

«Compassionate Listening and Peacemaking»

Sermon by Jan Hutton, May 31, 2009

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

I will be sharing with you, today, my experience of the Compassionate Listening Project, a non-profit based in Seattle, WA, which has local, national and internationally based programming.

Compassionate Listening is based on one core principle that we've witnessed over and over in our many years of teaching and peace-making around the world: that the greatest resource for peace-building that each one of us has, is our own heart. We believe that each one of us is responsible for contributing to the culture of peace on a daily basis. It's not just our leaders we are waiting for – we are waiting for each one of us – we have enormous capacities to contribute to peace in our world every day.

I'd like to share some words from Gene Knudsen Hoffman, on whose work *Compassionate Listening* is based. Gene is a therapist, writer, international Quaker peace activist, and long-time student of the Vietnamese Buddhist teacher and writer, Thich Nhat Hahn:

“Peacemaking is a healing process and it begins with me, but it does not end there. If I go into the world to make peace through coercion, or to prove the righteousness of my position – there is no way I can come to reconciliation with another. For reconciliation to occur, I need to build a bridge to the humanity of my opposition, and have enough humility to know that I don't have all the truth on my side” (Gene Knudsen Hoffman).

First, *peacemaking is a healing process and it begins with me*. Most of society's ills live in each of us – why not we're human beings touched by personal, social and cultural challenges as we grow up. We may be wounded and those wounds lead us to become reactive and defensive when we're triggered by something. What is our responsibility to learn to shift from those reactive, defensive places to a more compassionate, yes, whole-hearted place. So Yes, I bear significant responsibility in peacemaking and reconciliation. And, I try to live it at the level of my daily life since I cannot think of a more effective place to translate my principles of peacemaking into an ongoing practice.

Second, Hoffman also addressed *building bridges to the humanity of the opposition*. John Hope Franklin, the late and noted Duke historian died recently, and a colleague said this about him:

*“He worked on a crucial brief for *Brown v. Board of Education*, he marched in Selma, he lectured all over the world and he taught all of America to see through his uncompromising eye. But it was not just what he did but how he did it that marked his greatness. He understood that the public good was not merely a set of substantive outcomes; it is also defined by how we go about reconciling our competing visions of that public good. It is about how we view one another when*

we peer across the great divides of policy, preference, political party and personhood. John Hope Franklin looked at those who opposed him and saw fellow human beings.”

What does it take to perceive the person on the other side of the bridge as a human being, just as you are and I am, not as someone I demonize and dehumanize. What does it take for us to identify with one another's sorrows and joys so we can reach beneath the painful words that cause a breach. Teaching heart-based skills are speaking from the Heart with Language that Reflects a Healing Intention.

And, third, to *have enough humility to know that I don't have all the truth on my side.*”

Here some words from Gene Hoffman:

“In 1980, I had a life-changing experience. I was on a world tour of peace centers to learn what new ideas I could bring back to the USA. Outside the London Quaker Meeting, I saw a huge sign which said: "Meeting for Worship for the torturers and the tortured". I'd long known I should listen to the tortured-but listen to the torturers? “

“I soon realized that without listening to the enemy I could not make informed decisions. If I was an advocate for one side, I would never know the causes of the oppositions' anger and violence, and I couldn't possibly know the suffering they had endured.. So when I arrived in Israel, I began listening to Israelis and Palestinians. I found it changed my perspectives on each. I began to practice listening to both sides everywhere I went.”

How can we sit in judgment on someone whose story we have not lived? This is the idea that once you truly hear another's story, and understand their grievances and sufferings, it becomes more difficult to consider that person as an enemy. You may disagree with them utterly, or find their actions abhorrent, but even so you will see them as a human being. I call this peacemaking one heart at a time.

Compassionate Listening should not be confused with mediation or conflict resolution. We are not looking at negotiated outcomes, we are looking at the roots of discord. In those roots, we hope to discover the human-ness of the participants. It's our hope that a lasting resolution is built on this foundation of mutual understanding.

Healing from the inside out - when there can be no overt reconciliation – helps me to remember “that I live in all beings, and all beings live in me” building a bridge to their humanity. How can I find compassion for their frailties and wounds as I would hope others might find compassion for mine. This does not mean that I stop working for peace and social justice, but that I'm doing the work with an open heart.

Science of compassion. Heaven know everything can be measured these days. Our brains learns new skills by building neural networks, actual connections between brain cells.. If you think of compassion as a skill like playing the violin riding, or riding a horse, then the brain must also learn this skill by developing a neural network. This is a case of “*thinking* you're a compassionate

person does not do the job, but actually *practicing* it does". Do I sound like your mother saying "Go to your room and practice your compassion, dear?"

Finally, I treasure this quotation from the American poet Longfellow: "If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each person's life, sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility."