

The Hearts of the World, Multiplied

I can't let today pass without comment. Today is Sept. 21. It is the United Nations International Day of Peace, that is, as you may or may not know, marked every year since 1982. I find this extremely ironic. Also ironic is that on November 10, 1998, the United Nations, responding to request from every living Nobel Peace Prize recipient proclaimed the year 2000 to be the year for "the Culture of Peace" and the years 2001-2010 the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World. I don't think we're doing very well in this.

There are a great many activities listed on one of the handouts in your bulletin, things that are going on at the Quaker Peace Center in Wilmington. Some people are thinking about peace and paying attention to peace—but have you noticed in our daily lives we've stopped talking much about peace? We have many other things to talk about, of course, and we do hear discussion of removing U.S. troops from Iraq, along with sending more to Afghanistan. But "peace" seems so far, so far out of reach of reality these days, we hardly talk about it.

Before his death in 1948, Rufus Jones, the great Quaker writer and mystic, wrote of the Quaker testimony of peace. He said:

The Quakers have been primarily doers. They believe strongly in the laboratory method. They try their experiment and then proceed to interpret it. The words, the talk, come after the deeds. It is Quaker faith that war can be eliminated only by a way of life that first eliminates hate, greed, fear, jealousy, rivalry, injustice, misunderstanding, misjudging, and overreaching. but so long as that faith is only an untested theory, it is nothing but a pious hope. The Quaker has endeavored to try it, to make an experiment with it, in the interwoven tissues of social life. Having started this experiment in peace times, [Quakers] cannot give it up and resort to methods of hate and fear as soon as war is declared. [Quakers] believe that it is a matter of a good deal of importance to have a body of people, even though it may be a small body, who will not surrender their ideal—their vision of advance—even in the face of the earthquake and the broken strata.

It is worth something to have the lighted torch held high, when others have allowed the swirl of the storm to blow theirs out.¹

Peace and war have been much on my mind in the past several weeks, partly because of an elderly friend of mine—a WWII veteran who is currently struggling with paralyzing PTSD from his experiences over 60 years ago. Apparently this war in Iraq has brought to the surface things that some WWII vets and Korean vets and Viet Nam vets have kept repressed for decades. His wife gave me a book entitled *War and the Soul* by Dr. Edward Tick, a psychotherapist who works with veterans of all wars, and he identifies PTSD as a “soul sickness.” We don’t hear many psychotherapists talking about the soul—they talk about disassociation and other kinds of personality disorders, but he goes straight to PTSD is a *soul* sickness. Though he focuses on the souls of those who participate directly in war, either as warriors or as victims, Dr. Tick acknowledges war’s effect on the souls of those of us who merely watch. In speaking of how “the process of making war” works, he says, “First we [meaning our governments-“we”] dehumanize the people involved, both our antagonists *and our own population*; then we place ‘them’ and ourselves in a kill-or-be-killed situation.” He quotes Joseph Stalin who said, “A single death is a tragedy. A million deaths is a statistic.” And he quotes Madeleine Albright, who, as Secretary of State, commented on the United Nations report that one-half million Iraqi children died as a result of the U.S.-led embargo against that country: “Well, this is a price that we feel we are willing to pay.”² Dr. Tick continues:

The overwhelming death statistics delivered through the media—where millions, for instance, watch the endlessly repeated broadcasts of hijacked planes slamming into the World Trade Center—sets our defenses in motion. We feel helpless faced with deaths

¹ Rufus Jones, *Essential Writings*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books. 2001. p. 154.

² *Ibid.* p. 81.

of such magnitude; we become apathetic. [Out of self-defense] we turn the radio or television channel to something funny, mindless, relaxing. We put down the newspaper that causes us discomfort. Rationalizing that violence is necessary for our security [maybe not many of us Quakers but many of us Americans, apparently], we turn away, hoping it does not touch our loved ones or us, distancing ourselves from others' losses.

. . . We do violence to ourselves in emptying death of personal meaning, in relying on statistics as a substitute for truth. This kind of depersonalization is what led to Stalin's abuses and the body counts of the Vietnam War. It supports the current belief that we can win any war if we just kill enough insurgents . . . We begin to recover our sanity when we brush aside the statistics and apply ourselves to restoring quality of life to the real people we have dehumanized.³

So how do we do that? How and where do we begin? How do we, as Quakers, act in order to be the "small body" of people Rufus Jones identified, "who will not surrender their ideal," who will hold high the lighted torch in the swirling storm? How do we embrace and thereby grieve the tragedy of millions suffering?

I identify with Chenrezig a beloved deity in Tibetan Buddhism "renowned as the embodiment of the compassion of all the Buddhas, the *Bodhisattva* of Compassion."

According to legend, Chenrezig made a vow that he would not rest until he had liberated all the beings in all the realms of suffering. After working diligently at this task for a very long time [and remember he's a *deity*], he looked out and realized the immense number of miserable beings yet to be saved. Seeing this, he became despondent and his head split into thousands of pieces. [I know just how he feels.] Amitabha Buddha put the pieces back together as a body with very many arms and many heads, so that Chenrezig could work with myriad beings all at the same time. Sometimes Chenrezig is visualized with eleven heads, and a thousand arms fanned out around him.

When I am confronted with the numbers of suffering people, and try to put faces on all of them, like Chenrezig I feel despondent and splintered; it makes perfect sense that it would take many heads and many arms to deal with the misery and suffering in the world. It takes many arms held out in compassion—not mine alone, but mine should be among those reaching out.

³ Ibid. pp.79-80.

Another legend that speaks to me is in a legend of the Jewish tradition, according to which the world is preserved through the actions of the *Lamed-vavniks*, thirty-six—thirty-six in every generation—“righteous” people whose goodness keeps God from destroying the rest of the wicked world. Although the legend of the *Lamed-vavniks* apparently formed in the centuries after the death of Jesus, it contains some of his teachings he taught. Jesus—who was a good Jewish boy, by the way, all his life—stressed throughout his teachings that we should love one another, be compassionate to each other, even to those who consider themselves our enemies, and we should not seek reward and compensation for doing good. Jesus stressed the value of the “least of these,” saying that God the Father loves and cherishes the lowliest, least “important” among us, and this is precisely where *Lamed-vavniks* are often found.

. . . the *Lamed-Vav* . . . do their good deeds quietly. Their neighbors do not know who they are. They are not saints; they are not holy people, they are not recognized or known even to themselves. They simply are what they are and in their very being, they somehow sustain the world.

As one writer said, “The *Lamed-Vav* are the hearts of the world multiplied, and into them, as into one receptacle, pour all our griefs.”⁴ Anyone in this room might be a *Lamed-Vavnik*. You never know.

One person who might be a *Lamed-vavnik* is Bob Barnes, a Quaker from Pacific Yearly Meeting who for years served on the board for Right Sharing of World Resources [a Quaker organization, like the Heifer Project, but less well-publicized]. In a video produced by Right Sharing, Bob comments that too often we ask, “What difference it will make if I change my lifestyle to live more simply? How can anything I do really

⁴ Andre Schwartz-Bart, quoted by Francine Prose in Author’s Note, *You Never Know*.

matter or really change the world?” These are the wrong questions, Bob said. Instead we should ask simply: “What’s the *right* thing to do?”

Though we may have the urge to act—and many of us are really harsh with ourselves; we think we should be out doing more. But the problem of war on the planet is too big for any one of us to solve, even if *everyone* in this room left home and jobs tomorrow and went to Washington, D.C. to lobby for peace, little would be accomplished. You might do harm to your own families and children. That’s the wrong answer to the wrong question. Instead of thinking that we have to fix the whole big problem, we must ask ourselves, “What’s the right thing to do, here and now.? “What can I do, here and now?”

A few years ago, I was given a card published by a group called *Pax Christi* (the peace of Christ). On one side is the “Prayer for the Decade of Nonviolence,” and on the other is list of actions one can take to work toward peace.

First, “Pray to develop a spirituality of peace and nonviolence. Pray daily for a gentle heart and a generous spirit—pray to become a seeker of truth, a worker for justice, a channel of Christ’s peace.” Next, “Study the lives of the great visionaries and practitioners of peace and nonviolence. Use their example as a guide for living and working justly and courageously in the world.” Finally, “Act to decrease violence within yourself, your community, and your world.”⁵ Many Quakers do these things as a matter of course—the thing is to be more intentional about being loving and compassionate.

So what can one person do? John Wesley, 18th century English evangelist and founder of Methodism, said it best:

⁵ “Prayer for the Decade of Nonviolence” card. *Pax Christi*, USA. Erie, Pennsylvania.

Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.

— *John Wesley* (1703-1791)

Though we feel overwhelmed by the enormity of suffering in the world, we can, though intentional compassionate action, contribute something to “saving” the world. We must not stop caring, we must not turn off our hearts, we must not stop praying for peace, we must not give up hope. If we do, who will counter the terror and violence? Who will preserve for humanity the spirit of goodness, love, compassion, hope? Who will hold high the torch of peace? Beginning *where we are, we must do what we can*: Become one of the arms of the bodhisattva, one loving follower of Jesus, one patient and devoted Quaker, doing what we know in our heart is the right thing to do, knowing that for each of us the “right thing to do” will take a different form.

Perhaps the negativity of war and violence can be balanced somewhat by love and compassion in the hearts of many good people, “the hearts of the world, multiplied.”

Pray without ceasing for peace. I invite you to begin now.