

Who Is 'She'? (Messengers of War and Peace)  
February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2022  
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North Universalist Chapel Society

The whole world is divided for me into two parts: one is she, and there is all happiness, hope, light; the other is where she is not, and there everything is dejection and darkness...

Leo Tolstoy, War and Peace (1867)

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, February the 27<sup>th</sup> and the title of this morning's reflection Who Is 'She'? (Messengers of War and Peace). We gather together at this time in the context of new upheaval in the world. Kyiv, of course, is the most obvious, outwardly facing example of what Thich Nhat Hanh might have recognized as a crisis of wrong perception. It is a misunderstanding of what we are here to do and here to be and this inward mistake has outward consequences that have displaced 100,000 lives...in only the first few days. Hear our prayer.

Wrong perception exists between great nations and between great people. It exists between those who hardly know each other and between those who know each other well—bound as brothers, sisters, sibling...family. Wrong perception becomes dangerous over time so, we must ask: what soul-force within us can turn it around? To all souls, I say, "Good morning." It is good to be together.

The snows came all day Friday but, fortunately, I was well prepared. I'd shopped for the foods that I needed. I took the garbage and the recycling out and I pre-shoveled the driveway on Thursday night but it didn't work. The snow fell just where it would have anyway, ignoring my efforts. At least, I tried to make some space for what I knew was on the way. I try to look forward whenever I can but I didn't think there would be violence in Kyiv. Denial, maybe. I was prepared for the coming snowfall but not for that. And down came the snowfall and the violence, all around us, quietly, but only on this side of the world. Pre-shovel the driveway. Let's prepare a brave and a faithful space within us for what may come.

It's quieter on this side of the world...so it's easier to ask: Who is 'she', this part of the world that Leo Tolstoy talks about? The wise ones do...and the Earth herself, she knows the answer. The great the artists know—the composers, the painters, the actors, the dancers of life... Tolstoy knew—in part, at least. In War and Peace, he wrote,

The whole world is divided for me into two parts: one is she, and there is all happiness, hope, light; the other is where she is not, and there everything is dejection and darkness...

He wrote these words 150 years ago but who is 'she'? Who is this 'she' that Tolstoy talks about, this 'she'—seemingly beyond us, mysteriously within us all the same. Who is this 'she' who strives to keep the world from flying apart, from coming unraveled...this 'she' who turns us again and again away war. Where is 'she' now? For we need the light of happiness and hope. We need to enter nightly darkness with senses of mystery, not despair.

It was snowing the other day, up here in Woodstock, Vermont. From my window, the world looked peaceful and seemed so quiet. And yet, I knew then (as I do now) that violence rages in Kyiv. So, now is the time to call forth the spiritual energies of peace. It is time now...and the snowfall all around us not the sign of peace. It is a guide. Countless times and everywhere around us, we are given good reason to hope. Snowfall neither postures nor threatens. It neither provokes nor invades. It simply lays itself upon the ground nearly in silence and it remembers. What would happen if we were to do the same? If we placed our backs on the soul of the world, would we remember something more of hope?

Who hopes in times like these? The naïve folks? The hopeless romantics? Who hopes at all these days? And who would dare remember more of hope?

When I first learned about Jane Goodall, I was a child. I fell in love with the idea of her. She looked exactly like a member of my family. She looked like my mother's best friend in New Jersey. So, of course, Jane seemed just like kin. Gentle, gorgeous, courageous, wise...I wanted to be just like her. I wanted my life to be an adventure.

For those of you who may not know, Valerie Jane Morris-Goodall (formerly Baroness Jane van Lawick-Goodall) is an English primatologist and anthropologist, best known for her 60-year study of chimpanzees in Tanzania in East Africa. 'Formerly Baroness Jane...' Her early title was so impressive but it is the title that she carries today that really takes things over the top—Jane Goodall, Doctor of Philosophy, Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire and United Nations Messenger of Peace. That's one hell of a business card. One might need a larger wallet.

She's world-famous now. She's a great humanitarian. The natural world has taught her well...and she's a quick study. So, she's made more than a little bit of progress on the long and winding road of our collective maturity.

Last year, her book came out. It's called [The Book of Hope—A Survival Guide for Trying Times](#). I just bought it at Yankee the day before yesterday. Kari sold it to me. I was looking for a way to turn away from war. I had age-old questions about it and I thought Jane Goodall might have the answers...because the wise ones know the answers to ancient questions...and the Earth herself, she knows...as do the great artists... The book opens with a section that she calls "An Invitation to Hope." She writes [and I quote],

We are going through dark times.

There is armed conflict in many parts of the world, racial and religious discrimination, hate crimes, terrorist attacks, a political swing to the far right fueling demonstrations and protests that, all too often, become violent. [] On

top of all that, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused so much suffering and death, loss of jobs, and economic chaos around the world...

"Jane is almost ninety years old," you may be thinking. "If she is aware of what's going on in the world, how can she still be writing about hope?" [end quote]

I don't believe that a woman like Jane Goodall is challenged by those who doubt her. I want to be just like Jane Goodall, a messenger of peace.

There's lots of bitterness these days. When did we become so crass in our society? And why did we do such a thing? Sniping at each other...? Picking sides and building walls...? Setting sand traps and blindly shooting over fence-lines...? Now, I'm not some dreamy hippie from the drugged-out 1960s, blithely singing "Give Peace a Chance" to anyone who'll listen. I'm a sober hippie from the present...blithely singing "Give Peace a Chance"...not to Putin nor to Biden nor to Volodymyr Zelensky in Ukraine, but to the soulful heart of each and every one of us, those men included...for the battle between those sons and brothers in the human family is pitched right now. It has power enough to shatter us from our senses.

President Zelensky deeply fears that his life is now in danger. He said so himself. He said,

According to the information [that] we have, the enemy has marked me as target #1 and my family as target #2, They want to damage Ukraine politically by destroying the head of state.

President Putin says that he is powerless, that he had no choice but to invade. As Amy Goodman reported:

On Thursday, Russian President Vladimir Putin gathered Russia's wealthiest men for a meeting just hours after Russian forces began a sweeping attack on Ukraine by land, air and sea. Putin said he had no choice but to attack in order to ensure Russia's security. [President Putin said],

Everything that is happening is a desperate measure. They left us no other option. They've created such security risks that we couldn't react differently.

Vladimir Putin. Volodymyr Zelensky. Two men tied together by name, bound by the accident of history, brothers in the human family.

In the Bible, there was such a battle, a battle between brothers. In the Book of Genesis, as you may remember, Adam and Eve had two children, two sons—Cain was the elder and Abel, the younger. There grew to be a rivalry between them and things got far out of hand.

Cain and Abel were tested before the Lord—Cain, the skilled farmer, the tiller of the land and Abel, the shepherd, the keeper of the sheep...

Now, I have to pause for a moment because I'm laughing at myself a little. I am aware of my theological history. I have to pause for a moment because the language that I'm using reminds me of a story from years ago. Now, as you know, I

grew up in New Jersey...in the land of big hair and shopping malls, home to Asbury Park, Springsteen fans and the best and most delicious, average pizza in the world. I was reared in the humanist, UU church in Lincroft, a town not too far from the ocean. In fact, in the summers, we'd go swimming after church out on a beach called Sandy Hook. On the clear days, you could almost see Manhattan. It was a real life blessing to be there but here's what interesting.

I was living in North Carolina when I finally decided to go to seminary. It was 2005. I was forty years old but the spiritual journey began much earlier...with the real-life blessing of Sundays on the beach...at the "shore." New Jersey was pretty awesome.

Growing up that way, in the real-life church of the natural world, we didn't talk a lot about the Bible on Sunday morning. We talked a lot about peace and justice. We talked about equity and compassion...in the sanctuary and then again later, with the sand between our toes.

When I finally decided to go to seminary, my mom's best friend asked me a question. The one who looks like Jane Goodall, the one who is kin to me, she asked how I felt about studying the Bible. I think about her each time I find myself saying words like I just did...words like, "when Cain and Abel were tested before the Lord..." Somehow, this seems strange and sacred to me.

Anyway... When Cain and Abel were tested before the Lord, they did their best but the Lord shined light on Abel more than Cain, loving Cain no less. Cain became quite jealous and never got over it. His envy overcame him and he murdered his own brother...and then, he had the gall to lie about it—to his parents, to himself...and to God. The Bible passage reads,

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"

"I don't know," [Cain] replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Cain was not asking an honest question of God. He was using the question as a clever alibi. He was trying to outsmart God or, in the language of my theology, Cain was trying to outsmart the very best within him become possible. He was divided from himself. Cain betrayed his own potential, his own best possibility. And then, he suffered endlessly for what he did, as did his family.

We didn't talk a lot about Cain and Abel in the humanist church of my childhood. We talked about the values that we betray when we lie—the values of honesty and justice, the values of equity and compassion. In other words, we talked about the Second Principle of Unitarian Universalism—the principle that stands for justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

Cain missed the mark and by a lot. And so do we sometimes...and we can see that clearly when we are honest with ourselves. We miss the mark when we snipe at each other, when we pick sides and build walls, when we set traps and shoot over fence-lines.

We didn't talk about Cain and Abel in church but we sure sang about them afterwards...at Sandy Hook, looking out across the ocean...because Bruce

Springsteen wrote a song about it. We'd carry the lyrics in our back pockets, rarely looking. We committed almost all of the song to memory. We sang,

In the summer that I was baptized  
My father held me to his side  
As they put me to the water  
He said how on that day I cried

We were prisoners of love, a love in chains  
He was standin' in the door I was standin' in the rain  
With the same hot blood burning in our veins

This was Cain and his brother, Abel—the same blood in different circumstances. This is Putin and Zelensky. Both are graced by loved and both are plagued by history. How do we break the cycle of what keeps happening to us? How do we choose to turn away from war?

We loved this song. At the tops of our lungs, we sang along with Springsteen. We still do now. We sing,

In the Bible, brother Cain slew Abel  
And East of Eden, mama, he was cast  
You're born into this life paying  
For the sins of somebody else's past

We didn't know what we were singing. We were only thirteen years old back then. Over the years, we learned more and more...and that's what war takes away from us. It takes the ability to say things like, "Over the years, we learned more and more."

We sang this song in private but we never performed it in the band. You can't sing a song like this. Not because it's biblical...but because of how expressive Springsteen is. No one can sing like him. He's like Bob Dylan that way sometimes. He sings this line...

Lost but not forgotten, from the dark heart of a dream

And he screams it out, as if his life depended on it. Nobody else can sing it that like that. So, nobody dares and nobody tries. At least, in New Jersey, it's just not a thing you do. It's like a code. It's unwritten law and if you break it, you might be banished, cast out just like Cain...east of Eden somewhere.

For us, a song like this was Bible Study...theology by way of rock and roll...with the summer sand beneath our feet.

Cain, driven by foolishness and by jealousy, a son/a brother picked up a heavy stone and killed his own. ~~It's like they say:-~~ "There's no kind of trouble but a man with a smoke and no regard for kin."<sup>1</sup> What can I say? This is what we do...in times of war and peace. There was no invading army that threatened Cain in any way, save the army of anguish and anxiety within himself. He couldn't escape that

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<sup>1</sup> Kelly Joe Phelps, Window Grin

army. This is what we find in the Book of Genesis, the great fight between two brothers began within only one of them. If a different path had been available, what might have happen between them? And how do we create this different path? How Cain and Abel might break free is not in the Book of Genesis...which is enough to make one long for the Book of Thelma and Louise. They found a way to freedom...in that famously green, Ford Thunderbird that came off the line in 1966.

Thelma and Louise broke free. They changed the rules of the violence that threatened their lives. They broke free of the rules that let powerful men break the laws of our society. They broke free of the laws that were prepared for their demise. What power did they possess that Cain and Abel did not? And what does all of this have to do with War and Peace?

In 1867, the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy wrote one of the most cherished books in history, War and Peace. He wrote,

The whole world is divided for me into two parts: one is she, and there is all happiness, hope, light; the other is where she is not, and there everything is dejection and darkness...

Who is 'she'? I still wonder. Who was Tolstoy musing about? I just don't know. What I do know is that a woman named Joanna Macy believes that a better world is possible. "A better world," she said,

...than one where toxins [are] dumped into the waters, the air and the streams...

...a better world [she said] than one where the ancient old growth forests...are chopped down for pulp and chips...

...a better world [she said] than one where half the people of the world don't get enough to eat...

We are moving toward that better world. It doesn't feel like we are and like Cornel West said, "I am not optimistic." But just like him and like Jane Goodall I remain a prisoner of hope...not because I hope the peace is somehow coming 'round the mountain but because I know that hope is what inspires the mountains to rise. If you look around, you'll see it. Mountains are rising all around us...in good times and in tempest, still they rise. Jane Goodall is a mountain of hope. Joanna Macy is a mountain of hope. North Chapel and the broader community is a mountain of hope looking over the valley. And our dear Paul Farmer...dearly departed. Dr. Farmer was a mountain of hope. Against great odds and against the grain, we don't surrender. We carry on.

People like these, they strengthen hope. Paul Farmer strengthens hope, the doctor that Anne Marinello mentioned in her opening words. Dr. Farmer was the groundbreaking physician. He used his talents to develop global health initiatives in Haiti and in Rwanda. He brought healing energies into the world. What a beautiful choice...and he made it when powerful forces were threatening—war, famine, infectious disease, a failing healthcare system. Still, he chose the good way forward. He cleared a space and he prepared for what he knew was coming. He said,

That's why we went to Rwanda. We went with the Clinton Foundation and other partners and worked with the Ministry of Health of Rwanda. And that — and it's been the most rewarding decade in my life as a doctor just to see how — the reversal of fortune, how quickly it could happen.

We never know what going to happen. Great things are truly possible and in this time of darkness, we don't lose hope. We rise...like Tom, like Peg, like Mount Monadnock and Kilimanjaro. We rise up just like hope. In our earlier hymn, we sang,

This is my song, O, God of all the nations  
A song of peace for lands afar and mine  
This is my song. The country where my heart is  
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine  
But other hearts in other lands are beating  
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine

May we remember this in Kyiv. May we champion the hope that makes the choice of peace a genuine one. Choose peace. Breathe peace. Pray peace. Be peace. Bring to honor that strength of hope that slowly moves the mountains.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.