

May doves of peace embrace us.

Chalice lighting and prayer adapted from Leslie Takahashi, multicultural anti-racist and Unitarian Universalist minister.

May doves of peace surround us as we light our chalice flame, when globally it seems, Peace and reconciliation are on the brink,

The brink of all that humanity has ever loved.

When it seems that all that we have ever been, stands with us on the brink of all that humanity continues to hope for, to struggle to create.

That is - a deeper peace,

A larger love,

A more embracing hope,

A deeper joy in this life we share.

May doves of peace surround us as we, again and again light our chalice flame, knowing it always burns within our hearts.

Opening Prayer inspired also by Leslie Takahashi

We bring our thoughts, our intentions, our prayers to each other and to the Source of all being, the source of peace and love, the God of our understanding

Whenever we shake hands, clasp hands in greeting, link arms in affection, hold another in loving or comforting embrace, two people have united, between them they have formed a bridge over which love can pass, in both the peaceful and tumultuous times of life.

And so, in our pews, alongside each other, with those in front and behind we join hands and form a bridge of love. We hold that connection for a moment or two.

May we always be ready to build bridges and may doves of peace hover above us as we do

As we now release the symbolism our hands, we continue to express our commitment to remain connected to those across our world who are oppressed or in danger from the injustice of discrimination because of gender, sexuality, disability, faith, or simply difference, remembering that a bridge may be an escape route above or a refuge beneath.

May we, whenever possible offer a bridge and may doves of peace hover above us as we do.

We bring to our focus of peace, to the many countries around our world there is terrorist or civil conflict, where there are drugs wars, and we now direct our peace-prayers to Gaza and Israel, and Russia and Ukraine.

When peace seems to be at its most elusive, then between ourselves , through prayer, through giving, by deeply, extravagantly, loving and accepting ourselves and then, when there are excesses of love abounding for others,

We build between ourselves and through our prayers, stronger bridges. Beneath their arches, may there be shelter for those for whom secret protection is the only choice and may they be paths for those who can emerge, that lead to safety, may they be ways and means for love and peace to flow freely from minds, from hearts, from places and people ruled by destructive conditioning and hatred to minds, hearts and places and people for whom love and peace has been globally transforming.

And as we build those stronger bridges may doves of peace hover around us as we do.

1st Hymn words on sheet to tune 199 inspired by Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp – sing twice slowly

Building many bridges may we be set free,

I reach out to you; will you reach out to me?

Over our bridges hover doves of peace,

Joining now, together, pray that war may cease.

Hang peace doves around the pupil and windows

Bridge over troubled water.

Reading 1 The Doves, the Spider and Mohammed

Long ago, in the desert of Arabia, there was a small, beautiful city called Mecca. It was full of camels and caravans, colours, and perfumes. The desert around was a huge empty space but Mecca was very special. A place to rest, to trade, and to pray. All around the desert and Mecca were rugged mountains, hills, and caves. One of the caves was home to a little spider who was often very lonely and wished for a friend. Sadly, very few creatures stopped by cave. But one day a pair of young doves flew by, and they liked the look of the shrubs and bushes beside the cave opening. They decided to build their nest there. They gathered twigs, grasses, spider, silk, and sheep's wool branches and nested in a shrub at the caves mouth. There they were protected from the wind and the sun. The spider was so happy to have some friends at last, and they were no ordinary friends. These birds would take wing and bring back stories of all they've seen. Every day they'd rise high into the sky and fly into the desert to see what they could find.

Often, they would fly to Mecca where they'd find grain, crumbs, and water and interesting tales they'd heard. There was one young man in particular who would often

feed the doves. Muhammad was his name, and he was very special. Mohammed was from the family of Abraham he was known for his kindness, honesty, and trustworthiness. Never did he pass anyone without giving them a smile or a helping hand. His goodness shone, like a lamp in the darkness. The doves could see his light and were drawn to him. Then they would return to the cave and tell the spider all about this extraordinary man. The spider loved the stories about the man who was friendly with the rich and the poor, was kind to animals, and told people not to overburden them when they worked them. Mohammed even tried to tread lightly upon the Earth. Well, time passed, and the doves raised many broods of chicks. While they were off, searching for food the spider would tell the chick stories of Mohammed and sing them to sleep. One day, the doves were gone for a long time and on their return, they told the spider that Mohammed was in great danger. The leaders in Mecca did not like his words. They didn't want to be told to take care of the animals and share their wealth with the poor. And they didn't want to be told that they should stop worshipping statues of wood and stone and just worship one God, the great creator.

The leaders began to plot to kill Mohammed. One night the moon rose across the sand dunes and Muhammad and one of his friends came riding towards the cave. They knew they were in danger and being followed, and when they dismounted the camels and saw the cave, they realised although it was only just big enough for them, it was the best place to hide. They gently pulled aside the web and gave some crumbs to the doves in their nest and crawled to the back of the cave. The leaders of Mecca were not far behind, searching when the spider had an inspiration. He would weave a silken web right across the entrance to the cave from stone to stone. When he'd finished, he sat in the middle of it, as if to say none shall pass. The doves peacefully cooed in their nest, feeding their chicks and the search party from Mecca came to the outside of the cave. They sat down to have some refreshment. One of them noticed the cave and commented that no one could have entered recently as the doves would surely have flown, and the huge spider's web would've been broken.

Inside at the back of the cage, cave, Mohammed and his friend, wiped tears from their eyes. They at the bravery of the doves, and the speed of the spider spinning. The men outside, mounted their horses again, and returned to Mecca. The doves and the spider realised that they had been messengers from the creator, and they thanked God for their part, that even as small creatures they had been influential in saving a man of God.

Hymn 2 148 Spirit of life

Reflection

My service today was inspired by a recent visit to the Peace Doves in Chichester Cathedral. We followed a prayer trail around this beautiful ancient building while the doves beautifully flew from the vaulted ceiling, lit by changing colours. Each dove had a message of peace written on it. And the prayer trail contained some beautiful short prayers that I've included today. 'Peace Doves' is an artwork by Peter Walker Sculptor

that also involves mass participation culminating in the creation of a beautiful large scale hanging art installation, lit and set to music by Composer David Harper.

(youtube video of peace doves Rochester)

Bridport Unitarian church has a dove cote, when we've walked up through their garden for a service I love to see and hear the cooing white doves reminding us of the importance of peace beginning within each of us. I enjoy seeing the petite dove-grey collared doves we often come across and I never knew that the in family of doves and pigeons there are around 340 species, doves being the smaller ones, who actually pair for life. They are expert navigators who always know the way home after traveling vast distances, as do their cousins the homing pigeon.

The dove has a hugely symbolic place in mythology and faiths. Aphrodite the goddess of love, or Venus in Roman mythology is often depicted with doves fluttering around her or resting on her hand. The Blackfoot Native American tribe assigned the dove as protector of their warriors, ensuring that they would return unharmed after a battle. And the Aztec and Mexican Indian tribes would use doves in their wedding rituals, as symbols of love. In Hindu mythology, Kamadeva, the God of love is known to ride a dove. Christianity has the story of Jesus' baptism and a dove descending as God spoke which reflects the symbolism of the dove in Judaism. Most of us are familiar with the story of the dove returning to Noah in the ark, as the floods subsided with an olive twig in her beak, signifying life on earth was to begin again. And Genesis speaks of the spirit of God hovering over the face of the dark, deep at creation, like a bird protecting her young, while the rabbinic commentary, the Talmud names this presence as a dove. The Hebrew word used is Ruach, a feminine word, meaning the spirit of god, likened a mother dove. The Arabic word spirit in the Quran is almost identical – ruah.

So sadly, ironic that two faiths so anciently linked are currently and cruelly warring to protect their perceptions of their god and their spiritual and national identities that are both began with the same ancestor, Abraham.

The first bible verses from the Peace Dove prayer trail were from Genesis 1.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth ...and the Spirit of God – ruach- was hovering over the face of the waters.

We were invited to look up at the flock of doves and imagine the picture language of Genesis and pray for the Spirit of God to bring his peace and order to our world:

Loving God, so often we hear of chaos and disorder in our country and the world. Wrap each of your people in your love. Let us hear you say, "Come to me all you that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.

And we were reminded of the story in Mark's gospel Spirit of God alighting on Jesus at his baptism like a dove, enabling him to teach of building God's kingdom of peace and love, forgiveness and justice amidst the tyranny of the Roman Empire. The prayer asked that

we, filled with the Spirit of truth might build a world of peace, where people are wrapped in love and forgiveness, and justice flowed freely as a river.

Hymn 198 We'll build a land.

Reading 2 – Being Peace by Tich Nhat Hanh (tick, nart hah n), Vietnamese Zen Buddhist Monk written in 1987

Many of us worry about the world situation. We feel that we are on the edge of time. As individuals, we feel helpless, despairing. We need to remain calm. To see clearly. This is the meaning of meditation to be aware, internally, and externally, so we might be in a place we can try to help.

In Vietnam, there are many people, called boat people, who leave the country in small boats. Often the boats are caught in rough seas or storms, the people may panic, and boats can sink. But if even one person aboard can remain calm, lucid, knowing what to do and what not to do, he or she can help the boat survive. His or her expression-face, voice-communicates clarity and calmness, and people have trust in that person. They will listen to what he or she says. One such person can save the lives of many. Our world is something like a small boat. Compared with the cosmos, our planet is a very small boat. We are about to panic because our situation is no better than the situation of the small boat in the sea. We need people who can sit still and be able to smile, who can walk peacefully. We need people like that in order to save us from panic, overreaction, loss of hope. Mahayana Buddhism, which encompasses a wide range of Buddhist teaching, says that you are that person, each of us can be, that each of is that person.

Reflection and meditation

I want to share some words by a spiritual teacher I follow, who was influenced by Tich nach Han and Rumi – the oft quoted medieval Sufi poet. Jeff Foster writes realistically about how challenging it can be to find that inner peace, are his words compatible with that Buddhist teacher that each of us can be, that each of is that person.

If you want to be at peace, then stop trying! When you 'try' to be at peace, you can be holding up a mental image of 'peace'. You can be trying to be 'the peaceful one', something false. A mask. A persona. Your 'trying' takes you away from the very peace you desire!

Let the image of 'peace' fall away. Let the dream of 'calm' collapse. Let the hope of 'relaxation' relax. And turn towards your present experience. Come closer to Now. Drench the moment with loving attention. Get curious -What's it like to feel "not at peace", now? Are there turbulent thoughts? Loud judgemental voices in the head?

Bring some acceptance there.

Are feelings pulsating, rumbling, burning in the body? Bring some loving attention there.

Throw away the image of 'peace', bring some tenderness to this inner storm.

Bring a warm presence to this disturbance. Drench this restlessness in awareness, which is love. Yes - you can be at peace with your lack of peace! You can discover a deeper, unconditional Peace. The Peace that drenches 'non-peace' with tender love. The Sky that holds even the most violent storm. Smile at your struggle to 'stay calm', and bow to what is, even it's uncomfortable, even if it burns. This is the Peace that passes all understanding. The Peace of self-love. The Peace that is the ground, holding you.

All four gospels have Jesus quoting words from Leviticus in Hebrew bible well-known to him – Love your neighbour as yourself. This is what Jeff Foster is describing, the tough love of accepting our vulnerability, our humanity, our inabilities, the tough love of staying with our pain and struggles bringing awareness of how our body feels. Loving self means bringing life itself in the form of breath of to our human experiences. This is how we start to find inner peace, how each of us can be that person.

For so long now many have listened to guns and rockets, bombs and drones, we have only heard or read of these. Many have seen death and destruction day by day we have only seen pictures of this. The prayer trail asked us to wrap ourselves and others in love and peace. Let us do that now as we ground our bodies, feeling our feet firmly on the floor, and our backs resting against the wooden pew – a floor and a pew that have held generations of unitarians before us. Let's settle our breathing into a pattern that suits each of us, perhaps counting a long out breath, bringing awareness to how the breath of life moves our bodies. Let us listen to quiet music as we wrap ourselves and others in love and peace.

Hymn 4 – 97 love knocks and waits for us to hear

Closing words by St Teresa of Avalon

May today there be peace within.

May you trust your highest power that you are exactly where you are meant to be.

May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith.

May you use those gifts that you have received, and pass on the love that has been given to you.

May you be content knowing you are a child of God.

Let this presence settle into your bones, and allow your soul the freedom to sing, dance.

It is there for each and every one of you.

Our closing vesper is the Celtic Blessing set to music by John Rutter. Feel free to hum along

Libera Deep peace.

