

# Symptoms of Inner Peace

Hello everybody and welcome to Essex Church, where this community of Kensington Unitarians meets for worship each Sunday morning. It's autumn, a season of change. Here in London we have been spared the terrible rains that the north west of Britain has been devastated by this week but we've had plenty of changes in the weather to deal with – wet, windy, sunny, strangely mild – and these changes in the weather mirror sometimes the turmoil of the world in which we live, the disturbances of world news and the challenges that some of us are facing in our personal lives. In the face of turmoil it is helpful to find a place of inner balance, inner peace, from which to respond to life and that is what some of us come to church to find once again – some rock that we can place our spiritual feet upon, a sense of community that holds us firm however fiercely the wind blows, a chance to remember once again our connection with God, with spirit, whatever words you use for the divine, or with the human spirit that shines within us all, the love and commitment that comes from being related one to another.

So let's take a moment to centre ourselves, to settle into ourselves and into this gathered community here today as we consider that this is a day of promise, a day in which life will ever assert itself in the beauty of the natural world with its fresh air and scudding clouds; this is a day of potential and promise, may we rejoice and be glad of it.

## Chalice Lighting:

I light our chalice this morning, this world wide symbol of our Unitarian and Unitarian Universalist movement in thanks for all those who have been involved with Interfaith Week here in Britain. Interfaith activities bring people together and help to find connections between communities – may the warmth of this our chalice flame be reflected in the warmth of interfaith connections.

## Prayer:

I call on the divine spirit of life and of love to be with us now in this time of shared worship and to bless all that we say and do here together today. As we look back over the week that has passed we will be aware of the times when we fell short in some way – when we allowed ourselves to be diminished in some way by harsh words or thoughts, by failing to act perhaps or perhaps by acting too hastily. Let us think kindly of ourselves.

We may be aware of the failings of others – we may have been let down in some way or hurt or harmed. May we find the gracious gift of forgiveness if it is time to do so.

We may have been frightened or angered or frustrated by life – may the gentle flowing waters of the spirit allow us to let go of that which is ready to be released and may the light of understanding shine upon our situations in life so that we can better understand what is required of us at this time.

May we live this day, compassionate of heart, clear in word, gracious in awareness, courageous in thought, generous in love, with a good spirit that will help us always along the path. Amen

*Note: the final paragraph of this prayer is adapted from words by John O'Donohue.*

## Address:

Do you have certain words or sayings that stay with you for years and years and years? I remember back in the 70s/80s reading a book by Wilhelm Reich called Listen Little Man – not a book I would probably recommend to most of us now. It's Reich at his most damning about us humans and how we restrict the life force within us all by restrictive child rearing practices, through our education systems and our work and relationship patterns – it's not the most cheery of reads. And it's not the most cheery of sentences that stayed with me from that book. I read there this line:

*"Most men lead lives of quiet desperation." (repeat)*

and it has stayed with me ever since. What's interesting about this sentence is my growing realisation that it seems more or less true depending almost entirely on my own state of mind. A walk along the pavements of Notting Hill or a journey on our delightfully crowded London Tube system or even listening to the news on the radio or TV can cause me peace or despair – and that process – that inner process that can lead us to peace or to despair - is what this address is about.

The other interesting thing about Reich's judgement that "most men" and we'd better include us women – "most women and men lead lives of quiet desperation" is that these weren't his words at all. He was quoting Henry David Thoreau – the American transcendentalist who famously wrote the book *Walden* about his time of retreat by a lake in the woods of New England.

And whoever wrote those words did not write this second sentence which I have borrowed from *A Course in Miracles*. We live lives of quiet desperation and the *Course in Miracles* tells us "we could see peace instead of this."

Now any of you who have stood here leading worship will know the secret truth about this privileged position behind this reading desk which is that the speaker is generally speaking what they most need to hear. It isn't really for your benefit at all. Every word of what I'm about to say needs to be etched somewhere inside me because when it comes to inner peace, I still have a lot to learn.

That's probably why back in the 90s when I first was given a copy of the *Symptoms of Inner Peace* that you now have in front of you, it so touched a chord with me. The line that says that the loss of the ability to worry is a very serious symptom in particular has great appeal to me. I wonder which lines touch a chord with you?

(ask people to shout out)

It was only this week as I was doing research for this service that I found out who had written these words that we're looking at now – Saskia Davis. She wrote them way back in 1984 when she was working as a nurse with peer support groups for people with chronic or life threatening illnesses. She describes how she sat down to write, not at all sure what she wanted to say – and the words came pouring out of her onto the page – she describes them as a gift of grace. And as sometimes happens, this piece of writing *The Symptoms of Inner Peace* took on a life of its own. I've found it in so many places and in so many forms, I've got different versions of it, it's been translated into different languages. But what you have today is its original form. And Saskia Davis wrote it with some humour but also with an awareness of our human anxiety about infectious diseases. She was writing at the time when the so called AIDS epidemic was starting to come to public awareness. People were very frightened. We now have swine flu to worry about and are being endlessly reminded to wash our hands and throw hankies in the bin.

It is human to be anxious isn't it, yet there are also steps we can take to counter-balance that tendency towards worry. Wise beings throughout the ages have been pointing the way towards inner peace. It's a sign that something is important to humanity when there are lots of teaching stories about it in the world's faith traditions and I was spoilt for choice when it came to choosing stories for today. The story of the thief who brought back the bag of stolen jewels that we heard earlier on is a good reminder that even the most desperate of people can recognise the priceless jewel that inner peace represents. It is a gift that money cannot buy.

Our inner peace, or lack of it, reflects the state of our mind, the number and the quality of our thoughts. Many of you know the story of two Buddhist monks walking by a river. They noticed a young woman was having difficulty crossing the river as the ford was flooded, so one of the monks stopped and carried the woman across the river. Later in the day after a period of considerable silence, the other monk spoke saying, – "You shouldn't have carried that woman – us monks are not supposed to get involved with women. We're certainly not meant to touch them." The first monk replied, "I just carried her across the river, then let go of her. By contrast, you have been carrying her around in your mind ever since." How human it is to carry a great weight of thoughts with us through life unable to put down that burden and experience lightness once more.

A Hindu story tells of a great sage who spent many years meditating in a cave. Over the years he developed tremendous inner peace through his meditation. Once a great King came to visit and spoke to the sage about the turmoils of his earthly kingdom. The sage asked the King "why not come and meditate with me in the cave – Then you can have peace". The king replied – "what would the use be? If I came here, I would still be thinking of my Kingdom – I would be building imaginary castles in the sky and fighting imaginary battles". That King, at least, realised that the route to peace lay in his mind and nowhere else.

To become aware of the quality of our thoughts is probably for most of us the first important step on the path to inner peace. And finding a way to accept what is in life is often the second step needed to discover inner peace within ourselves. Again you may know the story of the general, notorious for his cruelty, who led his army through the territories of his enemy. People fled from the towns and villages up to the safety of the mountains – desperate to escape from the cruel general and his soldiers who were free to maim and kill all they found in their path. The army arrived one night in a village that was deserted except for a Zen monk who had stayed to take care of the monastery. On hearing that there was someone who did not seem to be afraid of him the general marched into the monastery where he found that small man sitting in his saffron robes in solitary meditation. "Don't you know who I am?" shouted the general, brandishing his sword as he approached the monk. "I am the one who could kill you with his sword without giving it a second thought". "And I am the one", replied the monk calmly, "who can let you kill him without giving it a second thought". And on hearing this, the general bowed and left.

And bowing and leaving is what I should do – this address has been long enough. Can I leave you this contradictory thought. Probably most of us would agree that finding inner peace is a ‘good thing’. But would you also agree that at times an inner discontent is also healthy – the discontent that encourages us to improve conditions in our world, that spurs us on to make a difference. It’s been described as divine discontent – and for me that captures something of its creative energy. Inner peace does not need to be passive; inner peace allows to assess what needs to be done, based on the situation that we are now in. So may your levels of inner peace and divine discontent be just how you’d like them to be today.

Amen