

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website  
**“Question of Just War”**  
Covenant Group Curriculum, River of Grass Unitarian Universalist  
Congregation, Davie, FL

**Opening Meditation/Music/Silence/Chalice Lighting** (whichever one(s) you choose to do)

**Opening Words:**

“Moral philosophers have long wrestled with the dilemma of what justifies war and they have uplifted seven criteria: a just cause, right authority, right intention, overall proportionality of the good to be done over the evil, a reasonable hope of success, a situation of last resort, and the goal of restoring peace. In the light of these criteria, wars of aggression are always immoral, but modern just-war theories allow latitude for defensive wars, wars that combat grave threats to the international order, and wars on behalf of helpless third parties. *[To delve further into this field, check out Michael Walzer's 1977 classic, Just and Unjust Wars.]*

These thoughtful criteria appear clear, however, only at first glance. Wade in, and the water grows murky...

- Marge Keip

**Check-in/Sharing**

**Topic/Readings:**

There never was a good war or a bad peace," Ben Franklin wrote in a letter to Josiah Quincy in 1783. But for Aristotle, the distinction wasn't so simple. "We make war that we may live in peace," he wrote in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Many theologians and political philosophers throughout the centuries would agree with Aristotle that at times war is necessary and, indeed, morally justifiable. The just war tradition, developed in the West over nearly two millennia, seeks to place moral restraints on warfare by establishing criteria for determining *when* and *how* to wage war justly. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the move toward war with Iraq, Americans have once again turned to the just war tradition for moral guidance.

St. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-74) significantly contributed to the development of just war theory in his *Summa Theologica* in the 13th century. He formalized three criteria for a just war—right authority (a sovereign government, rather than individuals), just cause (to avenge wrongs or to restore what was unjustly seized) and right intention (the advancement of good or the avoidance of evil)—while also laying the groundwork for other criteria that would eventually be integrated into the tradition. The result of 1600 years of evolving tradition is a fairly complex set of criteria that govern both moral justifications for waging war (*jus ad bellum*) and moral conduct once engaged in war (*jus in bello*).

--The Pew Forum of Religion and Public Life

**Facilitator:** Recognize that people may have very heated responses to this discussion at this time. Please remind each other of your covenant, of the fact that we are not called here to debate each other, but to listen to each other.

Explore with each other your thoughts about just war theory, about when, if ever, it is appropriate to use force and violence. Think about the differences between just war theory in regards to, say, WWII or the Vietnam War. How has the age of Terrorism and the post-9/11 world changed or altered folks' view on the waging of war.

### Likes and Wishes/Feedback

### Closing Words:

To end, a radical hope:

The little girl saw her first troop parade and asked, *"What are those?"*

"Soldiers."

*"What are soldiers?"*

"They are for war. They fight and each tries to kill as many of the other side as he can."

The girl held still and studied.

*"Do you know . . . I know something?"*

"Yes, what is it you know?"

*"Sometime they'll give a war and nobody will come."*

*-Carl Sandburg, from The People Yes*

Amen. May you live in blessing.