

Teresa's Gagné Keynote Talk from the Nov 2023 Let Peace be Their Memorial Ceremony

As peace activists it can sometimes feel like our 'Peace Call' is falling on deaf ears, rather than ringing loudly through our streets. *"It's a tough time to peddle pacifism,"* said US journalist Saeed Ahmed after the 9/11 attacks, and the same can be said today. In times of great stress people turn naturally towards the familiar, and unfortunately war has become our all-too-familiar, go-to response for most international conflicts. Stress can also lead people to 'silo', hunkering down with those they love and trust rather than opening themselves to other, less comfortable, views and perspectives.

Politicians, governments and the media rush to be seen taking the moral high ground, applying simplistic terms like 'terrorist', 'bloodthirsty', 'mindless' or 'fanatic' to one group while pledging to 'stand with' the other. Conflicts with decades of complex history are re-framed as clichéd battles between 'good' and 'evil' which warrant our unquestioning allegiance to and support for the favoured side.

Modern child rearing urges us to 'label the behaviour rather than the child', and to implement a 'time-out' to allow for emotions to cool rather than responding with a shout or a slap. But this seemingly wise advice apparently does not apply in the foreign policy playground, where careful consideration is seen as weak and waffling, and a ceasefire to protect civilians can be deemed 'inappropriate'.

Pacifists and antiwar activists are often seen as naive people who don't accept that conflict is part of human nature, but nothing could be farther from the truth. We recognize that conflict happens whenever two or more people or groups have incompatible aims. Indeed, to be a pacifist is to be in conflict with society's dominant values and many of its political structures.

As individuals, we learn to resolve our conflicts by engaging non-violently, aiming at an eventual resolution through dialogue and compromise, not brute force. But somehow, when it comes to international conflicts we let ourselves be guided by what the Vietnamese writer Viet Thanh Nguyen calls *"the machinery of war"*. It's the sum of the stories and mythology and propaganda put out through media, films and art that support one's nation's view of itself in war as human, as honourable, as victims, as upholders of justice and right, and our enemies as inhuman brutes and terrorists. It denies the reality that our enemy is as human, and inhuman, as we ourselves are. It prepares us to support war, to support our own 'war efforts' and to accept the morality of an arms industry that profits from exporting oppression and death.

Another effect of the propaganda machinery of war—perhaps one of the most devastating and surely the most disheartening – is to make us think that war is an inevitable product of human nature and that peace is an unrealistic pipe-dream. Nguyen also asks why we find it possible to accept the intentional murder of millions, but impossible to imagine pure forgiveness. Shouldn't it be the other way around? *"There is no one else to blame for the limits of our spirit and our imagination."* He says *"We submit to the pragmatists, the profiteers, and the paranoiacs who insist that war is part of humanity, our identity. They are half-right but all wrong in believing that we cannot convert the recognition of our inevitable inhumanity into a different kind of realism, a realism that believes we must imagine peace, no matter how impossible it may seem."*

"It is perpetual war that is unrealistic. Perpetual is madness, engineered in the rational language of bureaucracy and the high-flown rhetoric of nationalism and sacrifice, operating through campaigns that could lead to human extermination. This madness can only be matched by the logic of perpetual peace. If we wish to live, we need a realism of the impossible."

Writer-philosopher Aldous Huxley took a somewhat more optimistic line, writing *"What is called the utopian dream of pacifism is in fact a practical policy – indeed the only practical, the only realistic policy that there is."* Huxley was an early member of the Peace Pledge Union, originators of the white poppy, and the source of the poppies many of us are wearing today. There is a lot of wonderful information and food for thought on their website ppu.org.uk. I found the following insights particularly worth sharing:

"(As Pacifists) we believe in making an active choice for nonviolence as an alternative to both war and passivity. We recognise the repeated failure of warfare to achieve even its stated aims, and the harm that militarism causes to democracy, equality, human co-operation and the global environment.

But we are concerned with more than simply the rejection of war. We are committed to actively resisting war and other injustices and promoting alternative forms of conflict resolution. These vary from the long and difficult business of international peacebuilding to the nonviolent overthrow of unjust structures. We make the links between issues of peace, power, poverty and climate change. We seek to engage in conflict non-violently, aiming at eventual resolution of the conflict, and with a focus on changing systems and practices rather than descending to personal hatred of individuals (or groups)

War inevitably leads to innocent people suffering. And while violence can destroy the hater, it takes much more to destroy the hate."

Opponents of war are sometimes seen as advocating sitting back and doing nothing in the face of violent attacks - of just 'letting the bully win'. We are sometimes left at odds when asked 'Well what's your solution?', as though doing something we know causes untold harm is justified simply because we don't have a guaranteed alternative. When we learned about the side effects of Thalidomide and DDT we stopped using them, even though agricultural pests and morning sickness were still serious problems. Both products worked, but at a cost that couldn't be justified.

Perhaps this modest proposal from the Mennonite Central Committee is worth considering:

"At a time when emotions are running high and there are no simple answers, perhaps the best role for advocates of nonviolence is to ask good questions."

By admitting that we don't know, we free ourselves to ask our questioners whether they think that war is working? How often they think it achieves its stated goals; and whether they believe it does so at an acceptable financial and human cost?

But we need to ask those questions and to listen to the answers with an open heart. As Viet Thanh Nguyen points out *"This is the only path to reconciliation with our foes and with ourselves. Without reconciliation, war's truth will be impossible to remember and war's trauma impossible to forget."*

It's only by listening, and talking and asking hard questions that we can find, together, a better way.