

Preaching Peace...In the Name of Humanity

Beacon UU Congregation

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The misunderstanding about my Grandma Raisa's departure from Ukraine around 1912 has reached near legend status in my family. It turned out (as I discovered when she was in her mid 90's) that her family didn't flee with jewels hidden in jars of schmaltz. They left because another family (the Levys) moved into their village and opened a competing dry goods store....across the street! My great-grandfather declared that, in his words, "If they were going to have competition, they might as well live in America. " So, they left and settled in Pittsburgh. And yet another myth exploder – they didn't come steerage in babushkas. They were educated and middle class. My grandmother recalled: " Steerage? What steerage?" We had dinner, we had dancing!"

Raisa Unickel Landerman was a Ukrainian, from the village of Rogi, due South of Kyiv in the region of Cherkasy Oblast. I am part Ukrainian. And if lived there now, I'd be among 200,000 Jews who reside in a country under siege. It is a chilling thought on many levels, to consider whether I would be crouching for safety in the gleaming Chabad Jewish Community center in Kyiv, or hiding in the subway or in a root cellar in Rogi. But I would be scared...I know that, and I'd want to defend my homeland. I'd pray for peace while brandishing whatever weapon I might acquire, perhaps one of the Molotov cocktails common citizens are learning to create, and I'd hope the majority of humanity was with me.

This week, journalist of all stripes have asked: Is this the start of WWII? Some feared it might be, but international outcry has been strong and fairly unified. However, it appears this is the dawn of a new Cold War with a Russia pitted against the West. Some believe that Putin sees the dissolution of the Soviet Union as a tragedy and intends for his legacy to be reunification. Many have drawn comparisons to Hitler's invasions of Poland and Czechoslovakia; a blatant violation of international law with no justification.

As we've seen on many occasions, Putin is a paranoid and seasoned liar and manipulator, and now he qualifies as a war criminal, too, according to Geneva Convention of 1949. This is what the convention document would call a "war of choice." He wants the full bread basket of the former Russia empire and he doesn't want a democratic Ukraine to exist. He even claims Ukraine is not a nation. The conflict has simmered for years...this is not new. He claimed, with incredible chutzpah, that his objective was to "de-Nazi-fy the country. A statement made even more offensive by the fact that the Ukrainian President is a Jew who lost relatives in the Holocaust.

Putin claims that this is a justified aggression. But the designation of a “just war” has pretty much gone the way of the dodo bird, according to most political scientists and even among the Catholics who created the doctrine in the first place. The notion of any war being “just” is obscene in my view, although many argue that WWII was a “just war,” and I can see their point to an extent, given the facts and circumstances.

In his piece, entitled It's Not Personal, its Just War, the writer Jeremy Myers notes that when people and nations march off to war, its common to believe their cause is righteous (even in denial), that they are defending themselves against tyranny and that God is on their side. (what God, I wonder?)

He writes: “Go ask a Muslim Jihadist and he will tell you that the violence they engage in against others is holy, right and just. The truth is, he concludes, is that all wars are Just wars or none of them are. And since we know that most wars are not Just wars, we deceive ourselves into thinking that our war is just while their war is evil.

Just war theory originated with Thomas Aquinas in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and was further developed by Francisco de Vitoria in the 15<sup>th</sup>. It seemed like a useful idea at the time...an attempt to curtail warfare and stop evil and violence. The criteria is strict. Consider whether any of these requirements match this lawless invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent death and destruction.

1. A just war can only be waged as a last resort.
2. A war is just only if it is waged by a legitimate authority.
3. A just war can only be fought to redress a wrong suffered.
4. A war is only just if it is fought with a reasonable chance of success.
5. The ultimate goal of a just war is to re-establish peace. (but its still a war, I might add)
6. The violence used in the war must be proportional to the injury suffered.
7. The weapons used in the war must discriminate between combatants and non-combatants. Civilians are never permissible targets of war.

Such calculus is chilling. Does any of that sound like what's happening in the Ukraine or what Putin had in mind? President Obama explained bluntly that “Russia has made this move not because Ukraine posed a threat to Russia but because Ukraine chose a path of sovereignty, self-determination and democracy. For exercising rights that should be available to all people and nations, Ukrainians now face a brutal onslaught that is killing innocents and displacing citizens.”

People of conscience (us!) need to loudly and clearly condemn Russia's actions and offer support for the Ukrainian people. May we join President and Mrs. Obama in praying for the courageous people of Ukraine, for Russian citizens who have bravely declared their opposition to these attacks, and for all who will brave the cost of this senseless war.”

Countries around the world are sanctioning Russia and putting the screws to them. The UN has soundly condemned Russia “in the name of humanity.” Simple peaceful citizens on both sides of this conflict will suffer the most, while it is likely that Russian oligarchs will feel some financial pain but they will survive. In this evil realm, they may even profit.

The Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is pleading to be admitted to NATO, to have allies. And he will not be evacuated. He is standing with his people, come what may even with a target on his back. He appeared in a heartbreaking and chilling video Friday, with this plea: “We’re alone for defense of our country. Who will fight along with us now? To be honest, I see no one.” On Friday, NATO met and is expected to activate their rapid reaction joint force of about 5000 combat ready troops with full air and intelligence support. They have asked Israel to mediate discussions with Russia

Behind Ukraine’s army is another army, the NYT tells us...people like the brave exemplars lifted up in Margaret Wheatley’s piece – I Want to Be A Ukrainian. They are an army of civilian volunteers and activists who for years have propped up the country’s poorly funded military with donated warm clothes, medical equipment, walkie-talkies and even food. A corps of volunteer doctors and paramedics has operated for years along the frontlines of the Eastern Ukraine conflict. There are reports of young Ukrainians stocking up on guns and survival supplies, and signing up for military service.

Even far-right militias throughout Europe are rallying to Ukraine’s defense. 1000s have taken to the streets of St Petersburg and other Russian cities with “No war” chants. Hundreds of thousands are demonstrating in locations all over the world. 2000 Russians have been arrested and their lives are effectively over as dissidents. So brave. At least 200,000 people have streamed over the borders of Ukraine into Poland and other countries and have been welcomed.

This is a fight for democracy and free speech, and in order to squelch dissent about their heinous decision to invade Ukraine, bomb and terrorize its citizenry, the Russian government is also severely curtailing access to Facebook and other social media. If their cause was just, this wouldn’t be necessary, would it?

It's important to remember that all wars are wars against children. Parents in Ukraine are sewing tags with their children’s blood types into their clothing. Let that sink in. We weep for another country being reduced to rubble, for more innocents terrified and potentially bombed out of their homes... and for what? War must stop this, but how? Is it possible? Has humankind become so addicted to armed conflict and numb to the destruction it causes? Are we simply hard wired for war?

Writing in Scientific American magazine in 2018, R. Brian Ferguson asks these questions in his article entitled, “War is not part of Human Nature.” Hawks and doves in this scholarly endeavor disagree. Some claim that the roots of modern wars and genocides go back tens of thousands of years and that they’ve found evidence of war in

small scale societies throughout the prehistoric period. They argue that it was a form of conquest and also natural selection with the fittest prevailing to acquire mates and resources.

One evolutionary theory posits that the instinctual tendency to protect one's tribe morphed over time into group inclinations towards xenophobia (othering). If wars are a natural eruption of instinctive hate leading to the killing of outsiders, then we can grasp why wars continue to proliferate, including this one in Ukraine.

But doves challenge this view – they argue that humans have an obvious capacity for warfare, but their brains are not hardwired to identify and kill outsiders. It was a consequence of societies expanding and becoming more complex beyond the hunter-gatherer cohort. A transition to agriculture formed the basis for the development of political states. It was a social circumstance, and it was about dominance.

As we've seen throughout history, once established as a norm, war has the tendency to spread, with violent people replacing less violent ones...in some cases, dictatorships replacing democracies. We've seen this, we see it today...we must be a peaceful and steadfast sentry against it. As Aristotle wisely noted: "It is not enough to win a war, it is more important to organize for peace."

Ferguson laments that "people are people. They fight and sometimes kill. Humans have always had the capacity to make war, although he agrees with anthropologist Margaret Mead's assessment that "warfare is an invention, not a biological necessity." Humans learned to make war and they can learn to make peace, too. Ferguson notes that it turns out that some societies have distinct preconditions for peace, such as cross group ties of kinship and marriage, cooperation in hunting, agriculture and food sharing. They did not succumb to warfare as a survival strategy.

And peacemaking starts in your own heart, not in the halls of the UN. Gandhi put it well, when he said: Strive to become an expert at living. Be good to those around you in concrete ways. Create an island of peace in your own life. If you do, it will spread. If enough of us do this, our islands will meet, ceasing to be islands and becoming whole continents. World peace exists literally in the actions each one of takes in our own lives.

So, is pacifism the answer, then? Myers argues that pacifism is inherently as self-defeating as Just war theory. Of course, we must stand up for what's right and against evil. Yes, we must advocate for peace, but sometimes an active stance requires the kind of armed defense we are seeing in Ukraine. The third way, as it's known, is non-violent resistance – the way of Martin Luther King, Jr. Gandhi and Thich Nhat Han, among others. It stands up to evil where it is found, but with a commitment to do so non-violently. It's just so hard to do this in a world bathed in violence, especially as there are no clear steps for non-violent resistance like there are in warfare. 'Tis more the pity.

How do we show the world a different and better way to harmony and peace than the way it knows? How do our principles come into play for us as Unitarian Universalists?

Every week, we light candles for conflicts and catastrophes, near and far. They are heartfelt, but often we move on. I'm not judging us. There is so much to carry right now...it can be paralyzing and numbing rather than energizing and activating.

Last week I attended an online program called "Empathy, Exhaustion and Social Change." Empathy plays a role in how we can connect deeply with wars like this one happening 1000s of miles away from Flagstaff. People often define empathy as walking a mile in someone's shoes. But the truth is, if you do that, you end up a mile away from them...and with their shoes! True empathy is being well grounded in your own shoes and compassion, and walking alongside another, striving to center their experience and understand their feelings. How can we each empathically center the experience of Ukrainians right now?

All the sermons and breathing meditations and prayers and joys and sorrows stones in the world won't make a difference unless we take some sort of action afterwards. We must preach peace every day, in the name of humanity. We might ask ourselves – How can I connect to this crisis as a Unitarian Universalist? Look to our 6<sup>th</sup> principle...the goal of world community, with peace, liberty and justice for all...and make it real. There are dozens of organizations helping Ukraine right now. Google "Help for Ukraine." You'll find many options there.

Glory to the defenders of Ukraine. May they prevail. This week, I am uniquely aware of my Ukrainian roots. As lovers of democracy and peacemakers, we are all Ukrainians. And I'd like to believe that if I was under siege in Kyiv or in the village of my Grandma's birth, I would exemplify the kind of Ukrainian that Margaret Wheatley describes in her poem. May I recognize my imperative to be that person now, remotely and actively, right where I stand.

So that, " In my maturity, I will be glad to teach you the cost of acquiescence, the price of silence, the peril of retreat.

That I will teach you all that I have learned,  
the strength of fearlessness, the peace of conviction,  
the strange source of hope  
and that I will die well, having been a Ukrainian."

Blessed be. Blessed we. Blessed be the people of Ukraine. Amen.

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