

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
 “Making Peace with our Planet”
 Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore September 20, 2008

Spoken and Silent Meditation

I'd like to share with you an international prayer for peace adapted from the Upanishads by [Satish Kumar](#) who walks the world spreading the message of peace.

Lead me from death to life,
 from falsehood to truth.
 Lead me from despair to hope,
 from fear to trust.
 Lead me from hate to love,
 from war to peace.
 Let peace fill our heart, our world, our universe.
 Shanti, Shanti, Shanti. Peace, peace, peace.

Sermon

The dedication and unveiling of our peace pole today coincides with my own growing interest and commitment to peacemaking and nonviolence as a core Unitarian Universalist value. The focus on peacemaking at our yearly Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly for the last two years and the anticipated release of a statement of conscience November 15th for consideration at our next General Assembly in June in Salt Lake City this year is influencing me. The failure of conventional warfare to contain global terrorism is influencing me. My Buddhist meditation practice and Abrahamic religious values are influencing me. My training this summer in Marshall Rosenberg's nonviolent communication methods is influencing me. The older I get, the more I realize that causing harm to another is not a way to create lasting peace, whether in a family, a community or a planet.

A man who knew the limitations of violence to make peace was Masahisa Goi who originated the peace pole idea. I'd like to tell you a little bit more about him to expand your appreciation of what is behind the concept of planting a peace pole.

Goi was born in Tokyo in 1916 to a poor family with nine children. Ambitious as a child, despite challenging circumstances and health problems, Goi worked his way through school. Those health problems got progressively worse due to his strenuous work schedule, which led him to study spiritual healing, yoga, the martial arts and practice intensive meditation.

The end of World War II was a great turning point for him in his spiritual development. His religious studies increasingly absorbed his attention. He left his employment to devote himself completely to healing work, refusing any compensation, wishing only to be of service to humanity. A religious experience

called him to do healing work in close connection with the struggles and hardships of post war Japan. Witnessing the great suffering, especially in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, deepened his spiritual quest. The curing of disease was not enough, he realized. The inner spiritual self needed a simple spiritual practice to fully heal.

After rigorous training, meditation, and prayer, he reported attaining enlightenment and an experience of oneness with his divine self. Finally he felt a sentence was revealed to him that was the key to world peace: May peace prevail on earth. In 1955, he initiated an international movement of prayer for world peace using that phrase and putting it on peace poles as a way to propagate the practice everywhere. (1) Today there are about 200,000 peace poles in 180 countries.

What has caught my attention about the peace prayer is the mention of the world 'earth.' He could have come up with something that only referenced human beings. He didn't. Goi sensed the importance of including the planet in his peace prayer. I'm glad he did because the world suffers greatly when we are not peaceful.

Warfare during the era of bows, arrows and spears wasn't quite as destructive as it is today with tanks, bulldozers, stealth fighters dropping tons of bombs, chemical warfare and radioactive weapons.

World War I battlefields were some of the first ecological disasters. A German officer in 1918 described 'dumb, black stumps of shattered trees which still stick up where there used to be villages. Flayed by splinters of bursting shells, they stand like corpses upright. Not a blade of grass anywhere. Just miles of flat, empty, broken and tumbled stone.' (2)

Another big leap in our capacity to wreak environmental destruction came with the use of Agent Orange during the Vietnam War to defoliate Viet Nam's jungles and flush out guerrillas. Operation Ranch Hand sprayed 70 million liters of the stuff over 1.7 million hectares from 1962 to 1971.

By the end of the war, a fifth of South Vietnam's forests had been chemically annihilated, and more than a third of its mangrove forests were dead. Some forests have since recovered, but much of the land has turned, apparently permanently, to scrubby grassland. (3)

During the first Gulf War in 1991, Saddam Hussein blew up 730 oil wells, setting some 630 alight. Soot from the fires and the oil spills scar that region to this day. The total release of oil is estimated to be 10 million cubic meters, 1 million of which ended up in the Persian Gulf. At one point 300 oil lakes covered 50 square kilometers of desert. (3)

The desert ecosystem suffered terribly from other disruptions:

Gravel beds that once held the desert sands in check were fractured by thousands of bunkers, weapon pits and trenches. And the tracks of tanks and trucks compacted fragile soils and killed vegetation. The Kuwaiti Institute for

Scientific Research concluded that more than 900 square kilometres of desert were damaged by military vehicles and earth movement. The result has been more erosion, sand storms, advancing sand dunes and diminution of plant life (3)

And then there is the issue of depleted (but still quite toxic) uranium. Uranium metal shows up in ordinance for use against hardened targets like tanks. About 300 tons of the stuff were used in the Gulf War. The dust from these shells is suspected of being carcinogenic and causing birth defects. Who knows what it is doing to the wildlife. (Len Deitz, former member of this congregation, was very involved in bringing more attention to the dangers of DU)

We could talk more about what revolutionaries do to contribute to deforestation and the consumption of endangered species as food in the African bush, floods of refugees camped on boarders cutting trees for cooking fuel, and the pollution created by bombing factories full of toxic chemicals but I hope I've made my point. War is really bad for children and other living things.

Damage to ecosystems is not only the end result of war. Damage and degradation may also be the source of war in the first place. Population pressures on resources like water and arable land can easily drive nations to war with each other. The conflict in the Darfur region of Sudan has rapidly eroding environmental resources among the root causes of the strife.

The most serious concerns are land degradation and the spread of deserts southwards by an average of 100km over the past four decades. These are linked with factors including overgrazing of fragile soils by a livestock population that has exploded from close to 27 million animals to around 135 million now. Many sensitive areas are also experiencing a "deforestation crisis" which has led to a loss of almost 12 per cent of Sudan's forest cover in just 15 years. Indeed, some areas may undergo a total loss of forest cover within the next decade. (4)

The examples of increasing populations and degradation of the ecosystem leading to conflict are easy to identify but often hidden behind the headlines. The horror of the Rwanda genocide has deeper sources than the conflict between Hutu cultivators and Tutsi pastoralists exacerbated by racist colonial attitudes. Rwanda is a singularly crowded place with its population growing and its resources shrinking. The Soccer War between Honduras and El Salvador has as a source the frustration of campesinos who are unable to eke out a living on their land, leading to an increase of environmental refugees, a growing strain on social institutions and, inevitably, the flashpoint, the conflict. (5)

Water is the key resource in the Middle East that intensifies the conflict in that region. One reason Israel is reluctant to let go of the West Bank has more to do with control of water resources than fears of hostile Palestinian neighbors.

Many analysts are concerned that growing environmental pressures may soon create insecurities and possible conflict in pivotal states such as China, India and Brazil. Through countless examples, the link between environmental degradation and security risk emerges as an underlying explanation, the factor that allows all sorts of disparate and apparently inexplicable elements to fall into place. It is a long sought-for organizing principle, the credible cause behind so many symptoms [that lead to war]. (5)

So if we want peace to prevail on earth, we must learn to move from exploiters of the Earth to stewards of the Earth. As you might imagine, this will be a very difficult transition, made more difficult by a growing population. Keeping the peace is very closely connected to meeting basic human needs for food, clothing and shelter.

This is the moment in the service you could get very discouraged. Yes, the problems are overwhelming and the threats terrifying. And we haven't talked about what might happen if the sea level rises a meter due to global climate change.

Thankfully the world is beginning to wake up to these threats and respond. The key phrase in the Peace Prayer, to my mind, is the word 'prevail' which has, as its root meaning, to grow very strong. Today it can mean:

- to use persuasion or inducement successfully,
- to prove superior in strength, power or influence,
- to be recognized as the more important or frequent element, and
- to be widespread and exist everywhere.

May peace prevail is a powerful wish...and peace is prevailing in some surprising ways.

Some swords are being used as plowshares today. Some military and intelligence assets are being used to collect environmental data and assist with reforestation. The generals of the world are meeting to discuss threats posed by environmental degradation, share ideas and even co-operate in cleanup activities. Military assets and skills can be deployed for short-term environmental tasks.

Security institutions still prepare to protect their borders and their independence, but are moving toward a non-governmental organizational world-view. National leaders are looking at the concept of human security rather than national security as they are recognizing their borders are meaningless when it comes to global problems.

The development community is moving away from measuring progress in economic growth purely monetarily and toward a concept that includes effects on ecosystems in the equation. They are recognizing that threatening ecosystems can have consequences for national security and regional conflict.

Deep ecological thinking is taking hold more and more. Fritjof Capra, author of *Tao of Physics*, has become an eloquent and influential proponent of it as part of a new paradigm the world is entering. He says we are moving out of the old thinking that views the universe as a mechanical system where unlimited progress is possible to seeing the world as an integrated, interacting whole rather than a dissociated collection of parts. (5)

The ocean liner of human consciousness is beginning to turn and move a new direction. I deeply hope we can turn enough to avoid hitting the huge icebergs that loom ahead. The key, as Masahisa Goi saw over fifty years ago, is a change of thinking and a change of heart. The change is fundamentally spiritual. All the world's problems could be easily solved if we all loved each other and our mother earth who brought us out of the dust, helped us climb out of the sea, walk on two legs, master our opposable fingers and thumbs and gave us speech.

And now, on our FUUSA doorstep, we have a universal prayer we can speak. I encourage you, as pass the peace pole on Sunday morning coming to service, to recite that prayer. Let it be like the Jewish mezuzah on the entrance to a Jewish home. Let this prayer be our Shema:

May peace prevail on Earth.
 May peace prevail on Earth.
 May peace prevail on Earth.

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Notes:

- (1) This brief biography came from http://www.byakko.org/1_about/goi/index.html
- (2) Peace Pledge Union: WAR AND THE ENVIRONMENT - some examples
http://www.ppu.org.uk/learn/infodocs/st_environment.html
- (3) From destroyed vegetation to health hazards, the environment has been a systematic casualty of recent wars and pays the price long after peace returns
http://www.unesco.org/courier/2000_05/uk/planet.htm
- (4) United Nations Environmental Programme
<http://www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?DocumentID=512&ArticleID=5621&l=en>
- (5) State-of-the-Art Review on Environment, Security and Development Cooperation, World Conservation Union
http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2002/envsec_oecd_review.pdf