

Building a Culture of Peace

People have differences. Whether this erupts into conflict depends on which part of the brain they access. Psychologists tell us the primitive brain has only two responses to threat: fight or flight. It is the mature brain that sees a third option: engage. To access the mature brain takes training. That is why the Dalai Lama who builds six hours of mental training into each of his days says that one way to build peace is through mental training. What kind of training?

A World View: The astronauts' view of the blue planet produced an insight - there are no boundaries. We are interconnected in a web of life. Chernobyl produced the same insight - food in Denmark still has radioactivity. This view is very different from the tribal view - my tribe is best and we deserve the best.

A Vision: The term "culture of peace" was espoused by the United Nations when it designated the years 2001 to 2010 as the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for Children of the World. A culture of peace is a set of values, attitudes, modes of behavior and ways of life that reject violence and prevent conflicts by tackling their root causes. A culture of peace promotes the vision of a harmonious, happy, and productive global village.

Success Stories: We already have motivating examples of how to build cultures of peace. After huge riots in South Africa, ordinary black and white citizens, sick of the killing, began getting creative. They drew a picture of what harmonious living would look like, called it the National Peace Accords, shopped it around the entire country for leaders and citizens to sign, trained 26,000 peace monitors to come between clashing peoples, and starting running "culture of peace" vigils, demonstrations, festivals. This had the effect of marginalizing those prone to violence and prepared the way for a peaceful transition to a black president, Nelson Mandela.

Europe, totally committed to never having war again on its land, has created in our generation a new entity - the European Union. There is a new currency, new governing bodies, new "Europe parks", new Europe festivals. One highly successful mechanism has been city twinning: older member cities in the European Union are partnered with cities new to the Union. There is much exchange going on as people forge personal ties with others who once were of another tribe!

Choice: The mental training needed to build a culture of peace requires a choice to be creative, rather than reactive. The creative person exercises the freedom to create - to picture something that does not exist and to bring it into existence. Adverse circumstances are used to shape the vision of what is needed but are not given the power to stop the creation of new ways of being. The world is in a time of transition which could result in a global Renaissance or a disaster. Peace builders place their lives at the service of the Renaissance.

Focus and Commitment: Builders of cultures of peace focus on and commit to the building blocks they are creating for this new society. They search the newspapers for stories of how this can be done and do not get bogged down by the bad news.

Skills: Peace builders learn skills needed for the new society. People trained in conflict resolution/management, mediation, but most important, consensus building lead in creating cultures of peace. Other skills needed are : leveraging big change; future planning. Everyone needs to be a leader in this effort! So everyone needs training.

This is not an exhaustive list of what is needed, but a starter kit to stimulate our thinking and to catapult us into action. Passivity in these challenging times leads to depression and numbness. Imaginative involvement, banding together to create something new, brings good spirits and energy which builds to the critical mass needed for the large change required.

Organize! Don't agonize! Tish Sommers, Founder of the Older Women's League

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