

I would like this morning for us to keep in mind our pledge during the naming ceremony and keep Mariella's future firmly in mind as we consider questions of peace and climate change and our commitment to creating a better future.

One. Growing Up With War

We all come from somewhere, some place, and some time. All these things affect our thinking and our views of life. As for me, I grew up with three things that shaped my views—the Vietnam War, the continuing effects of the Second World War, and Christianity.

It was an accident of my birth that the Vietnam War was going on from my earliest memory and continued into my high school years. It appeared to me as a kid that the Vietnam War had gone on forever and would go on forever. The news footage of the jungle and the charts of killed, wounded, and MIA went from black and white to color as I grew up, a background noise and fearful reality that I grew convinced would never end.

Always for me the experience of the Vietnam years was mixed up with the fact that my father was a veteran of the Second World War. One closet, when I was a kid, was full of various medals and battlefield trophies—weapons, shell fragments, binoculars, buttons, and various insignia cut from Nazi uniforms. My father is a decorated front line veteran, but in the years when I was a kid, he did not tell the truth of his experience. Only in recent years, as dementia began, did my father begin to tell the real story, which was indeed heroic but which took the lives of several people. When I was a kid, all his stories were cynical and ironic, about the waste and idiocy of war. In his accounts in those years, he described being drafted and forced to serve and how he avoided responsibility at every turn. Quite unlike the stereotype of the Greatest Generation extolling the virtues of patriotism and sacrifice, I learned from my father to think of war as a kind of foul weather that comes and goes for no rhyme or reason and is to be avoided at all costs.

After all, the United States had been much like a dysfunctional family when the combat veterans returned from World War Two, encouraging people not to talk about it and thereby insuring that trauma went largely unprocessed.

My father, who was 22 when the war ended, never forgot the feeling of going from the devastation of the frontlines to Switzerland. For a sharecropper with a sixth grade education, the strangeness of that contrast was magical, and he communicated that wonder to me. How was it possible that a nation could choose to be neutral? For a young person who had just spent five months in chaos, destruction, and murder, Switzerland was Paradise. My father never stopped asking the question—how can it be that people can agree not to kill each other?

The third element always present for me as a kid was Christianity. Parents inevitably catch kids doing things that are really, really disturbing. As for me, I was caught out in the back yard. . . turning the other cheek.

It's even stranger than it sounds. We were living in a working class neighborhood where signs of weakness could lead to very bad scenes. And there I was—getting slapped and turning the other cheek. Now, the A#1 rule was never, ever have a parent intervene, but my mother ran the kid off and started yelling at me, “What are you thinking?” I explained that Jesus had said to turn the other cheek. I had read it in the Bible.

Now, I'm not running for sainthood status. I was a little kid growing up in a fundamentalist church. I didn't know anything about “just war” theory. I didn't know the difference between literal and metaphorical meaning. I was merely taking words at face value. And, to be frank about it, I'm still not sure—based on what I read in Christian scriptures—that Christianity should not be committed to pacifism. Certainly the Quakers and the Mennonites carry away that message. And a good number of Catholic priests, nuns, and laypersons have joined in that sentiment, as have many Protestant ministers and laypersons. No, you can't run an empire that way. But a good many good people have argued that running empires is not the point of Christianity. And I'm not sure they are wrong. . .

I grew up at the end of a long tradition of the poor and dispossessed avoiding and resenting the system overseen by what they saw as a power elite that had rigged the game. All this changed for many Americans after I had already gotten lucky and found a way to college. The movement that became known as the Religious Right convinced the poor and dispossessed that it was not ALL power elites that were to blame, but only the liberal and educated power elites. The Christian Right convinced many people that sincerity and Christian values, not education, would lead them to power. And they were correct—with just a little pinch of good old fashioned racism, the Religious Right has been able to consistently get roughly thirty percent of the US population to vote for the most conservative, uneducated, and Christian candidates.

I'm glad I left home before that movement started. When I was growing up, Christian fundamentalism taught that we were “in the world but not of it,” and that politics was “vanity and chasing after wind.”

TWO: The Nature and Nurture of War

Winston Churchill once said, “There are two occupations for man: war and gardening.” As I see it, war is the result of both nature and nurture. Our genetic material has gone roughly 50,000 years without changing. Which means we have the emotions developed as hunter-gatherers. Our reasons for killing—our gut reactions—are those of hunter-gatherers.

But we have nurture as well. And that nurture is based on the development of agricultural societies some six thousand years ago in Mesopotamia. In agricultural societies, certain things develop: One is the idea of territorial integrity—because people want to preserve their

crops. Another is the ability of society to stratify into farmers, and soldiers, and artisans to develop and produce weapons, rulers who decide who to fight; and priests who tell the population which wars are or are not the will of the gods.

Despite the trappings of tanks and airplanes and poison gas and nuclear weapons, not much has changed since the development of agricultural societies. War and gardening. Through the centuries we have fought over economic systems, political systems, religious systems, but the basis of our warfare has not changed. (And it won't change until we figure out how to get food from someplace besides the ground. . . We can make lots of weapons, but we have a hard time making soil.

I'm taking a long view to make a point: our nature is that of hunter gatherers but our warfare is that of farmers. How we feel and how we war are at—shall we say—war with each other.

And the rest is—well—history. Nation states functioned to extend tribal relationships. Larger and larger groups could be formed around aggregations such as ethnicity, language, or geography. The Chinese appear to have been the first to realize the power of this multiplier effect, though it was the Western Europeans who pushed nationalism to its dreadful logical conclusion. An English king could convince his subject to travel long distances to kill people who were of no danger to the subjects at all—simply because the victims were not white and did not speak English. Unfortunately, with minor tweaking, we still live in that world.

I must admit that it frightens me when I see nationalism becoming religion, and, as I mentioned before, this is one of the central ideas built into the Christian Right. As I said earlier, my attitudes are based on the accidents of birth. I have never been able to understand getting worked up about nationalism, since the lines are human-made and largely of use only for administration of people and territory. (We heard a bit at our recent Great Ideas lecture about just how destructive arbitrary political boundaries drawn by European states have been in the world.) If we humans were able to freely choose our nationality, perhaps I would feel differently. But it doesn't make sense to me—and it never has—to kill or hate or fear someone who, like me, had to be born somewhere, and just happened not to be born in the same "where" as I was born. It seems to me that human beings have enough problems with exclusion and difference without creating yet another category. That doesn't seem rational to me. It's a difficult point to argue, however, because it is difficult even to imagine a world without these arbitrary boundaries. National boundaries may make political sense, but I'm not sure they make any spiritual sense at all. I leave that as a question to ponder. . .

THREE: A United Nations

We will never know how many people died in the Second World War. Estimates range from the low end—60 million, to something over 100 million from a world population that was less than a third what it is today. Suffice it to say that the devastation of WW II was enough to spook a sufficient number of people into action. (I think it's safe to say that the United

Nations came from equal parts guts and desperation.) Something had to change. Somehow we would have to stop the strong from preying on the weak. Somehow we would have to stop seeing only difference and somehow work together toward a common good.

The Charter of the United Nations pledges

to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and
to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and
to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,
AND FOR THESE ENDS
to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours, and
to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and
to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest, and
to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples. . .

Sounds mysteriously like the sixth of our Seven Principles, doesn't it: "The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. . ." Well, of course, it's not a mystery. That's why Unitarian Universalists are one of the few religious groups to have an office at the UN. We have been involved since before the beginning. Unfortunately, the results have been mixed. No, we have not seen a conflagration like the Second World War since. Yet the estimate is that 50 million people have died as a result of war since 1945. No conflagration, just a slow, inexorable burn as the world's population tripled.

But back to that pledge to our children.

In addition to today being United Nations Day, it is also--by no accident--International Day of Climate Action. We all, come to that, no matter the arbitrary borders we live in on this earth's surface, breathe the same air. And that air is not in good health.

When the prophets of old preached about justice and peace, when they envisioned a time when lions would lie down with lambs and swords would be beaten into plowshares, there was one thought quite beyond them: that even if we could beat every sword into a plowshare, we might go on making more and more plowshares, until we all chock to death.

This is something new under the sun. This is a new human problem. It is a human-created problem. And nothing less than the future of the world's children is at stake.

Think about our pledge to Mariella. The reading asserts, “We cannot tell them how to live in that future.” The Golden Rule, do unto others as you would have them do unto you, is indeed a wonderful guide to ethical living. As has often been pointed out, many of the world’s religions—from Confucian to Wiccan—have embraced that idea as a key to right action. Yet there is a serious flaw in the Golden Rule: it assumes cultural similarity. It assumes that I know what it is YOU want. This is a safe assumption if everyone is of the same religion, cultural background, socio-economic group. . .and generation. In other words, the Golden Rule makes some big leaps in assumption. This is the rock the Declaration of Human Rights hit back in 1948. And this is the problem Mariella faces. We can assume Mariella wants all the consumer goods, all the material wealth that we ourselves so enjoy. We can do that thinking for her. And we can bequeath to her a hopelessly degraded planet.

The Platinum Rule proposes that we treat others not as WE wish to be treated but as THEY wish to be treated. In other words, that we go beyond empathy to an active attempt to understand the wishes and needs of others as they experience the world. This is a different kind of spiritual thinking. What kind of world does Mariella need? If we give to her what we want—what we have been taught to want—what are the consequences? How might we avoid doing her thinking for her?

As a child, I awoke into a world of post-traumatic stress, of nationalism, and of endless war. I awoke into a nation that told me my meaning had to be bought—brand names and endless stuff. In my lifetime, the poor have only gotten poorer, the commodities more complex, and the planet nearly used up.

But like Mariella, I have a childlike faith. Not in politics and the art of the possible, but in the spiritual world where human beings can be and do better. As science fiction writer Robert Ardry once said, “We were born of risen apes, not fallen angels. . .The miracle of man is not how far he has sunk but how magnificently he has risen.”