

The Risk of Peace
Sunday, May 13, 2018

On August 10, 1976, something remarkable happened. In Belfast, Northern Ireland, at the height of the Troubles, a car sped down a residential street. It was an IRA get-away car, fleeing after shooting at British soldiers patrolling the area. The soldiers shot at the car and hit the driver, who later died. When he lost control of the wheel, the car swerved, running up onto the sidewalk, hitting a mother and her three children who were backed against a fence, trying to get away. The mother was badly injured, but survived. The three children, along with the car's driver, died.

Unfortunately, such violence wasn't remarkable in Northern Ireland at that time. The remarkable thing happened next. Betty Williams, a 32 year old mother of two children, was driving by, saw the attack and the hurt children and pulled over to help. As she looked at the wrecked car and crushed bodies, she later said it was like a dam burst inside her. She felt she had to stop this violence and the terror it bred. She couldn't cower inside her home any more. Instead, she thought, "Now – for heaven's sake – something must be done." Without stopping to plan, she began knocking on doors up and down the street inviting people to work with her to create peace. Within days, 6,000 people, Protestants and Catholics, had signed her petition. She called for a peace walk and 200 women marched in Belfast for peace. The walk went by the home of Mairead (Muh-raid) Corrigan, the aunt of the three children who had been killed. She came out of her house to join the march, and ended up joining Betty Williams in organizing Women for Peace. Next, they organized a march to the graveyard where the three children were buried. Ten thousand women turned out. But so did members of the IRA who yelled at the women that they were dupes of the British, that they could never make peace peacefully, and, when they continued to walk, physically attacked them. The women turned back, but a week later, they were back, this time with thirty five thousand people, marching for peace.

Despite their words and the numbers in the streets, pundits and politicians and leaders of the Catholic and Protestant factions dismissed their efforts. The conflict was so deeply rooted, the hatred between Protestants and Catholics so ingrained, that peace seemed unobtainable, a dream. Terror and violence were so much a part of people's lives that living with them seemed normal. Almost everyone was resigned to the way things were. But not Betty Williams and not Mairead Corrigan.

Although threatened themselves, they refused to be silenced. They had a vision of a world where children played in safety, where Catholics and Protestants could walk into each other's neighborhoods without fear of attack, where neighbors didn't worry about informants next door turning them in, and they invited everyone to join them to make that vision real. They invited people to reconciliation. And it was as if their words and actions freed the people of Northern Ireland to see as if for the first time that the way things were wasn't the way they had to be. They saw that they weren't powerless, that they were allowing the violence to govern them, and that they could break its power.

So men and women, Protestants and Catholics, continued to come together and demonstrate for peace. They tore down barbed wire barriers which separated their neighborhoods and began to talk with one another. They began to understand each other's sorrow as well as their hopes. They began to see past the labels and the histories and the hurt which had divided them, and to find their connections. That's the remarkable thing that began on that August day in 1976.

A year and a half later, Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan were awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace. In presenting the award, the vice chairman of the committee said,

Love of one's neighbour is one of the foundation stones of the humanism on which our western civilisation is built. But it is vital that we should have the courage to sustain this love of our neighbour in the very circumstances when the pressure to abandon it is at its greatest - otherwise it is of little worth. This is why it is so important that it should shine forth when hatred and revenge threaten to dominate....

Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan have shown us what ordinary people can do to promote the cause of peace. They have taught us that the peace for which we strive is something that has to be won within and through the individual human being. This is the message to which they have given renewed force through their activities.

It seems appropriate to celebrate these two women today on Mothers' Day, along with Julia Ward Howe and Rachel Carson. Betty Williams and Julia Ward Howe were the only ones who were actually mothers at the time of their work for peace, but they were all mothers to the world – they all helped to bring to birth new understandings and efforts for the health and wholeness of all people. They remind us, men and women, those of us with children in our nuclear families and those without, that each of us is called to take up the work of peace. That, as Betty Williams realized, she needed to stop waiting for someone else to come along, and

start knocking on doors. This isn't just the message of activism, but the message of our faith as well.

Thursday in the Christian calendar was Ascension Day. As I say every year, Ascension Day is the most important holy day you've never heard of. For our Universalist ancestors, though, Ascension Day and Pentecost, which falls next Sunday, and All Souls Day in November, were the most important days in the church year, more important than Christmas or Easter. Because Christmas and Easter are about Jesus. And Ascension Day, Pentecost, and All Souls Day are about us. As Universalist Christians, they understood Jesus not as a person who brought humankind a salvation from above, but as someone who taught us what we needed to do – that we needed to move ourselves into the creative flow of the universe, aligning ourselves with the power of love and justice, so that that power might flow through us into the world. The story of Ascension Day was the start of that good news for them. According to the story told by Luke in his gospel and in his story of the early Christian community in the book of Acts, after Easter, Jesus repeatedly appeared to his friends, trying to give them courage and help them to understand all that they had misunderstood during his lifetime. After 40 days, a powerful number in the stories of the Bible, he decided that they were good to go. So he gathered them for one last conversation, blessed them, and then was lifted up out of their sight into a cloud. Then 10 days later on the Jewish festival of Shavuot (in Greek known as Pentecost) which celebrates the giving of the Ten Commandments, when they were all gathered in Jerusalem, waiting to discern how to take up Jesus' work, they found themselves filled with the spirit which had spoken through Jesus, and they began preaching the good news of love and justice. Ascension Day and Pentecost celebrate that that same spirit breathes and speaks in each of us. Each of us is called to take the risk of bringing peace.

And it is risky to speak out for peace. Julia Ward Howe and Rachel Carson were attacked venomously by those who opposed them. Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan were physically attacked as well as having the motives and their personal lives smeared. Just think what happens on Scituate Monthly if you try to calm a heated discussion. Being peacemakers can be dangerous. In the short run at least, it is safer to hide in your home, hoping that you can keep yourself and your family safe whatever may happen to others. But that is not peace – that is living in fear. Peace is not safety. Peace is the absence of fear.

So how can we on this Mothers' Day, this day of peace, recommit ourselves to work for peace? There are so many ways to start! We can get out into the streets and march – every year on Mothers' Day, people from across the state gather in

Boston to walk for peace. The walk started in 1996 as a way to make visible the number of mothers who had lost children to violence – to offer them support and to show the effects of violence in our community. Many Unitarian Universalist churches send teams of walkers – we could join them next year.

We could join the new Scituate chapter of Moms Demand Sense for Gun Safety – which is not limited to Moms or even to women. They are working right now to encourage the state legislature to pass Extreme Risk Protective Orders bill which would allow a judge to order the removal of guns from the home of someone found by the court to be a danger to themselves or to others.

We could learn from Julianna Dunn about being court watchers in Massachusetts, gathering information on how unspoken biases around race are a factor in the court system.

We could get involved in one of the groups supporting children whose parents are in prison. Or become a mentor through the College Behind Bars program as other area UU congregations are doing.

We could become more involved in the work of the Unity Council in Scituate to look at issues of race, privilege, and diversity. This is all the work of peace.

But we could also renew our efforts to care for the environment protesting the current administration's attempt to weaken standards of protection. That is the work of peace also.

And we could also promote peace within our community – encouraging direct and honest communication, encouraging one another not to let hurts or slights fester, but discussing them with the person or people involved, embodying reconciliation and compassion.

As Betty Williams said, "Peace in the world is everybody's business, no matter where you live or what you do." After church I invite you talk to one another about the activities you want to engage in to plant and grow peace. For whatever our gender, whether we are mothers or not, promoting the health and growth of those in our care is the meaning of mothering. Happy Mothers' Day!

- Pamela M. Barz