

Sermon – 2021 5-30 – *Beyond War* – Joyce Ramay

How Beautiful, Our Spacious Skies – That song always reminds me of a scene in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. At the Battle of Austerlitz, when the Russians are fighting against Napoleon, Prince Andrei Bolkonsky has an epiphany while lying wounded on the battlefield - gazing up at the vastness of the sky, realizing the triviality of human affairs under the eyes of nature, and that he has the potential to be happy. It relates a deep experience of going beyond the war that surrounds him.

"What's this? Am I falling? My legs are giving way," thought he, and fell on his back. He opened his eyes, hoping to see how the struggle of the Frenchmen with the gunners ended, whether the red-haired gunner had been killed or not, and whether the cannon had been captured or saved.

But he saw nothing. Above him there was now nothing but the sky- the lofty sky, not clear - yet still immeasurably lofty, with gray clouds gliding slowly across it.

"How quiet, peaceful, and solemn; not at all as I ran," thought Prince Andrew- "not as we ran, shouting and fighting, not at all as the gunner and the Frenchman with frightened and angry faces struggled - how differently do those clouds glide across that lofty infinite sky!

How was it I did not see that lofty sky before?

And how happy I am to have found it at last! Yes!

All is vanity, all falsehood, except that infinite sky.

There is nothing, nothing, but that. But even it does not exist, there is nothing but quiet and peace. Thank God!"

I read that book when I was 17 years old, and it has had a strong influence on me ever since.

Salman Rushdie wrote: "I believe that the books and stories we fall in love with make us who we are, or, not to claim too much, the beloved tale becomes a part of the way in which we understand things and make judgments and choices in our daily lives. A book may cease to speak to us as we grow older, and our feeling for it will fade. Or we may suddenly, as our lives shape and hopefully increase our understanding, be able to appreciate a book we dismissed earlier; we may suddenly be able to hear its music, to be enraptured by its song."

The magical music of Tolstoy's words awakened in me the possibility that we might be able to reconnect with nature and learn how to go beyond war.

When I was a child, we observed Decoration Day at Central Park, with a marching band, speeches by local dignitaries, recitation of poetry and Lincoln's Gettysburg address, and *God Bless America* sung by Harry Brown. The spirit was much like Meredith Wilson's *The Music Man*.

Then we went to the cemetery for the more solemn ceremony of putting flowers on the graves of deceased soldiers and other loved ones.

In America, Decoration Day began in 1868 after the Civil War, when flowers were placed to decorate the graves of both Confederate and Union soldiers buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

The name of Decoration Day was changed to Memorial Day in 1971. Placing flowers on graves of fallen heroes dates back to the early Greeks. It is a tradition that has existed for thousands of years, and many countries have their own Memorial Days.

For many people in America, it has become just a holiday for parties and outdoor barbecues.

But we should take this hallowed time to remember the sacrifices made by all those who died so that we might live in freedom.

And we should help and comfort the walking wounded who are still with us, and bless their families as well.

For those who have it, freedom is like oxygen. It's something we simply take for granted.

We do not often understand how precious either is until we are at risk of having them taken away.

Many of my early memories are of World War II when most of the young men were away at war.

We would listen to reports of the war on the radio, and look at a world map to see where the troops were. We even had a German prisoner of war camp just outside my small hometown in southern Minnesota.

Many of you or your relatives have been in the military.

My great-great grandfather Jacob Frost was with the Minnesota volunteers who served with General Sherman in the Civil War. (Sorry, Atlanta!)

In World War I, my grandmother's twin brother, Uncle David Goodnature, suffered from a mustard gas attack in World War I.

My father Frank Nye served in the U.S. Army Cavalry.

In World War II, my first husband Bob Bruce was an officer in the Army Air Corps in the first invasions of North Africa, Sicily and Italy, and my brother-in-law Russell Eisert joined the Navy.

My brother Bill Nye was in the Air Force as an aircraft mechanic all through the Korean War – I still recall that even years later he would flinch every time there was a sudden loud noise.

My niece's first husband was wounded in Vietnam by shrapnel that removed part of his skull. It caused brain damage resulting in violent behavior that led to their divorce.

My daughter Anna served in the U. S. Army.

All of them volunteered their service to our country.

And today is the 30th anniversary of the death of my second husband, Mirza Pervez Murad who was an officer in the Pakistan Air Force for ten years.

It is appropriate that we remember today our family members and all others who gave their service to their country. Some returned, and others did not.

In May, our theme for Sunday services has been **Transcendence**.

So today, I invite you to devote yourselves to exploring the possibility that we might **transcend war – that we can go beyond war to a realm of peace.**

Considering the news of these past few weeks, of the wars in the Middle East and the gun killings of our people here in America, it would be easy to become cynical – to believe that there really is no alternative to violence and war.

But then I recognize that there has been a growing consciousness that violence is not the answer to conflicts, and that we can find alternative and better solutions if we exercise our free will of choice.

During the Vietnam War, a major anti-war movement gained momentum. People asked, **Why are we there?**

Protestors marched in the streets, and intellectuals pondered the hazards of war that could lead to destruction of human life on Earth.

In 2003, many of us at All Faiths stood on the corner of McGregor and Colonial, with our signs opposing going to war in Iraq, led by Archie Goodwin, a World War II Veteran for Peace!

Iraq had nothing to do with the 9-11-2001 attack on the World Trade Center. Iraqis asked, **Why are you here?**

The Afghan people continue to ask, **Why are you here?** Just as they asked Alexander the Great, the British and the Russians before us.

Today, after we have spent 20 years fighting the Afghans, who also did not participate in the 9-11 attack on America, we are asking, **Why are we still there?**

Many people are beginning to recognize the necessity for resolving human conflicts without war.

Albert Einstein commented, “With the unleashed power of the atom, everything has changed, save our modes of thinking, and thus we drift towards unparalleled catastrophe”.

It was our widespread belief in Mutually Assured Destruction – appropriately named MAD - that enabled America and the Soviet Union to avoid nuclear war throughout the Cold War period.

We must not forget that - because it demonstrated we do have the capacity to be guided by wisdom.

I believe that the time has come for us **to transcend war – to move beyond war.** We must address all the distorted psychological, sociological and philosophical roots of our war making behaviors.

We have to correct our understanding of Darwin’s Survival of the Fittest – biologists are confirming the fact that species that cooperate have the best chance for survival.

There is a growing worldwide trend towards more compassion and a new concept of the evolving success of the empathic civilization.

We must realize that we are at a historical decision point of crossroads.

One path leads to death, destruction, and extinction.

The other direction opens new possibilities for the human species to develop a world where all people have the opportunity to satisfy their basic human needs, and to lead lives with bountiful meaning and purpose.

And now, when we are aware that we all face imminent danger from climate change, we have a good reason to bond together in a unified effort of mutual cooperation and salvation of life on Earth.

To accomplish this, it is essential that we form a new worldview, one in which we declare that war is obsolete as a means of resolving conflicts.

We can do that by forming a new identity – beyond race, religion, ethnicity and nationality – discovering that we are all truly one human species on our beloved planet Earth.

We now have the great blessings of communication technology and ease of travel that facilitate getting to know, trust, respect and love each other.

Henry Ford stated, "***Whether you think you can, or you think you can't, you are right.***"

I think that we can begin to believe that it is possible to resolve conflicts without the use of violence.

We can remove some of the root causes of war, by learning to share the resources of Earth.

We can stop identifying others as enemies.

We can adopt a benevolent attitude of good will towards all.

We can lift each other up, instead of putting each other down.

We can pledge ourselves to join with others to build a new world beyond war.

Like the theme of our sculpture here in our sanctuary, we can truly become each other's keepers.

We need to realize that war can lead to our complete mutual destruction.

This we can do!!

I can understand how hard it is to conceive of the possibility of a world without war. We still hear all the bad news about violence, aggression, killing and wars.

However, I truly believe that there are ways for us to unite – to talk together, to get to know each other, and to find common goals. We can be masters of our own destiny.

We have the power of choice.

While we honor our deceased heroes today, we need not glorify war itself.

On this Memorial Day, may we be guided toward a harmonious existence as we memorialize those who were willing to give up their lives that we may gather here today freely.

May we help to create a new world - where no men or women must give up their lives in pursuit of freedom.

May we be receptive to and participants in the call for worldwide peace.

In conclusion, part of the Memorial Day tradition is the wearing of red poppies.

These lines were written by John McCrae in 1918 – In Flanders Field

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.
We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,
In Flanders fields.

Let us share a moment of silence as we remember them.

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And now, let us hear the voices of all those we memorialize as Joseph sings, ***I Was Here.***