

Worship and Action Update, 1/31/03

Dear Friends in New York Yearly Meeting:

Where do we find the roots of our peace testimony? How do we articulate the faith basis of our belief in nonviolence? In what way is our peace testimony connected with the full panoply of Friends' testimonies? And how can we help sustain the Light of peace in a culture and world seemingly enamored of the brutish and accepting of the duplicitous?

We look to Scripture, and the Gospels appear to offer a militant voice of Jesus alongside his many advices to love, cherish, forgive and care for friends and persecutors alike. We may prefer to focus on the scriptural reports of Jesus' preaching of love and nonviolence, such as his declaration to his disciples that "I am sending you like sheep among wolves." (Matthew 10:16) But he also is said to have admonished them: "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword." (Matthew 10:34) Is it true, as an op/ed piece in the *New York Times* this week blared, that "The Prince of Peace Was a Warrior, Too"? Ephesians 6:11-18 offers a deeper understanding of warfare -- warfare that is spiritual rather than outward in nature -- and point us to those things which constitute the whole armor of god: "Put on all the armour which God provides, so that you may be able to stand firm against the devices of the devil. For our fight is not against human foes but against cosmic powers, against the authorities and potentates of this dark world, against the superhuman forces of evil in the heavens. Therefore, take up God's armour; then you will be able to stand your ground when things are at their worst, to complete every task, and still to stand. Stand firm I say. Fasten on the belt of truth; for coat of mail put on integrity; let the shoes on your feet be the gospel of peace, to give you firm footing; and, with all these, take up the great shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take salvation for helmet; for sword, take that which the Spirit gives you-- the words that come from God. Give yourselves wholly to prayer and entreaty; pray on every occasion in the power of the Spirit." (New English Bible)

We look also to the words and acts of Friends and persons of wisdom and faith who have preceded us. Here too we find ambiguity and seeming contradiction. How are we to reconcile the advice to "Wear Your sword as long as you can" with "we utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end or under any pretence whatsoever. And this is our testimony to the whole world"? How do we reconcile a choice for nonviolence with the choices of those friends over the years who served in military campaigns against groups and forces deemed evil or reprehensible? Throughout the ages, theologians, philosophers and ethicists who otherwise garner our respect have concluded that there may be "just wars," and churches with whom we share scriptures and values often have found the use of lethal force to be warranted. And what have we experienced inwardly from God? Have we been convicted by the light such that we can say "this I know experimentally?"

During the era of the military draft, the Selective Service System asked conscientious objectors whether they renounced all wars. Was that asking too much of them, and does

that ask too much of us? As one speaker at the FWCC Peace Conference noted, how can we know the mind of God well enough to know He will never tell us to kill? We dare not assume such arrogance.

Friends in New York Yearly Meeting have sought together in worship and action to understand how God calls us into relationship and how we are to conduct ourselves with each other, with neighbors, community and strangers, with oppressors and persecutors. In that experience, in our corporate deliberations and acts, in our celebration and support of individual vision and leading, action and servant leadership, we have accumulated knowledge, understanding, affirmation and reaffirmation that help guide our faith and discernment of new challenges.

For the past six months and more, NYYM Friends have built upon our history of jointly seeking God's path to nourish, guide and sustain our present journey. In the quiet and sharing of gathered worship, we have sought appreciation, inspiration and revelation of how we are called to respond to the belligerence and bullying rampant in our culture and nation. We have searched, and continue to search, for the words and strength to address a people plunging into actions prompted by fear, anger and even hatred without ourselves becoming fearful, angry and hate filled. And we have been torn, and will continue to be torn, by the dilemma of stepping into this world without becoming of this world.

At the FWCC Peace Conference, many plenary speakers offered partial prescriptions for remaining faithful to our peace testimony, retaining our sanity in this mad time, and yet vigorously stepping into this world in the cause of nonviolence and love. Some saw guidance in scripture. Some recalled the lessons of earlier Friends. Some reflected the inspiring example of risking their own lives and spirits to confront and combat violence with fierce nonviolence. But it seemed that all - both presenters and seekers - returned to one essence of what makes us a Society of Friends: Get still enough to hear the whisper of the Spirit; test with yourself and your religious Society the Spirit you have heard; and having tested it and found it to be truthful, act, act, act to further and fulfill the voice of God bravely, decisively and with trembling.

Every day, Friends in NYYM offer new examples of acting in the Spirit for peace, and of holding up those called to action.

- Friends gathered with others this past Monday morning, January 27th, at the United Nations to urge that the weapons inspections process be allowed to continue. Vitalah Simon shares these reflections:

"People were slow to gather and I wondered what I was doing there. It seemed like a scruffy bunch and that the demonstration wouldn't have much impact. But standing next to me was a monk chanting a prayer in a strong, deep voice, continuously and slowly, as he rhythmically beat his small flat round drum with a stick. He stood so centered and present, and his presence inspired me to remain . . . to be a witness to this day in history, the day Hans Blix reports to the U.N.

"I stayed and I stayed, the size and volume of the crowd grew. People started group word chants like "No Blood for Oil" and "The people, united, will stop this war." . . . More people came than could fit into the allotted space for us. . . . For a long while the overflow people were allowed to be a group close by, but then were asked to move on.

"But before they were asked to move on something very exciting happened. Suddenly there were about twenty people linking hands across 1st Avenue in front of the UN, and they stopped the traffic! They were committing civil disobedience. The first person to be arrested allowed his body to go limp/lame, and the police were a bit rough with him, but the others walked cheerfully and peacefully into the two police wagons. . . . The whole civil disobedience event lasted about half an hour - maybe it was less, but it made such an impression on me, that it feels like a big amount of time.

"I felt proud of the people who were willing to stop traffic and be arrested. I didn't run out in the street to join them, because I was not prepared to do so. But it has fueled my heart's desire to create and participate in some form of civil disobedience as careful spiritual discernment leads me.

"After the demonstration, there was a one-hour press conference in the UN Church Center. . . . Then a priest led a wonderful ecumenical brief prayer service. . . . He invited us into the quiet place in ourselves and spoke words of healing and inspiration, for peace and justice and changing our lives through simplifying them. I felt invigorated and lifted up by the experience."

- People were urged to gather in towns and campuses throughout the country on Wednesday, January 29, the day after the state of the union address, to express opposition to war against Iraq. Greg Robie reports on his experience:

"Last week the only other person in my community who has written a letter to the editor relative to our march to war contacted me about her decision to have a vigil today [Wednesday, January 29] in response to United for Peace and Justice's call for local demonstrations after Bush's State of the Union speech. This was a big step for her as she works for West Point and hasn't been public about these things except for her previous letter.

"Over the weekend our attempt to submit a single letter concerning the vigil for the local newspaper resulted in two being written. . . . The second letter, which I helped craft, utilized the Internet to share that letter and have those who wanted to sign it email a copy to the editor of the paper. A hard copy of the letter was brought to the Meeting, which most signed, and it was sent in. With many signing that letter I was then free to submit a third letter . . . about [Scott] Ritter.

"The end result was that the local paper carried the three letters this week, which came out today. The vigil was the largest ever in Cornwall. All of us in attendance had expected, at best, a small handful of participants. About 75 showed up. A lot of new faces."

- Brooklyn Monthly Meeting's Ministry & Counsel Committee is considering the need to establish clearness committees for conscientious objectors and military non-registrants. They ask that other Meetings getting under the weight of this concern share their discernment.

We are also reminded of the action of Rochester Friends Meeting to organize a Discernment Committee, consisting of three Friends experienced in both draft counseling and civil disobedience, to offer to the public a Quaker clearness committee process to help individuals work through and understand the consequences of decisions involving nonviolent civil disobedience. As well, we note the ad hoc committee established by Hartford Monthly Meeting (New England Yearly Meeting) to discern how the meeting can support members and attenders who are led to engage in acts of civil disobedience.

School of the Americas Watch reports that last week 42 human rights activists, part of a group of 86 peacemakers who engaged in acts of civil disobedience at the SOA/WHISC on November 17, 2002, were on trial. 17 defendants pleaded guilty, an additional 23 pleaded not-guilty while stipulating to the facts put forward by the prosecutor, and the last 2 pleaded not guilty and did not stipulate to the facts, forcing the prosecution to call witnesses and show evidence. All 42 defendants were found guilty of trespassing and will now serve sentences ranging from 12 months' probation, 250 hours' community service and a \$500 fine to 6 months in prison and a \$1,500 fine. More information can be found at <http://www.soaw.org/new/>.

John Humphries of Hartford Friends Meeting and the Connecticut AFSC Program Committee, who facilitated part of the program at the worship & action gathering this past August at Oakwood Friends School, offers the inspiration of a call to those in the military to resist war on Iraq Coupled with an offer of support and aid to those who answer the call. The plea to "Refuse to Fight! Refuse to Kill!" has been issued by members of Jonah House (410-233-6238) and Dorothy Day Catholic Worker (202-882-9649), knowing that even making this statement puts them in legal jeopardy.

As we continue to pray and act for Peace, we again note that Friends may wish to begin preparing to gather for called worship should our nation launch war, and to act to support and assist those oppressed or called to acts of civil disobedience. Has the time come to provide sanctuary and passage to persons fleeing our government's oppression of their civil liberties, conscience and faith?

Last, we continue these reminders of coming activities:

- New Brunswick Friends Meeting will hold a joint presentation with the Unitarian Society of New Brunswick on Saturday, February 1st, from 10:00 A.M. until noon on War Issues, Registration & Conscription. The discussion will center on the current war climate, its implications for mandatory registration with the Selective Service System and a possible military draft and resources for additional counseling. Information or registration (free) is available at 732-246-3113 or usnb@eclipse.net.

- A New York Yearly Meeting worship and action gathering will be held on Friday evening and Saturday, February 7 and 8, at Perry City Meetinghouse, near Ithaca. (Information and registration form for this event are available on the Events page of the NYYM Web site at <http://www.nyym.org/events/perry7feb03.html>.)

- United for Peace is organizing a Stop the War March on Saturday, February 15th in New York City to coincide with antiwar demonstrations that are planned in cities all over the world on the same day. Additional information is being posted as the plans are being developed at: <http://www.unitedforpeace.org/calendar.php?calid=1072> And the evening before, September 11 Families for Peaceful Tomorrows will celebrate their first anniversary with a free program (Peaceful Tomorrows and Friends) of music, spoken word and surprises from 8:00-10:00 PM, at Judson Memorial Church, 55 Washington Square South, New York City.

-Pennsylvania Friends will lead a day of education about, and protest against, the war on Iraq, ("Friends School Day of Peace") on Sunday, February 23rd, at Friends Select School and Friends Center, both in Philadelphia.

- Friends from Farmington-Scipio Region will hold their Spring Gathering on May 16 - 18, on the theme Quaker Roots of Peace. Attending Friends plan to explore personal leadings, participation in the religious community and corporate actions that come out of those leadings.

Peaceable Greetings,

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

"Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, and the hope of its children."

President Dwight D. Eisenhower, April 14, 1953

"The science of war leads one to dictatorship, pure and simple. The science of non-violence alone can lead one to pure democracy...The states that are today nominally democratic have either to become frankly totalitarian or, if they are to become truly democratic, they must become courageously non-violent. Power is of two kinds. One is obtained by fear of punishment and the other by arts of love. Power based on love is thousand times more effective and permanent than power derived from fear of punishment...."

Mahatma Gandhi

"The only thing that's been a worse flop than the organization of nonviolence has been the

organization of violence."

"The point of nonviolence is to build a floor, a strong new floor, beneath which we can no longer sink. A platform which stands a few feet above napalm, torture, exploitation, poison gas, A and H bombs, the works. Give man a decent place to stand."

Joan Baez

"The real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to on earth."

Thich Nhat Hanh