

**Paths to Peace**  
**Annual Peace and Justice Working Group event**  
**October 20, 2004**

**Theological Reflection**  
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I've been asked to offer a theological reflection on Margaret Boyce's wise words. That's a really tall order, but I will try to rise to the challenge. When Shirley Farlinger asked me to do this, I probably said "Yes" because I was in a particularly low space about the state of the world and the unlikely-hood that it will improve any time soon, and thought it would be good for me. Like the Psalmist, "My soul refused to be consoled. I thought of God and sighed. I pondered and my spirit failed me." I was settling into a place that I could only call one of "despair". Then Shirley reminded me that despair is a luxury that none of us can afford. In fact, more than a luxury, it is a place of unfaithful witness, one that is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Despair is a place that drains all our energies and basically says that we surrender, we give up.

So for my own sanity, and perhaps for some of you too, I have been thinking hard and collecting wisdom from hither and yon – which is my definition of a theological reflection. I am remembering someone that Helen Best will know: Sulak Sivaraksa, a Thai Buddhist who was very involved in interfaith dialogue a decade or so ago. He found himself in Toronto after he was slammed with the accusation of *lese majeste*, (a very serious accusation in Thailand of being disrespectful to the king). Sulak said that every religion has two gods, a god of war and a god of love. The god of war is tribal, judgmental, nationalistic with enemies both national and individual, (like those "evil empires", or Saddam Hussein) and operates a closed system of truth, requiring unquestioning obedience to a set of strict laws of conduct. On the other hand, the god of love is inclusive, forgiving, has enemies yes,

but they are whatever holds us down and apart, (like poverty, violence, hatred, or arrogance), and this god is open - open to change, to growth, to imagination.

Most of us, I imagine, or I doubt that we would be here tonight, have let go of that vengeful, warrior god long ago. And I suspect have come to the conclusion that ideas such as the theory of 'Just War' have outlived any usefulness or deterrence that they may have played in the past, which is probably precious little, if any. That the ways wars are conducted today, and the convoluted reasons for them are so beyond any concept of justice, that it is a mockery of all that is just or civil or even human, for that matter, and certainly a betrayal of every faith's code of conduct, of ethics and understanding of who and why we and our various gods exist at all!

I remember a lecture by Garrison Keillor, of Lake Wobegon fame, when we lived in Minneapolis, speaking in a series on Religion and Culture. He was talking about the role of humor in justice work. He painted a picture of lying out on a dock somewhere in northern MN, looking up at a star-drenched sky and being overwhelmed by the amazing beauty of this world. He said that it made him realize that the only faithful way, the only really effective way that we can engage in the work of saving this fragile planet, is out of a deep well of love for creation.

We cannot do this work out of fear – for our lives or for the planet. “Be not afraid”, said the angel. I think that's possibly the most important verse in the Bible! Fear stops our capacity to think, to listen. We can't hear what the real issues are. It stops our ability to imagine alternative solutions. It drains our energy. It makes us circle the wagons, to turn inward to resurrect that tribal god. We lose the ability to be generous, hospitable, understanding, and most of all, to trust the other. Fear elicits flight or fight responses. That difficult, painful, slow, wrestling, compromising,

middle way isn't an option when fear is controlling the responses. War is so much easier, so much more satisfying, so much simpler and simplistic, and so much more STUPID a response! Oops! I promised I wasn't going to rant!! Sorry!

I have been reading Joan Chittister's book, Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope. Most of you will know the story of this amazing Benedictine Abbess who has defied the powerful both religious and political and has lived to tell the tale. She uses Jacob's night of wrestling with God as the metaphor that focuses her thoughts about Struggle and it's gifts to us – primarily Hope. She makes it very clear that Hopefulness is not easy. To have any power, any effect on this life, it is a hard won gift that comes out of real-time struggle. And, like Jacob, it will leave us limping. She even allows that there actually is a place for fear – as long as we use it as a catalyst for creative action. I expect for many of us these days, I know for me, it is really hard to confront my ultra conservative family and friends in the states – and believe you me, there are so many of them! I share with you one of Joan's anecdotes:

We have all had our small moments of courage, our icons of possibility. One experience in particular reminds me how easy it can really be to face my fears. Just by being honest enough to admit that I think differently about something, I take a first step into the heart of courage. Slated to give a public presentation in Texas one evening, I was being hosted in the hotel penthouse as part of the pre-banquet reception there. They were serving six-inch prawns on sterling silver platters, and tall canisters of champagne were going around like ice water. Men in silk shirts surrounded me, talking to one another over my head about the price of oil. Suddenly Ronald Reagan appeared on the large television screens in the four corners of the room to announce that he had given the order that day that anyone attempting to cross the

Rio Grande River into the United States would be shot on sight. “Well, it’s about time that got stopped,” one man said. “They come up here and take American jobs. Someone has to put an end to that,” another said. “We’ve been warning them,” a third said. “What else can we do but shoot them?”.... I took a deep breath: “We could give Texas back,” I said. ... There was a long awkward silence. It was not polite talk in the present political arena, I knew. But down deep, inside, where it counts, I also knew that given the same conversation in the same place with the same people, I would say it all over again.

She reminds us that the struggle for God’s truth, God’s creation, is long, it’s exhausting, it will expose our vulnerabilities, change our realities, demand profound honesty, courage and patience, and be deeply painful. But it brings amazing gifts. This is so, whatever the outcome. For it is important to remember that God’s world is in God’s hands, and therefore can never be hopeless! So, as we have painfully learned, through all of our liberation theologies, it’s the journey. That’s what it’s all about. Not the outcome. It IS the journey.

Now none of this says How! But we know that we have those skills or can learn them. We know that we do this together. We know about “Win-Win” methodologies. Restorative Justice processes. I just heard about a new book from the Harvard Negotiation Project folks, Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most. We know about the power of massive and passive resistance, write-in campaigns, boycotts, the newly discovered power of the internet in expressing opinion and raising funds, etc. We have to tap into all of these skills, processes, campaigns, techniques, etc. We have to keep on struggling .

We are called to name the real weapons of mass destruction: like environmental degradation, poisoning of the oceans, depletion of

the ozone layer, overpopulation of the planet, extinction of species, subjugation of women, the scourge of AIDS, our dependence on nonrenewable resources. We are called to live lightly and yet more lightly on the planet, to give freely of our energy and strength, to join together, to image a peaceful and just world.

You may have read the remarkable memoir by the Iranian teacher, Azar Nafisi, Reading Lolita in Tehran. She has a marvelous passage just at the end of the book where she says: “I have a recurring fantasy that one more article has been added to the Bill of Rights: the right to free access to imagination.” She goes on to describe how her country, Iran, is denied access to creative story, and how their women in particular lose their ability to imagine a different future. But I think it is a universal truth that she is proclaiming – that it is our God given imaginations that open up alternative possibilities for individuals and nations.

Not to be partisan, of course, but when one of John Kerry’s friends, speaking in a PBS special on the two candidates, talked about how when Kerry would be offered 5 possibilities to solve a problem, he came back with 20 more. It is this ability to imagine alternative futures that is how we will find a way to do God’s purpose in the brief span that we each have been given.

So, in this time when thought is being more and more directed by a corporate world, the media, governments captive to private interest groups, conservative religious movements with their war gods, under-funded educational systems, and public lethargy and despair, we are called to imagine, to struggle, to hope, to a sure knowledge that this world that we love is God’s world, beloved of a God who never gives up hope, and that ultimately God’s will for God’s creation will be done. Thanks be to God.