to the last moment when love creates a way for those who have died to be remembered with gratitude and tenderness. And in the deepest night, when our hearts are breaking, it is the discovery of a love that chooses unshakable fidelity to our common humanity that renews us and redirects us to a life of generosity.

“In this time of war, when violence is a rising tide, our calling is to love.”

Let’s pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

Our closing hymn is #163, For the Earth Forever Turning

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering the brave history we share with each other and pledging to continue the work of our foremothers. May we spread peace as we practice love, embracing goodness and seeking to create paradise on earth. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.