

Peace on Earth
A Rough Start to the Beginning of a Better World
By
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From the “vantage point” of millennia, not centuries, historian Yuval Harari says, “it becomes crystal clear that history is moving relentlessly towards unity.”¹ By “relentlessly,” he means it’s an obvious, unstoppable, and exponential advance toward becoming one global, human society. That sounds great, especially during the holiday season when so many around the world are contemplating peace on Earth and goodwill toward all. It should be particularly welcome information for Unitarian Universalists who ought to be working toward such unity all year long. One of those seven principles many of us are so fond of, our 6th principle, is, “The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.”

It’s not a principle we hear or talk much about, as relatively easy as it is to remember—*The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all*. My guess is this is so because, for many of us, it seems more like a pipedream than a possibility. When we look at the continued state of the world today, world community sounds like a far off and lofty goal at best.

Barely more than two decades ago it seemed the world was moving into a promising new era, coinciding with the new millennium. The computer age had only just begun and many of us were unduly worried the turning of the clock on New Year’s Day was going to bring this modern marvel and all its promise to a sudden halt, resulting in technological shutdown and financial ruin. Y2K, we called it—Year 2000. But the technological apocalypse didn’t happen. Our computers kept working and so did everything else, pretty much the way they always have. Maybe that’s the real misfortune of Y2K, that within just a few months we would find the 21st century to be but a continuation of the same patterns, problems, conflicts, and injustices as we had in the 20th century.

Less than two years in, one of the worst terrorist attacks in U.S. history occurred on September 11, 2001. As horrific as it was, it prompted global compassion and a rare moment of global unity and support for our disheartened nation. A French Newspaper declared, “We are all Americans now.” Rather than accepting such extraordinary goodwill and an international commitment to find those responsible, the U.S. government used the tragedy to further its own global agenda by going after Saddam Hussein and seizing control of Iraq’s oil supply. Iraq had nothing to do with the attacks on 9-11 and, as the U.N. Inspectors repeatedly insisted, were not amassing weapons of mass destruction as the Bush Administration falsely claimed to justify its unprecedented preemptive strike against a country that had done nothing to ours.

Additionally, in the wake of the attacks, after all flights had been grounded in the U.S., the Bush Administration allowed officials from Saudi Arabi to secretly fly out of the U.S., even though theirs was the country most the terrorists responsible for 9-11 were known to have been from. But many Americans simply didn’t care who was actually responsible for the

attacks so long as we reestablished our sense of dominance and superiority by proving we can invade, shoot, bomb, and kill somebody, anybody. I'm still bitter about it, but my point now is that less than two years into what should have been the beginning of a new age of global peace and prosperity, we were still behaving like violent brutes, with no regard for the lives of those outside our own tribes and no sense of connection to or responsibility for their welfare.

During the past twenty-three years, despite all our advances, it seems the human family is growing further apart, not closer. According to Freedom House, our nation's oldest nonpartisan organization devoted to promoting and defending democracy around the world, there have been 16 years of consecutive decline in global freedom. Its 2022 report on the global expansion of authoritarian rule says, "A total of 60 countries suffered declines over the past year, while only 25 improved. As of today, some 38 percent of the global population live in Not Free countries, the highest proportion since 1997."² Since Y2K, that is, the world has become less free than it was in the 20th century.

A major reason for this, the report says, is that "In countries with long-established democracies, internal forces have exploited the shortcomings in their systems, distorting national politics to promote hatred, violence, and unbridled power."³ We know how that goes. In our own country, populist Donald Trump, the most unqualified and authoritarian personality ever to hold the office, became President of the United States and, after later refusing to concede his loss to Joe Biden and facilitate a peaceful transfer of power, helped to instigate a raid on the State Capital and, as many believe, an attempt to overthrow the U.S. government on January 6th, 2020.

And not so long ago, about the time Trump was being elected in the U.S. on a nationalistic promise to "make America great again," a slim majority of British voters made the xenophobic decision to leave the European Union they had been part of since 1973. Voting to leave the world economy, especially in the UK, which is next door to so many international neighbors it depends upon, has proven harder to accomplish than many Brexiters understood. Withdrawing from today's global economy is not possible in practice. Still, the wish of so many to retreat into isolationism and national identity has been a troubling trend in these early years of the 21st century.

In addition to what's happening on the national and international levels, it appears we are becoming more divided as individuals. The Occupy Movement that began on Wall Street in 2011 to protest the economic divide between the wealthiest top 1 percent of us and everyone else, quickly spread to ongoing protests in over 600 cities across the U.S. and in nearly 1,000 cities in 82 other countries. Identity politics and, so called, "woke" ideology on the extreme Left have also worked to further segregate and divide the human family based upon the very differences we have been arguing for decades shouldn't matter—race, gender, sexuality, nationality, religion, class, and so on. And today, as another New Year is upon us, we are watching Russian dictator Vladimir Putin oversee the brutal destruction of a neighboring country, and the killing and torment of Ukrainian civilians because he wants

to recreate the glory days of his youth be reestablishing an Eastern Block that can be kept apart from the West with a new Cold War and imaginary Iron Curtain.

Considering all of this, it's difficult to imagine there can be any truth to Harari's "crystal clear" claim that "history is moving relentlessly towards unity." Even so, our 6th principle, *the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all*, is still my favorite of the seven. And I don't consider it a pipedream that will never come true. Not only do I believe it is possible, I believe it is inevitable and that is happening right now, just as relentlessly as Harari says. Before explaining why I think so, let me back up and say a little more about how things look from his bird's eye view of history.

Twelve-thousand years ago, there were unknown thousands of human communities living on Earth, few of which knew any of the others existed. Only two-thousand years ago, the number of these "dwarf worlds," as Harari calls them, had shrunk to just hundreds, or maybe a couple of thousand at most. Only five-hundred years ago, "90 percent of humans lived in a single mega-world: the world of Afro-Asia."⁴ The other ten percent lived in but four distinct societies: the Mesoamerican, the Andean, the Australian, and the Oceanic worlds. All of this is what leads Harari to conclude that, "Over the millennia, small simple cultures gradually coalesce into bigger and more complex civilizations, so that the world contains fewer and fewer mega-cultures, each of which is bigger and more complex."⁵

Today this shift to one global community is happening faster than ever, even though it's not something our global leaders, the heads of our dying nation-states, ever say much about. Perhaps they are loathe to admit it, or simply unaware it's happening. There are officially 195 countries in the world today, which isn't very many considering how many human communities there were twelve thousand years ago. If history continues moving "relentlessly toward unity," as Harari predicts, there will soon be only one human society.

Until relatively recently, and only since the 19th century, nations have been the containers of human societies, the members of which have identified mostly with their nationalities, the country in which they are born and the thing to which they feel they most belong. Rather than seeing ourselves as Earthlings, or as a species, we see ourselves as Americans, Canadians, Russians, Chinese, French, English, Cubans, South Africans, Iranians, Haitians, or any one of another 185 other nationalities. Yet, that which most people on the planet share in common, no matter where we are from, is our desire to come together. In 1900, little more than a century ago, only 5 percent of the global population lived in cities. Fifty years later it was 30 percent and by 2007, only 16 years ago, half the world's people lived in cities.⁶ The United Nations predicts that by 2050, 68 percent of the world's population will live in cities.⁷ In the U.S., 83 percent of us already do, a number that's expected to be close to 90 percent in another 25 years.⁸

Even more recently, we've seen the rise of megacities, cities that have over ten-million inhabitants. The U.S. is home to two of them, Los Angeles, with 12.5 million inhabitants, and New York City with, 18.9 million inhabitants. With 21.6 million, Mexico City is the largest megacity in North America, and one of the largest in the world, but still small compared to

Tokyo. With more than 37.5 million inhabitants, Japan has the largest megacity in the world.⁹ Keep in mind that in 1950, Tokyo and New York were the only megacities on the planet. The third, Mexico City, wasn't added until 1975.¹⁰ Yet today there are 32 megacities, with nine more just a few hundred thousand citizens away from becoming so.¹¹ It is an astonishing realization, that as divided as we feel the world is, the vast majority of us are moving closer together, relentlessly moving from hundreds of thousands of rural communities into a few thousand small cities, into less than a thousand major cities, then into only a few dozen megacities.

As this trend continues and the economies of cities become greater than those of many nations, Nation States are becoming less significant and so are our national identities. Again, as Yuval Harari says, "As the twenty-first century unfolds, nationalism is fast losing ground."¹² This may come as a surprise to some, but the Age of the Nation State has been a relatively short one to begin with. In his 1944 book, *The Idea of Nationalism*, Hans Kohn reminds us, "Nationalism as we understand it is not older than the second half of the eighteenth century."¹³ That's only 175 years ago. Prior to this, individual identity was tied up with one's religion or with the small kingdom, village, or tribe to which one belonged.

Today we are poised, out of necessity if nothing else, to make another change regarding our identities. This is so because nationalism doesn't make as much sense as it once did. How can we isolate ourselves from the world when we share so much in common, global community, global problems, global awareness? How can we seek our own national interests at the expense of other nations when we are so connected to them? Today, as Harari says, "almost all humans share the same geopolitical system ... the same economic system ... the same legal system; and the same scientific system."¹⁴ Today we have global businesses, global employers, global investors, global entertainment, a global supply chain, an international space station, a worldwide web, as well as planetary challenges like global warming and global pandemics that require global cooperation to resolve.

All of this helps us understand why there has been so much chaos and conflict in the world during the past twenty years, because we are undergoing changes in which our old governments and identities don't work and don't make much sense anymore. But we haven't yet established the global rules and systems necessary for us to function well in this new reality. We are still thinking like nationalists even though we have all become globalists. As such, we need global rules that grant and guarantee basic human rights to every citizen of the world, focusing on human welfare and individual unfolding everywhere, regardless of nationality or any other identity that is secondary to the common humanity we all share, the brotherhood and sisterhood of mankind. In his book, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization*, philosopher Peter Singer says, "Until recently such thoughts have been the dreams of idealists, devoid of practical impact on the hard realities of a world of nation-states. But now we are beginning to live in a global community."¹⁵

Fearful of change and uncertainty, however, too many of us want to retreat into the old patterns and identities that keep us apart. This explains the decline in freedom we've seen

these past few years and the rise of authoritarians pointlessly promising to hold the line between their particular nations and the rest of the world. It also explains the rise of identity politics and identitarianism on the Left, based on old segregationist ideas that claim race, gender, sexuality, nationality, and the like make us so different from each other that we can't possibly relate to each other and that it is, in fact, dangerous and harmful for us to be around each other. Yet, when there are more people living together in some cities than there are in many countries in the world, these backward, fearful, and divisive mindsets become absurd.

And this is the point, that the unnecessary suffering and conflict we have experienced at the beginning of this new age are themselves proof that the new age upon us. Like any dramatic change, it is going to be met with resistance, especially until we establish the new and necessary ways of living and working together and develop a mindset that understands, accepts, and even embraces our new reality. We are in a moment of unfamiliar and uncertain upheaval as the old world passes and another is still emerging. So now is not the time to sink into helplessness and hopelessness, or to retreat into old, authoritarian patterns of thinking and behavior, whether as nations or individuals. Now is the time to remain calm and reassuring and hopeful and aware of what is really happening.

As Unitarians, we should be well suited to lead the way because the humanistic ethic that must become central in the new age of global community and world unity is something we have strived to live by since our religion began. The humanistic ethic, as you often here me say, is based on the imperative that everything we do must be for the good of humanity and individual unfolding. It is not a nationalistic ethic that suggests everything we do must be only for the good of our country and our countrymen, nor only for our race, or our gender, or our religion, and so on. It is based on the idea once expressed perfectly by Chief Joseph of the Nez Percé, "The Earth is the Mother of all people, and all people should have equal rights upon it."¹⁶ It was also expressed in the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights that begins by recognizing the "inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family [as] the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world."

These rights, the Declaration says, include:

- Freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want.
- The right to life, liberty and security of person.
- Freedom from slavery and servitude in all their forms.
- The right to be recognized everywhere as a person before the law, equal protection of the law, fair trials, impartial tribunals, and to be considered innocent until proven guilty.
- The right to be free of the kind of arbitrary attacks against one's character that are now occurring on social media.
- The freedom of movement and the right to freely leave and return to one's country.

- The right to marry, or not; to own property; to choose one's religion or reject it; to peacefully assemble; to vote; to access to public services; to choose one's work; to equal pay; to form unions; to leisure, vacations, and paid holidays; to education; and a right to basic needs, including food, clothing, housing, medical care and necessary social services like social security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, and old age.

Although this Declaration was envisioned 75 years ago, its time has finally come, because it is the only possible way of successfully and peacefully being together in our new global community. Yet, it represents a radical change in how we do things, in how we must come to think about others in the world, and about how we think of ourselves and our relationship to the whole wide world.

So as we consider all the difficulties and conflict in the world at the start of this century, let us look towards its end with hope that history really is moving relentlessly toward unity and that principle we claim to hold dear but scarcely mention because we can scarce believe it might ever come true, is coming true, faster and surer than we could ever have imagined: the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

¹ Harari, Yuval Noah, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, NY, 2015, (Kindle version), loc. 2562.

² <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule>

³ Harari, *ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.* loc., 2607.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Smil, Vaclav, *Numbers Don't Lie*, Penguin Books, New York, NY, 2020, p. 44.

⁷ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html>

⁸ <https://css.umich.edu/publications/factsheets/built-environment/us-cities-factsheet>

⁹ Vaclav, *ibid.*, p. 45f.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹¹ <https://elements.visualcapitalist.com/mapped-the-worlds-next-megacities-by-2030/>

¹² Harari, *ibid.* loc. 3185

¹³ Kohn, Hans, *The Idea of Nationalism*, Collier Books, New York, NY 1944, p. 3.

¹⁴ Harari, *ibid.* loc., 2607,

¹⁵ Singer, Peter, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization*, 2nd ed., Yale University Press, U.S. 2004, p. 196.

¹⁶ Freedman, Russell, *Indian Chiefs*, Scholastic Inc., New York, NY, 1987, p. 111.