

Worship and Action Update, 10/10/03

Dear Friends in New York Yearly Meeting:

Plans are confirmed for a NYYM Worship and Action for Peace Retreat Gathering in New Jersey on the question, "Where is our peace testimony leading New York Yearly Meeting Friends now?" The retreat will take place from Friday evening, November 14, through Saturday afternoon, November 15, at Rahway & Plainfield Meeting House, 225 Watchung Avenue, Plainfield, NJ 07060, (908) 757-5736. Detailed information, registration forms, and directions are being sent to monthly meetings and are posted on the NYYM Web site, [www.nyyym.org](http://www.nyyym.org).

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This is a time of opportunity as our society experiences the inability of militarism to solve problems. It is also a time of risk as our society redoubles its efforts to validate its myths. How can Friends contribute to the public reevaluation of the necessity of warmaking in the world and alternative, effective methods of conflict resolution?

The news media report: failure (absence of evidence) to substantiate the stated reasons for invading Iraq; floundering efforts to reconstitute civil society in Iraq and Afghanistan; astronomical costs with no end in sight; soldiers and civilians maimed and killed; continuing lethal acts by states, as well as by stateless violent groups. We hear the distress of our neighbors, our media, our political representatives at these developments and the calls for our nation to take a different path. Surely we welcome, and can join with, a societal recognition of the failures of a militarist approach. But is mere recognition enough?

Walter Wink warns of the resiliency of the "myth of redemptive violence." In *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Fortress Press 1992), he explains (page 94) that "if you can cause people to worship the Beast, you have created a public immune to truth. As studies of cognitive dissonance show, worshipers do not surrender their beliefs in the presence of disconfirming facts. They simply adjust their beliefs to neutralize the facts."

Walter Wink also counsels that, if we are to move our society and ourselves closer to God, we must first recognize the potentiality of our nation not only for evil, but also for good. In *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence* (Fortress Press 1986), he explores the nature of a people's relationship with their country and how we can be blinded by our inability to appreciate that relationship if we deny the real power of patriotism,

whether misguided or enlightened; he goes on to explain that "We cannot minister to the soul of America unless we love its soul."

First (at pages 87, 93):

We believe in the existence of idols, true enough - things falsely worshiped as gods. But our worldview and our theologies forbid us to believe in the real existence of gods. To be sure, we know that when people idolize the nation-state, this idolatry serves to make that state a god. But surely the state is not a god, in any sense of the word. We do not understand the real dynamics of idolatry - that when a nation is made a god it becomes a god, not just as the inner conviction of individuals, but as the actual spirituality of the nation itself. We do not comprehend what is unleashed when millions of people worship the state as absolute; we do not believe, as all ancient peoples believed, that there are gods behind the states, we have nowhere to locate the center to which all this false devotion flows. We believe that idolatry is something idolaters do, but we deny that they do it toward anything real. Thus we offer up countless new bodies to be sacrificed to the gods whose existence we deny, in order to make and keep the world safe for our nations and their interest.

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The angels of the nations, who have already exacted upwards of one hundred million human sacrifices in less than a single century, are not personifications. They are real. But their reality cannot be grasped if it is projected onto the sky. They are not "out there" or "up there" but within. They are the invisible spirituality that animates, sustains, and guides a nation. And we reckon with them whether we acknowledge their reality or not.

Are we and our nation, then, condemned never to move closer to the Light because we cannot grasp the reality of our angels? Walter Wink argues in *Unmasking the Powers* (at page 94) that this need not be the case:

The angels of nations are not static, changeless entities, nor are their vocations irrevocably fixed in their foundation. . . . As the "messenger" from God, the angel holds the vision of what a nation might become.... When the angel turns its back on its vocation, it becomes demonic, and a threat to the peace of the world.

How, then, can we reach those who now question our nation's actions, but cannot recognize our condition of idolatry? Walter Wink offers this insight (at pages 103-105):

When people speak of loving their country, they mean, without having reflected on the matter, its spirit, its essence, what it stands for, its image in their minds and before the world. Naming this the angel makes it possible to distinguish the soul of the nation from the actions of any given administration, or leaders, or dominant class, race, or group.

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People do not change national attitudes and policies simply because they are told they are wrong. They change because of love for their country.... [I]n the deepest sense, we must instill again a love for our nation and its angel. Patriotism in some form or another is indispensable to the survival of any state, and if it is not informed by the divine will and judgment it will become captive to demagogues and jingoists. A chastened patriotism that views the interests of our nation within the context of the well-being of the whole family of nations is required in order to counter the shortsightedness of those who equate love for America with short-term economic gain or being "number one."

We cannot minister to the soul of America unless we love its soul. We cannot love its soul faithfully and truly, without sinking into idolatry, unless we have correctly discerned its true vocation under the God who holds the destiny of all the nations. And we cannot discern that calling unless we know the angel who hears the message of what the nation might become.

What is the good news of the angel and soul of the United States that we can broadcast to our neighbors and communities? A piercing vision of the right vocation of the state was offered in 1999 when the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) for its unflinching service to the healthcare needs of peoples in crisis, in the acceptance lecture by James Orbinski. Excerpts from that lecture appear at the foot of this Update; the entire lecture can be found on the Norwegian Nobel Institute's Web site at [www.nobel.no/eng\\_lect\\_99m.html](http://www.nobel.no/eng_lect_99m.html).

Peaceable greetings,

Linda Chidsey, Vicki Cooley, and Fred Dettmer  
NYYM Worship and Action working group

Our action is to help people in situations of crisis. And ours is not a contented action. Bringing medical aid to people in distress is an attempt to defend them against what is aggressive to them as human beings. Humanitarian action is more than simple generosity, simple charity. It

aims to build spaces of normalcy in the midst of what is abnormal. More than offering material assistance, we aim to enable individuals to regain their rights and dignity as human beings.... But we act not in a vacuum, and we speak not into the wind, but with a clear intent to assist, to provoke change, or to reveal injustice. Our action and our voice is an act of indignation, a refusal to accept an active or passive assault on the other....

This meant sometimes a rejection of the practices of states that directly assault the dignity of people. Silence has long been confused with neutrality, and has been presented as a necessary condition for humanitarian action. From its beginning, MSF was created in opposition to this assumption. We are not sure that words can always save lives, but we know that silence can certainly kill. Over our 28 years we have been - and are today - firmly and irrevocably committed to this ethic of refusal....

Humanitarianism occurs where the political has failed or is in crisis. We act not to assume political responsibility, but firstly to relieve the inhuman suffering of failure. The act must be free of political influence, and the political must recognize its responsibility to ensure that the humanitarian can exist. Humanitarian action requires a framework in which to act.

In conflict, this framework is international humanitarian law.... Today this framework is clearly dysfunctional. Access to victims of conflict is often refused. Humanitarian assistance is even used as a tool of war by belligerents. And more seriously, we are seeing the militarisation of humanitarian action by the international community.

In this dysfunction, we will speak out to push the political to assume its inescapable responsibility. Humanitarianism is not a tool to end war or to create peace. It is a citizens' response to political failure. It is an immediate, short term act that cannot erase the long term necessity of political responsibility.... For MSF, this is the humanitarian act: to seek to relieve suffering, to seek to restore autonomy, to witness to the truth of injustice, and to insist on political responsibility.

[T]oday civil society has a new global role, a new informal legitimacy that is rooted in its action and in its support from public opinion.... As civil society we exist relative to the state, to its institutions and its power.... Ours is not to displace the responsibility of the state. Ours is not to allow a humanitarian alibi to mask the state responsibility to ensure justice and security. And ours is not to be co-managers of misery with the state. If civil society identifies a problem, it is not [ours] to provide a solution, but it is [ours] to expect that states will translate this into concrete and just

solutions. Only the state has the legitimacy and power to do this.... What we as a civil society movement demand is change, not charity.

We affirm the independence of the humanitarian from the political, but this is not to polarize the "good" NGO against "bad" governments, or the "virtue" of civil society against the "vice" of political power. Such a polemic is false and dangerous. As with slavery and welfare rights, history has shown that humanitarian preoccupations born in civil society have gained influence until they reach the political agenda....

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There are limits to humanitarianism. No doctor can stop a genocide. No humanitarian can stop ethnic cleansing, just as no humanitarian can make war. And no humanitarian can make peace. These are political responsibilities, not humanitarian imperatives. Let me say this very clearly: the humanitarian act is the most apolitical of all acts, but if actions and its morality are taken seriously, it has the most profound of political implications. And the fight against impunity is one of these implications.

This is exactly what has been affirmed with the creation of the international criminal courts for both the Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. It is also what has been affirmed with the adoption of statutes for an International Criminal Court.... Only states can impose respect for humanitarian law and that effort cannot be purely symbolic.

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Our volunteers and staff live and work among people whose dignity is violated every day. These volunteers choose freely to use their liberty to make the world a more bearable place. Despite grand debates on world order, the act of humanitarianism comes down to one thing: individual human beings reaching out to their counterparts who find themselves in the most difficult circumstances. One bandage at a time, one suture at a time, one vaccination at a time. And, uniquely for Médecins Sans Frontières, working in around 80 countries, over 20 of which are in conflict, telling the world what they have seen. All this in the hope that the cycles of violence and destruction will not continue endlessly.

*From Nobel Laureate Lecture of James Orbinski  
on behalf of Médecins Sans Frontières  
(Oslo, December 10, 1999)  
[www.nobel.no/eng\\_lect\\_99m.html](http://www.nobel.no/eng_lect_99m.html)*