

“Developing Peace”

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UUMSB

Rev. Carol Allman-Morton

Grace Note and Reading:

Our grace note today is from the April 17, 2006 issue of the *New Yorker*. From an article by Alec Wilkinson called “The Protest Singer”

Here is a story told to me lately by a man named John Cronin, who is the director of the Pace Academy for the Environment, at Pace University. Cronin has known Seeger for thirty years. "About two winters ago, on Route 9 outside Beacon, one winter day, it was freezing—rainy and slushy, a miserable winter day—the war in Iraq is just heating up and the country's in a poor mood," Cronin said. "I'm driving north, and on the other side of the road I see from the back a tall, slim figure in a hood and coat. I'm looking, and I can tell it's Pete, He's standing there all by himself, and he's holding up a big piece of cardboard that clearly has something written on it. Cars and trucks are going by him. He's getting wet. He's holding the homemade sign above his head—he's very tall, and his chin is raised the way he does when he sings—and he's turning the sign in a semicircle, so that the drivers can see it as they pass, and some people are honking and waving at him, and some people are giving him the finger. He's eighty-four years old. I know he's got some purpose, of course, but I don't know what it is. What struck me is that, whatever his intentions are, and obviously he wants people to notice what he's doing, he wants to make an impression—anyway, whatever they are, he doesn't call the newspapers and say, 'I'm Pete Seeger, here's what I'm going to do.' He doesn't cultivate publicity. That isn't what he does. He's far more modest than that. He would never make a fuss. He's just standing out there in the cold and the sleet like a scarecrow. I go a little bit down the road, so that I can turn and come back, and when I get him in view again, this solitary and elderly figure, I see that what he's written on the sign is 'Peace.'"

Our reading is from *Shop Work as Soul Craft* by Matthew B. Crawford

The basic idea of tacit knowledge is that we know more than we can say, and certainly more than we can specify in a formulaic way. Intuitive judgments of complex systems, especially those made by experts, such as an experienced firefighter, are sometimes richer than can be captured by any set of algorithms.

The psychologist Gary Klein has studied the decision making of firefighters and other experts who perform complex tasks in the real world. “In many dynamic, uncertain, and fast-paced environments, there is no single right way to make decisions,” Klein says. “Experts learn to perceive things that are invisible to novices, such as the characteristics of a typical situation.

The experienced mind can get good at integrating an extraordinary large number of variables and detecting a coherent pattern. It is the pattern that is attended to, not the individual variables. Our ability to make good judgments is holistic in character, and arises from repeated confrontation with real things: comprehensive entities that are grasped all at once, in a manner that may be incapable of explicit articulation. This tacit dimension of knowledge puts limits on the reduction of jobs to rule following.

Sermon:

About a year ago, Pete Seeger was touring for his Grammy Award winning album, *At 89*. Being who he is, Seeger didn't just go on a tour, he set up a series of benefit concerts for farmers. I was able to see him at the benefit in Lebanon, NH, with my 15 year old cousin Ella. Pete had a chair so that he could sit when he got tired, and he brought reinforcements, his grandson Tao Rodriguez-Seeger, and Guy Davis, both excellent musicians in their own rights. Besides seeing a folk legend, the most spiritual part of the concert was how much he made us work. Ella and I were in the back row of the theater, so we could see everyone in the audience. There were lots of farmers, retired hippies, and families who wanted their children to have seen Pete Seeger. He made us *all* work. We had to sing along, and when we weren't loud enough on one song, he made us sing it again. I realized that part of Pete Seeger's gift is that he invites people to participate with him in a musical experience. When his song is hopeful, he wants people to sing that hope, when a song calls us to action, he wants us to experience that call directly.

A strong work ethic is part of the story of the American Dream, but what that work ethic means has changed over time. Today people in the United States work very hard for flat or reduced wages, many without benefits like health insurance or paid sick time. As the American Dream has evolved, there has been a push in the US toward a knowledge based economy. As a society we have put a high value on our children going to school, then college and then getting a job as a knowledge worker (or a white collar worker). It is not the case that the majority of kids have this experience, but it is most assuredly part of the American Dream. In his book, *Shop Class as Soul Craft: An inquiry into the value of work*, Matthew Crawford explores the future of this dream and whether or not it is really good for *all* of us.

Crawford points out that face-to-face work involving manual labor, specifically the trades, helps to keep communities sewn together. It can build community because this kind of work builds relationships, has concrete and understandable results, and helps people to see themselves contributing directly to society. He suggests that much of the "office work" that people engage in out in the world today does not allow that direct kind of understanding and relationship to identity and self worth. He refers to the 1,000s of jobs in the US economy where workers are not connected to the products they make but rather only to the little patch of paper or megabytes that is their job to create and sort. As communities and individuals, we must be ever more attentive to building connections, because they are no longer part of every day life for most people. As a society, we evaluate success with financial reward, and have devalued face-to-face interaction, even in professions that require it, like those in the medical fields.

I think that we need a peace work ethic connecting all kinds of justice work. Pete Seeger's life is an example of this. Peace can only be sustainable when issues like economic justice, civil rights, and environmental justice are addressed as well. Seeger organized for unions, civil rights, environmental justice, and peace. Peace work relies on face-to-face interaction. It requires the knowledge and skills of people from all over the world and will never have rules that can be simply followed to make it happen. Peace is messy and unpredictable, largely because peace work is not just about the cessation of violence, it is about building just and sustainable communities, where scarcity of resources, or hunger for power does not bring societies into conflict. It involves coming up against systems that are hungry for power and

money and are willing to give up neither. It is hugely complex work. Peace work may require a reevaluation of our American Dream and what work we value as a society.

Part of peace work is having a set of articulated values about peace and how they should be enacted in the world. Unitarian Universalists, unlike our Quaker neighbors, are not explicitly pacifists. Many of our members are, but by no means all. Some of us ascribe to Just War theory, some serve in the armed forces, and some are conflicted about where the line is between non-violence work, peace, and humanitarian intervention.¹ That being said, it is part of the fabric of our faith that we seek peace whenever possible.

Every four years our association engages with Congregational Study/Action Issues that are worked on by a national committee. Their work includes developing programming in our congregations and presentations at General Assembly leading to a statement of conscience that can be voted on by the Assembly. The current study is on peacemaking and a draft Statement of Conscience came to the GA in June. It was referred back for further study for one more year. In their draft statement, they said that peace work should have a multi-layered approach with peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding. In other words everything that can be done to prevent violence and war should be done, and it all involves relationship building. They would like our association of congregations to call for peace work to be done at international, societal, congregational, interpersonal, and inner levels.² They want peace work to be everywhere.

To build relationships, we must develop skills in listening and communication. As Crawford suggests in his example of the firefighter from our reading today, “[o]ur ability to make good judgments is holistic in character, and arises from repeated confrontation with real things...”³ We cannot make peace from the outside. As the statement of conscience draft suggests, peace work needs to happen at every level of human organization from the individual, to society, to nations. We cannot grasp the patterns and understanding of these systems, unless we engage with them in real and concrete ways. We must utilize the resources and knowledge of the people who are enmeshed in systems and institutions around the world. We need to listen to one another and communicate, from the boards in our congregations, to our world leaders.

Pete Seeger has these skills in listening and communicating. As a child, he traveled around the mountains of the South with his parents, learning music from the people they met. He has always been a musical sponge learning new techniques, tunes, and words from people he meets. He also listened to people talk about the issues of the day. He learned from Woody Guthrie about song writing and in particular political song writing. Then, Pete began to teach. He wrote banjo manuals, a book on how to play guitar in the style of Leadbelly, and countless songbooks and albums. As I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, he is always looking for people to participate. Seeger said in an interview with Acoustic Guitar magazine in 2002, “I’m a teacher trying to teach people to participate, whether it’s banjos or guitars or politics or whatever.”⁴

Pete Seeger has worked for peace, for workers’ rights, for democracy, and for the environment. His music and teaching have touched millions of people around the world. His health and ability at 90 years old alone is inspiring. Seeger’s life is an example of human potential to do the work of peace. He is not afraid to write his hope on cardboard and stand by his home to share hope with his community. And, yet, when I read the story to my husband

¹ See more at uua.org/peacemaking

² Peacemaking SOC, <http://www.uua.org/socialjustice/issuesprocess/currentissues/peacemaking/121606.shtml>

³ Crawford, *Shop Class as Soul Craft*

⁴ Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers, “How Can I Keep from Singing”, *Acoustic Guitar*, July 2002.

about Pete Seeger we heard earlier, when he was out by himself with a cardboard sign on the side of road, he asked, “Does that story goes against your sermon?... He was out there alone and you are talking about relationship and community.” I wondered about that and had realization about Seeger’s commitment to participation and teaching. I don’t know what he would say about his motivations, but my sense is that he wants to take every opportunity he can for peace work, in huge stadiums, and alone by his house. That is his peace work ethic, and what he wants to teach others. We have a lot to learn from that commitment. At the same time, we are part of a community of faith that does peace work in the context of our community. It had been our experience in the world that the most effective peace leaders have done their work in relationship with communities of people, as Pete Seeger has done.

How do we build a peace work ethic? We listen and communicate and recognize the interconnections between peace work and all justice work. We need to begin in our congregations and expand out into the world. Peace takes work, and we have communities with the potential to help do that work. We are part of webs of interconnected relationship that must be attended to, from our friends and family, to people all around the world. Our choices from our shoes and socks, to our religious and political leaders impact people and peace around the world. When we share our hopes for peace with others, be it by participating in church life, working with peace organizations including the UUA, learning to listen and communicate with intention, or holding cardboard signs on the side of the road, we help to make those hopes for peace possible. It is by naming and deep listening, by communicating with each other that we build sustainable and sustaining community. Peace takes work and it is work in and between communities. We will be most successful when we are face to face, communicating and building relationship. May we each be part of making that possible.

Amen.