

Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting
Dec. 20, 2009

“But There Is No Peace” by Donne Hayden

I *want* to bring a good Christmas message that is uplifting and heart-warming. I know it's that time of year when we celebrate such things, when we talk about a star in Bethlehem as light shining out of the darkness; when we acknowledge that under the snow and frozen ground, seeds are germinating that will grow and give fruit within the year. It's the time of year when we encourage generosity, when we make overt efforts to give, both to those we know and love and to those in need whom we don't know. It's the time of year when we lift up the ideas of “peace and good will.”

But I don't have a heartwarming message today. In fact, Christmas has become increasingly difficult for me over the past few years. I haven't had that really heartwarming feeling for at least five years. I have become a Christmas grouch. I'm not a Scrooge; I'm not selfish; I'm not stingy; I just can't get in a really good mood around Christmas, partly because of emphasis on consumerism. But what bothers me most about Christmas each year is that I see such disparity between the message brought to earth by this one whose birthday we celebrate at this time of year, this one we call “the Prince of Peace,” and the reality around us. I cannot bring a message of peace, and that makes me sad and grouchy.

Did any of you know that this is the last year of “The Decade for Non-Violence”? Did you even know we *had* a “decade of nonviolence”? It's true: on November 10, 1998, the UN General Assembly voted to designate the years 2001-2010 as "The Decade for a Culture of

Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World." This came after an appeal from twenty

Nobel Peace Prize winners including:

Mairead Maguire Corrigan

Nelson Mandela

Mother Teresa

Aung San Suu Kyi

The 14th Dalai Lama (Tenzin Gyatso)

Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev

Shimon Péres

Elie Wiesel

Mgr. Desmond Mpilo Tutu

Adolfo Pérez Esquivel

Yasser Arafat

Mgr Carlos Felipe Ximenes Belo

José Ramos-Horta

Norman Borlaug

Oscar Arias Sanchez

UNICEF

Frederik Willem de Klerk

Betty Williams

Lech Walesa

Joseph Rotblat

I invite you to read the "Prayer for the Decade of Non-Violence" below. It's a beautiful prayer, worth reading, worth keeping, worth praying.

Prayer for the Decade of Non-Violence

I bow to the sacred in all creation.

May my spirit fill the world with beauty and wonder.

May my mind seek truth with humility and openness.

May my heart forgive without limit.

May my love for friend, enemy, and outcast be without measure.

May my needs be few and my living simple.

May my actions bear witness to the suffering of others.

May my hands never harm a living being.

May my steps stay on the journey of justice.

May my tongue speak for those who are poor without fear of the powerful.

May my prayers rise with patient discontent until no child is hungry.

May my life's work be a passion for peace and nonviolence.

May my soul rejoice in the present moment.

May my imagination overcome death and despair with new possibility.

And my I risk reputation, comfort and security to bring this hope to the children.

—*Mary Lou Kownacki*

This year, on December 10, 2009, President Obama's Nobel Prize acceptance speech brought me to tears. I was deeply proud to have such an intelligent, thoughtful and articulate leader for my country. But his message did not bring me, nor anyone else, peace.

(I am not talking about politics here. I am talking about *peace*, surely the most powerful and significant testimony of the Religious Society of Friends in its understanding of the teachings of the Inner Christ, the Inner Light.)

A Quaker friend sent me a copy of an opinion piece by Brian McLaren, writer, evangelical minister and leader of the Emergent Church, and a man who "spoke to my condition" in his response to Obama's speech. McLaren begins by acknowledging that "heads of state have responsibilities and are privy to 'intelligence' that the rest of us can't imagine." I know that; I agree with that. McLaren said, "I have never felt a tiny fraction of the burden of responsibility he must feel in making those sorts of life-and-death decisions."¹ I *hear* that; I understand that. I grant that the weight on President Obama's shoulders is beyond anything I can fathom, beyond any decision I can imagine having to make.

I listened to the President's speech and was impressed by his honesty, his humility and his masterful use of language. But I was disturbed by one particular passage of the speech. The President said:

*I am mindful of what Martin Luther King said in this same ceremony years ago —
"Violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and more complicated ones." As someone who stands here as a direct consequence of Dr. King's*

¹ Brian McLaren, "Obama's Nobel Speech, Violence, and Nonviolence: Who's Naïve? Who's Realistic?" *Sojourner* blog, 12-17-2009. Accessed 12-18-09. <<http://blog.sojo.net/2009/12/17/obamas-nobel-speech-violence-and-nonviolence-naivete-and-realism/>>

life's work, I am living testimony to the moral force of nonviolence. I know there is nothing weak — nothing passive, nothing naïve — in the creed and lives of Gandhi and King. But as a head of state sworn to protect and defend my nation, I cannot be guided by their examples alone. I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: evil does exist in the world. A nonviolent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force is sometimes necessary is not a call to cynicism — it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason.

This is a brilliant man—a *brilliant* man. Many of us—pacifists or not—may agree with these statements, though we wish they were not true. But these lines are deeply disturbing, in a way made clear by Brian McLaren in his editorial.

This passage created within him great conflict, McLaren writes; he addresses the “unresolved irony of those two paragraphs,” pointing out that Obama said “On the one hand, ‘there is nothing naïve in the creed and lives of Gandhi and King,’” and “On the other hand, ‘I face the world as it is ... evil does exist in the world.’” McLaren concludes, “It’s hard to read the latter in any other way than denying the former: King and Gandhi were naïve, underestimating the reality of evil in the world.”²

The truth about evil and violence is not really in question; we all know evil and violence exist; you can’t miss it. For those who embrace the teachings of the Prince of Peace, whose coming to earth is celebrated at this time of year, the question is more complicated than whether evil exists. The question is how do we meet evil and violence—do we use evil’s own

² McLaren, *Sojourner* blog.

tactics against it? do we use violence to counter violence? And how, if we create *more* evil, use *more* violence, does that eliminate these tragic elements from human lives?

Among the Religious Society of Friends, the issue of violence vs. nonviolence has been a central tenet from the beginning. It is important to remember where we came from, to remember where Friends began. In 1676, Quaker Robert Barclay acknowledged that not everyone can get to the point where they can lay down their arms and be pacifists—not everyone can get to that point. Some of us who *can* get to that point, some of us who will *die* for peace but not *kill* for it, need to hold up that idea and keep it as the mark toward which we all aim.

Barclay's *Apology for the True Christian Divinity* was written to answer the charges of those who criticized Quakers and to explain to the English people what Quakers believed (here the word "apology" is used to mean "explanation"). Barclay prefaced his book with "a letter to King Charles II, saying that he wished to explain Friends' theological principles to the King and his people, so that they might find the Quakers to be both wise and learned, and to understand that they held 'beliefs agreeable to scripture, reason and true learning.'"³ In the *Apology*, Barclay interpreted the teachings of George Fox and other Friends for their critics in English society. Near the end of this lengthy book, Barclay writes:

The last thing to be considered is revenge and war, an evil as opposite and contrary to the Spirit and doctrine of Christ as Light to darkness. . . . this horrid monster [finds] place and [is] fomented among those men that profess themselves disciples of our peaceable Lord &

³ "Robert Barclay's *Apology for the True Christian Divinity* in Context." Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. Accessed 19 Dec. 2009. <http://www.swarthmore.edu/Library/friends/Barclay/BarclayContextWeb.htm>

Master, Jesus Christ, who by excellency is called the Prince of Peace and hath expressly prohibited his children all violence, and on the contrary commanded them that according to his example they should follow patience, charity, forbearance, and other virtues worthy of a Christian.

...

Nevertheless because some, perhaps through inadvertency, and by the force of custom and tradition, do transgress this command of Christ, I shall briefly show how much war doth contradict this precept, and how much they are inconsistent with one another, and consequently that war is no ways lawful to such as will be the disciples of Christ. For first, Christ commands that we should "love our enemies"; but war, on the contrary, teacheth us to hate and destroy them.

Barclay goes through pages of "proofs" using scripture, such as the following which also brings in the practices of the earliest Christians, the "primitive Christians," with whom early Quakers identified:

because the prophets Isaiah and Micah have expressly prophesied, that in the mountain of the house of the Lord, Christ shall judge the nations, and then "they shall beat their swords into ploughshares," &c., and the ancient Fathers of the first three hundred years after Christ did affirm these prophecies to be fulfilled in the Christians of their times, who were most averse from war, [Did you know the earliest Christians were pacifists and would go to their deaths rather than take up arms and fight?] concerning which Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and others may be seen: which need not seem strange to any, since Philo Judaeus abundantly testifies of the Essenes, that "there was none found among them, that would make instruments of war." But

how much more did Jesus come, that he might keep his followers from fighting, and might bring them to patience and charity.

Here is another example of Barclay's reasoning:

because the apostle admonisheth Christians, that they defend not themselves, neither revenge by rendering evil for evil, but give place unto wrath, because vengeance is the Lord's: "Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good. If thine enemy hunger, feed him: if he thirst, give him drink":^t But war throughout teacheth and enjoineth the quite contrary. Therefore war is altogether contrary unto the Law and Spirit of Christ.

I realized the other day that ever since I have been a minister, trying to bring a Christmas message, my country has been at war. I gave my first Christmas message in 2005, two years into the Iraq War. That war has lasted going on six years now, expanded and continuing into war in Afghanistan. No wonder I feel grouchy at Christmas; it is impossible to speak with a straight face of "peace and good will toward all." Unless things change dramatically, I'm not likely to be bringing a message of peace next year either.

Today, let us end with Hymn #76, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in the middle of another American war, the Civil War.⁴ Let's sing all five verses because finally, at the end Longfellow gives us a glimmer of hope in the dark midwinter. (See below.)

⁴ Bob Bankard, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." (Words: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1864; Music: J. Baptiste Calkin, 1872)

What you hear is not necessarily what was written; although Longfellow was credited with the authorship of the lyric, the truth is someone else had a major hand in revising it. Longfellow did in fact write a poem, 'I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day,' with many of the lines familiar to today's carolers. Longfellow wrote the poem on Christmas Day in 1864, four months before the close of the Civil War. At that time, the thrust of the poem was much more obvious.

"I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day"

*I heard the bells on Christmas day
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet,
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good will to men.*

*I thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along
The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.*

*Till ringing, singing, on it's way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime
A chant sublime
Of peace on earth good will to men.*

*Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the south
And with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth good will to men.
It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearthstones of a continent
and made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth good will to men.*

*And in despair I bowed my head
"There is no peace on earth," I said,
"For hate is strong
and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men."*

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The wrong shall fail,
the right prevail
With peace on earth, good will to men.*