

“Satyagraha”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Meditation

Gurudeva Subramuniaswami, in discussing the Hindu belief in ahimsa or non-violence: By our own decisions and actions, in everything we do, we promote peace or we promote violence. What can we do as individuals or institutions to responsibly promote non-injury? ... Talk about peaceful means of dealing with problems, not allowing even your words to promote injury & harm. Purify yourself so that you are free from anger, free from hatred, free from wanting anyone to suffer either at your own hand or in any other manner. Volunteer your time to help groups who are sincerely working for a peaceful world. Learn more about other cultures and philosophies, so your appreciation of them is genuine and deep. Work to strengthen your community and the people near you. Reduce stress in your life. Be joyful. Do all this and you will do much to bring peace and tranquility to your part of the world. This is what Mahatma Gandhi did, and look what a difference he made. One person who lives ahimsa truly can be an instrument of peace for many. And you can make a difference too, by affirming within yourself the vow not to injure others, physically, mentally or emotionally. Remember this one thing: peace and the choice to live the ideal of non-injury are in your own hands.

Sermon: “Satyagraha”

It was one of my first assignments on the job.

I had just been hired to assist the minister at Boston’s Arlington Street Church.

The person responsible for posting the coming Sunday’s sermon title in big letters on the sign out front had misspelled it. And badly.

And, it was my job to fix it, as soon as possible.

But, fifteen years ago, I wasn't so sure myself how to spell Satyagraha, and I was even less sure of what it meant.

To make matters worse, it's a Sanskrit word not readily found in most older English dictionaries—and it's a concept that's not so easily or accurately defined, even when it is.

Satyagraha is often interpreted as Mahatma Gandhi's notion of non-violence or passive resistance or civil disobedience, but the real meaning of the word is actually a bit broader and much more difficult to grasp.

After wrestling for years to find just the right word for his philosophy of non-cooperation, Gandhi coined the term Satyagraha by combining the Sanskrit word *satya*, meaning truth or love, with the word *agraha* which means firmness or insistence.

Satyagraha, then, is best understood as an “insistence on truth,” a firm and stubborn love, or as Gandhi summed it up himself: as “soul force.”

Getting at the relationship he saw between violence and truth and resistance, he said that, “Satyagraha is soul force pure and simple, and whenever and to whatever extent there is room for the use of arms or physical force or brute force, there and to that extent is there so much less possibility for the soul force.”

Satyagraha as soul force involves spiritual work of the highest order, because there's enormous internal work to be done in order to undertake and sustain any effort to resist or overcome violence.

Elsewhere, Gandhi wrote that, “Satyagraha is the vindication of truth not by [the] infliction of suffering upon an opponent, but [in the willingness to take on suffering] on one's self.”

To be a satyagrahi—someone who practices Satyagraha—requires a willingness to receive blows rather than inflict them on others. To commit that the violence will stop with one's own self, rather than be passed on—and on and on.

This commitment, this experience, is what gives a person moral power, and Gandhi felt it essential in dealing with one's opponents who could only "be weaned," he said, "by patience and sympathy."

What this means is that Satyagraha is more than a strategy, or a weapon, or a tool.

It is, when undertaken with intention, a genuine spiritual practice; a way of life as demanding as anything we could ever conjure, as it requires such extraordinary levels of commitment, courage, and self-awareness.

For all of its demands, though, Gandhian philosophy is often denigrated as idealistic pacifism—seen as a strategy ill-equipped to confront the harsh realities of "the real world."

This response, I believe, comes from misunderstanding Satyagraha as a mere political tool rather than a spiritual path that has the potential to transform the one practicing it as much as anyone on whom it might be practiced.

The true power of Satyagraha is found in the change of heart that occurs when people are able to not only resist passive submission to some injustice, but are also able to resist the very human urge to retaliate with violence in response.

Martin Luther King, Jr., who was deeply shaped by Gandhi's thinking when in seminary, gets at the real challenge of practising Satyagraha:

"Nonviolence," he said, "means avoiding not only external physical violence but also internal violence of [the] spirit. [It means that] You not only refuse to shoot a man, but [that] you also refuse to hate him."

Satyagraha requires choosing the path of non-violence in every circumstance, not only through our actions, but at least as much through our thoughts.

And, this is where it gets sticky; this is where it becomes most difficult. This is surely where most people decide Satyagraha's a lovely idea, but a lovely idea for other people in far off places.

At best, maybe a strategy for well-meaning protestors to use in seeking to right some wrong, to challenge and change some injustice, somewhere. Somewhere out there.

But, what about here (at First Unitarian), and what about here (in our very hearts).

There is often a misperception that Unitarianism belongs to the great Peace Church tradition that includes the Mennonites and the Quakers, faiths with a long-standing commitment to pacifism.

It's a fair assumption given our congregations are proudly packed with large numbers of anti-war protestors and draft resisters, with peaceniks and hippies, and that we have, I would venture, the most impressive array of tie-dyed t-shirts in our collective closets.

But, our history has never actually included an explicit and enduring commitment to pacifism or non-violence.

Many Unitarians are, of course, deeply committed to justice and non-violence. We have a long history of working for peace. Through the years, we have passed numerous resolutions about specific situations the world over.

Every few years, a resolution comes forward challenging us to consider the question of pacifism once again.

Debate eventually and inevitably seems to make its way to Hitler and the seeming impossibility of overcoming organised human evil by merely non-violent means.

There's another sermon in all of this, to be sure— one on the merits of a pure pacifism and Just War theory and the unsettling question of whether certain circumstances require violent confrontation in service to a greater good.

This isn't that particular sermon, though it's one that needs to be preached.

Instead this is a reflection on non-violence.

And, what is clear to me is that if we were ever to make such a commitment to being part of the "peace church" movement, to adopting non-violence as a guiding principle, we Unitarians would have our work cut out for us — a lot of hard, spiritual work to do as individuals and congregations before we could claim such a mantle for ourselves in any meaningful way.

Approving a policy of non-violence doesn't make it so, no matter the strength of the vote.

Even setting out on the path of Satyagraha doesn't mean one achieves a life always lived beyond the reach or the temptations of violence.

If anything, it is a commitment to wrestle with violence, without and within.

It is a commitment not only to resist violent forces in the world around us, but to actively resist the physical and spiritual and emotional violence that we might find brewing inside us at any given moment.

A person like Gandhi, as wise and revolutionary and sometimes flawed as he was, didn't drop from the skies, fully formed at the start.

He stood in the long and complicated religious history of India.

He was schooled in the concept of *ahimsa*— a central tenet of Hinduism and Buddhism and Jainism that encourages non-violence toward all living things.

He was profoundly influenced by the *Bhagavad Gita* and Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount."

And he was deeply inspired to couple his religious insights with political philosophy through Unitarian Henry David Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" and Tolstoy's anarchist pacifism.

But mostly, he strived to practice what he preached in his daily living, discovering that there was indeed power to be found in a stubborn soul force that compelled him to love his enemies as he did himself.

We don't remember him today because he did it perfectly.
We remember him because he did it effectively.
Over and again, in different ways, and in different places,
he demonstrated that it is possible to change the course of history
without giving into the seductive lure of violence.

What I find most compelling about Satyagraha
is the way it puts into powerful practice what I consider to be
the two foundational principles of Unitarian Universalism:

Our affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of every person,
and our respect for the interdependent web of all existence.

The rules Gandhi set forth for anyone aspiring to be a satyagrahi,
included one having a deep faith in the inherent goodness of human beings,
which he believed could be evoked by suffering.

He believed that by refusing to respond in turn with violence,
one could hold up a mirror to the abominable behaviour of one's opponents
and slowly call them back to their better natures.

He believed that the cognitive dissonance caused
in bearing witness to one's own capacity for harm could return a person
to be conscious of her or his own humanity.

I'm honestly not certain such a moment of transformative recognition
is possible in absolutely every circumstance,
but I have seen it in my own life and in the lives of others,
as we have been made to grapple with how our actions have hurt others.

It is a moment I imagine we have all had—
a moment when we've been recalled to our own humanity.

When we ask, "Who am I?" "Who have I become?"

When such a moment of recognition does come,
there is the shining possibility of change, of healing and reconciliation,

of justice and lasting peace.

Over the past century, we have seen such moments arise
in the tens of thousands who marched with Gandhi to the sea to make salt, and
in a woman trained in the ways of soul force
sitting on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama.

We have seen such moments of soul force arise
within the walls of a prison in South Africa,
in the streets of cities around the world
as ACT-UP activists demanded that AIDS be taken seriously,
and we've seen it of late on the streets of Toronto
as the Occupy Movement has found its voice.

While these moments are more easily spotted on the global stage, a friend of
mine recently reminded that they can happen much closer to home.

Kim Crawford Harvie (the minister I worked with all those years ago at
Arlington Street) tells the story of a friend of a friend.

Jim is a huge bear of a guy[, she says,]
a Vietnam vet who has spent the years since he's come home
trying to stop fighting that war.
The violence he witnessed in Vietnam,
the violence in which he participated,
poisoned him, sickened him, and threatened to take his life.

The way Jim negotiated a truce in his soul
was with the power of satyagraha, soul force: [with] an unconditional
determination to live the rest of his life as a peaceful warrior.

One of the most inspiring ways that Jim has found to embody his vow in his
daily life is "what he does in supermarkets when a child is crying
or screaming and a parent begins to lose it."

Just this: as the situation escalates,
Jim purposefully steers his cart into a display of canned goods.

He doesn't consider it a success
unless [the whole thing] comes down with a huge crash.

The point is, no tantrum can compete with Jim's giant distraction. Invariably, there is a collective intake of breath, and a great silence descends in aisle six. The energy shifts.

"Sorry," Jim says, [as he stoops down] to begin the cleanup.

By making a mess, Jim intervenes in moments that could descend into violence, be it physical, emotional or spiritual.

As we go through this life, let us remember that we have the power to push a shopping cart into a mountain of chick peas or creamed corn and change the world around us.

Let us strive to be satyagrahi in our every day lives, that this world may know less violence and ever more peace, and that it may know it through each of us. Blessed Be.