

Trish Nemore: The Things that Make for Peace

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Today we celebrate Epiphany. An epiphany of sorts – maybe a reverse epiphany – came early for me this season. It came on December 24th, somewhere in the first hour of “Return of the King,” the third of the Tolkien “Lord of the Rings” series. Eowyn, the beautiful daughter of King Theodan of Rohan, says to Aragorn, who will, later in the story, be crowned King of all Middle Earth, “Our men will follow you, even to their deaths. You have given them hope.”

This noble sentiment really irked me. It’s not the part about being willing to die for something larger than one’s self, for the hope that Aragorn’s leadership offers that bothers me; it’s that the context was, in the movie and is, in virtually all literature and especially popular culture, a call to war, a call to kill other people for that lofty dream. Only that part is never said. I believe it is right to be willing to put one’s self in harm’s way for a larger idea, but we do not mention that doing so entails killing others, wrecking havoc on others’ homelands, destroying others’ families. (Alternatively, of course, the “other” is so demonized that it seems ok.) To the best of my knowledge, the Army has never tried to recruit 17 year olds by telling them that they will be taught to kill other humans on command, to do it without having to think because if they think **they** will be dead, instead of “the enemy.” The Army instead appeals either to a

sense of patriotic duty – usually in time of war or war build-up – or, in times of less conflict and threat, to the desire of a young person to get a good education, learn a trade, learn discipline, get his or her life in order.

Where are our cultural images of courage that do not involve being willing to kill? Who is showing us how to put ourselves in harm's way for a greater good, for something that really matters, and doing it without picking up the sword?

Well, as Pat pointed out during my post-movie rant on this subject, as we were driving down to church for Christmas Eve dinner, that would be Jesus. Indeed.

Ok. So much for my Epiphany rant. This Word was originally scheduled to be brought to you on December 14, in the middle of Advent, as we awaited the birth of the Prince of Peace. [That Sunday we were snowed out.] I was then and am now asking us each the question "What do you mean when you wish for peace on earth, when you say 'pray for peace,' when you wish another 'peace, brother' or 'peace, sister'?" Everyone seems to want peace. Even those who make war claim to be doing it in the name of creating a lasting peace. However, who ever thinks about what peace means, what peace looks like? Where do we go to talk about peace, where do we learn the skills of peacemaking? Why isn't it required learning from the day we are born?

I remember being struck by Coleman McCarthy telling us last year when he spoke during Advent what he tells his students: that we should figure out what matters in the world and make sure our schools teach it. I'm eager to promote peace studies throughout the schools because I think it matters and there is

certainly evidence that we could get people excited about ways of living, being in the world and achieving their goals that do not involve the use of force or violence, but that nonetheless require engagement and great courage. Many large stories exist about non-violent conflict engagement – especially in social and political movements of the twentieth century – that have not reached very big audiences. Why aren't these stories being told in our schools? Why aren't **they** playing at the Uptown Theater?

I have been studying pacifism and non-violence in a catch as catch can way in the past year. My studies were stimulated by our Advent series of classes last December examining Seekers commitment to working to end all wars, public and personal and by Pat Conover's class last winter on the three Christian ways of viewing war – pacifism, crusade and just war. I began wondering if I would call myself a pacifist, the circumstances under which I could imagine responding to a situation with violence, whether a world without violent engagement of conflict is imaginable. These questions do not actually interest me so much anymore. I am more interested in how to correct the sorry circumstance that we don't require peace studies in our schools, that we don't require the teaching of skills of non-violent engagement, that we don't create images of the courage it takes to engage the world without weapons of violence. How far **could** we go in addressing the world's ills through non-violent means, if we took seriously learning the skills and ways of non-violence in our personal lives, in our communities and as citizens of the world? Those questions interest me now.

Neither pacifism (at least as I believe that word is currently understood) nor non-violent conflict engagement is about being passive, isolationist or disinterested. If we become truly

immersed in a pacifist/non-violent consciousness and way of being, we are training ourselves for an alternative to the classic psychological responses to danger of “fight” or “flight.” A non-violent engaged response is not without danger itself.

For example, Christian Peacemaker Teams and other similar groups deployed to areas of conflict around the world intentionally put themselves in harm's way in an effort to stop the violence of others. This kind of action is consistent with Gandhi's view of Satyagraha – truth force (and to Gandhi truth = love), so we could say, love-force. Satyagraha is peaceful. It is the vindication of truth by infliction of suffering on oneself (if necessary), not on another.

Many of us may think of non-violence in connection with civil disobedience – as exemplified in the tactics and strategies of the civil rights movement in this country and the Indian independence movement, among many others – a way for disenfranchised people to achieve a political goal that does not rely on the use of force. For Gandhi, however, non-violence or “ahimsa” was a total way of life. It dictated how one engaged an adversary in a political struggle, how one managed one's business affairs and personal relationships and how one chose what to eat: proper treatment of animals was an important issue for Gandhi and other satyagrahi.

One source of Gandhi's understandings of how life is supposed to be lived was the Sermon on the Mount. A common Christian understanding of the Sermon on the Mount is that it is **not** directing us how to live, but rather pointing out how miserably our human lot fails to live up to its standards and so pointing us to the gospel and the good news that our salvation is by grace through faith. However, not all

Christians see it exactly that way. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for example, despite the fact that he was not able to entirely eschew the use of violence in the context in which he found himself in Hitler's Germany, nonetheless believed that the Sermon on the Mount directs us how to live our lives.

I hope those of you more grounded in theological studies that I am will consider the Sermon on the Mount a worthy topic for the Word on future Sundays.

Jonathan Schell, author of *The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People*, told a group of Church of the Saviour congregants and fellow travelers gathered last September to study the things that make for peace that the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount have been seeping into the political world over the centuries.

In his book, Schell remarks, "The terrible violence of the twentieth century . . . holds a lesson for the twenty-first. It is that in a steadily and irreversibly widening sphere, violence, always a mark of human failure and a bringer of sorrow, has now also become dysfunctional as a political instrument." At the same time, "another, complementary lesson, less conspicuous than the first but just as important, has been emerging. It is that forms of nonviolent action can serve effectively in the place of violence at every level of political affairs."

Schell's view of the rise of non-violence as a strategy for engaging conflict without our own use of force (force is often used against those who engage in non-violent action; it is

sometimes part of what makes the strategy effective) is supported by the PBS documentary series, "A Force More Powerful: A Century of Non-violent Conflict," a fascinating set of stories of six of the major non-violent social movements of the twentieth century. Why aren't these stories required study in all our schools?

In addition to non-violence as a political strategy, we can also think it as a way of life, as Gandhi and others have. It seems to me that if we view the Sermon on the Mount as a directive for how we should try to live, we are talking about the latter.

I came away from our Advent series of classes last year feeling like Seekers was indeed moving in that direction. While nearly all of us acknowledged that we knew of circumstances where we would use force – most seemed related to defense of loved ones or situations of extreme injustice – we nonetheless seemed to be raising our own consciences to how we view violence of all kinds – physical, emotional, spiritual – in the world.

On silent retreat last fall, I found a copy of the Pax Christi vow of non-violence that I would like to read to you:

*"I vow to carry out in my life the love and example of Jesus by striving for peace within myself and seeking to be a peacemaker in my daily life;
by accepting suffering rather than inflicting it;
by refusing to retaliate in the face of provocation and violence;
by persevering in non-violence of tongue and heart;
by living conscientiously and simply so that I do not deprive others of the means to live;
by actively resisting evil and working non-violently to*

abolish war and the causes of war from my own heart and from the face of the earth."

We may not be individually ready to embrace every tenet of that vow, but I know that many of us are working on pieces of it and that there are many places in our community life where the seeds of peace and non-violence are being sown and cultivated.

One of my personal favorites is Seekers gift, made in early December in the annual distribution of our Community Passions budget, to preserve Bonobos from extinction. Maybe you, like me, have read articles recently about bonobos – the chimpanzees that are closely related to us, that provide us with modeling of non-violent conflict resolution: Bonobos may be the only primates that do not engage in aggressive violent behavior but rather work out their conflicts through x-rated sexual activity. This gives new meaning to the old phrase "Make Love, Not War." Thanks to Julia Dahlin for making Bonobo preservation part of Seekers life.

I see, too, the ways in which Seekers has engaged the issue of war and peace and violence in the world, more openly and intentionally in the past year than ever before in the time I have been here. A year ago last September, we birthed Seekers Church Peace Witness, a loosely affiliated group of Seekers interested in expressing our opposition to the war and exploring the things that make for peace.

SCPW engaged in various activities to witness to our opposition to the war build-up, including demonstrations, peace prayer and Bells for Peace.

We cosponsored the Advent series last year and, in collaboration with Celebration Circle, introduced the lighting of the peace and justice candle as an integral part of our weekly worship.

We began monthly Peacelucks, second Sunday gatherings for pizza and conversation, as a place to explore issues of relevance to our effort, both individually and collectively, to wage peace. David Hilfiker spoke at a Peaceluck about his visit to Iraq. Hazam Barakat from the Islamic Center in Alexandria spoke to us about Islam. We viewed and discussed the video "Death and Destruction," part of the Brian Swimme series called Canticle of the Cosmos. We worked with a writing of Pat Conover about the spiritual underpinnings of his peace and justice work in the United Church of Christ. We shared a Peaceluck evening with a similar peace group at Takoma Park Presbyterian Church where we learned more about the work of Christian Peacemaker Teams. We spent an evening creating the perfect high school peace studies curriculum then identifying next steps for trying to get it or pieces of it into the school systems.

We engaged in a process to discern the areas in which we want to focus our peacemaking efforts. A summary of that activity is included in the worship bulletins; I invite you to take a look at it after the service, note the areas that speak to **your** heart or mind, initial those and give the sheet to one of the Peace Witness Four: Kevin Ogle, Lewis Busch, Else Sizemore or me. We are eager to provide leadership in the places the larger community wants to focus its attention.

Seekers' conversations of the past year have led to our renewed understanding that peace does not mean **merely** the

absence of violence, that violence does not mean **merely** physical violence or force, that peace **cannot** exist without justice. Maybe the peace we are coming to understand is better captured in the word "shalom." One definition I found for "shalom" says Shalom has to do with physical health, peace and good relationships, prosperity in the sense of having food and shelter and family. Shalom has to do with groups and right relationships and not just with the well-being of unconnected individuals. Shalom has to do with salvation. The German word for salvation is "Heilung," or healing, and shalom means the healing of relationships.

Therefore, we now have the River of Light Mission Group, a group whose call is about healing, and whose members view healing as part of their contribution to peacemaking.

Jeanne Marcus has attended a Pendle Hill event about the spiritual underpinnings of non-violence.

Jesse Palidofsky is working on an idea for offering music events at Carroll Street that have a peace theme, a sort of peace cafe.

Sandra has preached to us about world hunger and has taught a class in faith and food, increasing our awareness about the peace and justice issues in our food distribution and daily eating habits.

Jeanne, Sallie Holmes and I have attended several classes of peace studies in the Montgomery County schools and are engaged

in conversation with one of the teachers about how we can enhance her efforts. This is a tiny first step toward my personal goal of having peace studies in every grade of the school system. Kevin Ogle is looking for the ways into starting that discussion in the Falls Church City Schools. Lewis Busch is investigating the Quakers' effort to be an alternative presence to military recruiters in schools.

Recognizing the importance of ongoing commitments to nurturing the "root causes of peace" (a wonderful phrase I am stealing from the Heifer Project), those with special caring for South Africa have created the Washington Area Tumbling Team, to be in regular conversation about our commitments in Winterveld.

Keith Seat has made a 100% transition from lawyering for a large corporation to being a mediator and promoting mediation as a conflict resolution strategy, a much less adversarial approach than much lawyering allows for.

We have people engaged in body/spirit movement and music making, both of which I consider elements of learning to live non-violently. There are many others whom I am not naming. I hope each of us will share with the larger community the ways in which we are becoming active peacemakers, in which we are deepening the roots of peace.

What has become clear to me in my journey over the last year or so is that there is a whole lot of interesting, good stuff, on a personal level and on a larger political level that I never learned in school. Charlie Collyer, one of our teachers in the course on non-violence that Jeanne Marcus and I took at

Common Ground on the Hill last summer, says that often the reaction of students in his non-violence seminars is "Why haven't I learned this before?"

Peace activism and non-violent engagement is not for wimps. Charlie asked for our thoughts on why non-violence is not more popular or well received. One of his own answers is that it seems "cowardly" and "easy." The other student in our class, a Sandy Spring Friends 15 year old, thought it was because non-violence is too hard. Although I suspect most people are ignorant of that fact, I believe she is right.

Non-violent engagement is hard, but there is joy in it. In a documentary about the toppling of the Serbian dictator, Slobedan Milosevich, a student is asked in the end how they had been able to mobilize and sustain a campaign that ultimately resulted in the police withdrawing support for their dictator. His response is "We love life more than they did!"

Charlie Collyer says much of psychology is grounded in observable behavior; non-violence says observable behavior is not the last word. To me, this translates that non-violence is about possibility, about hope.

The spiritual challenge to lessen the violence in the world, to become active peacemakers is huge and is before us. It is a right place for an intentional spiritual community to put its efforts. To live a life of engaged peacemaking and non-violence requires the kind of disciplines and accountability that Seekers has in its structures. We have places of learning: the School of Christian Living and monthly Peacelucks; we have spiritual reporting and we have the

support of each other as we face situations that require courage and putting ourselves in harm's way; that require **us** to suffer **instead** of inflicting suffering on another.

Starting January 13th, Seekers Church Peace Witness will sponsor three evening classes to improve our skills at non-violent communication. They will be a place to continue the conversation.

In the meantime, as our hymn tells us, the work of Christmas has just begun. How will **you** present **yourself** as gift to honor the birth of the Prince of Peace?

Amen.