

Peace, Liberty and Justice for All©  
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet  
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Three weeks ago I stood before you and stated that Unitarian Universalists dream big. We dare to dream of community that encompasses all of the world's people. 7.6 billion people is a really big community. Yet while the idea of world community is immense, it is only one aspect of an even grander dream contained in our Sixth Principle—the dream of peace, liberty and justice for all. As our reading by Lao-Tzu indicates, aspects of that dream predate Unitarian Universalism by at least six thousand years. The dream then is not only big; it is long-lasting. For centuries it has been passed from generation to generation. Sages and teachers from cultures around the globe have been inspiring us to embrace and enliven the dream across the ages. After all that time though, we have not yet been able to actualize it. In spite of this, or maybe because of this, the dream lives on. Clearly, the dream has staying power. Today, the dream deserves, and desperately needs, our attention and our efforts.

Through the course of time there have been many people within our religious tradition who have held the dream and worked to make it a reality. John Adams, the second President of this country and a Unitarian, was one such person. Adams was a delegate to, although not present at, the convention of 1787, where the Constitution was crafted. At the time of the convention he was in Europe. This was a few years before the internet so he didn't have the opportunity to actively participate in writing or signing the Constitution. Yet while he was absent, many of his ideas and dreams became part of this important document. His support for independence from Great Britain along with a lifelong opposition to slavery offer examples of his belief in and advocacy for the ideals contained in our Sixth Principle. His efforts to further the dream helped establish the foundation for the peace, liberty and justice that many in our country enjoy. His dedication to the dream has had an immense and positive impact on millions of people. Significant numbers of people however are denied the peace, liberty and justice they deserve.

To cite even a small portion of the multitude of areas where peace, liberty and justice are being denied would take longer than any of us would want to sit and listen to. Just thinking about such a long list could cause even the most optimistic of us to become discouraged or even disillusioned about the dream. My intention here though is not to discourage but to encourage. It is not to disillusion but to inspire.

Maybe I am grandiose, or possibly even delusional in my thinking here. Maybe so, but I imagine there were those who thought John Adams was grandiose and delusional in his time as well. You be the judge.

With all of the places where the dream of peace, liberty and justice for all is unfulfilled, where can we look to find encouragement and inspiration. It seems to me one place we can look is to the LGBTQ community. The advancements that have been achieved just in my lifetime are quite incredible. When I was young, there wasn't a single legal protection in any city or state in the nation for a person who identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender or Queer. In fact, in many places there were very regressive and punitive laws against an array of behaviors between consenting same-sex adults. Prejudice, discrimination and harassment were rampant toward folks thought

to be anything other than heterosexual, as well as those who might demonstrate patterns of behavior considered incongruent with the person's birth gender.

Our national organization, the Unitarian Universalist Association, was one of the first religious organizations in the country to advocate for the LGBTQ community to be granted the same rights to peace, liberty and justice as everyone else. At the 1970 General Assembly a resolution was proposed and passed calling for an end to discrimination against people who identified as homosexual and bisexual. In 1987 the delegates at General Assembly passed a Business Resolution to support legal equity for gays and lesbians and in 1996 a resolution was passed supporting the right of same-sex couples to marry. Today, many more religious denominations are following our lead and advocating for equal rights and equal respect for members of the LGBTQ community.

Changes began occurring following the passage of each of these UUA resolutions. In March of 1972, East Lansing, Michigan passed the first nondiscrimination law focused on protecting members of the LGBT community. I was a student at Michigan State University that year and remember reading about the ordinance in the student newspaper. I had no idea then how significant the passage of that ordinance was. Since that first nondiscrimination ordinance was passed, multitudes of cities, counties and even some states followed with their own ordinances and laws. The first legal same-sex marriage in this country occurred in Massachusetts a mere 14 years ago in May of 2004. Just 11 years after that, in June of 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court made same-sex marriage legal in all 50 states. And the expansion of the dream for equal treatment for the LGBTQ community continues beyond the borders of our country. As of last year, same-sex marriage was legal in 26 countries around the world. In 2011 the United Nations got involved in the issue when it voted to authorize the United Nations Human Rights Council to draft a report "documenting discriminatory laws, and practices and acts of violence against individuals based on their sexual orientation and gender identity."

As you likely noticed, so far I have mentioned only the positive accomplishments. The push-back and set-backs have been there throughout the years. In spite of that, many people have held the dream that someday the LGBTQ community would attain equal rights to peace, liberty and justice. That said, with the political climate what it is today, the gains which have been made are being assaulted on numerous fronts. Today, the dream is being attacked and chipped away at, which is the reason the dream is so important.

But how do we continue to hold the dream—not just the dream related to the LGBTQ community but the much larger dream I mentioned of peace, liberty and justice for all? In almost any direction we look, life presents situations where each of these, peace, liberty and justice, are lacking or under threat. As I mentioned earlier, the list of situations where the dream doesn't match reality is immense. The constant onslaught of real life experiences can challenge even the grandest of dreamers. In the face of such challenge each and every one of us needs respite and renewal.

It is here that the great teachers through the ages have something very important to offer us. It is here that teachers such as Lao-tsu and Mohandas Gandhi remind us to turn our focus inward. Yes, you heard me correctly. When we are face to face with such things as persecution, injustice, and even war they tell us to turn inward.

The reading by Lao-tsu begins with the big dream, the dream of world peace. He writes; “If there is to be peace in the world, there must be peace in the nations.” While he begins with the grand scale, he concludes this teaching at the level of each individual. “If there is to be peace in the home, there must be peace in the heart.” Gandhi, on the other hand, begins with the individual. “If someone with courage and vision can rise to lead in nonviolent action, the winter of despair can, in the twinkling of an eye, be turned into the summer of hope.” He goes on, in echo of Lao-tsu, to center attention on the heart:

Nonviolence is not a garment to put on and off at will. Its seat is in the heart, and it must be an inseparable part of our being. Nonviolence, which is a quality of the heart, cannot come by an appeal to the brain. It is a plant of slow growth, growing imperceptibly, but surely. If a single person achieves the highest kind of love it will be sufficient to neutralize the hate of millions.

Then, in the following sentence he speaks to the dream of world peace. Both of these great teachers and leaders advise us to attend to the place deep in our chest, in our heart, to keep the dream alive. The dream may exist in our head but if it is to remain vibrant and alive it must be nourished and sustained within our heart.

It seems that every day we are reminded that peace, liberty and justice for all remains an ideal and not yet a reality. The opportunities to focus our attention and energy on a cause in our community, our state, our nation, and our world are innumerable. Selecting a cause or causes and then putting time and energy there is important and beneficial—but as both Lao-tsu and Gandhi make clear, it is not sufficient.

Focusing only outward will not make the dream come true. And focusing only outward will not keep the dream alive. To keep the dream alive we must also attend to our own heart. We must grow our capacity for love and compassion, for those around us as well as for ourselves.

Jesus spoke to the importance of love when he was asked which of the commandments was most important. His answer was two-fold. The second portion of his answer was to love your neighbor as yourself. What I find very interesting is that even here there are two parts. Initially it seems that what comes first is to love your neighbor. The focus on your neighbor is external. If we take a moment to really consider this statement, however, we will soon realize that loving one’s neighbor isn’t actually the first step. The first step involves loving one’s self. What Jesus is speaking of here isn’t a self-absorbed or shallow type of love. That type of love will never allow us to appropriately or adequately love our neighbor. The type of love he is referring to is a love that involves great caring and concern. It is a love that is wide and deep, a love that can completely fill our hearts. It is a love that can provide inner peace. It is a love that can nourish and sustain our dreams. It is a love that can include every person on earth

as our neighbor. That, I believe, is what Gandhi was getting at when he referred to the “highest kind of love” which “will be sufficient to neutralize the hate of millions.” We may have difficulty comprehending or accepting such a proposition but leaders such as Gandhi and Nelson Mandela demonstrate the power that such love can have.

As we strive to make peace, liberty, and justice for all a reality then, let us remember that our attention cannot be singularly focused on the external world. Yes, one part of our attention needs to be on the work we do in the world whenever and wherever we are able. Another part of our attention though needs to be on that which is more personal, more individual. It is to expand our capacity to open our hearts to love. Both of these things take time, commitment and determination. Both parts are required to keep the dream alive. As we go forth today, may we recommit ourselves to the dream and to the love that will be required to keep it alive in the days, months, years and even centuries to come. Let us continue to dream and to love big.

May it be so.