

Anger, Grief, and the Art of Peacemaking

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The challenge of living a commitment to peacemaking, while sustaining ourselves in a violent culture, encourages us to look closely at the relationship between peacemaking and healing—that is, between peace within and without, between personal transformation and nonviolent social change. This approach to peacemaking may be familiar to anyone knowledgeable about the history of nonviolence, as well as about the relatively “new” interdisciplinary of peace and conflict studies.

Although consistent with and very much a part of the larger effort to understand the implications of nonviolent action in the writings of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, my major indebtedness in this instance is to Thomas Yeomans, psychotherapist at the Concord Institute in Massachusetts and his discussions of spiritual psychology. Hesitating to name this approach “spiritual psychology,” Yeomans nonetheless finds that term more acceptable than “transpersonal” psychology. While embracing qualities related to mystery and religion, he continues to struggle with the term, delineating it so as to avoid being vague or imprecise.

Spiritual psychology is a synthesis of insights from a range of disciplines about how spirituality works as a force, a power, not only in the individual, but in groups and larger systems. As Yeomans says, it’s a synthesis of psychoanalytic theory—analytic, existential, humanistic, systems theory, deep ecology—an approach that builds upon and complements insights from major religions. Among other influences, he acknowledges the importance of the pioneering work of Elise Boulding, in *Building a Global Culture: Education for Interdependent World*, and Joanna Macy.

The challenge that peacemakers face at this moment of history is a formidable one, as anyone knows who commits him/herself to justice and peace in the family, school, community, nation, or around the globe. The distance or disjunction between where we are now, as a national culture, and where we would like to be seems, at times, irreparable. Maintaining our equilibrium often requires what Father Daniel Berrigan calls revolutionary patience, as well as courage, forgiveness, and arts associated with healing body, mind, and spirit.

The disjunction between our experiencing the violence of the status quo and appreciating the world's radiance is the theme of "Concurrence," by Denise Levertov. In that insightful poem, the speaker calls attention to our conflicting responses to the daily news, as we try to reconcile the horror evoked by perpetual war and the wonder and awe evoked by the natural world.

Each day's terror, almost
a form of boredom—madmen
at the wheel and
stepping on the gas and
the brakes no good—
and each day, morning-glories
faultless, blue, blue sometimes
flecked with magenta, each
lit from within with
the first sunlight

This conflict in sensibility was dramatized for me recently when I received a message about the massacre of well-known peacemakers in Colombia, a place and people I have come to love, after being among nonviolent activists and community organizers in Bogota and Medellin four years ago. During that time, I participated in a ceremony honoring the late Guillermo Gaviria, Governor of Antioquia, who was deeply committed to building a peace culture amid violence perpetrated by paramilitaries, drug lords, and armed rebels. There I witnessed, also, the consequences of the U.S. military's allotment to the national government. At \$3 billion, Colombia's allotment is larger than any other nation, except for Israel and Egypt.

Governor Gaviria was kidnapped and later killed by rebels after he and five hundred people in the countryside conducted a peace walk just south of Medellin. Today, activists inspired by his leadership maintain a sophisticated education and action campaign, in areas plagued by violations of human rights. So when I learned that an activist, his son, friends, and principal associates had been murdered in the northeastern part of the country, I felt not only sad, but vulnerable. In grief and anger, I realized that such a reaction accompanies the ongoing work of almost anyone engaged in education and action programs amid political repression and violence around the world.

For Americans, events similar to those in Colombia remind us that we are, as Martin Luther King said in 1967, “the major purveyor of violence in the world.” Our military budget and establishment is larger than all military budgets and establishments around the world combined. Worse, the \$500 billion we spend each year, according to the United Nations Development office, would feed, clothe, educate, and provide health care for every person in the world for several years. The armies and paramilitaries responsible for random and organized violence in Iraq, Afghanistan, Central America, and elsewhere are often armed with weapons made in the United States and paid for by our tax dollars. The poverty and disease endured by the poorest of the poor around the world are the consequence of billions of dollars squandered by the military/industrial complex, as President Eisenhower warned fifty years ago.

Is it any wonder that our emotional response to this condition resembles the response we feel at the loss of a loved one? For historically and etymologically, “anger” and “grief” are closely linked to “angst.”

In the relatively young inter-discipline of conflict resolution, we have learned that healing such grief requires, at some level, forgiveness or transformation. A dramatic instance of this applied principle is, of course, the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions that emerged in South Africa, following the end of apartheid.

Similarly in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, ravaged by civil war and U.S. military intervention, health professionals discovered that one way for people psychologically wounded by the violence of the status quo (death squads in this case) to begin to heal included encouraging them to tell their stories. Simply acknowledging the pain was a step on the road to recovery. A similar exercise may be appropriate, in acknowledging the anger

and grief that many peacemakers experience at some level. Left unattended or unacknowledged, that grief may impede our effectiveness and even our commitment—our willingness to stand on the street corner with a sign saying, “No more killing” and “Bread not bombs,” or to initiate campaigns to redirect the priorities of our government.

Acknowledged and attended to, these wounds may be a source of healing, in our effort to remain faithful to the peace testimony and to the long struggle in which we are involved. The diagnosis and possible remedy of our ailment are explored in the poem “Healing,” by D.H. Lawrence:

I am not a mechanism, an assembly of various sections.
And it is not because the mechanism is working wrongly that I am ill.
I am ill because of wounds to the soul, to the deep emotional self
and the wounds to the soul take a long, long time, only time can help
and patience, and a certain difficult repentance
Long, difficult repentance, realization of life’s mistake, and the freeing
oneself from the endless repetition of the mistake
which mankind at large has chosen to sanctify.

The language of the Lawrence poem is relevant, in light of its religious connotations—words such as “soul,” “repentance,” and “sanctify.” It anticipates recent insights in our understanding of the testimony and spirituality of peacemaking, as well as the relationship between nonviolent social change and healing.

The approach I suggest emphasizes skills and practices that can help individuals and groups at the local, national, and international levels. In practice it relates to nonviolent strategy, such as working for peace in our own back yard. This effort or transformation requires our thinking hard about how we perceive ourselves and how we develop skills to sustain rather than deplete life on earth.

This is obviously work of a very high order, but work that is imminently concrete and specific; it involves our being fully present to ourselves and one another, and being attentive to the difficulties that we face over time.

In this regard, I have found Michael Howard’s insightful essay, *The Invention of Peace* a valuable aid. A military historian and former Regis Professor at Oxford, he is sensitive to

the complex and demanding nature of peacemaking—more complex and demanding than war-making, as he suggests. Acknowledging the long history of sophisticated studies of war-making, he compares that with the brief history of comparable studies of peacemaking. Lao Tsu's *The Art of War*, revised and continually updated over the centuries, dates from about 500 B.C., while its counterpart on the art of peacemaking, Emmanuel Kant's *Perpetual Peace* dates from 1795.

This fact was dramatized recently by the experience of a member of Worcester Peaceworks who visited a local Catholic parish to discuss the obvious connection between religion and the UN Decade for the Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World. Speaking with the parish council during the early months of the war on Iraq, she discovered that many parishioners were simply not ready for what she had to offer regarding the peace testimony. A therapist who daily counsels others on issues related to depression, addiction, and low self-esteem, she is obviously experienced in working with people in difficult contexts. Offering counsel on peacemaking to a contentious religious body caught her off guard. "Gosh, Mike," she exclaimed, "I didn't know this was going to be so *hard*."

In maintaining our commitment, it's helpful to recall an epigram familiar to anyone visiting the UN building in New York: "War begins in the minds of men." Peace also begins in the minds of men—and women—as Professor Howard suggests, though thoughtful planning for war began in the minds of human beings long before thoughtful planning for peace, particularly in international relations.

"The peace invented by the thinkers of the Enlightenment, an international order in which war plays a part, had been a common enough aspiration for visionaries throughout history," Howard comments, "but it has been regarded by political leaders as a practicable or desirable good only during the past two hundred years." He mentions Kant particularly, as well as Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine, their arguments repeated in the Hague Peace Appeal of the late nineteenth century, the League of Nations and the United Nations, on "a social and political ordering of society that is generally accepted as just."

As Elise Boulding documents in *Cultures of Peace*, there are indeed communities and peoples throughout history whose cultures were warless. For the most part, however, war has been the means of unifying people, a way in which loosely connected communities began to identify themselves as "states." Initially, a society's only justification for being

may be its military power, eventually legitimized by sanctions from the populace or organized religion, such as the church during the Roman Empire. Legitimized order produced domestic peace, but it also legitimized the conduct of war. Success in war further reinforces legitimacy. And in many instances, “The greater the effectiveness of a military elite, the greater will be its capacity for extending its power and creating hegemonies.”

Is it any wonder, then, that “peacemaking” is viewed as a less legitimizing force than war-making by most people? But as peace, conflict, and nonviolence studies point out, peace requires sophisticated skills, skills that we have given insufficient attention to, whether in family disputes or community, national, and international conflicts. That fact has been dramatized by the emergence of many new nations since 1945 founded on principles associated with the Enlightenment—the U.S. Declaration of Independence and Constitution, for example, but without an underlying civil society or social structure that furthers these principles.

So here we are, after centuries of people living in cultures that legitimize war-making, trying to legitimize peacemaking, to imagine, to learn, and to construct cultures of peace. Recognizing that we are involved in a rather ambitious and complex task, we proceed with modesty and openness, learning as we go.

In the process, we learn that the art of peace, as with any other art, is not doctrinaire or “settled.” Rather, it is assimilative, respectful of what human beings with similar concerns have experienced and learned from the past and applying it to the present. It’s a process of development. As with other insights regarding conflict, it is influenced by an increase in the world’s population, in a short time, from 3 to 4 to 6 billion, and the concentration of people in urban areas competing for space and natural resources.

The focus on nonviolence and healing, with the help of insights from spiritual psychology, requires re-learning what it means to be human. That includes sustaining the best human values, at a time when they are threatened by forces and institutions we have created and inherited (perhaps including organized religion).

Our concern is not only with personal aspects of spiritual experience, but also with social dimensions: how it informs and exhibits itself in relationships between ourselves and others, ourselves and the environment. If peace is part of that spiritual experience, how do we insinuate it into the world? What constructs and behaviors impede or further it? How do we

apprehend, if not comprehend, and express this “deeper order”?

Learning how to do that is in a very real sense the learning of an art, an art that is relatively “new,” involving skills not previously taught in a systematic way in American culture or confined to the periphery of that culture.

Making the spiritual dimension visible in its broadest sense requires committing ourselves to inter-religious engagement, also, so as not to be tied to one exclusive way of interpreting spiritual experience. For as William Stafford says in a poem called “Freedom,” “Most of the world are living by/ Creeds too odd, chancy, and habit-forming/ To be worth arguing about by reason.”

Disconnectedness is sometimes manifest as an addictive disorder associated with materialism, violence, alienation, ecological destruction, deceit, depression, and suicide. In moving toward connectedness, as Thomas Yeomans says, “The soul needs and can use all of our experience, and it is in its acceptance and integration that the realization of the soul proceeds. It is the work of coming to know who we are and to live fully one’s given life on earth.”

Similarly, the psyche is a patterned field of psychic energy comprised of conscious and unconscious dimensions. Living nonviolently means re-connecting what has been separated, dispersed. Psychological and physical work can help “cleanse” the lenses so that the spiritual light is less blocked, fractured, distorted, and the soul more evident. This is what Gandhi called “soul force.” The soul is “the self,” “the Atman” in Hindu and Vedanta teaching, something inherent in our common experience. So also are personality, psyche, body, feelings and mind: the organizing principle of life, “providing a context and a container for the vicissitudes of experience and the development of the human being.”

The body is, of course, the ground of our spiritual being, our piece of earth, central to spiritual development and soul-realization. Sexuality is part of it, as is suffering and other inter-penetrating aspects of being. We reach the soul not by transcending the body or rejecting it, but by integrating it with other aspects of being. Similarly, peacemaking in society extends to the excluded or “untouchables” by widening the circle of participants.

Practicing and living nonviolence means resisting injustice and humiliation, resolving or transforming conflict, and bringing about social change without harming or killing people.

Peacemaking widens the circle of participants by including the excluded or “untouchables.”

War-making, in contrast, may result in a “loss of soul,” resulting from a separation of the physical and psychological from the spiritual dimension, the secular from the sacred. As Thich Naht Hahn, the Vietnamese Buddhist whose insights have begun to permeate Western culture, says: “We must look deeply into the wounds of the soldiers who have returned from war so we can see the real suffering that war causes, not only to soldiers, but to everyone.” His point is corroborated by studies of veterans returning home after being immersed in war, such as D. Hallock’s *Hell Healing and Resistance: Veterans Speak*.

Acknowledging spiritual psychology, in our effort to live nonviolently, is truly an “awakening,” analogous to waking to our true nature. It takes place in the present, not the future or the past, though they may be helpful. The particular is experienced as the universal, a means of achieving both the transcendent and immanent, as Quaker practice suggests.

The realization of the soul is also a realization of community and our participation in and interrelatedness to nature. It is a realization that takes us well beyond the requirements of purely individual development, toward community building and, as peacemakers, to nonviolent direct action.

Up to this point, I have focused on the challenges of living as a peacemaker and on the anger and grief evoked by our immersion in a war culture. Being peacemakers involves protecting ourselves against such wounds and learning how to heal them, while participating in a communal effort that has its own special consolations and rewards.

In this effort, the UN Decade for the Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World is important, since it reflects successful victories around the globe accomplished through nonviolence over the past twenty years—the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the over throw of Marcos in the Philippines, Solidarity in Poland, the end of apartheid in South Africa, persistent resistance in Latin America.

Emphasizing the principal components of a peace culture, including a reliance on the power of nonviolence rather than violence, power-sharing between men and women, and sustainable development, the UN Decade builds on insights and research associated with peace, conflict, and nonviolence since 1965. Its basic theme is rendered in the epigram: “We

are bound to each other by unknown thread,/ a stitch of red corpuscles sewing up the globe.”

There is much to celebrate in this initiative that originated in UNESCO in the early 1990s, endorsed by Nobel Laureates, International Fellowship for Reconciliation, and the UN General Assembly, under the guidance of Anwar Chowdury, former Ambassador from Bangladesh. (A website maintained by David Adams provides updated information on the Decade.)

Whether the document sits on the shelf unacknowledged and unused, like similar eloquent declarations, is up to us. We must make it a “living” document by applying its principals in our own communities, in Elise Boulding’s words, “bringing the UN to our own back yard.”

The importance of international law and the principles of the UN Decade in sustaining peace was recently dramatized by nonviolent activists in Minneapolis protesting the making and deployment of depleted uranium weapons. In that incident, twenty-eight people were acquitted by a six-person jury when they “trespassed” at Alliant Tech System and defended themselves on the basis of international laws that regard such weapons as illegal.

Such initiatives and rulings give those of us involved in peacemaking reasons for hope. And in her poem, “Political Action in Which Each Individual Acts from the Heart,” Denise Levertov conveys the feeling resulting from such occasional victories, both personal and communal. They evoke peace within and without, personal transformation and social change, uniting body, mind, and spirit in a fully human experience. As in the ominous poem cited at the beginning of this essay, our reactions are “concurrent”:

When solitaries draw close, releasing
each solitude into its blossoming,
when we give to each other the roses
of our communion—
a culture of gardens, horticulture not agribusiness,
arbors among the lettuce, small terrains—
when we taste in small victories sometimes
the small, ephemeral yet joyful harvest of our striving,
great power flows from us,
luminous, a promise. Yes! ... Then
great energy flows from solitude,

and great power from communion.

Endnotes:

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