

Peacemaking in the 21st Century

An essay by The Reverend Steve J. Crump of the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, 2011.
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Being a peacemaker in the 21st century requires of us something more than loving our neighbor. Loving one's neighbor is a snap, especially if we are getting along with our neighbor. The hard part is loving our opponent. Harder still, is to love one's enemy. Post-moderns are likely to say, "That loving my enemy stuff is for saints, not us." While many well-intentioned instructions for living in peace amount to little more than bromides, platitudes, and greeting card inscriptions, peacemaking is complex and thoughtful work. It's not for wimps. No road of peacemaking is without its potholes of ambivalence, setbacks, or cynicism. It is not always clear how we should begin or redirect our efforts. Furthermore, we cannot be assured that our efforts will better a situation. But we must try. We must take first steps.

And we must make an attempt to go below the surface of matters. For example, "turn the other cheek" can easily be dismissed, and probably is dismissed by culture, as the behavior of sissies or martyrs. A deeper understanding of that instruction, however, reveals that turning the other cheek placed a Roman soldier in the awkward and embarrassing position of having to backhand an inferior with *the left hand*, something not done in that culture.¹ So, turning the other cheek was openly defiant and subversive, yet non-violent action.

Peacemaking is subversive and courageous work. We recall Martin Luther King, Jr. who preferred being jailed in Birmingham than to stop direct nonviolent action against American apartheid. I think of theological school student Walt Staton who was arrested two years ago for leaving jugs of water for immigrants crossing the Mexico/U.S. border. A jury found Staton guilty of "premeditated littering." On appeal, his conviction was overturned. *Aqua*, the Spanish word for *water*, brings to mind the human issue of common thirst to the debate on immigration policy.

Have you been moved to take stands for what you understand to be justice and peacemaking? Some of the steps we take are baby steps. Remember that King, by his own admission, did not start out as a social activist. He wanted to become a professor at a fine school somewhere. He was drawn into or called into the movement that formed and transformed him and would transform a nation. But let us also remember that many of his allies thought he had lost his focus when he began to speak out against the U.S. war in Southeast Asia. No, the work of peacemaking is not for the risk adverse. Becoming a peacemaker starts in little steps: saying "ouch," for example, when we hear someone in our midst speak words of sexism, bigotry, homophobia, or some such intolerance. "Ouch" will get their attention.² They will ask if they inadvertently bumped into us or caused some harm. And then we will say, "Yes. Thank you for asking. Your words caused harm."

And that evening, we will sleep well because we dared to speak up. We spoke a tiny four-letter word for justice-seeking and peacemaking—a word that began a conversation, a word, for all we know, began a transformation.

¹ See Walter Wink's [Engaging the Powers](#) and [The Powers That Be](#).

² *Ouch, no zaps*, is a diversity training technique described in Sharon Welch's book, [Sweet Dreams in America: Making Ethics and Spirituality Work](#), pp.108-110.