

Taking a Stand for Peace in the Middle East  
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship  
October 15, 2006

The story of Ishmael and Isaac touches me because I have two older brothers whom I love. They are, each of them, beautiful and compassionate, successful and responsible, handsome and gifted. My parents couldn't have wished for more, nor I'm sure, could they have had greater dreams for them. Like Ishmael and Isaac, they each received blessings and prayers at their birth that promised them to God and promised to them the fullness of life.

My oldest brother got good grades, starred on the basketball team, was president of his senior class, followed the faith of our father, and settled into a comfortable life as an attorney and a community leader.

My other brother lived in the elder's shadow, and worked mightily to ultimately achieve an admirable life as a builder and a father. This second brother has a ton of great friends, a wonderful sense of humour, four incredible kids, and knows how to fix just about anything.

From my perspective, each of my brothers is an amazing man. They are different people, and I couldn't choose between them to save my soul. They share the landscape that is my life, and my life wouldn't be whole without them.

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Today's topic was inspired by a couple of things. First, I wanted to share with you a conversation that took place among the UU Ministers of Canada about peace in the Middle East and the resulting action that was taken. Second, I hoped to make a connection between our theme for the year – On What Do We Stand – and a global issue such as this. Our sixth principle states that we affirm

and promote the goal of a world community with peace, liberty and justice for all...a lofty and worthy goal. But, sometimes I'm stymied as to what such a goal requires of us. What exactly does it mean, and what impact can it possibly have, for us to stand here and call for peace in a war-torn and far away place?

Rev. Steven Epperson of the Unitarian Church of Vancouver was the driving force behind an action taken by many UU Ministers of Canada this summer. The action came in the form of a letter calling for a cease-fire and an international peace conference, and you will find a copy of it in your order of service...it is something for you to take home and to study, to endorse and to send to your MP and others as you'd like. The letter was based upon and inspired by a full-page appeal that appeared in the July 31 issue of the New York Times written by "The Network of Spiritual Progressives." Speaking of it to his congregation last month, Rev. Epperson said, "One outcome of the Hezbollah attacks on Israel and Israel's assault on Lebanon and the Gaza Strip was, for me, unanticipated: as a Unitarian minister, I had an obligation to do and say something publicly..." (and later) "I need a place to stand; I need concepts and a narrative through which from out of the chaos I can arrive at some tentative place of understanding so that I will not lose my mind, my heart, my will, and ultimately my hope."<sup>1</sup>

The conversation among our ministers about the letter, which involved countless emails over several weeks, was an illuminating one for me. I like to hold the illusion that Unitarians are in agreement on all things political, and although I'm not really that naïve, it still surprises me when I'm confronted with our differences. Throughout that conversation, I tried to listen in order to understand each voice. How had each arrived at their position, and how did it serve both them and the world? Was it grounded in experience? feelings?

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<sup>1</sup> "Autonomy and Home", Steven Epperson, 9/17/06, Unitarian Church of Vancouver

knowledge? What might I learn from these diverse positions? Some felt that writing a letter was despairingly futile. Others felt that such a letter would be sanctimonious, and that we had no place or right to take a stand on something we aren't intimately involved in. Still others could not agree with the position the letter takes. I found that we are a diverse group, all struggling to find footing on this difficult issue. In this, we are something of a microcosm of the world, and our disagreement, even in what one might consider a relatively homogenous group, hints at one reason this issue seems impossible to solve.

I signed that letter proudly and warily. Its position is one I agree with, even if I can't pretend to understand the ramifications of each position statement. And, as a new minister, I was happy to add my name to a list of other ministers, many of whom I've now met and come to respect. In some way, I suppose, these colleagues gave me Ruby Mae's big hat<sup>2</sup>...a voice that could be heard. And yet, there was a part of me that wondered what possible difference words on a page could make. As the destruction and death toll in Lebanon escalated, as what some call the "Apartheid wall" grew, and continues to grow, in length and height, as the sanctions and restrictions continued to crush the people of the West Bank and Gaza, the political rhetoric turned my stomach, and hopelessness stood at my door, knocking to be let in.

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You know how it is when you open a door to something and then you can't shut it again? This is what happened for me when, almost three years ago now, I participated in a delegation to Israel and Palestine. That trip opened a door for me to that holiest of lands, creating an opening, or better, a vortex, that pulls me to explore, to understand, to learn more. I was changed by that trip.

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<sup>2</sup> Reference to the story for all ages "Ruby Mae Has Something to Say", David Small

Our small group from the Graduate Theological Union met with organizations on both sides of the green line, groups working for peace across barriers of race, religion, class, age and gender. Some are Jewish, some Muslim, some Christian. Some are Israeli, some Palestinian, some American, some Norwegian. Some focus on education, some on advocacy, some on relief. But they all have a vision and a hope that the work that they do will make a difference...that somehow, someday, barriers of difference, barriers of fear, and even barriers of concrete will come down, and peace will prevail in a land that has known little but conflict for thousands of years.

Over and over we asked how they go on. At the YMCA that works to rehabilitate those maimed in the intifadas we asked...where do you find hope to keep going? At the refugee camp where people are living like sardines in concrete block boxes...how can you keep working to empower your children? With Palestinians who are suffering incredibly high unemployment under the shadow of rich, walled Israeli settlements...why don't you just give up? With the Druze in the Golan Heights, living amidst landmines, within sight of their families in Syria but unable to cross the border to see them...what makes it possible for you to sustain community? With the people at the International Center in Bethlehem, Mitri and Sami and Nuha and Lala, people working to restore some sense of normalcy under military occupation by insisting upon maintaining their culture...Over and over we wondered, do you really think you can make a difference?

Rafit Kassis, the director of the East Bethlehem YMCA, tried to explain it to us. He believes that hopelessness and apathy are privileges that are available only to those who have that option. I think that what he meant was that the choice is much clearer when one's back is up against a wall. In that position, you cannot look away, and there are only literally two choices, hope or

hopelessness...action or apathy... life or death... and to choose hopelessness is a choice for death.

You see, we do have the luxury of choice. From our position of distance and comfort, it is possible to ignore the issues or to choose mind-numbing activities. It is possible to say, “ah, it’s hopeless” and to turn away without endangering our survival. But here’s what we need to learn about this. Choosing hopelessness is to buy into a short-sighted, fearful and defeatist perspective that seeks to overpower the truth about human nature. Hopelessness does not trust that what is possible can ever be. The truth is that humanity is infinitely capable. We have, all of us, the capacity to be welcoming to, generous with, and loving toward each other. We are capable of living in peace. So, choosing hopelessness does threaten our survival because it kills what is best in us and blinds us to all that we can do and be. Indeed, choosing hopelessness is a choice for death.

Hope gets a bad rap, I know. It’s sometimes seen as naïve or misguided. And I agree...our hope cannot be an empty thing. It is worthless if it is insipid or Pollyanna-ish. Our hope must be the rock on which we stand. It must be solid and of palpable substance.

In preparing for today’s service, I read a new book entitled “*The Tent of Abraham: Stories of Hope and Peace for Jews, Christians, and Muslims.*” It was written, along with a Christian nun named Joan Chittister, by the Jew and the Muslim who crafted the narrative that Trudi read a few minutes ago. Its title refers to Abram’s tent, a tent reputed to be open in all directions, a tent from which he runs out to welcome strangers and to offer hospitality. His welcome, his willingness to see each face as that of a brother, resulted in an encounter with

God. I feel like I had such an encounter with this book, because it provided an important insight that has helped me to ground my hope in something solid.

The book lays out the story of Ishmael and Isaac in a new way. In it, we see the birth of three great religions within one family. Isaac, who begat Israel, and Ishmael, who begat Islam, are brothers. They're brothers. My Christian upbringing lied to me. It told me that Ishmael was a bastard who deserved to be outcast. It told me that God had turned away from Ishmael. But I see now that this is not true. This is not how the story goes. God made a covenant with Abram saying that he would give this land to his descendents.<sup>3</sup> His descendents. Not just to Isaac. Both sons are blessed.

Now perhaps boys will be boys, and brothers will be brothers, but my two brothers have a similar problem. Even now, as adults, sibling rivalry tarnishes their relationship. I can't really understand it. My best analysis is that the younger is somehow victimized by his 'lesser' birthright position, or maybe by imagined inadequacies measured on some scale that no one else sees. The elder is blind to these feelings, and as a result sometimes acts in ways that might be interpreted as judgmental or insensitive. Of course they're civil to one another, yet it seems to me that they grow further apart as we get older. It saddens me. I wonder how these old and ingrained hurts can be healed and I feel helpless to do anything about it. They are brothers...why can't they coexist in peace and love?

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What ultimately drew Isaac and Ishmael back together, some sixty to seventy years after Hagar was expelled into the desert, is significant. They came together to bury their father. They come together in grief. They come together to mark the passing of a man who had been willing to sacrifice each of them. And

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 15:18

equally significant is that the word for their presence together, in that grief, is from the same root as the word shekkinah, the word in Hebrew for God's presence in the world.<sup>4</sup>

God's presence...the presence of peace, the hope of reconciliation, a vision of harmony...is achieved by being present with one another, sharing our grief, and recognizing the other as family. In the words of Adrienne Rich, "my heart is moved by all I cannot save; so much has been destroyed."<sup>5</sup> By fighting we lose so much. It is in recognition of what we have lost that we can come together to attempt to reconstitute the world.

There is an organization born out of the intifadas. It is called "Israeli-Palestinian Bereaved Families for Peace", and was begun by two men...one an Israeli whose son was kidnapped and killed by the Hamas, the other a Palestinian whose brother was killed by Israeli troops at a checkpoint. Grief has brought them into one another's presence. In 2002, a delegation representing 350 families from this organization traveled to the United States where they assembled more than 1000 coffins in front of the United Nations. Their tears are a reminder of what they share, and in powerful witness to that shared experience, they work for peace.<sup>6</sup>

At a conference held near the Dead Sea in 2004 by the Women's Partnership for Peace in the Middle East, Jewish, Palestinian and Christian women spoke simply about that fact that it was the presence of the other...the understanding, the mutual grief and the lingering pain...that brought peace and

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<sup>4</sup> Tent of Abraham, 64

<sup>5</sup> Singing the Living Tradition, #463

<sup>6</sup> [www.mideastweb.org/familyforumcoffins.htm](http://www.mideastweb.org/familyforumcoffins.htm)

healing to each of them.<sup>7</sup> Again, it is the recognition of a timeless truth...a shared humanity, the family that holds us all... in this we find peace.

Palestinians and Israelis, Muslims and Jews, are very much alike. They are born of the same father, and dream of the same home. They each hold sacred one piece of rock in Jerusalem and yearn to govern it alone. Both have been marginalized, crying out from ghettos and refugee camps. And both seem unable to hear the other's outcry. They are hardened.

I remember thinking that the holy land was a place of rocks, and in that respect Thunder Baynians might find it familiar. Rocks make up the landscape. They have been thrown at tanks, collected to build walls, used to stake out tents of welcome, gathered to mark holy shrines, and literally killed for. We work with what we have. We use our resources for good or for evil, to harm or to heal, and this is the choice we have. We can hoard or share, turn away or welcome, prejudge or work to understand. There is always a choice.

God promised to make a nation of both Ishmael and Isaac.<sup>8</sup> The land is not the land of Israel, it is the land of Abraham, and both Ishmael and Isaac are Abraham's sons.<sup>9</sup> Their very existence as two different people proves that there is more than one way to fulfill the divine purpose,<sup>10</sup> more than one place of fatherly favour, more than one chosen. This is not a story of separation, a story of a hardened and permanent split in the family tree; rather, buried deep in their collective story is a hope for connection, a story of love and promise aplenty for each, a story whose vision is yet to be fulfilled.

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<sup>7</sup> Tent of Abraham, 92.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 17:19-20, 21:13; 22:18

<sup>9</sup> Chittister, Joan, Chishti, Murshid Saadi Shakur, and Waskow, Arthur, *The Tent of Abraham: Stories of Hope and Peace for Jews, Christians, and Muslims* (Beacon Press: Boston, 2006), 65

<sup>10</sup> Tent of Abraham, 151

We can play a part in the fulfillment of that vision by taking a stand and speaking up and acting out, in every way and every day, for things that will connect us and remind us of all of what we share as a global family. We can embrace the possibility of a better way.

We may take that stand in different ways, but let me be clear that it does not take extraordinary power. Ed recently suggested to me that we sell Palestinian-produced olive oil during the holidays. We can write letters, educate others, or put on a huge hat and get involved in politics. Some of us may be moved to become actively involved in hands-on work – here or even there. Steven Epperson’s answer to my question ‘what can we do?’ is to find an organization that is doing work that builds bridges of connection and then to support it as best we can. I can be an advocate for peace between my brothers by reminding them that they are each beloved sons with an indisputable stake in a rich and limitless inheritance. We can all be advocates for peace – in our hearts, in our homes, in our city, in our nation, in our world. And we can all keep the hope alive.

Se be it.