

Rev. Betsy Mead Tabor
UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes
November 10, 2019

Study War No More

READING - "Wage Peace" by Judyth Hill

Wage peace with your breath.

Breathe in firemen and rubble,
breathe out whole buildings and flocks of red wing blackbirds.

Breathe in terrorists
and breathe out sleeping children and freshly mown fields.

Breathe in confusion and breathe out maple trees.

Breathe in the fallen and breathe out lifelong friendships intact.

Wage peace with your listening: hearing sirens, pray loud.

Remember your tools: flower seeds, clothes pins, clean rivers.

Make soup.

Play music; memorize the words for thank you in three languages.

Learn to knit, and make a hat.

Think of chaos as dancing raspberries,
imagine grief
as the out breath of beauty
or the gesture of fish.

Swim for the other side.

Wage peace.

Never has the world seemed so fresh and precious:

Have a cup of tea and rejoice.

Act as if armistice has already arrived.

Celebrate today.

SERMON: *Study War No More*

Wage peace? Don't you love the sound of that!

This weekend of parades, speeches in cemeteries, veterans' breakfasts, and gatherings at town memorials gives us a lot to think about.

They used to call the annual observation of the end of World War I Armistice Day – “armistice” means truce or peace. It then became Remembrance Day. Now we call it Veterans' Day, when we honor all members, past and present, of the military service. Sometimes this feels like any 3-day weekend. Sometimes it feels patriotic, flags flying, military might on display. Sometimes it feels deeply emotional, smiling veterans (who will never forget) grateful to be alive, glad to have survived.

This milestone can also feel somber. No one ever comes back from serving the same. Some veterans miss war's adrenaline rush. Some miss the structure. Others have had successes in the service and gained valuable skills. Many suffer from trauma and struggle to adjust to civilian life, struggle to sleep through the night.

The fighting never over, this country still deploys soldiers to war zones – worlds of violence and ever-present fear of danger, attack, pain, capture...death. It's a top-down existence with little say in how you spent your time. You live on MRE's—"Meals Ready to Eat" – entree, side dish, crackers, dessert, candy, beverage, a flameless ration heater, water pouch, and utensils. You sleep, when you can, on cots, in tents, in outpost bunks, slumped against sandbags.

Here at home, news reports hint of more wars, weapons build-up, nuclear threat, a military space force. Yet we dream of peace. For the war veteran, peace might be a restful, dreamless sleep. Back in your own bed, back home. Peace might look like deciding for yourself how to spend the day or enjoying a home-cooked meal.

We live in the quiet of NH. Is this what peace looks like, war zones at a comfortable distance, something we view on tablets and phones? What is the peace we dream of?

Lincoln, Mass. school children imagine peace to be...

...the beginning of a new world.
 It means that nations are friends;
 It means joy to the world.
 Peace is quiet and calm, it is rest;
 It is silence after a storm.
 Peace is love and friendship;
 It is the world's dream of dreams.
 Peace brings comfort and happiness;
 It brings bread to the hungry;
 It brings prosperity to the nations.

It means the strong respect the weak,
 the great respect the small,
 the many respect the few.
 It is like spring after winter;
 It brings sunshine into the world;
 It is like sweet music after harsh sounds.¹

Imagine the peace of sitting under our own fig tree. Inviting passersby to stop in, sit for a while, rest, visit in the shade – no one afraid; sweet fat figs overhead, ready to pick.

A symbol of peace and well-being, figs fill the poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye. In “My Father and the Fig Tree,” her Palestinian father points at a cherry tree and wishes they were figs. His bedtime stories, she wrote:

...always involved a figtree.
 Even when it didn't fit, he'd stick it in.
 Once Joha was walking down the road and he saw a figtree.
 Or, he tied his camel to a figtree and went to sleep.
 Or, later when they caught and arrested him,
 his pockets were full of figs.

At age six I ate a dried fig and shrugged.
 “That's not what I'm talking about!” he said,
 “I'm talking about a figtree straight from the earth—
 gift of Allah!—on a branch so heavy it touches the ground.
 I'm talking about picking the largest fattest sweetest fig
 in the world and putting it in my mouth.”
 (Here he'd stop and close his eyes.)

Years passed, we lived in many houses, none had figtrees....

The last time he moved, I got a phone call.
 My father, in Arabic, chanting a song I'd never heard.
 “What's that?” I said.
 “Wait till you see!”

He took me out back to the new yard.
 There, in the middle of Dallas, Texas,
 a tree with the largest, fattest, sweetest figs in the world.
 “It's a figtree song!” he said,
 plucking his fruits like ripe tokens,
 emblems, assurance
 of a world that was always his own.²

¹ “Peace,” Pupils of the Lincoln School [adapted], Reading 589 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

² Naomi Shahib Nye, “My Father and the Figtree,” *Different Ways to Pray*. Portland, OR: Breitenbush Books, 1980.

In the peace we dream of, the world is our own. Everyone's. Weapons are no more. We have beaten them into plowshares that till the land we love.

Philadelphia activist Shane Claiborne does this today as a form of healing – he asks people for their guns, chops them to pieces, then melts them down and beats them into garden tools. He holds what he calls “gun-transformation” events for people traumatized by gun violence.

In a video from this past July, he heats a gun part until it softens, red hot, and holds it out with long prongs over a steel surface. He hands a hammer to the Rev. Sharon Risher. Four years ago in a Charleston church, her mother, two cousins and a childhood friend were killed. She pounds the metal over and over: “I hit this, Mama, for you. I hit this for Tywanza. I hit this for cousin Susie. And all the others who died in that church. [She pounds faster and faster] I hit for gun violence....” She pounds and pounds, sobbing.³

In the peace we dream of, we have cast away more than swords and guns. We've rid the world of *all* our weapons, even our own unhelpful thoughts and words and behaviors, tried and true weapons we've cultivated and used to get what we want. Peace at home is doing good. Listening generously. Talking gently. Reaching out. Making amends. Loving. Loving more.

In these times, our towns are feeling fractured and edgy. We are, too, as is our country. Peace at home – respecting and understanding one another, being willing to compromise –feels a long way off.

Sometimes, peace can look like simply getting along. My hometown of Portsmouth has just gone through a polarized, fiery city council election. “We-they” language turned up the temperature and made for a larger than usual turnout. A slate of six candidates, angry with City Hall and the current council, ran with a strong message to vote the incumbents out. Well organized, they stoked the anger. They blanketed the town with signs and mailers, sample ballots all filled out, and armies of volunteers descended on the polls. They even had lights on their signs (I was so envious!). They won big. A majority, they will wield the power in a council of nine – a challenge for the minority, which includes my husband John, who did win a seat....

This is not war or peace. But it's an opportunity to “wage peace.” With luck, the battle now won and the fight over, people can get started on trying to work together. I hope they do. It will take a concerted effort to establish relationships and find common ground.

We close with inspiration. Yesterday, the Concord UU church filled up with people celebrating the life of a 97-year-old woman, peace activist Lois Booth, mother of a good friend. John and I had met this sunny, smart woman once or twice. We knew of her Quaker faith and her fame for being a familiar figure at the NH State House for many decades, where she and her husband would stand, carrying signs for peace.

What we didn't know, and learned, yesterday that Lois Booth truly *waged* peace. She devoted her life to bringing about good. She wrote a lot of letters, and so, many words spoken yesterday

³ <https://billypenn.com/2019/07/25/using-fire-and-force-this-philly-author-turns-guns-into-garden-tools/>

were her own. “Working for peace,” she said, “is my calling.” She educated people about alternatives to war. Everyone, she said, needed flowers. She grew and shared them – in fact, we learned that she provided the flowers for the wedding of our own Andy Davis and Andrea Walsh!

“Everything,” she believed, “is possible...nothing is lost. Every good act is touched and altered as we pass aspects of ourselves on to others.”

This very woman – smiling, thoughtful, humble – *established* the NH office of the American Friends Service Committee! She hired Arnie Albert, a beloved guest preacher here! She mentored Donna San Antonio, who spoke at our MLK Jr. event last year! When not at her desk or phone, she would be on Main Street handing out leaflets, gathering signatures for petitions, organizing meetings and protests, tirelessly raising money for activism and research.

We learned that, in her last days, even with memory loss, she continued to engage people. After singing with one visitor – she still knew every song in the Quaker hymnal – she would say, “We’re not done yet!” and ask him to wheel her around the building. “This place is bigger than this room,” she’d say. She would roll by residents and smile, lighting up one face after another. And then she would say, “We’re not done yet!” She would ask to be wheeled out into the sunshine. There, she would raise her face to the sun, close her eyes and smile. “Being with Lois was always worship,” her visitor told us.

This Veterans’ Day, let us remember peace. As we honor all who have served, let us keep our eye on that prize – peace beyond our imaginings, “peace that passeth all understanding.” Let us be grateful for the wisdom of peace-seeking children and for the brilliance of peace-waging radical activists too. Let us cherish our fig tree moments.

We’re not done yet. May we wage peace and create the peace-loving world of our dreams. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

Deep peace of the running wave to you.
 Deep peace of the flowing air to you.
 Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.
 Deep peace of the gentle night to you.
 Moon and stars and sun pour their healing light on you.

We’re not done yet. Let us wage peace.