

Report of the General Presbyter
Rev. Shannan Vance-Ocampo
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Last month Buddhist Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh died at the age of 95. Back in the early 2000's I had the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to spend two days at the Beacon Theatre in New York City, which had been converted into a sitting meditation space for Thich Nhat Hanh and some of his monks for meditation and teachings with him (and many others). I still have that ticket stub, one of the few I've held onto over the years. Learning from him and sitting with others united in meditation and prayer was not just a moving experience but a transformative one. His writings on peace come from a deep well of not just experience but pain. As the New York Times pointed out in his obituary, he was exiled from his home country of Vietnam for opposing the war, an exile that lasted until 2005. He found "home" in other places around the world, founding monasteries and teaching "engaged Buddhism," that is Buddhism attached to the social issues of the day. During his time of exile he studied at Princeton Theological Seminary, Cornell and Columbia. His work, ministry and practice deeply engaged the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who nominated Thich Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize and was himself persuaded to [denounce](#) the Vietnam War just one year before he was assassinated. In that speech Dr. King spoke these words in that speech which still ring true today:

The war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit, and if we ignore this sobering reality...and if we ignore this sobering reality, we will find ourselves organizing "clergy and laymen concerned" committees for the next generation. They will be concerned about Guatemala -- Guatemala and Peru. They will be concerned about Thailand and Cambodia. They will be concerned about Mozambique and South Africa. We will be marching for these and a dozen other names and attending rallies without end, unless there is a significant and profound change in American life and policy. And so, such thoughts take us beyond Vietnam, but not beyond our calling as sons of the living God...During the past ten years, we have seen emerge a pattern of suppression which has now justified the presence of U.S. military advisors in Venezuela. This need to maintain social stability for our investments accounts for the counterrevolutionary action of American forces in Guatemala. It tells why American helicopters are being used against guerrillas in Cambodia and why American napalm and Green Beret forces have already been active against rebels in Peru...I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin...we must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and

computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

Hard words to hear?

Dr. King, was influenced by his relationship with a man from Vietnam, a man of peace and nonviolence; as committed as Dr. King was to those values, but from his practice of Buddhism - and this relationship led to the deepening of Dr. King's relationship with Jesus.

I have been considering the words and teaching of Thich Nhat Hanh the last few weeks. For some reason, early in my time in ministry, his words had deep resonance for me. And then I got busy in so many spaces of my life. I lost the practice of meditative reading which was so important to me early on in ministry. That is a practice I am committed to regaining in this new year. I am also committed to deepening the active practice around nonviolence focused on nonviolence to Creation. Weighing heavy on my mind, heart and spirit these days is thinking back to New Year's Eve, 2020, when were reminded by climate scientists that this is a critical decade for the care and keeping of this planet, our only home, the place we revere as the first, diverse, intricate, life-giving gift of the God of Creation. My current favorite magazine, *Emergence*, in honor of Thich Nhat Hanh's expansive life, published his [Ten Love Letters to the Earth](#). I hope you will read them, meditate upon them. Read them alongside the early parts of Genesis, the Psalms of Creation, the parables, teachings and healings of Jesus...***did you ever think to yourself about the fact that nearly every part of Jesus ministry was outside, including the bookends of his life?***

What is this New Year calling you to in faith?

Where is it inviting you to go back and dig into your own faith journey reservoir?

What new commitments are you being invited to take on?

What stretches and risks for the Gospel is Jesus asking of you and your faith community in this critical decade?

May the wisdom of our elders guide us.

May our faithfulness to the Gospel of Jesus grow us and bring healing to Creation.

Peace and Blessings in this New Year,

Shannan