

“What Is a Culture of Peace”

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by Martha Gallahue

I want to start this talk today with a moment of silence for all those who have died in war - the women and children, who are now war's greatest victims, those whose idealism or need was exploited to fight a war, and to those who die after war is technically over but the ravages continue. Felicia Dunn-Jones, a 42 year old lawyer, for example, who died from sarcoidosis as a result of toxic exposure to the collapsed building of the World Trade Towers five months later; I'm thinking of those family members who are murdered by deranged spouses who have returned from war and to those who have committed suicide from post traumatic stress inflicted by war. I ask that we reflect upon words written in the Constitution of UNESCO in 1945, “Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that defences of peace must be constructed.”

Memorial Day, originally called Decoration Day, is a day of remembrance for those who have died in our nation's military, commonly called the Service. The Day came into being to honor the custom of southern women who decorated the graves of their sons and fathers at the same time Nella L. Sweet published in 1867, “Kneel Where Our Loves are Sleeping” shortly after the Civil war ended.

Certainly the presence of 146, 000 troops in Iraq gives rise to remembering, reflecting and honoring those who are caught in this failed war. Just as our Civil war failed to erase racism, this war has failed to end terrorism, the excuse that started it. We might remember the dead in war as those lost who could have just as easily given their lives to the practice of peace as did Mohatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King.

But for some, it is a day to celebrate our “unparalleled military strength...and uphold the conviction (that) the defending of our Nation against its enemies is the first and fundamental commitment of the Federal Government.” (Bush, National Security Strategy , USA September,2002) Mr. Bush’s assumption rests in the premise that war is inevitable and dying in battle is the greatest act of patriotism. After all, it guarantees the survival of a nation.

I want to talk to you, however, about the Culture of Peace in the context of Memorial Day. I want us to remember our young, who have died in service with greater determination on their behalf, that we will do everything in our power to live into such a culture of peace

Before we can define it , before we can envision a culture of peace we need to disarm the past.... we need to strip away the distortions of mythology about dying in battle, the great mythology that further perpetuates heroism in war. My son is not a hero because he served four years in the Coast Guard, bravely I may say. Neither is Demond Mullins or Todd Ensign as outspoken Veterans Against the War in Iraq, our Peace Site Awardees at Brooklyn Society. Rather, they are heroes in their practice of peace. My son’s heroism lies in his compassionate care of the mentally ill. Demond’s heroism lies in his humility as he witnesses to the mental cruelty he both practiced and witnessed in fulfilling his role as soldier.

Our dead in battle are victims. We need to remember them as prophets for a different future. Let their deaths represent the atrocity caused by war itself. Let us honor their humanity so that their deaths are not in vain.

My point today is that war is no longer necessary to survival but opposed to it. . When we understand that, we can truly honor

those who have perished. We can truly credit them as teachers of a lesson we find so hard to learn.

Toward the end of the 20th century, there came into being some public agreement that war merely exacerbates assumptions of militarism and violence. It erodes our environment, worsens the impact of poverty, destroys local economies and contributes to the spread of epidemics and other health crises. War does not teach the lessons of diplomacy. Rather, it undermines the great project of peace building

The concept of a culture of peace dates back to 1989 during an International Congress on Peace in the minds of Men, held in Cote d'Ivoire. The congress recommended that UNESCO help construct a new vision of peace by developing a peace culture based on the universal values of respect for life, liberty, justice, solidarity, tolerance, human rights and equality between men and women. !

Today, we have the tools to make peace. These tools are the rise of international law, even now an International Criminal Court, a Court finally built upon the principles of justice and reconciliation. We have global interdependence with trade. We have international agreement that education needs to be universal, that human persons have rights and much more, including that military personnel may be used as peacekeepers even peace builders. But tools are not enough.

What we lack is conviction. Until we believe that we can create peace, we will not have it. In 2001, The United Nations defined the Culture of Peace as a set of values, attitudes, modes of behaviour and ways of life that reject violence and prevent conflicts by tackling their root causes to solve problems through dialogue and negotiation among individuals, groups and nations. Today, that definition remains largely theoretical. Nice words, not much to show for it.

The principle that countries feel most resistant toward is non-violence. When Kofi Annan suggested it again for the Millennium Summit Conference in 2000, the GA still refused to embrace that one. What a failure of imagination.

I've been thinking a lot about the power of memory and the power of Imagination. In fact, I've been thinking about it ever since I became a psychoanalyst over 30 years ago. I have learned from listening to people how creative we can be in reshaping a future from a past digested by forgiveness. That occurs when we grasp how much more alike we humans are to each other than different. Wisdom teaches that what we see in others, we must eventually see in ourselves.

Memory is a set of encoded neural connections that takes place in several parts of the brain. It is a fascinating process that works throughout our entire nervous system. Human memory remembers that it has memory. If the brain is healthy and a person is fully conscious when experiencing some trauma, the likelihood that they will forget the event is nearly zero, unless either they are very young or experience a brain injury.

Memory is formative. It shapes our perceptions in very powerful ways. Thus, the more acts of violence we witness the more violence becomes embedded in our assumptions. Violence is never boring. Violence is seductive. The brain thinks in pictures and concepts not in paragraphs.

Jim Wallis, Editor of Sojourner's Magazine quoted a young prisoner in Sing Sing who said, All of us at Sing Sing are from only about five neighborhoods in New York City. It's like a train. You get on the train when you are about 9 or 10 years old. And the train ends up here at Sing Sing." Memory unreflected is like the train. It stimulates rage and anxiety. Memory becomes cyclic when we ritualize it.

So, what we commemorate today matters because it influences how we think of war. And, if we honor all who died in war from the place of moral contradiction, the moral contradiction that so much good blood was spilled for the commission of governmentally approved horror, we are beginning to embrace the culture of peace. If we have recognized that what used to be accepted is no longer so, we begin to walk the long road to non-violence. If we get to the place where we just cannot and will not live with it any longer, we have taken another step. Until that happens, injustice and misery and conviction that military solutions are inevitable, military force will continue and escalate into nuclear disaster.

But if we remember that war machines bring down governments as happened with the USSR in the 90's, destroy the environment as is happening in Iraq, becomes self-perpetuating and even ritualized ways of being as in Sudan and Democratic Republic of Congo and Haiti, then we will accept memory's lesson.

Memory in itself is shared with the animals though it is applied differently. The inevitable outcome of memory in humans is imagination. We move as Wallis said in his commencement address at Georgetown University on May 18, from what is acceptable to what is possible.

Most of us know that the life expectancy gap between the rich and the poor is now 40 years death has become a social disease, but has it gotten our attention the way Kathy Kelly's son's dying got hers? When her son died in the Iraq war, something shattered her spirit. And once, she knew she had to live with that loss, there was no going back. To live, she took her place as a witness against war.

When she realized the unacceptability of war, the foolishness of it, the no win proposition it represents, she stepped up. This was her act of imagination. Now, I say, we all must. But we won't if we can't first

imagine that this is the time, the 11th hour and 59th minute for us to say, no more!

When we march against the war in Iraq, we are marching for the end of another shibboleth, the end of a false assumption. Mostly we march for chasm that exists within ourselves. that terrible space between how we live and how we can imagine we might live.

Imagination itself is an evolutionary stage in human development. It is that seventh sense that is exclusively human. We define imagination as the ability to mentally visualize abstract ideas and concepts and to associate this mental power with vocal sounds and writing. Some areas of imagination include creating, reasoning, speculating, inspiring, associating, analyzing, pondering, learning.

Imagining a shift toward a culture of peace requires the shift from cynicism to hope. Hope is not a feeling. It is a decision. It is that which opens to us the practice of getting whatever we want by first giving it. You want love, give it. You want wealth, share. You want peace, be it by walking away from reaction.

Speaking of reaction, we were forever changed by September 11, 2001. But what a reaction, it produced. What a woeful failure to imagine another alternative. What we imagined has cost 100 times more loss of life than what occurred at the World Trade Towers. What an opportunity lost to mobilize the countries of the mideast to work together, a good strategy for moderate Islam to grow and flourish. And what about our reactions in our everyday experience....

On Sesame Street years ago, I remember a scene with Bert and Ernie. Ernie is returning some sugar he borrowed. He knocks on Bert's door humming a tune and eager to greet his friend. When Bert does not appear, he knocks again. Ernie begins to wonder... "I know I

could have returned the sugar earlier, but that is no reason for Bert not to come to the door.” He knocks again and waits. Finally, Bert opens the door, smiling. But Ernie is no longer humming. Ernie yells at his friend, “Well, you don’t have to be so angry just for a little sugar! Bert is wide-eyed, and completely unprepared for Ernie’s reaction.

Certainly, Ernie’s response is not the practice of peace. Rather, it was a great lesson for our children to imagine another way of thinking. So too, another way of thinking is required for us to imagine becoming the models for a culture of peace, one as radical as coming to terms with our addiction for oil.... and linking our greed and dependency with justification for violence ultimately gives us more power in terms of reducing conflict. Self-awareness is greatly conducive to the neural construction of pathways to peace.

What would happen everyday if we received on our emails letters like this one: A friend of mine sent on this letter from her friend in Iraq,

“I am sorry for my continued complain to you. You and Beth do understand properly the reality of our dreadful situation in Iraq, especailly the Christian community which is a real target at the moment. Everyday we have a new story to tell. On Tuesday two Christian men and a woman, all university professors, were assasinated on their way home back from Mosul universiti

I believe these three individuals must be remembered along with our dead. Maybe, being mindful of all the dead in wartime is necessary for a soul shattering such as Kathy Kelly’s to occur within ourselves.

So today, if we can acknowlege the violent culture we perpetuate, we have equal opportunity to devise the many millions of small actions it will

take to reverse our romance with militarism. What an alternative we have available by imagining reduced need for oil as a way to prevent violence and killing. Within the frame of our oil dependency, the wisdom of buddhism's call to non-attachment as a way to peace becomes self-evident. It is peace building attitude we first imagine and then live into.

Applied imagination will change the world. We must be careful with memory. Memory ritualized becomes a cyclic phenomena.....it loses the true power of myth, of transforming story. The story we need to digest is the story about so many people dying everyday unnecessarily.

In December, 2000, there was a Congressional National Moment of Remembrance resolution passed which asks that at 3:00pm local time, all Americans "To voluntarily and informally observe in their own way a Moment of remembrance and respect, pausing from whatever they are doing for a moment of silence or listening to 'Taps'". This resolution may have merit. But it matters what our silence stands for as we listen to "Taps"..... mere sorrow of war, or the resoluteness to create peace.

Rabbi Waskow at The Shalom Center has been working with the Tent of Abraham, Hagar, and Sarah - Jews, Christians and Muslims, and with the leaders of the great church, mosque, and synagogue bodies of American , to imagine and plan a moment this fall for us to turn..."from conquest to community, from violence to reverence. Because, sure as anything, reverence is a key ingredient for a new direction.

The Culture of Peace is still in its infancy from the perspective of thousands of years when war among human beings was assumed to be inevitable. Yet, when we look closely what we do to achieve it, we are already doing it aren't we.

Aren't we fostering peace through education? ... does smiling on the subway when someone bumps against you matter? Is learning

abstract or lived? And what do we learn from video-games?

Don't we promote sustainable economic and social development? Well, how do we invest? How large is our ecological footprint? It's hard to remember, isn't it?

So don't we promote respect for all human rights? We protest the death penalty and promote The Innocence project and that matters. Do we engage in the thornier issues of environmental racism or treat with dignity those we don't like?

We enjoy equality between women and men often, but do we appreciate how hard it still is for single mothers who are poor? for women who do not still have rights over their own bodies when it comes to bearing children? Do we really understand the importance of same sex marriage or does it feel incidental to the peace agenda?

And when will we become passionate about the Culture of Peace as a way of life? What will it take to develop that passion. Brooklyn has for the 3d year in a row celebrated September 21st, International Peace Day for its part. The Peace Pole you have here is a widely held global symbol planted all over the world. We have the visuals. We are now called to the practice.

Louise Diamond noted peace activist who has spread peace throughout the world wrote, "Peace is a true warrior's path, for peace is rooted in the highest ideals on which our nation and all our major world religions are founded. It takes more effort and courage to wage peace than to wage war.it grows from a seed within us. The peace warrior's task is to water that seed so that it may unfold in all its radiant beauty, in spite of the many forces that would impede its blossoming.

She called upon us to imagine a world where:

- children practice playground diplomacy, setting their own disputes, peaceably, without fighting and without guns.
- the technology for peace is as big a business as the technology for war;
- rival gang leaders sign a peace treaty, and turn to helping youth find jobs'
- ideological opponents search for common ground on controversial issues, and work together to solve the problem;
- you can attend a university whose whole curriculum specializes in peace studies;
- political and religious leaders apologize for oppression of racial or ethnic and (gender) groups and seek ways to right the wrongs;
- movies, songs, games, television, books, newspapers, and magazines all portray peaceful rresolution of conflicts as the "in" thing...full of drama, excitement, joy, and satisfaction;
- governments have cabinet-level Departments of Peace.

Louise is correct in her observation that peace building is invisible. But it is tangible in proportion to our steadfast practical witness to it. So from memory to imagination; from cynicism to hope; and finally imagination to practice, we can do it. We can honor our dead in life. There is a way. We must.

Thank you.

