

“Choosing Peace”

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This Memorial Day weekend,
even as our hearts lift with the delightful promise of summer,
we still remember that this is a sober holiday.
Our nation is at war,
a war many of us, myself included, believe to be
a foolish, irresponsible, and deadly mistake.
Today I want to lift up and honor the efforts of all those
who have worked for peace over the years.
But still I also want to invite us all to keep an open heart
toward those who have chosen to be a part of war.

Our faith, as we know, was rooted in the Christian tradition
for many, many years,
and Christians have been struggling to make good, faithful choices
about war and peace ever since the death of Jesus.
The earliest Christians were pacifists.
They felt called by the way Jesus lived and died
to respond to violence as individuals with peace and compassion.
But when Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire,
several centuries later,
it wasn't so simple.
It seemed totally unrealistic for the state religion of a great power
to preach pacifism and non-resistance to violence.
People asked, could the state really give up the right to defend itself
and its people?
Was it really right for individual Christians to refrain from defending
their neighbors when they were in danger?

The famous teacher St. Augustine pondered these questions

and finally came up with guidelines
about when Christians could legitimately participate in wars—
to protect the innocent,
to respond to an unprovoked attack.
This was the beginning of the Just War tradition in Christianity.
Since then, most Christians have made their peace, as it were,
with some wars
as a necessary evil to preserve justice in the world.
A few Protestant churches have always been known as historic peace
churches, consistently teaching nonviolence as a total way of life—
but Unitarian Universalism is not one of these.

Let me share with you a few chapters of our recent history.
The United States was slow to enter World War I,
but once we did,
the vast majority of Unitarians supported the war effort.
They accused pacifists and conscientious objectors
of being cowards and traitors.

At the continent-wide Unitarian General Conference in 1917,
things came to a head.
Former United States President Taft, who was a Unitarian,
was serving as moderator.
Can you imagine?
It's as if, today, Jimmy Carter were going to chair our General Assembly
next month in Portland.
Taft himself leaned toward pacifism,
but he believed this war was necessary.

In his opening address to the General Conference, he said:
“It is the duty of our church to preach the righteousness of the war
and the necessity for our winning it
in the interest of the peace of the world.
Let there be no doubt that our country's cause...is our cause.”¹

¹ Quoted in Conrad Wright, ed., *A Stream of Light* (Boston: Skinner House, 1975), p. 102.

Next on the agenda of the General Conference was a report from John Haynes Holmes.

Now Holmes was probably the most famous Unitarian minister of his generation. He was legendary for his social activism.

And on that day, he proclaimed to the assembled Unitarians that he was a pacifist.

“I hate war,” he said,

“and I hate this war;

so long as I live and breathe I will have nothing to do with this war or any war, so help me God.”²

But on that day he was part of a very small minority.

By a vote of 236 to 9, the General Conference passed a motion

“that this war must be carried to a successful issue,”

and that they “approve[d] the measures of President Wilson and Congress to carry on [the] war.”³

Meanwhile, here in Stockton,

this congregation had called the Reverend Arthur Heeb to be its minister in 1914.

In 1917, on the eve of the U.S. entry into World War I, Heeb declared himself to be a pacifist.

Now, 90 years later, we don’t know exactly why he made that choice.

We do know his wife was German,

which I feel sure must have had something to do with it.

I can’t imagine anyone feeling *good* about the prospect of war with their spouse’s family.

At any rate, we also know that his declaration of pacifism set off a crisis in the church.

It was tremendously controversial.

Some people left; some people stopped pledging.

² Quoted in Wright, ed., *A Stream of Light*, p. 103.

³ Quoted in Wright, ed., *A Stream of Light*, p. 103.

Then, in 1918, the American Unitarian Association declared they would no longer give any financial support to congregations with pacifist ministers.

“Any society,”

the declaration ran,

“which engages a minister who is not a willing, earnest, and outspoken supporter of the United States in the vigorous and resolute prosecution of the war cannot be considered eligible for aid from the Association.”

That included our church.

Later that year, the Reverend Heeb resigned to spare the church the funding cuts.

A good many people in the church were not sorry to see him go.

Again, we don't know all the details.

My colleague and predecessor in this pulpit, Joy Atkinson, has researched this time

and concluded that Heeb's resignation wasn't *just* about his pacifism; it sounds as if he antagonized people in other ways too.

Some of the history has been lost.

But it seems clear enough that, at that time, our church found it very hard to embrace a leader who didn't support the war.

By the time World War II broke out, things had changed somewhat on the national scene.

In 1936, the board of the American Unitarian Association had formally apologized for pressuring clergy to support the government in World War I.

The board acknowledged its actions had been “contrary to the fundamental principle of freedom of thought and conscience.”⁴

⁴ Quoted in Neil Shister, “Embattled Faith,” *UU World* July/August 2003, available at <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/1849.shtml>.

Now the American Unitarian Association took a more moderate position.

The great majority of Unitarians supported the U.S. war effort.

In 1942, the president of the AUA, Frederick May Eliot, declared:

“The churches of our Association stand together in full commitment to the overthrow of totalitarian power wherever it seeks to dominate free people or destroy the institutions of free nations, and in complete dedication to the establishment of a world order in which an enduring peace shall be possible.”

But Eliot added:

“We all recognize the necessity for national unity in a time of grave national peril, but it is fatally easy for us to forget that there is a basic respect for the rights of individuals to think and act in accordance with the dictates of their own consciences that no need for unity of national purpose or effort supersedes. . . . Our churches should make it a very special part of their business to watch for any infringement of this right.”⁵

Pacifism was not a popular stance in World War II, though there were some conscientious objectors who believed war was simply not the way to confront evil.

One of them, a young musician at the time, recalls simply, “I certainly didn’t want to kill anybody.”

For him, the war posed a stark question:

“Are *you* going to carry a gun and go out and shoot the supposed enemy?”

He had spent his life in liberal churches, where he came to believe that all life was sacred—*all* life.

⁵ Quoted in Neil Shister, “Embattled Faith.”

He knew that he couldn't stop other people from fighting.
He accepted that there was no quick or easy way to end war.
But he also knew he didn't want to shoot anyone.
So he registered as a conscientious objector.
It was hard, choosing to be cast out of society in a sense,
but he was lucky to have support from his family,
and from other COs who met regularly to talk about their beliefs
and support one another.

“I can only live in my own stance,” he said,
“and hop[e] [my] views will spread in the future.”
Meanwhile, he said,
“You'll just be a person,
facing each day as best you can.”⁶

Just a person.
And I want to tell you,
the person I've been telling you about is right here.
He's our music director.
His name is Charles Schilling.

Charles was a conscientious objector
at a time when there were not many to be found,
and he was gracious enough to spend some time
talking with me about his experiences
so that I could share them with you.
By the way, Charles also told me a story
about the time he went to see the minister of the Broadway Tabernacle,
a Congregational church in New York City
that was famous for its support of conscientious objectors.
They had a wonderful talk,
and at the end of it, that minister told Charles,
“Stick to your guns!”
And so he did.

⁶ Interview with Charles Schilling, May 1, 2007.

Charles, thank you for your witness and your example as a person of deep integrity and courage.

I know of at least one other person in this congregation besides Charles Schilling and Bill Walker whose life has been deeply touched by a commitment to pacifism. Maxine Schwab is a member of this congregation, and her late husband Galen Schwab was a conscientious objector in the 1950s, during peacetime. Maxine shared with me that Galen was drafted in 1956. Even though our country was at peace at that time, he strongly objected to joining the military. Like Charles, Galen was the son of a minister. Maxine recalls his saying that he had two loyalties—to God and to his country—and his loyalty to God was more important. Galen had read Martin Buber's book *I and Thou* and really internalized its message that we should never treat other people as objects. He believed in the sacred worth of all people, and he simply could not accept the idea of killing anybody, even in war.

Galen's choice was not without sacrifice. Like most conscientious objectors, he had to enlist for two years of civilian service doing a job that he would not have chosen otherwise. He was posted to the Patton State mental hospital in Southern California, where his job as a technician included scrubbing human excrement off the walls. It was something of a change from his previous life as a musician. But for him there was no question that it was worth it.

In his day, Galen was part of a small minority. But, of course, everything changed during Vietnam.

It was so obvious to so many people that Vietnam was a bad war fought for bad reasons.
In our own faith community,
the Unitarian Universalist Association passed resolutions supporting conscientious objectors and denouncing the war.
Those of you who remember those days will remember that many of our clergy were radically against the war.
And ever since then,
there has been a deep suspicion in our movement toward our government's use of force.

So much has changed since World War I.
Today anti-war sentiment is the norm within Unitarian Universalism,
and people in our churches who are also in the military often face scrutiny at a minimum, if not outright hostility.

But still we are all faced with choices every day about war and peace, and they're not always easy.
As an individual, I personally do not want to participate in war.
I don't want to kill anyone.
And yet I don't think I'm ready to tell our military to put down their weapons and respond nonviolently no matter *what* happens.
I do believe self-defense is OK.

Having said that,
I also believe the war we are fighting in Iraq is not only unwinnable but wrong.
I believe *this* war is unjust and unwise.
And I believe we as individuals are always giving a gift to the world when we embody peace in our lives and our words.
I am so grateful for your witness for peace.

You are struggling with the same questions we all struggle with:
What is needed? What is right?
And who are we called to be?

And you are doing it with care and integrity.
That's all anyone can ask, really.
In the end, we're all of us just people,
facing each day as best we can.
May we choose according to the best wisdom we know,
and may we live out a commitment to peace
with all the faithfulness we possess.

May it truly be so.
Amen and blessed be.