



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

The Best Thing To Say To a Friend

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The Seminary where I received my training – Thomas Starr King School for the Ministry – is part of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, a conglomerate of nine mainly Christian seminaries, plus various centers for the studies of other faith traditions.

Included in the GTU are two Roman Catholic seminaries – one Jesuit and the other, Franciscan. And while I admired the scholarship of the Jesuits, and even went for a while to the former Dean of their school for Spiritual Direction, it was the Franciscans to whom I felt the most drawn – because of their commitment to simplicity, to serving and often living among the poor, and to what they called “radical hospitality.” They strive to embody the lifestyle and teachings of their founder, St. Francis of Assisi.

Known to most of us by the statues that can be found in many a garden, or through the Animal Blessings commemorating his birth in both Catholic and Protestant churches – and even occasionally in a few Unitarian Universalist congregations, St. Francis was born in the town of Assisi, Italy, in the late 12th century; the exact year isn’t known. His father was a wealthy merchant, and Francis grew up knowing nothing of the poverty he would later voluntarily take on. In his early years, according to the Catholic Encyclopedia, “No one loved pleasure more than Francis; he had a ready wit, sang merrily, and delighted in fine clothes and showy display. Handsome, ...gallant, and courteous, he soon became the prime favorite among the young nobles of Assisi, ...the leader of the civil revels, the very king of frolic.”

But despite this, he seemed to always have some sympathy for the poor. In his twenties he began having dreams that seemed to beckon him to a deeper spiritual life; and then one day, it is said, he came unexpectedly upon “a poor leper. The sudden appearance at first filled him with disgust and he instinctively retreated.” But finally controlling his initial aversion, he drew closer, embraced the man, and gave him all the money he had.

This kind of behavior became more and more normal for Francis – giving away all of his money to the poor, including sometimes the very clothes on his back, and embracing those considered to be “untouchables” by everyone else. He was ridiculed by the townspeople, and eventually even his father disinherited him. Francis, in turn, gave up all of his worldly possessions, took to wearing only a brown cloth robe, and traversing the countryside preaching “penance, love and peace,” while performing acts of charity. In time, he gained the respect of many, and was able to develop his own religious order of monks, known today as the Franciscan Order.

Somewhere I read that St. Francis taught that “the best thing you can say to a friend is, “May God give you peace;” and I found that so moving that I used it as the title for today’s sermon. But what I’ve since learned is that he said those words to every person he met, not just friends – which makes the words even more profound. What would the world be like, if each of us said those words to every person we passed on the street – or even just to one another? I suppose we’d receive the response St. Francis first received: We’d be ridiculed, or worse, shunned. Strangers would try to ignore us and friends or family would try to get us into treatment.

Even if people didn’t treat us as crazy, they might still find it baffling that anyone would think it possible to find peace today; I don’t mean the peace that comes from the ending of wars (though that seems equally implausible), but an *inner* peace – the serenity that we long for, but so rarely find for more than fleeting moments.

We live in a world and in a time that makes it more and more essential that we find that inner peace, yet at the same time it seems more and more *impossible* to attain. In just the last couple of months alone, we have been bombarded by news that keeps us off-balance: Continuing violence around the world; misbehavior by politicians who we may have trusted; appalling acts by Congressional leaders that lift up the rich and push down the poor and the vulnerable. (I’ve pretty much stopped watching news pundits who share my views, like Rachel Maddow, because I become so angry and off-balance.)

Events in your personal life may be keeping you off-balance and anxious. And just the distractions of technology can serve to keep us from any sense of serenity. Two weeks ago I turned in my Blackberry for an iPhone, and last week joined the ranks of Mac users. It has made my last week of vacation anything but restful!

Yet if I am to follow St. Francis' example, and wish that all people find peace, it is imperative that I strive to embody that peace myself. Author Jonathan Lockwood Huie has written, "There is nothing worth losing your inner peace over. Take action as the circumstances require, but never surrender your inner peace. Stop. Breathe deeply. Close your eyes and breathe again. Then – and only then – take action – from a peaceful heart. Choose love, choose gratitude, choose forgiveness, choose peace."

Ah yes...*breathing!* Stopping in the midst of our busy days and *breathing!* It is why I so often speak to my congregation of the importance of finding some moment *every day* of "Sabbath" – to stop, breathe deeply, listen, so that we can be reminded of the peace of the Universe, and stay connected to it.

As these Gaelic Runes from our Hymnbook wish for us:

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 shining stars to you.

Deep peace of the infinite peace to you.

Peace is all around us, if we only take some time each day to breathe it in and make it our own.

But many wise people also suggest that the best way to find inner peace is to help others find it, through our compassion and acts of kindness. When I was a child, I loved sitting at the piano and accompanying myself while singing songs found in music magazines and various song books we had. One of my favorites was, in fact, the original Prayer of St. Francis that I read a little while ago, and that we heard expressed so beautifully through music; the words are found in our UU Hymnbook. But that prayer actually *begins* with a line not included in our Hymnbook version: "Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace..." And then it goes on, "Where there is hatred, let me sow love...." And so forth.

"Make me an instrument of thy peace," by sowing love, joy, comfort, and understanding; "for it is in giving that we receive;" it is in offering peace – becoming "instruments" of God's peace, that we, ourselves, receive peace. What a profound concept! And yet how profoundly simple.

During my time at Starr King, I worked for a while at the Jesuit Seminary as the Treasurer's secretary. One of my co-workers, the bookkeeper, would always arrive several hours before the rest of us in order to avoid the rush-hour traffic, and consequently would leave work several hours early. And because she lived quite a distance from the school, I would always say to her as she was walking out of the office, "Drive safely!"

One day she told me that while she assumed I said it out of habit, nevertheless, "It always feels like a prayer for me," she said. And, in a way, it was; and it brought her some peace.

Likewise, the woman who cleans my house for me every few weeks always says to me as I'm walking out the door, "God bless you, Miss Anna;" and I say back to her, "God bless you too, Marguerita." And always, I feel a momentary sense of peace. Perhaps she does, too.

The Dalai Lama has said that "the key to happiness is inner peace," and that "love and compassion and a sense of universal responsibility are the sources" of that peace and happiness. So it's not *only* sitting quietly and breathing deeply that brings us peace, but moving beyond ourselves – our own need for happiness and peace – to caring and doing for others.

In an interview on NPR a few days after the tragic earthquake and tsunami in Japan, an American who had been living there for many years addressed the fear that so many of us were then feeling about the affect that radiation might have on us. "If you can re-focus your mind on compassion for those in Japan, rather than on your fear for yourselves, you will greatly decrease your anxiety, and find more peace of mind," he suggested.

Again, by offering compassion and peace to someone else, we gain peace for ourselves. It is one reason many of our churches take an extra Offering during our worship after a disaster such as that in Japan. We *want* to help, and by so doing, we decrease our anxiety, our sense of helplessness and fear.

The host of NPR's "Speaking of Faith," Krista Tippett, said in a speech somewhere that "Compassion is organic, across all religions, yet transcending them as well. It is kindness, empathy, generosity, hospitality. It looks for the face of God in suffering, in the face of the stranger."

We see such compassion on display many places around the world, and *always* during times of crisis like in Japan, or Haiti after *their* earthquake; in New Orleans several years ago, and after 9/11.

But there are a thousand acts of such kindness between human beings every day, that we never hear anything about – not as dramatic, perhaps, as those we read about after major calamities, but profound nevertheless.

Such as the man I met back in the '80s at a Quaker Retreat Center, who, while many of us were protesting our government's involvement in the brutalities of oppressive Central American regimes, was quietly donating his services as a massage therapist to refugees of those regimes who had fled to this country, and in many instances were still in hiding. He brought an inner peace to those people, and in so doing brought peace to himself as well.

Or like a young woman in my congregation who recently interrupted her day to sit in an intersection, cradling a woman who had been struck by a car while crossing the street. No one else stopped to help, but my parishioner put compassion first, soothing the injured woman, being a *presence*, until medical help arrived. She gave some peace to that woman, and in so doing, brought peace to herself as well.

Krista Tippett said that "Compassion is *spiritual* technology, which humanity needs as much today as all the other technology." And we *all* benefit when we master that spiritual technology; indeed, I would say our world's survival depends on our mastering that technology far more than any other.

In many Christian churches today, a ritual is included called "Passing the Peace," in which people turn to one another in the pews and say simply, "May peace be with you," and in return they answer, "And with you." And I always like this part of their service. While I admit it can seem a bit awkward, I still always feel a momentary connection to the person – usually a stranger – saying it with me. I feel as if I've been granted a ray of inner peace, and that I've offered the same to them.

One might say that we've incorporated a similar practice in many of our UU congregations, including Emerson; except that in *our* churches it's more of a "howdy, how are you?" that's said to one another as we pause in our worship to "greet our neighbor." And while I enjoy it when we walk around the Sanctuary saying hello one another during our service, and I love the cacophony of voices that rises up for those few minutes, I actually wish for some common words that we would say to one another in that moment – something a bit deeper than simply "hi!"

I wonder how it might feel to hear from your spouse, for instance, "May peace be with you" – especially if you'd had an argument just before leaving the house for church?

How would it feel to say “May peace be with you” to someone in the church who – and I know this is hard to imagine! – you find annoying? Or to hear those words from them?

What if you came to church during a particularly painful time in your life, and a complete stranger simply said to you, “May peace be with you?” What kind of healing might begin for you in that moment?

Our world is rife with conflict and sorrow, and we hunger for some sense of peace. And I believe that you and I and all human beings are the embodiments of that peace; that it flows from us to others every time we speak words of compassion, perform acts of kindness, and work for justice. Perhaps that *is* how we say “May peace be with you.”

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen tells the story that in the beginning of Creation, the original light of the universe shattered into countless pieces, lodging as shards inside every part of Creation. The highest human calling, the story tells us, is to look for the hidden shards of light, point them out when seen, gather them up and in so doing, repair the world.

May we become beacons of that hidden light. Through our acts of compassion and justice, may we be instruments of God’s peace, and in so doing, come to know peace ourselves.

Amen.