Lest We Forget
A sermon preached on Hiroshima Sunday, August 7, 2016
at Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society in Madison, CT
By Rev. Randall Spaulding

Yesterday was the 71st anniversary of a heartbreaking event in history. On August 6, 1945, the United States of America exploded the world’s first deployed nuclear bomb on the citizens of Hiroshima, Japan. Eighty thousand children, women and men were instantly incinerated. Imagine all the people of Guilford, Madison, Branford and Clinton combined were all wiped out in a moment. Three days later, a second nuclear bomb was dropped on the citizens of Nagasaki, Japan. Forty thousand people—all the people living in Old Saybrook, Old Lyme and East Lyme—turned to ash in a few eye blinks. The total cost of lives, from the nuclear bombings to the radiation-related injuries and deaths in the years that followed, totaled over two-hundred thousand people. They were mostly civilians, living their lives, raising their children, going to work, school, worship; living with the hope of passing on their stories and their principles for living to their children and their children’s children.

No matter what our individual beliefs are about being at war, or about the events surrounding the end of World War II, what was needed to bring about “peace;” no matter our ethics on Just War Theory, pacifism or nonviolence, the devastating facts remain. The world was horrified and terrified; so much so that for 71 years no nuclear weapon has since been used in warfare or against people. At the same time, the advance in technology—the “success” of harnessing the

Our reading today is from progressive theologian, social justice activist and biblical scholar Walter Wink. His 1998 book, “The Powers that Be,” critiques systems of domination and power structures, and points toward a way of hope to live freely and peaceably in the face of injustice. Our reading is adapted from the chapter “Beyond Pacifism and Just War.”

“Violence is contrary to the way of Love. But we are not always able to live up to this way. I am embarrassed at how easily I can lash out at anyone who makes me angry (it is the lashing out, not the anger, that disturbs me). Even so, when as individuals or nations we are unable to act nonviolently, we are not excused for our actions, nor may we attempt to justify them.

“We must admit our addiction to the Myth of Redemptive Violence—an addiction every bit as tenacious and seductive as bondage to alcohol or drugs. Civilization is hooked on violence. Rational argument, therefore, is not enough to break its grip over us. We need to acknowledge our bondage and turn to a higher power for help in extricating ourselves from our trust in destructive force.”

“We can affirm nonviolence without reservation because nonviolence is the way a domination-free order is coming.”
atom has been heralded by many as one of the greatest achievements of the 20th century. Indeed, as an oncology chaplain—I work at Yale-New Haven Hospital and the Smilow Cancer Center providing spiritual support to patients who have cancer—I have learned the importance of radiation—a form of nuclear technology—as a treatment for one of the most pervasive and serious diseases of our time. But what happens to us when we laud ourselves for how smart we are but forget our humanity?

For many of us the story of Hiroshima is not new. And from virtually the moment we dropped the first bomb on the people of Hiroshima, anti-nuclear social justice groups have been voicing opposition and have helped in real ways to halt the proliferation of these weapons of mass destruction.

Unitarian Universalists have been speaking out from the beginning, especially when it comes to our cultural arrogance and celebrating our great achievement without thought of the devastation created. On the front of our printed bulletins this morning is a picture that appeared in the society pages of the Washington Post newspaper in 1946. It depicts people celebrating: a military admiral and his spouse are smiling and cutting a cake created to resemble a nuclear mushroom cloud explosion. The article said it was made from, quote, angel food puffs. The Revered A. Powell Davies, who was the minister at that time of the Unitarian All Souls Church in Washington, D.C. saw the picture in the newspaper and preached just days later what became a famous and controversial sermon. It was titled, “Lest the Living Forget.”

In his sermon, Rev. Davies called the newspaper image obscene and utterly loathsome. He said that the act of creating such an atomic bomb pastry is to “treat with levity the most cruel, pitiless, revolting instrument of death ever invented by man.” What must the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagaska think, Davies wondered, “to know that Americans make cakes—of angel food puffs—in the image of that terrible, diabolical thing that brought sudden death to thousands of their friends, and a lingering, loathsome death to thousands of others?” He demanded an apology from those who participated in the atomic bomb cake; an apology to the American people and even to the branch of service of which they were a part. Davies affirmed that he loved America and its people, which for him was the “only hope for the human future” on earth. In the midst of a destroyed Europe and Japan, he asked those listening, “Will America lead us? Is there enough decency left in the world...to lead us back to hope...to liberty...to being human beings again?” What does it say to the world, then, to be shown this picture! In 1946, the world was looking to America and its people as a bastion of hope and goodwill, a space for peace and freedom. In 2016, billions of people around the world still are. Are we? Are we still the space where peace, freedom, liberty and justice are not only claimed but lived out and made real? And is America the space for all to experience this, or just for some?

In our reading for today, theologian Walter Wink declares that “civilization is hooked on violence.” We see violence everywhere. And, many say, it’s not a bad thing. Think of all the good-guy/bad-guy movies, television shows, police, detective and superhero stories, cartoons and video games that tell us that what saves us from the bad guys is redemptive violence. Unitarian Universalist theologian, Paul Rasor, describes this as the classic Star Wars theme. Bad violence is overcome by good or better violence Wink says this myth of redemptive violence is so pervasive, so all-encompassing in our culture that “violence simply appears to be the nature of
things.” Yet, he reminds us that, “Violence is contrary to the way of Love.” And at a fundamental level it can leave us cringing because we are so often unable to live up to it. It leaves me cringing because our culture—of which I am a part and play a part—embraces the myth so strongly. So strongly that we smile and eat atomic bomb cakes while whole populations burn. Today we need armed personnel in our airports, our schools and at times our churches. Our Nobel Peace Prize winning president has been at war longer than any other American President. In 2013 the US had armed, special forces in 134 countries. Paul Rasor suggests that “war is not just about what we do” anymore, it has become about “who we are.” I don’t know about you, but that’s a chilling thought.

Wink’s prophetic word to us is this: “We must admit our addiction… to violence—an addiction as every bit as tenacious and seductive as bondage to alcohol or drugs. We need to acknowledge our bondage and turn to a higher power for help in extricating ourselves from our trust in destructive force.” For Unitarian Universalists, I think that means seeking a path and a way here and now that is more powerful than violence. It sounds simple—or not. And some will say, “Oh, you’re gonna get all warm-fuzzy and say ‘It’s about Peace and Love.’” And you know what? You’re absolutely right. It is about a higher power called Peace and Love. And the good news is that when it is put into practice, it’s stronger than you think! It is stronger than violence and hate. Just practices that restore community, as well as acknowledging our own complicity in injustice allows us to participate in modest and authentic ways that lead to peace.

Reverend Davies’ sermon denouncing the nuclear attacks on the people of Hiroshima was brought to the attention of Dr. Howard Bell, an official with General Douglas MacArthur’s provisional government that was set up in Japan after the war. Dr. Bell wrote a letter to Rev. Davies, describing the horrible situation of Hiroshima’s school children who were trying to return to some sense of normalcy but had little possessions or school supplies. Could Rev. Davies, he asked, send at least some leftover crayons and pencil stubs? The children of All Souls Unitarian church responded, and in 1947 a half ton of pencils, crayons, paper, paste and school supplies were delivered to two schools and an orphanage in Hiroshima. In thanks, the children of Hiroshima created original works of art with crayon and water color and sent them back to All Souls church as gifts of appreciation. One of those images is on the cover of our printed bulletin. It is in black and white here, but the picture is brightly colored in blues, greens, yellows and reds. It’s peaceful image, created by eight year-old Toshimi Ishida, a child who experienced so much trauma and devastation, is a stark contrast to the cold and arrogant image of the atomic bomb cake. The drawings that the children of Hiroshima created eventually went on tour around the United Stated, sponsored by the federal government. They remain a witness to the higher power of cooperation, compassion and peace.

The power of the bomb is in its destructive violence that frightens us into subservience. We may have the capacity for such technology, and we may believe and our war-making culture may preach that it is the only way to keep the bad people from getting us. But accepting the principle that violence is an inevitable part of our civilization so lock and load and get your finger on that button… that kind of thinking and living diminishes us as human beings; it diminishes the revelation that we are the Earth aware of itself, and that connects us all. Buddhist monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hahn says, “When you drop bombs on your enemy, you drop those same bombs on yourself, your own country.” Because we are more aware of our place in the
universe, a great work is required of us. And that work is to become more fully human, and in doing so, to become not just citizens of the United States to be pitted against the citizens of another nation-state, but to become citizens of the world, of the Earth and ultimately of the Universe. We must move beyond our myopic attitude that trusts in violence and domination. Such an attitude is why we have remembered Hiroshima every year for the last 71 years. It is why we must speak out and lovingly act out, with nonviolent resistance if necessary, especially in the light of the political and cultural rhetoric this election season, as the threat of using nuclear weapons has once again become part of campaign speeches.

Hiroshima Sunday is not a time intended to make us afraid. It is a time to be challenged and even made a little uncomfortable, to be curious about our role and our work toward authentic peace-making in the world. The good news is always with us—we may choose hope, cooperation, understanding and peace over despair, fear and war. How are you doing this day in choosing? What are the challenges for you on this Hiroshima remembrance day? Does it bring to mind other difficult struggles that have the effect of a nuclear explosion in your life or in the lives of others? If fear, anxiety, anger or bitterness are irradiating what love and compassion we have, may we find in this community and in other communities of justice and peace a safe place to heal and to become more fully human, and then to journey on the path of being peace-makers ourselves.

I would like to end my reflection with words adapted from the Rev. William Sinkford, who was the president of our denomination from 2001-2009. This is a Prayer for Hiroshima Day:

Like most traumatic scars, the ones that are found in Hiroshima and Nagasaki are permanent: reminders of the terrible damage human beings can inflict. Similar scars can be found in the hearts and souls of people around the world who understand this terror: scars of grief, sadness, fear and even shame. None of these scars promise an end to war and devastation. Instead, they serve as a reminder of healing and renewal—of a return to life. Gracious Spirit of Life and Love, help us to see our scars: those we have created, those we are called to witness, and those we may soothe and heal. We are deeply grateful for the buds and blossoms that even the most scarred offer as a revelation to the world.

And, especially on this anniversary of Hiroshima Day, we renew our commitment to peace individually, collectively and globally:

To "peace within" which calms our anxieties and fears,
To "peace between" which overcomes differences, animosities and conflict,
And, to "the great peace," beyond even our understanding. May we cherish this precious gift and do all we may to be its stewards for the world.

This is our prayer. Amen.

Resources:
- Hiroshima Day Worship resources at: [http://www.uua.org/international/engagement/worship/hiroshima](http://www.uua.org/international/engagement/worship/hiroshima)
• *Transforming Violence: Linking Local and Global Peacemaking*, eds. Robert Herr and Judy Zimmerman Herr