

“Peace Among Nations”

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It was a tough choice – whether to tend to the erudite words and the commanding presence of my professor or to catch a glance through the window at the sun dipping into the Mediterranean waters just a few hundred yards from my classroom. As a student in this year-long seminar on Moral Philosophy, I knew I was privileged to learn through the seasoned lens of Dr. Charles Malik, as schooled in the philosophical particulars of Plato and Nietzsche as he was skilled in the political intricacies of Lebanon and the Middle East. As I sifted through the ideas and exchanges of that classroom and those occasional field seminars that lifted those exchanges into the villages above Beirut, I knew that these were moments not to be missed, however tempting the sunsets. Here was the man who had served as the first President of the General Assembly of the United Nations at its founding in 1945. Dr. Malik would lace his commentary on moral philosophy with stories of notes passed back and forth with Dag Hammarskjöld in their days at the UN. He would tease the political taboos of this Lebanese university with an offhand comment favorable to Israel. I learned a large horizon from that man so committed to peace among nations, so hopeful that it was possible.

My roommate that year was from Baghdad. Laila was in Beirut on a mathematics scholarship from her government. She would return home proud to bring expertise valued by her country in a discipline that still carried a gender barrier for young girls in my own.

Yet unknown to me was another student at the university, a young Palestinian woman who in 1948 with the creation of Israel had been forced to flee with her family first to Jerusalem and then to Beirut. Years later I would meet her at the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City, a city she would have long called home. At All Souls, Hanan became chair of the Peace Task Force.

How woven we are. How woven we are in this web that is never static. We know what happened last summer with the devastation of Southern Lebanon, with the raids on both sides of the border. We know that tomorrow marks the fourth anniversary of our country’s invasion of Laila’s homeland. We know that the institution served so well by Charles Malik and Dag Hammarskjöld still stands, however little faith some vest in it, no matter how many times it has kept us all from the brink of the even more horrific.

Ours is an extended family of nations. There is ready grist for petty quarrels; there is ready venom for brutality and war. Hope is commonly called unrealistic in this unruly family. Sharing does not come easy for this family’s most spoiled children. Resentment and rage flair understandably for this family’s most fragile members. Keeping the peace is fraught with problems that accrue when human rights are sacrificed on the altars of being right and having more.

Hope is unrealistic only in hearts and minds that hoard the tools of realism. Keeping hope is as tough as keeping peace. Building hope is as tortuous as building peace. Yet we as Unitarian Universalists espouse a goal of “world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” Is this just idle religious chit-chat or are we serious? How faithful are we to this notion of a functional global family? How ready are we as citizens and as people of faith to beat our addiction to goods

and resources that come at such an unconscionable price to other family members? How ready are we as a family of faith to wade into the murky waters of peace among nations when we quarrel over money and the kids in our congregations?

How ready are we, I wonder, as my head turns to look out the window and catch the sun dipping once again into those waters off the coast of that jewel city of the Mediterranean, as the wisdom of my professor resonates through the years, and as the silent footsteps of my unknowing friend out there on the campus hold a Palestinian history, a Lebanese present, and an American future. How ready are we, I wonder, as we consider once more just how it is our family of nations will be family.

Sources:

UUA Congregational Study/Action Issue 206-1020: Peacemaking, www.uua.org/csw.