

## Worship and Action Update, 11/12/03

Dear Friends in New York Yearly Meeting:

In the opening paragraphs of *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Fortress Press 1992), Walter Wink notes how deeply rooted and insidious is the culture of violence in which we live. Whenever a fear arises, it inexorably becomes defined as an “enemy” of such evil or danger that resort to violence appears justified to wipe it out. We regularly see this response in children’s television cartoons, popular films and fiction, in the justifications for the death penalty, in the “war on terrorism”. Violence is **the** “redemptive” response; and no other response is imagined as possible or available. In Wink’s words (at page 13):

“Violence is the ethos of our times. It is the spirituality of the modern world. It has been accorded the status of a religion, demanding from its devotees an absolute obedience to death. Its followers are not aware, however, that the devotion they pay to violence is a form of religious piety. Violence is so successful as a myth precisely because it does not seem to be mythic in the least. Violence simply appears to be the nature of things. It is what works. It is inevitable, the last and, often, the first resort in conflicts. It is embraced with equal alacrity by people on the left and on the right, by religious liberals as well as religious conservatives. The threat of violence, it is believed, is alone able to deter aggressors. It secured us forty-five years of a balance of terror. We learned to trust the Bomb to grant us peace.

“The roots of this devotion to violence are deep, and we will be well rewarded if we trace them to their source.... [T]his myth of redemptive violence undergirds American popular culture, civil religion, nationalism, and foreign policy, and ... it lies coiled like an ancient serpent at the root of the system of domination that has characterized human existence since well before Babylon ruled supreme.”

Walter Wink goes on in *Engaging the Powers* to explain why this bleak picture is not inevitable nor immutable. He offers the alternative of “Jesus’ third way: nonviolent engagement”. The “powers” of the book’s title are the “powers that be” which “are ordained of God” (Romans 13:1); the principalities and powers “we wrestle against” (Ephesians 6:12). The theme of the book is that the powers are good; the powers are fallen; they can and shall be redeemed.

At last weekend’s Worship and Action for Peace retreat gathering at the Rotary Sunshine Camp in western New York, Friends shared how the Peace Testimony was moving among us in these times. Bowen Alpern of Scarsdale Meeting, evoking the lessons of Walter Wink, spoke to transforming our society’s addiction to violence by facing conflict in our meetings and communities openly and in love. Here is a summary of his message:

## Ending War Soon

“The whole world could, might, truly give up war. Give war up as an institutionally sanctioned undertaking, within the next 20 years.

“Among the powerful forces we must understand and confront is the ‘addiction’ of the American people to the ‘myth of redemptive violence.’

“The current administration has cynically attempted to manipulate this addiction to maintain power. This is obscene, but if we focus on the obscenity, we are lost. We must find a way to confront the underlying addiction.

“The lore of recovery has it that addicts cannot choose to give up addiction until they hit bottom. If things continue in the direction they are headed - a series of politically motivated little wars, popular at home but uniting the world against the United States - then, eventually, America will hit bottom.

“What then? Will there be a peace movement capable of nursing and supporting our country in an endeavor to renounce violence as a tool of foreign policy? Or will America, as in the early Seventies, face an antiwar movement compromised by its unconscious absorption of the values of the system it had opposed?

“These are questions that the Religious Society of Friends may have an important role in deciding. Friends need to let go of an orientation to past glory. We need to say that our best days are ahead of us - everything we've done up to now is practice for what faces us now - and take up the challenge of the future: how to manage conflict in truth and love (without resort to violence).

“To do this we need to begin at home. We need to face and engage in truth and love the conflicts within our meetings. Our meetings are ‘schools of the spirit’; we need to learn to see our conflicts as ‘gifts of the spirit.’

**We need to get in the habit of producing miracles, miracles of reconciliation.”**

Friends are invited to share ways they “manage conflict in truth and love”. Messages forwarded to the Worship and Action working group (via email at [fdettmer@aol.com](mailto:fdettmer@aol.com), or by regular mail to the New York Meeting office at 15 Rutherford Place, New York, New York 10003) may be included in future Worship and Action Updates.

Friends can also communicate directly with other Friends through the NYYM Worship and Action Listserv, known as “Quaker Wanda”. This service is a functioning email discussion group of Friends in New York Yearly Meeting for exchange as we seek grounding in shared worship, action for peace, and company along the way.

You can subscribe by sending a blank message from your email address (or another email address at which you want to receive Quakerwanda messages) to: [quakerwanda-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:quakerwanda-subscribe@yahoogroups.com). You don't have to do anything else.

If you subscribe, you will receive the messages posted by all other participants, but your privacy will be protected and your email address will not be disclosed to other participants (except when you post a message to the group).

Peaceable greetings,

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

*For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Romans 8:38 - 39 (NIV)

*I go among trees and sit still.  
All my stirring becomes quiet  
around me like circles on water.  
My tasks lie in their places  
where I left them, asleep like cattle.*

*Then what is afraid of me comes  
and lives a while in my sight.  
What it fears in me leaves me,  
and the fear of me leaves it.  
It sings, and I hear its song.*

*Then what I am afraid of comes.  
I live for a while in its sight.  
What I fear in it leaves it,  
and the fear of it leaves me.  
It sings, and I hear its song.*

*After days of labor,  
mute in my consternations,  
I hear my song at last,  
and I sing it. As we sing  
the day turns, the trees move.*

Wendell Berry  
**Sabbaths**, 1979, I

*Always be wanting peace with all people, and the holiness without which no one can ever see the Lord. Be careful that no one is deprived of the grace of God and that no root of bitterness should begin to grow and make trouble; this can poison a whole community.*

Hebrews 12: 14 - 15 (The Jerusalem Bible)