

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
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The First Peace

“The first peace, which is the most important, is that which comes within the souls of people when they realize their relationship, their oneness, with the universe and all its powers. [The first peace comes] when they realize [that] at the center of the universe dwells [the Great Spirit¹], and that its center is really everywhere; it is within each of us. [The first peace] is the real peace....

These are the words of Black Elk, spiritual leader of the Oglala Sioux, who lived in South Dakota from 1863 to 1950. He continues,

“The second peace is that which is made between two individuals. And the third [peace] is that which is made between two nations. But above all, you should understand that there can never be peace between nations [or individuals] until there is known that true peace, [the first peace,] which, as I have often said, is within the [soul of every person].”²

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I read *Black Elk Speaks*³ when I was young and his words have rung in my ears ever since. The work that is always before us is to make that first peace: peace in our own souls. It may be the most important thing we can do — the most inspiring example we can set — to help heal the world.

¹ Wakan-Taka

² Joseph Espes Brown, *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux*, final page of chapter VI.

³ John Gneisenau Neihardt

For the time being, for the most part, we are living on high ground, above a flood tide of suffering — the failures of our government and law and order, the plight of millions of refugees, the sickening volume of mass shootings, the obliteration of whole species, the degradation of water, earth, air. *I won't go on.* We have different strategies for metabolizing this suffering: Some of us can't look; others can't look away. Many of us are paralyzed.

In his book *How to Be Alive: A Guide to the Kind of Happiness that Helps Heal the World*, Colin Beavan writes, “Our [smart] Phones connect us to children working in factories in China, our food choices connect us to domestic animals everywhere, and our oil use [connects us] to Iraqi and Afghani widows and widowers.

“For many of us, these relationships are out of line with our values, and so we feel bad when we look at them. [Under the spell of] our mistaken feeling of powerlessness, some of us develop a habit of suppressing or ignoring thoughts and feelings about these relationships. We stop listening to the little voice inside ourselves and put ourselves to sleep....

“This isn't to say that [we should] become overwhelmed with sadness and grief.... But instead of turning off the ... painful feelings, we have to come to terms with them..... to feel compassion for the suffering in the world without either feeling overwhelmed or [going] numb.⁴

How do we do that? How do we keep our broken hearts open?
We do something.

Sixteen-year-old Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg's solitary, year-long School Strike for Climate; her recent visit to the Americas; and

⁴ as quoted by Rev. Sara Goodman in *Living a True Life*, White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church, 8/11/19.

her speech to the United Nations have inspired millions of students all over the world to take to the streets and demand that our elected officials do something about the climate crisis. More than 2,000 scientists in 40 countries pledged to support the strikes and last month, strikes took place across 4,500 locations in 150 countries — the largest environmental protests in history.

Do something.

I am deeply moved that Greta got the idea of a climate strike from the teen activists at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, who refused to go back to school after 17 of their classmates were murdered and, instead, organized the March for Our Lives in support of gun control.

Do something.

Across a century, Black Elk speaks to us:

Start with yourself. Cultivate the first peace.

Sociologists Juliet Schor and Margaret Willis researched the relationship between, on the one hand, making choices in our personal lives that will improve the world and, on the other hand, civic engagement and activism. Their paper in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* is called, “Does Changing a Light Bulb Lead to Changing the World?”⁵ The answer is a definitive *yes*. Zen Master Won Hyo said, “Helping ourselves and helping others are like the two wings of a bird.”

Colin Beavan writes, “Becoming more responsible in our personal lives takes us through a process that makes us more responsible in our community and civic lives.... Changing from the outside-in ... is neither trivial nor self-centered. It is the beginning of a self-perpetuating path that leads to a deeper and more compassionate, ... engaged relationship to the world. People who change [one thing] end up on a path that leads then to change more [things], and to influence others to do the

⁵ Please see journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0002716212454831

same. That, when amalgamated with ... efforts by other people, amounts to the beginning of cultural change — shifting ... the norms by which all of society lives. In other words, we ... aren't just drops in the ocean, but drops who, together, actually change the ocean.”⁶

The flapping of a butterfly's wings has been proven to have even a tiny influence on the atmosphere ... which might just cascade into a tornado. This is the butterfly effect, and each of us is a butterfly. Our choices matter and, compounded by those of others of good will, our choices can change the trajectory of a storm.

Start with yourself, says Black Elk. Cultivate the first peace.

Australian Cathy Burke, former Global Vice President of The Hunger Project, tells this story:

“In September, 2001, I visited Mahatma Gandhi's ashram in Gujarat, India. The twin towers had just been attacked.... War had not yet been declared. It was a moment between breaths as the world scrambled for answers and responses....

“I was working in India at the time, and I felt drawn to the ashram to make sense of what was happening. Gandhi's message of peace made more sense to me than ever. I was staying nearby at Gujarat Vidyapith, a university dedicated to nonviolence, dedicated by Gandhi in 1920. There, I spoke to a lot of old Gandhians who were part of the liberation movement in the 1940s.

“It was from them that I heard one of my now-favorite⁷ Gandhi stories. A woman and her young son had come to the ashram to speak to Gandhi. She complained about her child's addiction to sugar. “My

⁶ Colin Beaven, *How to Be Alive: A Guide to the Kind of Happiness that Helps Heal the World*, in the online/digital version (no page numbers)

⁷ original: favourite

son won't stop eating [sweets]," she told Gandhi. "Please tell him to stop."

"Gandhi listened to her, and then asked her to return in two weeks.

"Two weeks later, [once again,] the woman and her child sat in front of Gandhi. He looked at the boy and said, 'Stop eating [sweets].' The mother was perplexed. 'Why couldn't you have told him this two weeks ago?'

"'Madam,' [he replied,] 'two weeks ago, I was still eating sugar.'"⁸

Start with yourself, says Black Elk. Cultivate the first peace.

The New York Times editorial board wrote, "Evil is everywhere, and anger and hatred are loud. The shouting drowns out the quiet; tragedy and disaster block the view of the good. Yet there are always signs of progress toward a better future. Look, or you may miss them." We are called to help create those signs of progress — to throw our weight toward that better future.⁹

Cuban-born Christian de la Huerta, author of *Coming Out Spiritually*, writes,

We must shine....
 We must shine now....
 This is the goal toward which we stretch....
 step by step,
 in our own time, at our own pace.

As our beauty unfolds, and our hearts open,
 we become gentler and more compassionate,

⁸ Cathy Burke, "Gandhi's Sugar Story," 8/8/18. Please see cathyburke.com/2018/08/08/gandhis-sugar-story/

⁹ Thanks to Parker J. Palmer for pointing me to this *Times* editorial (12/25/15)

yet brighter, more empowered, and fearless.

We have been holding on, holding back
 playing small, hiding our light under a bushel.
Enough of that.

It is time to let go.
We are all needed now,
All of us.
All of us together....

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Beloved spiritual companions,
 In these perilous times,
 some of us can't look; others can't look away.
To break the spell of our mistaken feeling of powerlessness
 we are called to act.

Start with yourself, says Black Elk. Cultivate the first peace.
And let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!