

**With Grateful Hearts**  
**First Unitarian Church of Baltimore**  
**November 9, 2008**  
**Reverend Lyn Oglesby, Ph.D.**

Today is a paradoxical day. It is the Sunday we selected this year to honor those who have given their lives in service to our country, to respectfully acknowledge the practice in many parts of the Hispanic world of honoring the ancestral dead, and for all of us to remember and honor friends and loved ones who have passed away this last year. Each of those represents an acknowledgement of sadness, grief, and gratitude for the lives of people who have been significant to us.

Today is also the first Sunday after one of the most momentous, and I dare say for many of us, joyous elections in our nation's history.

Today is indeed a day of celebration. A celebration of former lives and also a celebration of the changes and transformations we hope to experience in our future -- as individual citizens of the United States of America, as a nation, and as citizens of the larger world. It has almost become redundant to recount that we are all interconnected, a global village, that we all are in this life together, to succeed or fail in our human and planetary survival.

And that is why I want to speak to you about something that has been bothering me. I'm increasingly uncomfortable with our language, our metaphors, the way we talk, the examples we use. We communicate with one another and to others in outdated ways that need to reflect a different manner of thinking and speaking if we are to persuade and cooperate in our global environment.

To survive in the world – for the world itself to survive – is going to require cooperation and collaboration. And yet we speak in warlike terms. “We fight.” “We must fight.” “I will fight for you.” “I will fight for this.” “I will fight for that.” “We will win the battle.” “We will win the war against terrorism.” “We will fight the good fight.” “We will win this war.” And on and on.

These are the terms we use, instead of, “I will work for you.” “I will work with you.” “We must work for peace.” “We must work together.” “We will work to resolve problems.” “We will work to resolve conflicts.” “We must work hard to find a way we can both live with.”

I don't know whether language reflects thinking or thinking is a function of inner language. Or whether language is simply a socio-cultural phenomenon.

Sometimes I wish I had taken the time to study linguistics, and to learn more about that. But I do know that the words and terms we use are bound up somehow in our culture, our values, and our thoughts.

I don't enjoy violent movies or television shows. I've complained often about the bad examples they set for children, and how modeling violence teaches people that violence is an acceptable way to solve problems and conflict. My late husband argued with me. "Violence is a way of life in this country. It is part of our culture. It is part of our cowboy, individualistic history and way of being. America was built on violence." Well, I contend that is one of the things about the United States that needs to change.

That kind of change is even more difficult to bring about when candidates for president....I'm talking about Hillary Clinton, John McCain and Barack Obama, all talked about fighting during their campaigns. How many times did you hear them during the past two years, talking about fighting for us? I kept shouting back at them from my living room sofa. "Don't fight for me, **work** for me." "I want you to **work** for me." "I want you to **work** at engaging our enemies and our friends in productive **diplomacy** and constructive **dialogue**." "I don't want you to be going to war for me." "I want you to **work** for me and my family and my friends." "I want you to **work** for the best interests of our country. Not fight all the time."

The work of diplomacy and dialogue is ever so difficult. It requires patience to achieve peaceful resolution to problems. It is difficult. It is challenging. Working is hard work! And sometimes working is painful. It's tiresome. But when people resolve differences, or develop a policy, or construct guidelines for a way of being and doing things together, something new and transformative occurs. This is not about winning and losing. It's not a zero-sum competitive game. It's about finding common ground that will serve the purposes of all the stakeholders, that will serve the common good. That will serve a greater good.

Now it's logical to maintain that in the world of sports, things are different. Usually in sports, we end up with a winner and a loser. For the most part, sports events are indeed zero-sum games. Winner take all and loser buys the refreshments.

Working together to resolve conflicts is different. Working to achieve a goal creates something more than a simple Hegelian synthesis, where you have a thesis and an antithesis, that transforms and takes new life as a synthesis. It is more complex, because our problems are more complex. These days there are no simple yes or no answers. There are too many stakeholders. Too many variables to consider. Everything we do, everything our government does, impacts an ever-widening circle

of relationships. Every agreement we make, every fight we fight, affects not only the people we agree with or fight with, but their relationships as well.

And this is why I am convinced we need to be with one another, and talk with one another in a language of work, and effort, and dialogue, and discussion. We need to minimize the language of fighting, battle, war, winning and losing. We need to be looking for common ground, for the greater good, or ways to come to agreement that don't involve beating someone, or winning over someone, or achieving victory over another group or nation.

I am convinced that becoming more self-aware and intentional about the words and terms we use, we can influence behavior, and begin to think in terms of cooperation, collaboration, and rational problem solving instead of winning wars.

Now you may think that sounds silly, abstract and perhaps even weak.

But think about it. Civil, courteous language and good manners frame peaceful and non-violent behaviors. "Please." "Thank you." "May I?" "Would you please?" "Would you please pass the butter?" The words we use, how loudly or softly we speak, the tone we select, as well as our body language, can establish limits and boundaries that preclude and even prevent rough talk and violent behaviors.

I'm tired of living in a world of wars. I'm tired of living in a world of violence. I'm tired of searching and searching and searching television channels for programs where people aren't shooting each other, hitting each other, or cutting each other to ribbons. Let people who enjoy that kind of body contact do it on the football field, with time limits and rules and referees. We are supposed to be rational creatures. Can we not intentionally and purposefully develop new paradigms for resolving conflicts without resorting to war and weaponry?

Could we not use more civil language than warlike language? We have to begin somewhere, for Pete's sake. We learned to say, "Please pass the gravy," instead of "Gimme the gravy." We learned to say, "Thank you for a good game," instead of "I won, or I beat you." Those civilities are part of our lives, and we weren't born with them. We learned them. And they became part of our routine behavior and interactions. I don't know whether the behavior comes first or the language comes first, but I'm sure of the interaction, and that we can't possibly do any harm by intentionally using non-violent, non-warlike language. We learn to swear, and then we learn not to swear, or at least to limit the company and places where we use swear words. Folks, we can do this. I'm sick and tired of fighting, and I'm sick and tired of fighting language.

We are never going to live in peace as long as we continue to communicate in fighting language. Now I'm not saying that there is not a place sometimes for the use of force, and perhaps even to defend ourselves in war. But we need a culture change in our thinking. We need a shift to positive conflict resolution.

The Harvard Negotiation Project has been operating for over twenty years, teaching people how to find common ground, and how to use language that invites dialogue and identification of interests rather than positions. It is possible for rational people, when we work at it, to negotiate to a peaceful resolution most of the time, when we work at it. It's hard work and it requires intentionality, self-discipline, determination and patience. Not only that, it requires listening, focusing empathically to others. That's hard work. But if it doesn't come naturally, we can learn to do it...think how many therapists are out there trying hard to teach us.

We live in increasingly interdependent times, economically, socially financially, politically, religiously and spiritually. We can do a better job of the way we live together and relate to one another at home and abroad, and that can happen faster and better if we work at it. This is not something we fight about or fight for. We develop better relationships by working at it, not fighting.

We can all become better diplomats. We can all become better ministers. We can all become better teachers and mentors. We can all become more effective communicators. We can all become peacemakers. We can all set better examples for younger generations. We can start by working for peace rather than fighting for peace.

So I'm OK with Texas Fight on that football field. But off the field, let's talk more "work" and less "fight". Let's talk more using dialogue and less using argument. Let's discuss rather than debate. Let's convert conflicts into problems and solve those problems before they become monster conflicts. We're smart. We can do that. We just need to get into the habit of using the word "work" rather than the word "fight", to listening before we speak, and to get accustomed to achieving some of what we want, instead of insisting on getting it all. Nobody's going to win it all...but there's enough to go around if we combine our hearts and heads, and work at achieving goals, rather than fighting and trying to win all the time. Nobody wins when we fight. Nobody wins in war. I think we need a less warlike language, and the first word after "peace" and "love" that we need to use, is "work" and to use that word diligently.

I'm grateful for all those who fought for our freedom. They did not die in vain. Let's hope we can do our part to build a more peaceful world, **without** so much fighting. I'll be those who died for us would have appreciate that. It's worth a try.

Amen