

Paths to Peace

Annual Toronto Conference Peace and Justice Working Group gathering

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Theme Presentation by Margaret Boyce

I was asked to talk about the campaign for the de-legitimization of war. I have to admit that I didn't know much about this specific project in the beginning. Frankly, it seemed a bit on the ho-hum side: after all, isn't that what the United Nations was organized for, to see that war is done away with?, and if the United Nations can't do it, who do we think we are? And anyway, isn't that what the whole peace movement has always been about?

Well, (just by the way) , it turns out that the UN in its very charter, has some loop-holes in its approach to getting rid of war. For example: here is a stripped down version of the opening lines of the UN charter: "We, the peoples of the United Nations, determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, etc." "And for these ends -to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used *save in the common interest*". *The trouble is, who defines "the common interest"?* Even more dicey is article 51. "Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right to individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a member of the United Nations" and we have seen recently how self-defense can be made to include the right to make "pre-emptive strikes" at the pleasure of the most powerful.

Not for one minute to denigrate, or fail to appreciate the UN, which gets too much criticism and not enough appreciation: only that even Kofi Annan assumes that you always have to keep the option of war open; and that the world is starting to look at more focussed efforts, other avenues, both within the UN and outside to insist that war is NEVER the best or only choice..

As some of you will know, the Voice of Women, now legally known as the Voice of Women for Peace, has been working for peace and justice in Canada for over forty years. It sprang up like a mushroom as a national protest organization during the great upsurge of public concern over the nuclear arms race in the early sixties, but it has had an up-and-down history. It was tarred with the Communist brush as so many peace groups were, and many of the prominent women who gave it strength in the beginning cut loose. VOW dwindled down to a relatively few local and provincial groups across the country, loosely united under a national board. For a while the national office was in somebody's basement.

But for these forty-three years Voice of Women has beavered away at issues of peace and justice especially from the angle of women's concerns. One thing that has always impressed me about VOW was how an individual or a small group could go ahead and organize a project on their own which would get legitimation in the rest of the world because VOW was behind it. For example, since 1986 it has been the mission of one member, Janis Alton of Mississauga, to organize study tours of the United Nations organization. Once or twice every year a small group of women go to New York and spend days becoming familiar with the way the huge set-up operates - in theory and in practice. They join up with other non-governmental groups there who share their objectives; and they find out how and why proposals get side-tracked and how to get

around obstacles.. I admit that I used to wonder at the amount of energy, time and expense and ask myself what good all this was really doing, back then when to my mind the real activity was in demonstrations at places like Greenham Common in Britain and Litton Industries in Toronto. But now after all this time, look at the results of these years of effort. We have a corps of women who know their way around the UN and are convinced of its value. (It was one of these women who pushed and shoved and helped Lloyd Axworthy to give leadership on the land-mine treaty.) We have women who will take the trouble to attend conferences, and follow them up and build on them, and write speeches, and rewrite speeches, sometimes for years, and eventually get an issue or a point of view to a level of prominence where the world and its governments have to pay attention.

For example: nine years ago the United Nations division on women's issues held the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China. The women who gathered then were determined that it wouldn't be just another get-together to vent their discontent with the way things are: follow-up was built in. Every year since, that follow-up consists of reconsidering, two at a time, the worst obstacles to women's well-being identified at Beijing, NGO's and governments on hand to check progress and propose remedies.

This year one of the issues examined was the necessity to get women participating equally in conflict prevention., conflict resolution and in post-conflict peace-building -areas where women could have much to offer but where they are usually notable for their absence. So we find 16 VOW members at the meeting of the UN division on women's issues, presenting their workshop titled "War is not Good for Women and Other Living Things" and a video discussion titled "A Force more Powerful: Non Violent Conflict in the 20th Century" - and politicking among other NGO's to get support of there resolutions de-legitimizing war.

My point is simply that all the effort and energy expended over many years organizing study tours, writing papers, etc. etc. have issued in getting this crazy idea of outlawing war into a meeting of an official arm of the UN, and hence onto the world stage.

And it IS a crazy idea! Support for the institution of war has a lot going for it. Lack of imagination is one thing, perhaps the main one: It says 'we have no other options'. Another is the economy. In this crowd I don't have to spend much time on the question of the deadly grip the arms trade holds on many national economies. Just one figure tells the tale: world-wide military spending in 2002 was over 842 billion dollars. Project Ploughshares also show how much the Canadian economy depends on producing for modern warfare, and how much of our life-style, yours and mine, depends on this production. For instance the Canada Pension Plan that many of us here depend on has somewhere around 200 million dollars invested in the world's top 20 military contractors.

Nothing is simple. When thinking about the arms trade, I used to have mental pictures of wealthy tycoons in Cadillacs twirling their moustaches as they counted up the millions in profits; but there are the jobs, and the people who need the jobs to feed families and earn pensions, and they make war and its preparations politically acceptable and even economically necessary.

More powerful in support of war-making is the emotional and psychological factor. When I

mentioned to an old friend that I was working on the question of de-legitimizing war, she said: "The first thing to do is get rid of all those glamorous uniforms". She had a point: so much of what we see of war has been clothed in glamour: handsome young men and women in sharp dress uniforms, personifying all the best in patriotism, stiff upper lip, resolution and courage.

Here's the Roman poet Horace, who said in the first century before the Christian era "It is pleasant and honorable to die for one's country" and here's General George Patton of WWII, "Compared to war all other forms of human endeavour shrink to insignificance. God! I do love it so."

A recent book by Chris Hedges titled "War is a Force that Gives us Meaning" describes the many levels of war's emotional appeal. He says that for many people, both civilians and soldiers, war is an emotionally intense and even exhilarating experience. We have probably all heard about the experience of sacrifice, bravery, camaraderie and a sense of mission that have given many veterans, even in the midst of horror, a time they wouldn't want to have missed. For how many young men in 1939 was enlisting in the army the gateway to respect, a pay packet and the satisfaction of having an important job to do - for the first time in their lives after the unemployment of the depression. And the recruiters appeal to the wish for adventure and don't mention the danger. Why would they? especially when, for instance, the TV is not allowed to show pictures of those flag-draped coffins returning from Iraq..

As well, the whole business of patriotism is ambiguous. At one end it's all tied up with natural, human, powerful feelings around one's identity, the concept of home, the sense of belonging, the security of family and people we understand - legitimate and natural feelings that bind us into community.

At the other end there's jingoism and "my country right or wrong". And the mixture is powerful. Then, literature, from Homer right on through to the comic books and pulp magazines, BOTH CONDITIONS US AND SHOWS HOW WE ARE CONDITIONED to think that war is noble, selfless and glorious.

Anyway, don't we have to defend ourselves, and if we're too noble to consider that a legitimate reason to go to war, can we stand by and not defend the weak and helpless when they are attacked? DON'T TELL ME YOU THINK WE DIDN'T HAVE TO STOP HITLER!! It is noticeable however that we are most likely to defend the helpless when there are things like oil or diamonds involved.

But there are many signs abroad at this time that it possible to work in hope for the primary aim of the UN - 'to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war'. One is the deeper and wider acceptance of this fact: we must outlaw war in order for humanity to survive. This acceptance has many roots: one is the rise of more interdisciplinary studies, which make it obvious that every ill that befalls the earth or humankind is exacerbated by war: hunger, the rich-poor gap, social unrest, environmental degradation, the Aids epidemic. So people in every field are beginning to see that nothing can ultimately come of their efforts when the lion's share of the earth's resources is devoted to war and the preparation for war. A striking demonstration of this wider concern is the Hague Appeal for Peace, and its conference in 1999,

oppressed are ignoring the fact that refusing to fight doesn't have to mean there won't be conflict. I guess there will always be conflict, original sin being what it is. But the question is, on the world stage do you handle conflict like an adult or a four year old? "Do what I say or else I won't play with you!" becomes "Do what I want or I'll kill you and blow everything up." The chap who wrote "Everything I ever needed to know I learned in kindergarten" makes a good case, and it seems that people who think you have to solve conflict by going to war never got to grade One

For examples of major change achieved without war: the work of Mahatma Gandhi springs to mind, and that of Mandela and Tutu in the downfall of apartheid in South Africa. There are many others that could teach us a lot, but of which most of us know nothing. Walter Wink in his book "Engaging the Powers" tells how the Marcos regime in the Philippines was brought down. He writes: "The Philippines show how achievable this vision really is, though few know the inside story. A strong undercurrent of nonviolent teaching has long characterized both Catholic and Protestant churches in the Philippines. Through the initiative of the nonviolent community there, three people were brought in to train trainers in non-violence. In little more than a year, these trainers and others taught half a million poll-watchers non-violent means to protect the ballots from theft by the henchmen of Marcos. These then formed the nucleus of the street demonstrators that brought down the Marcos regime. That revolution did not just "happen". It had been prepared." (P.219). I recommend this book for anyone interested in pursuing non-violence.

It's almost a cliché to refer at this point to the institution of slavery. The western world's economy a couple of hundred years ago was firmly based on slavery, and supported by powerful interested parties. The American civil war was fought largely over that question. The slave trade was one pillar of the British Empire, an institution many of us here were taught to revere. Slavery paid for many of the stately homes of England that we like to visit, and the gracious mansions in the southern USA. Though it was a main cause for the American civil war, in Britain it was mainly a non-violent struggle. BUT abolitionists started speaking against the slave trade as early as 1600 AD, and they didn't get real results till 1850. Getting rid of so entrenched an evil as slavery - or as war - takes a long time - and often we can't help thinking quietly to ourselves - "more time than we may very well have!"

The thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians ends grandly this way: "And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." This chapter gets read at many occasions secular and sacred, where all the emphasis is on love, and hope gets strictly a back seat. But Paul put it right up there at least in the same league with faith and love

I remember the first time I had it explained to me that there was a difference between optimism and Christian hope. It made sense at the time, but I have always been by nature an optimistic person and I've found it a difficult concept to keep on my screen. These days optimism is not an easy position for any of us who read the papers. I guess it is Christian hope that makes us keep on keeping on with whatever small or large things we do. One writer says: "Christian hope is hope in action." The abolitionists of the 1600's who never saw their hopes fulfilled must have persevered on the basis of that kind of hope. Another says: "Christian hope is hope AGAINST hope, against all the false hopes of those who do not reckon with..... reality."

A story that inspires me is of a hope in God from pre-Christian times. You will remember from the book of Daniel the three young men in Nebuchadnezzar's court who refused to bow down and worship a golden statue, on pain of being thrown into the fiery furnace. Here is their answer to the king's demand: "O Nebuchadnezzar., we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. BUT IF NOT, be it known to you, O king, that we will NOT serve your gods and we will NOT worship the golden statue that you have set up."

The golden statues all around and among us do not want a world without war. Christian hope is hope in action, action that resists the power of the golden statues on every front.

What action are we talking about? Well right now, today and tomorrow, there are the ten things listed on the back of this hand-out - resistance things that anyone can do, that many of us are doing already, but can perhaps do more diligently and intentionally. In that list I see, for example, community-building, care of the earth, creativity, simplicity of life, - all resisting the mind-set that makes for war - and all Earthworm work.

Another action is practicing discernment. That's a word I've learned from our Roman Catholic friends, and to me it means learning to spot and name the values, the lies and distortions upon which our acquisitive, consumer society is built and which give rise to and justify war. This is hard work and uncomfortable, because there are facts and situations before our eyes (as well as in our own lives) which we don't want to talk about out loud. Perhaps the most important such situation is the political climate in the United States, and the power of the USA to impose its will on others, increasingly on Canada. We shrink from absorbing the implications of the declared American foreign policy which has been summarized as "Whatever we want, we'll get".

I don't think it is either moral or useful for Canada to pussy-foot around our neighbours in the hope of placating them. I think we all share the same hopes for the oncoming election, but we needn't be fooled that the basic outlook will change a whole lot, no matter who wins.

I'm not an optimist any more.

Considering the numerous disasters looming over us, and the arrogance, short-sightedness and stated ambitions of the most powerful nation in the world, I can't see any reason to hope in the ordinary sense, which is optimism.. Yet the Christian hope still stands.

The trouble is, for Jesus it meant resistance that led to the cross. I suspect that most of you are like me and wonder if we would have the courage to say BUT IF NOT in the face of a fiery furnace, or a cross. Probably most of us will not have to face that decision, but we have to be aware that that can be part of the deal with the Christian hope for a war-less world. Peace people may very well have to be as willing to sacrifice lives for peace as fighting men and women have done for war. The golden idols, and their worshippers, don't give up their powers without a struggle.