

"To Embody Peace as the World Wars"

Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno

March 13, 2022

"On the Bridge" by Lynn Unger

For two days he has been standing
in the rain, in the middle of the I205 bridge,
holding his blue and yellow flag.
Not waving or shouting. Not
demanding that we do something
in particular. I imagine he is grieving.
I imagine he is praying. I imagine
he is furious and confused and
devastated and desperate for
the safety of those he loves.
My heart goes out to him,
but I just keep driving. What else
can I do? What, I wonder,
is he hoping to accomplish?
What can any of us accomplish?
Whatever he is doing out there,
between the cars rushing past
on the sodden bridge, I guess
he isn't doing it alone.

Our hearts go out to the Ukrainian people – for the brutality, cruelty, and devastation they are suffering. Thousands have died. Two million others have fled their homeland and are now refugees.

And right out of the gate, we must name the same brutality, cruelty, and devastation suffered by our siblings and brothers and sisters who have fled the same kind of violence in their homelands and are as deserving of the world's outstretched hearts. Hear these numbers and weep:

1. Syria — 6.8 million
2. Venezuela — 5.4 million
3. Afghanistan — 2.8 million
4. South Sudan — 2.2 million
5. Myanmar – 1.1 million

Source: World Vision 2020

These statistics represent millions of stories of human resilience, bravery and heartbreak. And in the world's response – or rather, the lack thereof – there is one single story of racism and xenophobia. We cannot forget as we reckon with the human wreckage in Ukraine.

And, as our hearts go out to the Ukrainian people so must our hearts go out to those Russians who are risking their lives and their freedom as they take to the streets to protest the horror unleashed in their name – the horror unleashed on their siblings in Ukraine. Our hearts go out to those Russian soldiers who, laying down their arms, reveal that they were sent to Ukraine under false pretenses.

Our hearts go out in so many directions worthy of our loving attention abroad and here at home. Here at home - anti-gay / trans laws proposed and passed in TX, FL, & ID anyone? We can't even get started. Back to Ukraine. Many of you have shared your own feelings that resemble those of the man on the bridge. Like that dear man,

I imagine [you are] grieving.
I imagine [you are] praying. I imagine
[you are] furious and confused and
devastated and desperate ...

Have I missed some way that you are feeling?

If you're grieving, praying, furious, confused, devastated, desperate, – *and ya know it* – stamp your feet.

All of these big feelings contribute to a sense of overwhelm. Overwhelm is particularly dangerous because it can lead straight to an emotional shutdown. It can lead us to the temptation, the false belief, that nothing we can do will possibly matter.

From the depths of that underwater place, we're going to swim to the surface together today and take a deep breath. In fact, let's take a deep breath together right now.

A deep breath. Stamping feet. It helps.

Okay. Let's start for the surface.

Someone, and it's not clear who, once said that God created war so that we would learn geography – and I would add, history. Although we'd all agree

that war is a particular *human* abomination, every single time, the war does inspire the learning we lack.

For example, we are inspired to learn more when in amazement we watch the way the Ukrainian people rise up despite odds so dramatically stacked against them, and astounded, we ask, “*Who are these people?*”

We must learn more.

Here’s some historical context that sheds light on the Ukrainian national character. We’re going to go way back to the 19th century and hear the people cry out:

Dear God, calamity again!

So begins a poem written in 1859 by the Ukrainian poet, Taras Shevchenko, Ukraine’s most prominent poet, he is known as “the Minstrel”. Here’s the whole poem:

*Dear God, calamity again! ...
It was so peaceful, so serene;
We but began to break the chains
That bind our folk in slavery ...
When halt! ... Again the people's blood
Is streaming! Like rapacious dogs
About a bone, the royal thugs
Are at each other's throat again.*

“Calamity Again” by, Taras Shevchenko Translated by John Weir

I learned that Shevchenko wasn’t speaking metaphorically when he referred to slavery. He was himself born into slavery in central Ukraine, then part of the Russian empire. The horror of slavery grew when as a child he was taken from his family and brought to St. Petersburg where years later, a group of artists, impressed by Shevchenko’s artistic potential, bought his freedom from his Russian “master”. (A hateful word.) Anne Applebaum, “Calamity Again”, *The Atlantic*, 2/23/22

This poem and the poet’s life story offers insight into the spirit and identify of the Ukrainian people. A spirit formed by the trauma of slavery and Russian occupation in the 19th century; Russian occupation that included a forced famine created by Joseph Stalin and his evil regime in the 20th century; and Russian occupation and an now an unprovoked attack by Vladimir Putin’s evil regime in the 21st century. But the war we are witnessing now roiled to a full boil two weeks ago after tense simmering for nearly 10 years. You’ll remember the poem I shared last week, written by Ukrainian teenagers in 2020 – two years ago! – a poem that laments the weight of death and destruction under which they are coming of age.

And yet, there were recent victories! Even if life in Ukraine was not so peaceful, so serene – as the poet says – then at least there was a glimmer of hope that at least a fragile liberation had been realized and would hold after thousands of Ukrainians took to the streets to claim a democratic future.

Who are these people? They are the ones who have had to put everything on the line to ensure a democratic future after enduring a brutal past and present that live in the memory and in hearts of the Ukrainian people. They are made from fire and beauty and music and determination.

And from a world away, we scroll through our news feeds, pick up our newspapers, watch our news programs, and witness the Ukrainian people going to great lengths to defend their democracy, taking up arms, for goodness sake, and I bet not a few of us have asked ourselves this question: “What would I do if our own democracy was similarly threatened ...”

Oh ...

wait

What *am* I doing – what *are WE* doing as a congregation - to defend democracy here at home?

To remind: Unitarian Universalism's 7th principle attests to the interconnected web of all existence of which we are a part. This principle is a foundational Universalist value. With that interconnectedness in mind, consider that what we are witnessing in Ukraine reflects how the decaying of American democracy has emboldened autocrats the world over. In part, the war we witness in Ukraine reflects our own government marching our own country into wars – in our names – under false pretense. Case in point, days before the Russian invasion began, President Putin was televised as he gave an hour-long rant in which he said, “weapons of mass destruction” over and over again. This phrasing was not a coincidence. As many of you well remember, Colin Powell, then the Secretary of State, used the claim of “weapons of mass destruction” in a speech at the United Nations to justify the invasion of Iraq – a claim that we all know proved to be untrue. The Russian president claims justification in “protecting Russia” from the same. It is the same lie.

As people of faith who convene and affirm:

The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

and

The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.
(our 5th & 6th principles) then we are committed to finding ways to defend our democracy because doing so, protects all the world. We cannot fall prey to overwhelm or despair. There's too much to do, as Dorothy Day once said.

But like the poet, we keep on driving as we wonder what we can accomplish.
Like the poet, we ask,

*What else can I do?
What can any of us accomplish?*

Let me remind you of the power of Together.

Raise your hand here in Unity Hall or in the chat if you wrote postcards encouraging people in swing states to vote? Over a million postcards were written and sent by Unitarian Universalists in the last election. It mattered.

Raise your hand if you made telephone calls to your fellow citizens encouraging participation in that same election or about another issue about which you felt strongly. It made a difference.

Raise your hand if in the past two pandemic years you nevertheless made your way to an anti-racism protest or peace vigil or a march to save our ailing earth or a rally to preserve reproductive freedoms? It showed the force of our collective commitment.

Raise your hand if you financially supported any organization committed to liberty and justice for all? So many organizations made it through these lean times because of our collective generosity. Next week our Good Neighbor Offering beneficiary will be the International Rescue Committee for their on-the-ground work in Ukraine. It will help.

Plenty. Together we can accomplish plenty.

I hope you'll all be at the community peace vigil tomorrow night. Bil is playing. Geoff Kauffman is leading us in song. Mark Samos will be representing Start Fresh in their efforts to resettle refugees and I'll be introducing Mark with this story. (So if you'll be at the vigil, you're going to hear this story twice in as many days. That's okay. It's a good story.)

At a meeting of the Greater New London Clergy Association back in 2015, our friend Mongi Dhaouadi, who represented the New London mosque and Muslim community, threw down the gauntlet. The refugee crisis in the Middle East was

raging. As religious leaders we were, by and large, overwhelmed and honestly, we were paralyzed. Mongi would have none of it. He blew away the fog that is “what-can-any-of-us-accomplish?”. It was out of this challenge that Start Fresh was born. At the start, it was just a bunch of good-hearted people who had no idea what resettling refugees entailed. Quite a few of you know the rest of that story. That bunch of good hearted people representing a bunch of faith communities got together - there were about 80 people gathered at Congregation Beth-El for that first meeting. We heard from representatives the Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services - IRIS -- and they helped that bunch of good-hearted people figure it out. For All Souls' part, we bought the house next door that we've named the House of Hope as a soft-landing for those seeking refuge in a new country after suffering torments that most of us will never know. Three families have made that house their first home and a fourth family will be our neighbors by early summer.

That's the power of “together.” And it is good.

And how about individually? If you think you have nothing to contribute that will create a more peaceful world: you're wrong. Any little thing you do helps. From the Christian Left's Facebook page, I ordered beautiful stickers designed by a Ukrainian artist. The artist gets all the profits. It helps.

And there's this: the basics: be the most kind and fiercely loving person you can be. Honor our first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of all people – and treat people accordingly. Every morning as a new day dawns, give thanks and then say out loud:

- I will be the walking, talking embodiment of Peace.
- In the face of bad behavior, I will resist the temptation to respond in kind.

Like the child in this morning's story:

Give yourself a moment. Take a breath. And then tell yourself: It's alright.

Say it with me: It's alright.

Every morning, as the new day dawns, give thanks and say out loud:

I am Peace.

Say it with me: I am Peace.

Say it again: I am peace.

We are Peace.

Say it with me: We are Peace.

Say it again: We are Peace.

Yes you are. Yes we are.

Let there be peace for the Ukrainian people.

Peace for the Russian people.

Peace for the Syrian people.

Peace for the Afghan people.

Peace for the Venezuelan people.

Peace for the South Sundanese people.

Peace for the Myanmar people.

Let there be peace on Earth and let it begin with each one of us and all of us – together. Amen.

For further contemplation:

The following is the poem that inspired the chalice lighting:

“Make Love” - by Yuri Izdryk - Translated from the Ukrainian by Boris Dralyuk

this war isn't war — it's a chance not to kill anyone
 this love isn't love unto death — it's as long as it lasts
 to protect one another is all this occasion demands
 and to look at the world through a steady rifle sight
 and to look within ourselves through every microscope
 and to look at you at every hour every minute at all times
 to protect one another — and in keeping calm and carrying on
 to burn down to the ground and to rise up as smoke
 this war isn't war — but a certain and fiery passion
 this love is forever — just as moments pass forever
 we hit bottom to get stuck in some new heaven
 there is a string that binds us all together
 that string between us is a safety fuse

On Ukraine & “Calamity Again”

<https://www.anneapplebaum.com/2022/02/23/calamity-again/>