

Give Peace A Chance

By Cade Coldren, guest speaker
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On July 7, 1969, a song was released, whose chorus would become like an anthem to the anti-war movement through the rest of 1969 and the first part of the 1970's as the Vietnam War raged. The chorus is simple – “All we are saying, is give peace a chance.” With those 9 words, John Lennon expressed what I believe to be a simple truth, particularly for this fellowship who believes so strongly in peace and social justice issues. Give Peace A Chance. We KNOW it will work better than the status quo, if we can just give it a chance.

I know there are others in this fellowship that are more imminently qualified to speak about Peace, like Steve and Kevin, but I am up here today because peace is very important to me, and has been for most of my life. And because the focus this fellowship has on peace and social justice issues is what keeps me coming back. Sorry Steve, I enjoy your sermons, but that is not what keeps me in this fellowship.

Anyway, I'd like to give my message today in 2 parts. The first is my personal history and how I came to my beliefs regarding Peace. The second is my clumsy attempt to answer a question that has come to mind repeatedly over the years, and that is: “What is Peace?”

Part 1

I was born in 1960. This date is important because it is revealing regarding the climate I grew up in, relative to war. For reference, the first combat troops landed in Vietnam in 1965, when I was 5. The last combat troops left Vietnam in 1973, when I was 13. Saigon fell in 1975, when I was 15. So this time, from the age of 5 through 15, during the Vietnam War, is a ripe time for anybody's development.

I grew up in a household that was very very, very conservative. This was largely determined by my father. Now, I do not intend to rag on my dad too much, since he is not here to defend himself, having passed away a few years back. But he is central to the development of my personal attitudes towards peace.

He grew up in the Depression, but was too young to serve in World War II. He did try to enlist in the Korean War, but failed his physical, for reasons he never would tell. I think this was one of his biggest disappointments in life – never being able to serve. So, he never personally experienced war. But, in his life, he supported it. Defended it. Dignified it. Glorified it.

One of his favorite pastimes was studying war. His favorite was the Civil War, followed by World War II. He had a huge library of war books. Books on specific battles, campaigns,

generals, uniforms, weaponry, strategy. You name it, he had it. Not just Civil War and World War II, but any war you can think of in this country's history.

For the Vietnam War, he did not have to read books by historians, it was taking place real time. And he never missed news of the war if he could help it. Let me give you several examples.

One of my earliest memories of the Vietnam War was a map my dad had of Indochina. One of those like you got in National Geographic. He would pull it out most evenings and mark on the map the locations of battles, and who "owned" what territory. I recall that over time, he had to acquire several of those maps, since the battle lines in Nam were much less clear cut than say, for example, World War II.

I also vividly remember the nightly news on CBS with Walter Cronkite. The news would show footage of the war in Vietnam, along with details of the body counts. My dad also had a small notebook he would jot down and keep track of the body counts. Part of the reason I remember this so well is that I was forced to sit down with my dad and watch. He would try to explain what was happening to me. I guess being his oldest son, I was expected to follow in his footsteps. Boy, that didn't work out so well for him.

I sat there and watched, and listened, and was repulsed. I often wondered how anyone could think that what I was watching was good. But I could never express that to him. No, he ruled the household with something of an iron hand. Questioning his views or beliefs was simply not allowed. So I learned to keep my opinions and views to myself. It's a trait I still have. Despite my views, which are pretty strongly held, that reluctance to express myself is part of the reason you rarely hear me speak out, even now. I could never be an activist like Eliza or others in this room, but you have my admiration for your ability to do so.

As a youth, I'll admit, I had my share of toy soldiers. But unbeknownst to my dad, each one of them had a name. And so, none of them ever died. You may get knocked down, but you got back up, unhurt. That was my idea of war.

Does the name Bill Watterson ring a bell with anyone? He was the creative genius behind the Calvin and Hobbs cartoon. He wrote one of the best quotes I have ever heard about Peace. It is one I might have asked my father. "Dad, how do soldiers killing each other solve the world's problems?"

And so, I ended up being the black sheep of the family. My three siblings all embraced, to some extent, the attitudes of my father. I'm not sure how much of it in the beginning was merely a way to get along with his iron hand, but it stuck. Not me. And so you can see why I turned out to be a disappointment to my father.

Years later, I confided in my mother that I would have gone to Canada to avoid the draft if I had come of age during the war. Of course I had never heard of a conscientious objector. And what was her response? She was appalled I would "chicken out" and run.

That's the household I grew up in.

Over the years in that environment, I learned that Peace is simply "not at war." After all these years, I have finally come to the conclusion that Peace is so much more complex than that.

Which brings me to the second part of my message...

So, just what is Peace? That is not such an easy question to answer.

There are what, 20 adults in this room. I'll bet you that I could ask each of you "What is Peace?" and I would get at least 25 answers. That is how difficult it seems to pin down this word.

But, here is the deal. I am a scientist. I think like a scientist. So, I approached the question about the only way I know of. As a scientist. But here's the problem. How do you study "Peace"? I'm not sure how to devise an experiment to do that. That would require a holistic approach, I believe, but so much of science, and my training, is based more on a reductionist approach. This is where you test a limited suite of variables, trying to keep all others constant. I didn't see how to take that approach.

So, I decided to see what others had to say about Peace. More learned people than I.

What I did was read a number of passages, written by a variety of great thinkers, some long and others short, but all dealing with Peace.

What did I conclude?

To me, Peace is a series of hierarchical levels. Think of the layers of an onion.

Level 1, the inside of the onion, is what I call Inner Peace. This is one of the most obvious. Intricately linked with Inner Peace is Peace with God. Originally I split those out, but the more I thought about it, those are one and the same, to me.

Here is what others have said about this:

- Buddha – "Peace comes from within. Do not seek it without."
- Ralph Waldo Emerson – "Peace cannot be achieved through violence, it can only be attained through understanding."
- Nicholas Black Elk – "The first peace, which is the most important, is that which comes the soul of people when they realize their relationship, their oneness with the universe and all its powers, and when they realize at the center of the universe dwells the Great Spirit, and that its center is really everywhere, it is within each of us."

- Marvin Gaye – “If you cannot find peace within yourself, you will never find it anywhere else.”

Level 2 is Peace between fellow humans. Peace between individuals, between groups, and ultimately between nations. In many respects, this is the projection of Inner Peace outward towards our fellow human beings. This is the view of peace that, I think, is most prevalent.

- Etty Hillesum – “Ultimately, we have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves, more and more peace, and to reflect it toward others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace there will also be in our troubled world.”
- Dalai Lama – “World peace must develop from inner peace.”

Now, I am not advocating the views of some (like the Dalai Lama), that Inner Peace must be obtained before moving on and working for peace on Level 2. I tend to be more pragmatic than that, and realize that while that approach is desirable, it must not preclude us from working for peace NOW. In any way possible. Like the good work that others in this fellowship are engaged in.

Lastly, is the most outer skin of the onion. This is Peace between humans and the rest of the natural world. Particularly in our culture, I see this as the least commonly held view of Peace. And certainly the least commonly expressed definition of Peace. I doubt if many of you would have expressed this definition when asked.

- Albert Schweitzer – “Until he extends the circle of his compassion to all living things, man will not himself find peace.”
- Pythagoras – “As long as man continues to be the ruthless destroyer of lower living beings, he will never know health or peace. For as long as men massacre animals, they will kill each other. Indeed, he who sows the seed of murder and pain cannot reap joy and love.”

When going through all the readings, two other thoughts came bubbling up:

The first is that levels are recognized, maybe not consciously, by a variety of religions and cultures. I quoted Christians, Buddhist, Native Americans... Ancient Greeks. Indeed, these are not only simple truths, but universal truths.

The second is that Peace is not just the absence of violence. It is active. And it takes work. And courage.

- Robert Fulghum – “Peace is not something you wish for, it is something you make, something you are, something you do, and something you give away.”
- Thomas Merton – “Peace demands the most heroic labor and the most difficult sacrifice. It demands greater heroism than war. It demands greater fidelity to the truth and a much more perfect purity of conscience.”
- John Paul II – “Do not be afraid to take a chance on peace, to teach peace, to live peace.”

How does all this relate back to my father?

My dad lived a bitter and angry life. And he died bitter and angry. So, I doubt he ever came to know any measure of Inner Peace. His idea of Peace was to eliminate the possibility of conflict, and the way to do that was for everyone to agree with him.

Let me leave you with one last quote. It doesn't really fit anywhere in the previous discussion, but it expresses to me one of the difficulties we have in working for Peace, on any level. Once again, the cartoonist Bill Watterson - "How come we play war and not peace? Too few role models."

Peace. (with fingers raised in the universal Peace Sign)