

Passionate Intensity

On the face of Pete Seeger's five-string banjo, written around in a circle, are the words "This machine surrounds hate and forces it to surrender."

I heard Pete play in front of several thousand Unitarian Universalists at the 2005 General Assembly in Fort Worth, Texas.

We started at nine o'clock in the morning, and he got us singing, of course, some of the old protest songs from the sixties: "If I Had a Hammer," "We Shall Overcome," "Blowin' in the Wind." Everyone was singing their brains out, and many of us were crying, and I remember coming out of the dark hall into the morning sunshine filled with a fierce nostalgia for those passionate, innocent times.

As the folks who had been at Pete's concert shared their feelings over the next few days, what emerged was a deep sadness for the loss of that passion, that anger, that courage, that hope. We wept for our lost innocence, our lost focus, the difference between then and now, except that Pete is still doing

it, and for an hour on a Fort Worth morning he had us doing it, too.

Last month I saw the new Jim Brown documentary, *Pete Seeger: The Power of Song*, at the Jacob Burns Theater, every seat filled. It's a wonderful film full of vintage footage of Pete singing over his long life and interviews with him and his family now in their home in Beacon, NY. Eighty-eight years old, he's still splitting wood for the stove, "still busy, still angry, still hopeful, still singing" (A. Q. Scott, in a *New York Times* review of the film). When the house lights came back on after the film, the audience sat for a few moments as if stunned, then people filed out quietly and that same nostalgia and sadness seemed to fill the room.

Most of us don't sing like that any more. We don't march like that any more. Not like we used to, thousands of us. "The best lack all conviction" (W.B. Yeats, "The Second Coming").

In today's reading Curtis White says we live in a nation where sincerity trumps reason and common sense, where everyone insists on their right to believe whatever they want, a

nation without shared convictions or a sense of community

(“Hot Air Gods” in *Harpers*, December 2007):

Strangely, our freedom to believe has achieved the condition

that Nietzsche called nihilism, but by a route he never imagined. For Nietzsche, European nihilism was the failure of any form of belief (a condition that church attendance in Europe presently testifies to). But American nihilism is our capacity to believe in everything and anything all at once. It’s all good! (13)

The Rev. Rosemary Bray MacNatt remarked recently that she hates that saying. “It’s *not* all good,” she said.

Where has all our passion gone? Charismatic leaders like Pete Seeger and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. have been fueled by the passion of their righteous convictions. Today it seems those who shout the loudest and sound the most committed are people whose values we do not share. “The worst are full of passionate intensity” (Yeats, *op cit*).

One of the great lessons of our Universalist faith is that humans are meant to be happy. But happiness by itself is not enough to guarantee right action. Today’s cross burners and suicide bombers are the current incarnation of an age-old dilemma. They teach us once again that passion is not enough,

sincerity is not enough, believing in yourself and your ideas is not enough, to guarantee right action. Hitler was a very sincere person. He believed deeply in what he was doing. The witch burners and the inquisitors, the builders of gas ovens and concentration camps, the wagers of holy war have been with us for a long time. What they do may very well make them happy, and I assume they are by and large very sincere.

Their passion is also contagious. One of the challenges of the anti-war movement has always been that war seems so much more exciting and engaging than peace. Journalist Chris Hedges writes, “The rush of battle is a potent and often lethal addiction, for war is a drug...It is peddled by mythmakers—historians, war correspondents, filmmakers, novelists, and the state—all of whom endow it with qualities it often does possess: excitement, exoticism, power, chances to rise above our small stations in life...Even with its destruction and carnage [war] can give us what we long for in life. It can give us purpose, meaning, a reason for living” (*War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* 3).

Next to the passionate intensity of war, peace appears ordinary, boring, and mundane. And yet we know from the stories about the soldiers who came home from Iraq for Thanksgiving that what made them feel so deeply happy and lucky and thankful was the ordinary celebration of our national holiday around the table with their families. An afternoon of nothing more exciting than a football game on TV and the routine of cleaning up the kitchen after the feast offered these service women and men a welcome respite from the fear and chaos of war.

Chris Hedges' book about war addiction is called *War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning*. What keeps peacemakers from acting with the passionate intensity of warriors? How can peace become the force that gives us meaning?

I believe that our current political and cultural situation has profoundly affected our ability to feel deeply and act effectively for justice and peace. People are weary and fearful and made cynical by the behavior of our government, the media, our candidates for public office. No political leadership has emerged for ending the war. Those who long for peace are

mostly silent. An attitude of wary waiting has fallen across the land.

As Unitarian Universalists, we have a long heritage of passionate engagement in social issues. Our ancestors fought for women's suffrage, against slavery, for civil rights, against racism, for the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, against war, for the preservation of the environment, for worker's rights, against torture.

We are also a rational people, a people schooled in tolerance and in respect for differences, a postmodern people who can see the many sides of an argument. We are, by and large, a civil people, polite, willing to compromise and see the other person's point of view. Intelligent and often intellectual, we are inclined to use our minds to analyze and our voices to discuss. Are we too polite for passionate intensity? Too comfortable? Too rational?

Robert D. Richardson, author of *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, writes, "We have...got the relation between reason and emotion wrong, Immanuel Kant thought emotion was a sort of disease of reason, and in this Kant was wrong, Reason is, quite

the contrary, just one specialized case of emotion or feeling, which is the larger category. William James wrote an essay provocatively called ‘The Sentiment of Rationality’...he argues that we feel something to be rational when that something feels harmonious and fit and proper to us. The greatest claim that can be made for us humans is not that we are creatures of reason, but that we are creatures of feeling” (“Emerson and the Perennial Philosophy” in UUMA, *Unitarian Universalism Selected Essays 2003*, 79).

So what are we willing to do for peace and justice? Does passionate commitment require side-taking? Does it require confrontation? Does it require violence? What would you die for? What would you kill for? What matters enough to you that you would give up your daily life to pursue it?

How can we be sure that our passion won't take us on the wrong path? We have seen that sincerity alone is no test. I would ask: What are the fruits of the path you take? Where does it lead?

A true path leads to right action and lessens suffering.

And it's not easy to tell what the results of our actions will be. During the time that I was officiating for same-sex weddings in New Paltz, I went to Washington, DC to lobby for marriage equality, and I asked a legislative aide what more I could do to help stop the passage of a bill to amend the US Constitution to define marriage as one man, one woman. The aide said stop doing those weddings in New Paltz. They just galvanize the opposition.

So, of course, I said we were right and we needed to press our cause in this way, but since then I have watched state after state pass legislation forbidding same-sex marriage, and I wonder.

This congregation is a community of shared values, an alternative to the "Church of the Infinitely Fractured" (Curtis, op cit). We come together to help each other stay the course and support each other's passion for justice. In the documentary film about his life, Pete Seeger said, "If you love your country you'll find ways somehow to speak out, to do what you think is right." Here in this congregation we study what is right and seek new ways to take our faith into action.

We also give each other hope. St. Augustine of Hippo said, “Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage: anger at the way things are and courage to see that they don’t remain the way they are” (in Owen- Toole, *Growing a Beloved Community* 55).

In an interview, Pete Seeger said he is happy to teach the old songs but we also need to write new songs. May each of us find new ways to surround hate with our passionate intensity and force it to surrender. And may we help each other on the way.

Amen.

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By the Rev. Dawn Sangrey
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