

# “The Tangled Webs We’re In”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

21 September 2014

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.

We gather this late summer morning,  
to take one more step:  
toward the centre of our being,  
toward the meaning of our days,  
toward the purpose of our lives on this planet.

We come with joys and sorrows, with hopes and fears,  
with some part of ourselves holding out the possibility of transformation—  
a longing for things to be different, to be changed, to be healed.

We gather this day in the sacred hope  
that we might move our world,  
beginning with ourselves,  
toward love and compassion,  
toward justice and peace.

In this time that we make sacred in our coming together,  
let us set ourselves to the task of this high calling.

\* \* \* \* \*

Before inviting the children forward,  
I want to offer a quick word about this morning’s service.

Today, as you’ve heard, is the International Day of Peace,  
established in 1981 by the UN General Assembly—  
at the height of the Cold War—to strengthen the ideals of peace,  
within and among all people and all nations.

Recent books have argued that we’re actually making progress,  
that there is now less armed conflict in the world than there used to be.  
It’s a hard fact to believe, given the recent wars we’ve seen raging,

in the Ukraine, Iraq, Syria, and Gaza,  
Nigeria, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic.

While the world may be growing more peaceful,  
we have a very long way to go before we live in peace.

In today's service, we'll be look at the question of peace  
through the prism of Israel and Palestine,  
certainly one of the world's most intractable conflicts.

And, without a doubt, one of the most difficult to discuss.

For this conflict like few others brings out very strong emotions,  
even from people far removed from the situation.

It would be easy to think that we, as Unitarians,  
might have an easier time of it, but I've not experienced that to be true.  
If anything, our strong opinions may make it more difficult.

So, I invite you to do some risk-taking this morning.

To open your own heart to another part of the story,  
to consider what compassion asks of you,  
to give thought to your part in moving the world toward peace.

Let me say from the outset, none of us will come up with the same answer.

This is one of those Sundays, perhaps more than most,  
when I am leaning on our tradition of freedom of the pulpit,  
the privilege extended to Unitarian ministers to speak from our heart,  
from our conscience, "without fear or favour."

And, this may be one of those Sundays when many of you exercise the  
privilege extended to congregants called Freedom of the Pew,  
the long-standing tradition that respects the fact that not everyone will—  
or could, or should—be in complete agreement  
with what any minister has to say, at least not all the time.

So, with that, I invite Lynn Torrie and the children of the congregation forward  
for this morning's story!

## Reading

## “Call Me by My True Names”

In his book, *Peace is Every Step*, the Zen Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh writes:

In Plum Village, where I live in France, we receive many letters from the refugee camps in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines, hundreds each week. It is very painful to read them, but we have to do it, we have to be in contact. We try our best to help, but the suffering is enormous, and sometimes we are discouraged. It is said that half the boat people die in the ocean. Only half arrive at the shores in Southeast Asia, and even then they may not be safe.

There are many young girls, boat people, who are raped by sea pirates. Even though the United Nations and many countries try to help the government of Thailand prevent that kind of piracy, sea pirates continue to inflict much suffering on the refugees. One day we received a letter telling us about a young girl on a small boat who was raped by a Thai pirate. She was only twelve, and she jumped into the ocean and drowned herself.

When you first learn of something like that, you get angry at the pirate. You naturally take the side of the girl. As you look more deeply you will see it differently. If you take the side of the little girl, then it is easy. You only have to take a gun and shoot the pirate. But we cannot do that. In my meditation I saw that if I had been born in the village of the pirate and raised in the same conditions as he was, there is a great likelihood that I would become a pirate. I saw that many babies are born along the Gulf of Siam, hundreds every day, and if we educators, social workers, politicians, and others do not do something about the situation, in twenty-five years a number of them will become sea pirates. That is certain. If you or I were born today in those fishing villages, we may become sea pirates in twenty-five years. If you take a gun and shoot the pirate, all of us are to some extent responsible for this state of affairs.

After a long meditation, I wrote this poem. In it, there are three people: the twelve-year-old girl, the pirate, and me. Can we look at each other and recognize ourselves in each other? The title of the poem is “Please Call Me by My True Names,” because I have so many names. When I hear one of the of these names, I have to say, “Yes.”

## **“Call Me by My True Names”**

Do not say that I'll depart tomorrow  
because even today I still arrive.  
Look deeply: I arrive in every second  
to be a bud on a spring branch,  
to be a tiny bird, with wings still fragile,  
learning to sing in my new nest,  
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,  
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.  
I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,  
in order to fear and to hope.

The rhythm of my heart is the birth and  
death of all that are alive.

I am the mayfly metamorphosing on the surface of the river,  
and I am the bird which, when spring comes,  
arrives in time to eat the mayfly.

I am the frog swimming happily in the clear pond,  
and I am also the grass-snake who, approaching in silence,  
feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,  
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks,  
and I am the arms merchant,  
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat,  
who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate,  
and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.

I am a member of the politburo, with plenty of power in my hands,  
and I am the man who has to pay his “debt of blood” to my people,  
dying slowly in a forced labor camp.

My joy is like spring, so warm it makes flowers bloom in all walks of life.  
My pain is like a river of tears, so full it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,  
so I can hear all my cries and laughs at once,  
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.  
Please call me by my true names,  
so I can wake up,  
and so the door of my heart can be left open,  
the door of compassion.

## **Meditation**

The meditation today is taken from the earth-centred traditions of the Bantu Tribes of Africa. In many Bantu languages there is a word that is very important. That word is “Ubuntu”. This word “Ubuntu” has no English equivalent. Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes it this way:

“Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a western language. It is to say, ‘My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up in yours. Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that we can’t exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our inter-connectedness.’”

Many Bantu tribes have an expression that conveys the essence of Ubuntu: “I am because you are.” Our own special uniqueness as individuals, or even as communities, is contingent upon all others being recognized for their own special uniqueness. There is an underlying unity, not in spite of, but because of our uniqueness. In justice Ubuntu focuses on reconciliation rather than punishment, on the restoration of relationships rather than retribution. Dr. Judith Rich, in an article to the Huffington Post writes: “In the consciousness of Ubuntu, when met with conflict, or harm, forgiveness is the very path we must travel to know freedom.”

## Reflection by Dallas Bergen, Music Director

I am usually pretty comfortable speaking publicly, but I won't lie... I'm feeling pretty nervous about doing this... addressing what is quite possibly the MOST polarizing, MOST incendiary topic of them all; the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. Please be gracious with me.

Why me? -- I married an Israeli.

2002... exactly one year after 9-11. The events of 9-11 and the war on terror that followed brought me passionately into the world of geopolitics and social justice. I became increasingly interested in the Middle East and in Israel-Palestine. My daily reading routine was commondreams.org, The Guardian; Democracy Now....

I went to Thailand. I had formed my world view, but I was going out into the world to learn more; see more; be more. I was looking for love--for someone different; someone who would shake me up; teach me things; challenge me.

My third day in Thailand, I met Rinat, the petite Israeli beauty; who at 18 became a Gulf War veteran during her compulsory service in the Israeli Defense Force.

The first day took the normal path of courtship; a song, a dance, a drink, a walk on the beach, a massage... that was about it. After less than 24 hours we parted for different Thai islands, exchanged emails, and kissed each other goodbye...

Soon after our encounter, she returned to her life in Israel and I started my new life in Thailand. We chatted via MSN and emailed daily.

Here's me... progressive, left leaning, west-coast-hippie-pacifist. I wrote to her:

"First, let's both agree that we may not see issues the same way... and let's agree that we have two completely different perspectives on the situation; me, being an outsider with no experience, only knowledge I gather through research--and you, having grown up with the conflict and having lived in terror (I almost hate using that word because of its over-use in the past year). Now let me also say that I LOVE talking about these things with you because you teach me so much--and it lets me know you better as you speak of your personal experience. If I say anything that drives you to anger... well, I hope that doesn't happen..."

Well, it happened... quite a few times... enough to build a formidably strong foundation for our relationship; not based on common beliefs, but based on mutual respect for our differences and the effort and interest we showed in seeking to understand those differences:

*So, Rinat... the IDF levelled an apartment in Nablus, home to 10 families and 150 people in it yesterday... tell me about that?*

*What about the massacre at Sabra & Shatilla?*

*Apartheid wall. Security fence. Apartheid wall. Security fence. It should be built on the Green Line! It's land grab!*

*Did you hear about Rachel Corrie?? and so it went on...*

And in response I received replies, often thousands of words long, explaining her view of the conflict, her interpretation of history, her personal story--and with every email, we fell more deeply in love. I listened, and learned what it was like to live in fear during the height of the Second Intifada: To always be avoiding large crowds; deciding which bus, cafe or square might be a less-likely target of a suicide bomber; the horrible anxiety of waiting in line; the trauma caused by the setting-off of benign fireworks... and what it is like to fear for the very survival and existence of your country, *and* your people.

... and before we were even married, I got a taste of these things first-hand; in 2005, the night of Rinat's stagette there was a bombing at a nightclub in Tel Aviv just a few blocks of where we were partying. Years later in November 2012 I went to my in-law's wedding in Ashdod with tensions extremely high as the numbers of rockets fired from Gaza reached unprecedented numbers. The next day Israel commenced their relentless bombardment of Gaza and the assassination of Ahmed Jabari. Our next two weeks were spent taking cover; in the apartment stairwell; during a patio brunch in Shenkin; on the highway as every car frantically pulls over and passengers run to and fro to find shelter. We witnessed rockets being intercepted overhead, and felt the frenzy of cell phones ringing as loved ones checked in on each other.

During the most recent conflict, things became pretty tense in our house. Reading the posts on Facebook can stir the strongest human emotions. I know this was particularly difficult for Rinat, as she viewed the very worst of anti-Israel rhetoric from people she has considered to be "friends". And she suffered the numbing virtual silence and rejection of Facebook, procuring just a handful of likes--almost always by Israelis--on her posts in support of Israel. And what of me? Considering the safety of my family in Israel and my upset with Israel's heavy-handed use of violence is hard enough... adding having to determine whether to 'like' my wife's posts on the situation was almost too much. I couldn't do it--even when much of me *agreed* with some of her posts. I couldn't align myself so strongly. I won't take sides as long as both perpetuate violence. // Rinat decided that she would attend one of the pro-Israel rallies. This seemed out of character--she had never had this desire during the previous Gaza conflict or the war in south Lebanon--but for whatever reason, perhaps partly due to her alienation on Facebook (and at home), and what she perceived to be a pro-Palestinian bias around her, she decided to attend the rally. When she told me, we made eye contact and in a split second, had a silent conversation... my look said, "you know I can't go with you" and she replied "I know, but I hope you'll respect me and my decision to go"... and then we continued aloud with her saying, "so, you'll stay with Noa?"--very challenging indeed. I told her that she should expect to hear terrible things from both camps and urged her not to get sucked into the vortex of anger. I encouraged her to be an instrument of peace. She nodded knowingly.

I have not given up on my pacifist principles nor my commitment to aiding the oppressed. I have plenty of condemnation for the actions and policies of the state of Israel... but what I once thought was a cut-and-dried matter, will now only illicit the simple response of "it's complicated"... and if anyone really wants to take the next step in the conversation, I will quickly take a centrist (or Devil's Advocate) position and debate all comers; in my online community of football fans, many with conservative leanings, I more often speak up for the

Palestinian cause. In my liberal progressive communities, I'm more often trying to invite staunch opponents of Israel to resist dehumanizing Israelis by diminishing their well-founded fears and security concerns as being an evil desire to oppress and control. Certainly their actions are not justified; but they *are* explainable. Without understanding, there can be no peace.

What we need is compassion. Compassion for the inherent worth and dignity of every victim of terror, every sufferer of oppression, and even every aggressor, every martyr, every zealot, every bullheaded politician, every terrorist (state sanctioned or rogue).

People directly affected by the conflict will no doubt align themselves with one camp; this is understandable and tolerable. But as outsiders, viewing the situation with our ideals and principles, opining from afar, never having donned a gas mask, seen a rocket intercepted overhead, done military service at a check-point, lost a loved one... we'd be best to do more seeking of perspective, and directing our efforts to being the bridge for peace to occur.

Neither side needs any more combatants... once anger fuels our activism we are only throwing that fuel on the fire. Once we so firmly align ourselves with a side, the dehumanization begins. Counting women, children, civilians, soldiers, combatants... all of the data carefully manipulated to show 'the truth'--from one side.

When someone says "1000 rockets have been launched at Sderot," the response lacking compassion jumps to comparing atrocities; to counting dead; it plays the best rebuttal in defense, saying, "those rockets have never even killed anyone!" The compassionate response reflects on what it must be like to be a family in Sderot; a parent at work, with a child in school, as the sirens go off, day after day.

To be a true peacemaker, we must force ourselves to see all sides; to empathize, to sympathize; to understand; and to be able to articulate the positions of both sides *to* both sides, without inciting anger, suspicion, mistrust or hatred. Aligning oneself in the center does not mean being apathetic or cowardly. It can be strongly activist and truly committed to peace--having the courage to speak up for either side, giving reasoned, well-articulated responses to those at the extremes. Where was *this* group during the rallies? Who was standing in the *centre* of the road, inviting people from either camp to join them in dialogue, peacemaking and understanding. *This* is where 'the inherent worth and dignity of *every* person', and 'the interconnected web' meet. The bridge to peace starts in the space-between, and it is where the building must begin.

...

A couple days after the Israel rally we were at Nathan Phillips Square, enjoying a free concert... Noa befriended a boy with her dancing (just like her parents!), and Rinat and the mom ended up in deep conversation. She was a Palestinian. They shared their common dreams for their children, and their disdain for the Israeli and Palestinian leadership. They hugged each other warmly, teared up a little, and wished each other peace and safety for their families. In that moment, their connection did a little to increase the sum total of love and justice in the world...

--and so may we all.

**Sermon: “The Tangled Webs We’re In”  
by Rev. Shawn Newton**

Before I begin this morning, I’d like to take a couple of minutes to tell you about a product that Bob and I have come to love over the past three years. It’s called the SodaStream.

It allows you to create soda water or sparkling water in your very own kitchen.

There are even flavours you can add to make your own versions of pop, if you’re so inclined.

All you do is fill the litre bottles with water—  
either filtered or straight from the tap—  
and then twist it into place,  
press the big button to carbonate,  
and in seconds you have,  
what we call at our house, fizzy water.

Voila!

It saves us money over the long run  
because we no longer have to buy soda water at the store.

And it reduces the environmental impact of using plastic bottles  
or shipping heavy bottled water across the country.

The best part is that we don’t have to schlep  
heavy two-litre bottles from the store to our kitchen.

What’s not to love, right?

Now, if this were a real infomercial—  
something I swear that I would never subject you to—  
I’d tell you that there’s nothing  
that’s not 100% loveable about this product.

But, as you may have guessed, it’s not that simple.

SodaStream is one of Israel’s great success stories in recent years.

A business that has gone global and won over fans everywhere.

Its critics point out that SodaStream is an Israeli company operating in an illegal settlement on occupied land in the West Bank.

For the past few years there has been an active boycott of the company around the world—something I should say I did not know when I bought ours.

The boycott reached a milestone this summer, when the company's largest store closed in London after being steadily picketed for two years.

And hanging in the balance, on the other side of the scales of justice, in all of this, is the recognition that SodaStream is one of the largest employers in the West Bank— with some 500 Palestinian personnel— a crucial point in an economy where steady jobs are hard to come by.

And, so, a simple glass of water isn't so simple— in my household or in countless kitchens around the globe.

The truth is that I think about my connection and my complicity to the conflict between Israel and Palestine, every time I carbonate a fresh bottle of water, and every time I pour myself a glass to drink.

On an almost daily basis I'm confronted in my kitchen with the question of what one is supposed to do in such a situation?

It's the kind of question we must ask ourselves frequently in our highly interdependent world.

As Unitarians, we celebrate the interconnected web of being with great gusto.

We understand that our destiny on this planet is shared. We affirm that what touches one touches all.

It's easy to appreciate and honour

the wondrous webs of connection that we're caught up in.

Harder, though, is owning up to the reality that these same connections, and our sense of kinship with the wider world, come with some very serious complications.

Complications that can be, quite literally, matters of life and death.

So, whatever are we to do?

This ongoing conflict, familiar to us all on some level, has, of course, brought about innumerable protests and calls for justice.

Horrified by the violence that has played out in that part of the world, people in Israel, Palestine, and countless other countries have routinely taken to the streets to register their anger at the violence and aggressive action that has gripped that part of the world for as long as most of us can remember.

Over the course of recent years, some have called for boycotts, for sanctions and divestment. Some have called for a renewed commitment to the feeble peace process. Some have called for new governments in both Israel and Palestine. And some, having absolutely no idea what to do, have simply given up hope.

The conflict between Palestine and Israel is one of the toughest and most complex topics there is.

I find it difficult to discuss with strangers and friends alike, for it feels hopelessly fraught, and impossible to unravel.

For starters, it's never clear where to begin sorting through the litany of woes—whether we are to go back to the lead-up to this summer's war, or back to the Second Intifada, or the first; whether we are to take up the grievances that date to 1967, or the ones evident at Israel's founding in 1948. Or whether we are to trek back through time to what ancient archeology and biblical records have to tell us.

In light of all of this, I often wonder what my opinion,

held in the relative safety of Toronto, can possibly mean.

For years, I had heard people say that you had to go there to understand.

And so I did that two years ago, and only came back more confused and disheartened about the prospects for peace.

I learned a lot. I gained an appreciation, at least on a small scale, of how different the conflict appears on opposite sides.

Bob and I had dinner with Israeli friends in Tel Aviv across the street from where a suicide bomb killed 22 people on a bus in 1994.

We heard them speak of the gripping fear in which they perpetually live, and their hope to leave Israel before their children reach the mandatory age for service in the Israeli Defence Forces.

Days later, we found a Palestinian guide who took us into the heart of three refugee camps in the West Bank.

There, we saw, first hand, the squalor that defines daily life, as we walked through residential buildings meant to hold temporary refugees that have now been home to three and four generations of Palestinians raised within their walls.

We witnessed the deep longing for a return to ancestral lands, and we saw the dreadful impact of daily life behind the Separation Wall, or Apartheid Wall as many people there call it.

I told the story shortly after we returned, but Bob and I also witnessed a conflict on the Temple Mount that involved rock throwing and the tossing of chairs, smoke bombs and rubber bullets.

And, later, uncomfortably close to where we fled to avoid getting caught up in the violence, the death of a Palestinian boy who was shot after throwing a firecracker at an Israeli officer.

These experiences, relatively minor to those who live there, day in and day out, left me shaken on many levels, uncertain what to think.

And they left me humbled, feeling that there were complexities to this conflict I will never—and can never—fully understand as an outsider.

I returned, resonating with the sobering bit of wisdom found in Betty Smith's novel *Tomorrow Will Be Better*, that:

“Bad quarrels come when two people are wrong.  
[And] worse quarrels come when two people are right.”

There is so much wrong and right in this epic quarrel that it leaves those on the outside simply bewildered.

What's clear enough is that all people of good will want the killing to stop, for there to be an enduring end to the cycles of violence.

How to go about that, though, is where these people of good will so often part ways.

I can see validity in the arguments made by people on both sides.

I have respect for people, who out of genuine concern for the welfare of people in Palestine, or Israel, or both, have taken action by signing petitions, donating money, or calling on their politicians—people who have tried to do something, anything, to pave the way to peace.

I do not know the answer. I'm not sure anyone does anymore.

What does seem obvious is that until the *existential fears* of Israelis are alleviated—their deep-seated fears of annihilation relieved—and until the *existential needs* of Palestinians are met—needs as basic as food and water and as vital as dignity and security—there is no real promise of peace to speak of.

In this prolonged stalemate, there remains a need for those who demand and deliver humanitarian aid, and for those who pressure and protest our government to act in response in accord with our highest values.

Our meager efforts, though, are not always adequate to the task.  
And our limitations can leave us feeling powerless and pessimistic.

I have reluctantly come to believe  
that only the parties directly involved  
can find the solution that has so long evaded them.

I'll admit that can be a profoundly depressing thought.

And, yet, I find a glimmer of hope in the risk-takers  
who are defying the boundaries and barriers that would divide them  
to forge a new way forward.

Peacemakers, in the truest sense of the word,  
who reach across the gulf of grief, the chasm of chaos,  
to say, "this has to stop."

Israelis and Palestinians who reach over seemingly insurmountable walls,  
to declare that they refuse to be each other's enemies.

The most profound example of this, for me,  
is found in the almost unthinkable existence of the organization  
called Palestinian and Israeli Bereaved Families for Peace.

Immediate family members of people  
who have been killed in the violence have—against all odds—  
come together in the hope that through dialogue  
they can bring about tolerance, reconciliation, and peace.

Can you imagine the strength required of one's soul  
to turn up at one of these events?

Can you fathom the radical change of heart that it would take  
to turn away from such overwhelming grief and justifiable anger  
in order to walk toward the possibility of peace and understanding?

The organization's motto is: "It won't stop until we talk."

And, so, defying so much of what could come so naturally—  
bitter resentment and hate-filled rage—

these people open their broken hearts to the promise of a different story,  
or at least a different ending to the nightmare they have been living.

To hear their stories, to read the letters of outreach and reconciliation,  
which I would encourage you to do,  
is enough to crack open even hearts that have grown cynical and cold.

I am in awe of such people.

And I am compelled to do what I can to support their efforts.

For, if there is ever to be peace, it will come through what they do.  
As they say, it won't stop until they talk.

The Sufi mystic Rumi famously said the same thing.

“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing  
and rightdoing,” he said, “there is a field.  
I will meet you there.”

That proverbial field is, in my view,  
the single most important field in any war,  
in any human conflict, in any misunderstanding,  
no matter the size or scope.

Amid the battlefields strewn  
with the desecrated debris of war,  
it can be difficult to find that field.

Caught up in the senseless cycles of conflict,  
it's easy enough to give up the search—  
to reconcile ourselves to the costs of war,  
rather than wrestle with the difficult demands of reconciliation.

And so the question remains: what, then, are we to do?

In the coming months, there will be a series of dialogue opportunities  
here at First concerning the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Come, listen, and learn.  
Engage and act in the ways your heart is moved.

But, mostly, though, commit to being keepers of the field.

I think that is a meaningful role that we, as Unitarians, can play—  
be it with this particular conflict, or with any other,  
if we can summon the spiritual strength to do so.

It's tricky. It involves holding your heart open,  
and sometimes entertaining opinions you may radically oppose.

It means creating a protected place,  
where the truth can emerge,  
where fears can be named,  
and where fragile hopes can be held and given the room to grow.  
It is in such a field that the healing of the world will begin,  
just as it always has.

Let us, then, labour in that field  
until the harvest of justice and peace has been brought in.

Amen.

### **Closing Words**

In the words of the Roberta Bard,  
author of the hymn we sang earlier:

Bless the earth and all your children,  
one creation: make us whole,  
interwoven, all connected,  
planet wide and inmost soul.

Holy mother, life bestowing,  
bid our waste and warfare cease.  
Fill us all with grace o'erflowing.  
Teach us how to live in peace.

May it be so.

Amen.