

Worship and Action Update, 5/23/03

Dear Friends in New York Yearly Meeting:

This week we offer insights on the peace testimony - on the interconnectedness of speaking truth, love, and activism - from the perspectives of three very different, sparkling voices.

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Paddy Lane of Butternuts Meeting asks that we test these thoughts on how to live and work and act in these times:

Finding an anchor which will connect us to a firm basis for how to act and how to stay centered and calm when all around us feels dizzyingly sinister is a necessity for psychic survival in these times. As an integral and necessary part of this, we must constantly ask for God's guidance. What are our guiding principles? Here are some thoughts:

People are basically good at heart, and we can speak to that in them which is good at heart. This is the basis of John Woolman's efforts: He did not rant and rave at slave owners. He went to them one by one in private and spoke to them with love in his heart. His work was slow and deliberate and matured over years. Out of his work came a resolution from the whole Society of Friends to condemn slavery outright.

In the end truth will triumph, although it may not seem so at present. Grounding ourselves in truth can lend to our actions the power that comes with truth. Acting in love rather than anger or guilt will draw out the best in others.

Actions which grow out of this love and the power of truth are free of anxiety or stress. We will be given the power to act, the words to speak. It is important that our messages be offerings that do not polarize, but invite.

And it is important to celebrate the joy of this discovery. To be able to love and to laugh and to celebrate is a sign that we are grounded in God's work.

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Message to Peace Activists by Thomas Merton

Those who are not in tutelage to established political systems or cultural structures - those who dare to hope in their vision of reality and the future - there is a new fire among us, a flame of hope. . . .

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We believe that our future will be made by Love and Hope, not by Violence and Calculation.

Our solidarity is not planned and welded together with tactical convictions or matters of policy since these are affairs of prejudice, cunning, and design.

Rather . . . our task rests on Innocence, an Innocence that would be lost in business or politics or an overly organized academic life.

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We, the Peace Activists, stand together to denounce the shame and imposture of all such calculations!

We must not merely be FOR something and AGAINST something else, even if we are for "ourselves" and against "them." (Who are "they"?) Let us not give them support by becoming an "opposition" which assumes they are definitively real.

Let us remain outside "their" categories. In this sense, we are all monks: we remain invisible and they cannot imagine what we are doing. . . . They weave words about life and then make life conform to what they themselves have declared. They devoutly believe the magic of the Lies that they tell.

For the Peace Activists, there is no magic. There is only life in all of its unpredictability and freedom.

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We will not be like those who wish to make the tree bear its fruit first and the flower afterwards. We are content if the flower comes first and the fruit afterwards, in due time.

Let us obey Life, and the Spirit of Life that calls us to be Peace Activists. We shall harvest many new fruits for which the world hungers - fruits of hope that have never been seen before. With these fruits we shall calm the resentments and the rage of man.

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We are not persuaders. We are the children of the Unknown. We are the ministers of silence that is needed to cure the victims of absurdity who lie dying of a contrived joy.

Let us recognize ourselves for who we are: dervishes mad with secret therapeutic love which cannot be bought or sold and which the politician fears more than violent revolution.

For violence changes nothing. But love changes everything.

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When the Peace activist puts his foot into that ever-moving [Heraklitean] river, peace itself is born out of the flashing water, and in that unique instant, the truth is manifest to all who are able to receive it.

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No one can enter the river wearing the garments of public and collective ideas. He must feel the water on his skin. He must know that immediacy is for naked minds only, and for the innocent.

Come, Peace Activists: here is the water of life. Dance in it.

(Adapted from a message read by Thomas Merton at a meeting of Latin American poets in February 1964; adaptation by Beth Hagan Cioffoletti, Pax Christi Palm Beach local coordinator, 2002)

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From A Graduation Speech at Rockford College on May 17, 2003, by Chris Hedges (a reporter with *The New York Times* and author of the book *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*):

The seduction of war is insidious because so much of what we are told about it is true - it does create a feeling of comradeship which obliterates our alienation and makes us, for perhaps the only time of our life, feel we belong.

War allows us to rise above our small stations in life; we find nobility in a cause and feelings of selflessness and even bliss. . . . War for those who enter into combat has a dark beauty, filled with the monstrous and the grotesque. The Bible calls it the lust of the eye and warns believers against it. War gives us a distorted sense of self; it gives us meaning.

We feel in wartime comradeship. We confuse this with friendship, with love. There are those who will insist that the comradeship of war is love - the exotic glow that makes us in war feel as one people, one entity, is real, but this is part of war's intoxication.

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The danger of the external threat that comes when we have an enemy does not create friendship; it creates comradeship. And those in wartime are deceived about what they are undergoing. And this is why once the threat is over, once war ends, comrades again become strangers to us. This is why after war we fall into despair.

In friendship there is a deepening of our sense of self. We become, through the friend, more aware of who we are and what we are about; we find ourselves in the eyes of the friend. Friends probe and question and challenge each other to make each of us more complete; with comradeship, the kind that comes to us in patriotic fervor, there is a suppression of self-awareness, self-knowledge, and self-possession. Comrades lose their identities in wartime for the collective rush of a common cause - a common purpose. In comradeship there are no demands on the self. This is part of its appeal and one of the reasons we miss it and seek to recreate it. Comradeship allows us to escape the demands on the self that is part of friendship.

In wartime when we feel threatened, we no longer face death alone but as a group, and this makes death easier to bear. We ennoble self-sacrifice for the other, for the comrade; in short we begin to worship death. And this is what the god of war demands of us.

Think finally of what it means to die for a friend. It is deliberate and painful; there is no ecstasy. For friends, dying is hard and bitter. The dialogue they have and cherish will perhaps never be recreated. Friends do not, the way comrades do, love death and sacrifice. To friends, the prospect of death is frightening. And this is why friendship or, let me say love, is the most potent enemy of war.

(Chris Hedges's complete speech is published in the May 20, 2003 issue of The Rockford Register Star, and can be found at:
http://www.rrstar.com/localnews/your_community/rockford/0521hedgesspeech.shtml)

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A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. (John 13:34)

Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breast-plate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. (Ephesians 6:14-15)

Peaceable greetings,

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