



Peace

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community.

In the late 1950s, New York started yearly civil defense drills designed to help citizens practice surviving a nuclear war. The state made it a misdemeanor to fail to take cover during the drill. In response, Catholic activist Dorothy Day and several others camped outside, hoping to illustrate the lunacy of practicing to survive nuclear weapons. Each year, Day and an ever-expanding band of co-conspirators got arrested, sometimes spending up to a month in jail for their crime. As the resistance grew, New York City eventually stopped the drills.

These pacifists “disturbed the peace” to protest the war. Civil defense drills, said Day, were “a military act ... designed to instill fear, to prepare the collective mind for war.” For Day, true peace meant weapons disarmament, but it also meant disarming the mind. Then and now, peace disrupts standard systems and awakens body and mind to a new way of living.

Agitating for peace does seem a bit counterintuitive. But achieving peace in a violent society often involves tension. Almost two hundred years ago, noted Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing claimed that peace was the most expressive word in the English language, and thus commonly misunderstood. Peace carries many meanings and Channing himself reflects that. Though he co-founded the Massachusetts Peace Society during the War of 1812, his written work on peace focused on the individual soul, not social reform. Public opposition to war was not part of his peacemaking. Channing didn’t march.

Instead, Channing explained peace in two ways. What he called negative peace was “relief from disquiet and corroding care. ... repose after conflict and storms.” Positive peace demanded more effort. It was “the highest and

most strenuous action of the soul ... in which all our powers and affections are blended in a beautiful proportion, and sustain and perfect one another.” Peace could be “more than silence after storms;” it was hard-won internal harmony, a state of being that connected humanity to the divine spirit.

Channing’s second vision of peace, with its spiritual striving toward soulful balance, is a platonic ideal. Yet let’s not dismiss that negative peace out of hand. Parents, especially those with small children, often associate peace with quiet. For many parents, peace is synonymous with the calm that descends after the last “I’m thirsty” and “I’m not sleepy” is uttered and each child has finally, blessedly, gone to sleep.

It’s not just parents. In today’s 24/7 society and roiling political climate, peace feels far away. Life comes at us so fast, so hard, that remembering to breathe can be a challenge. Turning off the television, avoiding the internet, finding the “repose after conflict and storms,” is sometimes all we can achieve. It feels good.

But what Channing termed “negative peace” is never enough, either for our souls or for our society. An absence of tension is never true peace because we live surrounded by unchecked violence. Our senses are inundated with brutal images and martial language that desensitize us; we learn to accept violence as normal. This means peacebuilding and peacemaking takes focus and effort, demands consistency as an avenue to liberation and harmony. Poet Denise Levertov writes that “peace, like a poem, is not there ahead of itself, can’t be imagined before it is made, can’t be known except in the words of its making, grammar of justice, syntax of mutual aid.” Peace is a necessary but uncertain journey.

This is true for both individual balance and for societies. Peace emerges not from the avoidance of conflict but in how we respond to it. Parents can’t just walk away from the fussy baby. We can’t simply ignore our challenging times. Justice and mutual aid make peace possible. Sometimes that means disrupting the system, taking a stand. Always that means focusing on our own actions and letting ourselves be transformed by love.

However we work toward peace, being in community helps. Thich Nhat Hanh called “looking deeply together” the main task of religious communities, the best way “to uproot war from ourselves and from the hearts” of all people. Yes, peace is hard work. But being accompanied on the journey, feeling the power of community, strengthens our patience and our ability to continue in the struggle. Peace becomes part of the quality of relating with each other. This kind of peace approaches the grace of Channing’s formulation, “blended in a beautiful proportion” to liberate and sustain.

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Peace Theme Resources

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

The Peace Book by Todd Parr

I Am Peace: A Book of Mindfulness
by Susan Verde

*Wangari's Trees of Peace: A True
Story from Africa* by Jeanette Winter

BOOK

*Peace Is Every Step: The Path of
Mindfulness in Everyday Life* by
Thich Nhat Hanh