

Peace Sunday Concluding Speech, January 30, 2011, at Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Santa Monica

The “peace cards” hanging on the wall to your left were made today by children in our church’s religious-education program. What you can’t see from your seats is that the words on them are translated into many languages—all languages where wars are currently being fought. The cards are the contribution of our kids to Peace Sunday. [applause from audience]

I join Rev. Bijur in welcoming you to our church and I admire your commitment to peace that has motivated you to participate in today’s long and packed program. We are close to the end; soon exhibits and food await you. I do ask for your close attention, however, because at several points during this talk I’m going to ask for your help.

I’m sure all of us feel frustrated at the lack of massive fight-back in the United States. Our country is engaged in unjust wars in the Middle East and Central Asia, millions of people are unemployed or underemployed, millions have lost or are about to lose their homes, college tuition has reached unaffordable levels with no end in sight, fascistic attacks by federal and state government on immigrants and social justice activists are on the rise—why aren’t the streets filled with people demanding change?

I am sure that a few weeks ago people in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen were asking similar questions. As we have seen, things can change quickly. More accurately, lots of small, unseen changes can turn into a big change. The more important question is, what kind of a movement are we trying to build? Let me tell you a quick story to show you what I mean:

In May 2010 our congregation passed a resolution urging the US to immediately cease combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and to withdraw all troops and civilian support personnel as rapidly as logistically possible.

I bring this up because it’s an important step in building a movement, a step that most churches, union locals, and community organizations have not taken—and one that many of you and your friends could lead in organizations you belong to. Our Peace & Social Justice Committee would be more than happy to help you.

Our resolution was the culmination of 17 months of work, and the beginning of a campaign to pass it at the district and national level of the Unitarian Church. We began by collecting signatures on a letter to Barak Obama after he had been elected but before he was inaugurated. Members of our committee disagreed about whether we should include Afghanistan as well as Iraq, and we knew we’d get a lot of disagreement outside the committee. Obama had stated during his campaign that he would send an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan; many members of our

church felt we had to support Obama to help him move in a progressive direction. Others said the US had to stay in Afghanistan to support the rights of women, or to stop terrorists, or to build democracy.

Nevertheless, we included Afghanistan. In the course of collecting 87 signatures on the letter, we had to answer these objections. We showed people the pipeline that the US wants to build through Afghanistan, to bring natural gas out of Central Asia without going through Iran or Russia. We explained that the pipeline was part of global competition among the capitalist powers for resources, markets and labor. We said that if the US were committed to the rights of women, it would invade its ally, Saudi Arabia. [laughter from the audience]

We held film showings and forums on Afghanistan. We participated in Friday night peace vigils. Our church newsletter carried articles for and against the resolution. We organized church members who supported the resolution to come to the annual meeting. About 80% of those present voted for the resolution.

Why did we think it was critical to break with President Obama over Afghanistan? My blurb in today's program says I've been organizing against imperialist wars since 1964. We were joking at an organizing meeting for this event that I was a failure [laughter, a shout, "No, you're still up there."]...we still have imperialist wars. Nevertheless, I like to think I've at least learned a few things. In 1964 people, myself included, began organizing opposition to the US war on Vietnam, which was still relatively small. At the same time, a presidential campaign was underway. Anybody recall who was running?

[audience: Lyndon Johnson, Barry Goldwater]

Right, Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater. Almost everybody in the peace movement worked to elect who? [audience: Johnson]

Right, they said if Barry Goldwater won, he'd do what about Vietnam? [audience: escalate, widen the war] And what would he do to North Vietnam? [audience: bomb] Right, Goldwater would "widen the war" and "bomb North Vietnam."

Well, LBJ won. Within three years, LBJ had increased the number of US troops from 25,000 to 500,000. He bombed North Vietnam and greatly increased the use of napalm bombs in South Vietnam. A chant was heard across the land. Anybody remember it. It started "Hey hey LBJ..." [audience: "How many kids did you kill today?"]

Barack Obama made a speech in Tucson January 13. He talked about the death of a 9-year old child, Christina Taylor Green. "I want our democracy to be as good as she imagined it," he said, "I want us to live up to her expectations." Well, if we are going to build a movement that can change the world, we have to face the facts. President Obama is Commander in Chief of the US armed forces. He is responsible for

launching drone attacks on homes and cars in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen. This terror from the air wipes out whole families, including children. Is this what Obama means by living up to Christina's expectations? Domestically, Mr. Obama supports giving hundreds of billions in bailouts to financial institutions but does essentially nothing to prevent millions of families, including [audience: children, 9-year-old girls] millions of children, from losing their homes. Let's face it: if George Bush had gone to Houston and talked about living up to Christina's expectations, we'd say he was a [audience: liar, hypocrite]. Well, I was looking for "hypocrite," but I heard "liar" too.

We have to build a movement—with apologies to Marci Winograd*—that is not fixated on elections. Particularly when it comes to the presidency and other high offices, the choices we are given are all people who have proven their allegiance to the system of finance capital. In his state of the union address, Obama said, "We have to make America the best place on earth to do business." He quoted Robert Kennedy, who said, "Sustaining the American dream...has required each generation to sacrifice."

Well, according to the stock market, America is a dreamy place to do business. The Dow Jones Industrial Average has almost doubled since its low in March 2009. That reflects a great increase in corporate profits. How could that be, with such high unemployment? [Audience member: Because there is high unemployment.] Precisely! High unemployment leads to one worker doing the work of two, which is called "increased productivity." High unemployment leads to lower wages, reductions in benefits, reductions in pensions. High unemployment leads to more profits! High unemployment equals competitiveness!

So we're supposed to sacrifice to "make America the best place on earth to do business." Buried in that statement is the notion that we—ordinary people, working people, students, soldiers—have more in common with our corporate CEOs and corporate board members than we do with our fellow working people in other countries. Why should we have to compete with our fellow workers in Europe, in China, in India, in Japan, in Brazil? Why do we have to engage in a race to the bottom in terms of wages and benefits so that our products can be cheaper than products produced in other countries, so that GM can, as it recently announced, sell more cars in China than in the United States?

What does this have to do with fighting for peace? Where does competition for markets, for resources, and for access to cheap labor ultimately lead? [Audience: to war] Yes, war. And, twice in the previous century, to World War. {The rest of this paragraph was left out in the interest of time.} After the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, Russia unilaterally withdrew from World War I. In terms of lives saved, that may have been the biggest contribution to peace in world history. Russia's allies—the governments of France, England, Italy and the United States—were outraged. They were apoplectic when the Bolsheviks published the secret treaties among the allies. Turns out the war was being fought not for "democracy" or "to end all wars"

but so that France, England, and Italy could grab colonies and territory from Germany and the Austrian and Turkish empires. Did working people in France, England, and Italy wake up one morning lusting for these territories and colonies? Or was it the constant need of capital to expand that drove the conflict?

What are the domestic effects of constantly waging these competitive wars for profit? Guantanamo? Still open for business. Habeas corpus? Still missing. Racist characterization of Muslims, Arabs, Afghanis? Ask anyone who has been through basic training or served in Iraq or Afghanistan. Trillions of dollars unavailable for education, health, and other social services? Check. All of the above disproportionately affecting black and Latino workers? Check. In the panel discussion, we heard how that woman in Akron, Ohio who tried to get her child into a better school was thrown into jail.

So what should we do? As residents of the United States, we have a special obligation to oppose US imperialism. I talked about one step we can take: involving our churches, union locals, and community organizations in passing resolutions to end US military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and, now, Pakistan and Yemen. I'm talking about organizations filled with regular people, not peace organizations: organizations whose members have not yet been won to mobilize for peace.

The education it takes pass these resolutions forms the basis for more visible actions. We can mobilize against local supporters of US military operations. For example, within a few miles of this church, there are at least three major institutions that conduct research funded by the Defense Department: UCLA, USC, and, right here in Santa Monica, RAND. On Saturday, March 19th—the 8th anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq—ANSWER is having a march starting at Hollywood and Vine. I propose that those of us in faith-based communities organize our congregations to turn out in force for that, and march together, with slogans that tie the wars to the scourge of unemployment and the need to rid ourselves of the profit system that ultimately demands that we wage racist wars against our fellow workers in other countries.

Building such a movement is hard work, but any time, effort, and money we "sacrifice" for THIS cause is well worth it. And if at times we feel frustrated, feel that more should happen faster, think about Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen. Things can change fast. Everything you do counts. Thank you.

*Marci Winograd spoke earlier in the program. In the 2010 race for US Congress in the 36th Congressional District (Los Angeles), Marci ran in the Democratic Primary against incumbent Jane Harmon. Marci said she'd vote "for jobs, not wars. Jane Harmon votes for wars." Marci got 38% of the votes in the primary.