

**SERMON**  
**for September 23, 2018**

**TURNING AND TURNING: Can You Influence the Moral Arc of the Universe?**  
Rev. Jack Donovan – Unitarian Universalist Church - St. Petersburg, Florida

**READINGS** (texts printed below, after sermon)

<b><u>Gathering</u></b>	<i>Thoughts</i> from Theodore Parker, Lao Tzu, Francis of Assisi
<b><u>Invocation</u></b>	<i>An International Day of Peace</i> , adapted from the U.N. Declaration
<b><u>Meditation</u></b>	<i>On Peace</i> – from Baha'i, Buddhist, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Protestant, Quaker
<b><u>Benediction</u></b>	<i>This We Know</i> , from Chief Seattle to President Franklin Pierce

**SERMON**

Unitarian Universalism is founded as a religion on belief in the worth and dignity of every person and on belief in each person's potential to experience and learn enough about existence to fulfill that worth and dignity. Individual worth and dignity is the first value we affirm and promote in our denominational covenant of caring. I see achieving it as the first stage in human spiritual development, leading in time to stages of appreciating and caring for the worth and dignity of community and of all existence.

As the first source from which we learn, the Unitarian Universalist covenant points to our own individual direct experience of being and life, followed thereafter by learning from wise people in our lives, and then from humankind's wisdom traditions of religion, philosophy, and science, and in time from our own ripened reflections. Each of these sources of understanding is ours to help develop our own faiths, our own understandings of life and how to live.

These paths constitute our spiritual and faith process. We are a process religion, with a process theology, a process anthropology, a process ecology, and a process cosmology. Generally, among many other things, we believe in the realities of cosmic evolution and individual development.

On the previous two Sundays here, I asked that we begin our new church year by pondering the nature of the beginning of all things, the Beginner's Mind, the nature of the Source of all being and the nature of the potentials of all beings that evolve from the Source. I for one favor the view that the Source, or what is expressed from the Source, is an unimaginably creative energy – an energy of pure goodness, if moral labels can apply to the non-dual singular point of origin. From that Source, through the vibrations of its fields and forces and particles, comes energy, time, space, light, and matter. Eastern peoples often call this originating energy *Chi* or *Brahmin*; Western peoples often call it *Grace* or *Soul*; and some of the most ancient peoples often called it *Spirit*.

And I favor the view that there is no other originating power for our universe than this gracious creative energy – no original co-creating evil force, malicious in intent, injurious in effect - not

even a “Tester” kind of being, as with Satan in the Book of Job. You may differ or still be pondering. I’d love to hear.

For right now, on this day of hope and commitment to international peace, I’d like to go on and ask us to ponder whether a human being can influence the Source of Being – influence it as to its nature and as to the unfolding of this universe of potentials it creates. In traditional words, Can we change God’s mind and God’s influence on existence?

In a sermon having to do with the abolition of slavery, published in 1853, the Unitarian minister Theodore Parker said, “Look at the facts of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right.” He added, “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one; my eye reaches but a little way. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight - though I can divine it by conscience. But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.” This is a kind of predetermination – positive, but unusual coming from a Transcendentalist Unitarian.

Julia Ward Howe was an active member of Theodore Parker’s congregation in Boston and after meeting a depressed President Lincoln in Washington in 1861 and then observing the dispirited troops in a nearby Union army camp, she wrote *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, which became the favorite song and a primary inspiration for those enlisting in the Union forces. *Mine eyes have seen the glory...*

But the slaughter of the Civil War (which Parker did not live to see) was so great in impact that to this day it changes and excuses the American national personality, as historians have observed. The Civil War and the subsequent devastating wars on all continents between nations and between races moved the spirits of the nations, one might say, from optimism to submission. Perhaps regretting having written The Battle Hymn that led so many men to slaughter and be slaughtered, Julia Ward Howe called out for an International Mothers’ Day of Peace and resistance to war between nations. But after World War One, writers like William Butler Yeats were more likely, in fear and trembling, to prophesy apocalypse:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned; ...  
And what rough beast, its hour come ‘round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

When you see the superb movie *Operation Finale* about the 1960 discovery and capture of Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann, I wonder if you’ll find the fulcrum of the story to be Eichmann’s words to one of his heroic Holocaust-devastated Israeli Security Agency captors: “You have no children? Perhaps you fear the future looks like the past?”

I think this may be the fulcrum question of peace, because, from what I've seen, I'm pretty sure that the moral arc of the universe does not bend toward justice or the peace that caring justice brings.

To the initial question of this talk I'd answer, we cannot influence the originating creative Source of Being or what emanates from it – be that emanation itself called *Source or Energy, Chi, Brahmin, Grace, Force, Natural Law, or God*. It will be what it is, from the beginning of time to now to the end of time. Neither we nor anything else can influence or change its nature or its laws – probably not even It can change itself.

But the great thing about being human, I believe, is that we can influence what we do with the Source's energy that is embodied in and empowers us and all. We can influence what grace will be used for. We can influence what grace as life will become. We can influence the grace embodied in our potentials by influencing what those potentials become. And that is great, because the grace in us is already great, even perfect – and it is ours to use to what great ends we will!

We could say that the seeds of your mother and father were the living grace that joined to make the potential-filled seed of you – your soul, seed of all your grace-filled potentials. If you nourish these potentials - consciousness, imagination, cooperation – whatever is not only for surviving, but for thriving - whatever is of goodness, love, forgiveness, truth, hope, light, or joy – you will come to understand what is and what could be and what should be.

You will become aware of choices – and choices are what free your will. The more choices, the more free will. Grace gives you power. Will gives you purpose. Will and Grace - Grace and Will – the two ingredients for the peace that comes with the kind of justice that is caring for all.

The Buddhist teacher and human rights activist Thich Nhat Hanh, in his book Being Peace, offered lots of insights and steps toward achieving peace in the heart and in the world. One step for peace within a person is breathing four words in and out: Inbreath - *Calm*; Outbreath - *Smile*; Inbreath - *Presence*; Outbreath – *Wonderful*. You can choose other words – my favorites are grace and gracious. And for peace between people or peoples, he suggested taking the other person's or people's hand and saying, "*Dear one, do I understand you well enough - or in my ignorance am I making you suffer? Tell me truly so I may love you better.*"

I think you can see that in each of those exercises there is a turning and turning in a spiral gyre that that brings you back, like a beautiful falcon, a winged spirit, toward your center. Can you imagine if we made enough time, courage, intimacy, and insight to breath and turn and ask the world, *How can I get to love you better?*

Let me conclude with a short story. A visit I made one day as a Hospice chaplain has always stayed in my memory, maybe because Hospice chaplains from time to time write what are called *Verbatim* – a word-for-word script of their dialogue with a patient for confidential assessment later with an advisor. The patient and I were able to talk a little bit that day, though medications put the patient in and out of near-sleep. At last I said, "Time for me to let you sleep. Shall we say a prayer before I go?" The patient replied, "I don't believe in prayer." There was a bit of silence, then from someplace deep the patient murmured, "Some good

words, though – that would be good.” Another pause, then the patient said, “Freedom is a good word ... a hard one for us, but good.”

A long pause, then I offered, “Peace? Would peace be a good word?” “Yes,” said the patient. “Peace is a very good word.” Then more silence. I tried to imagine more good words. Then the patient said, “Can you imagine world peace?” Pause, then I said, “I have a hard time imagining world peace.” “Yes,” said the patient. “It’s a hard one for us, too. The only way I can imagine is that there are smarter beings on other planets that have figured it out. Maybe we could send out a message instead of a prayer. ‘Anybody out there? Anybody know how to create peace?’” “Yes,” I said. “That’s a message I could send, too.” “Good,” said the patient, giving my hand a squeeze. “Send out the message - ‘Hey, anybody out there know how to create peace?’”

Can we influence our own Source of Being? My answer is, No, the lawful nature, the grace, of being is what it is. But we do have the potential to influence what Being will become! We already have people on our planet who know how to use grace to create peace. The Source’s gracious energy has materialized as our potentials and our power for understanding and caring. So it’s a question of learning to use our potentials to learn our choices, and to will which one to follow. Will we use our grace to understand what we each need and will we use our grace to care enough for each other’s needs? I believe we would bend the moral arc of our universe to the peace which surpasses understanding if we willed it.

## READINGS

### Gathering     *Thoughts for Gathering*

*The moral arc of the universe is long.* - Theodore Parker

*For peace in the world, nation, community, family – peace in the heart.* - Lao Tzu

*For peace, to their opposites bring love, forgiveness, truth, hope, light, joy.* - St. Francis

### Responsive Invocation     *An International Day of Peace*, adapted from the U.N. Declaration

*Since wars begin in the minds of humankind,*

**it is in the minds of humankind**

**that the defense of peace must be constructed.**

*A peace based exclusively upon*

*the political and economic arrangements of Governments*

**would not be a peace which could secure the unanimous, lasting, sincere support  
of the peoples of the world.**

*Peace must therefore be founded, if it is not to fail,*

**upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of humankind,**

*May this day and all our days be devoted*

**to strengthening the ideals of peace**

**within and among all nations and peoples**

### Meditations On Peace     from Baha’i, Buddhist, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Protestant, Quaker

**Responsive Benediction**    *This We Know*, from Chief Seattle to President Franklin Pierce

*Every part of this Earth is sacred.*

**Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore,  
every mist in the dark woods, every clearing,  
every humming insect.**

*The air is precious,*

**for all things – beasts, plants, humans –  
share the same breath.**

*What are we without the beasts and plants?*

**If they were gone, we would die  
from great loneliness of spirit.**

*All things are connected.*

**Whatever befalls the Earth befalls all its children.**

*This we know:*

**the Earth does not belong to us; we belong to the Earth.**

*Whatever we do to the web,*

**we do to ourselves.**

*With all our strength and with all our heart,*

**let us care for the Earth and all its children,  
as the Great Spirit cares for all.**