

An Interview with Catherine Whitmire

Author of
Practicing Peace
A Devotional Walk through the Quaker Tradition

Why is practicing peace a spiritual discipline?

For Quakers practicing peace is a spiritual discipline because it begins in prayer and worship, leads to recognizing God in all people, includes practicing nonviolence, and endeavors to make love the guiding force in all they do. This path, which is available to everyone, celebrates life's highest joys and witnesses life's deepest tragedies amidst the beauty, uncertainty, and violence surrounding us. While practicing peace is not always easy, it is a spiritual discipline that expands love, generates hope, and satisfies our soul's deep longing for peace.

Why is it important to envision peace?

Visions of peace are God's invitations to look beyond the materialism, individualism, and violence of contemporary life as it is and see how life could be in God's peaceable commonwealth. It is through our visions that God invites us to enlarge our imaginations, see what is yet possible, and live into our dreams of a just and peaceful world. We can't work for something we can't envision.

How does prayer help bring about peace?

Historically for Quakers the path to peace begins with the practice of meditation and prayer. Listening within changes our perspective on the world, because when we open ourselves to a prayerful relationship with God, we are invited to view the world from God's perspective. And through God's eyes we see that poverty, violence, and war are not God's choices for the world, but are willful, human decisions. Over the centuries many people have experienced what educator John Yungblut describes as "an inescapable connection between contemplative prayer and motivation to engage in social reform. It is contemplative prayer that confirms the inseparable unity of all things. It is here that we discover we are not only our brother's and our sister's keeper, but that in some profound sense we are our brother and sister."

Why is listening within and discerning what we hear important in the practice of peace?

The world's problems loom so large and are so multitudinous that it is easy to feel immobilized and unable to address any of them. Discernment, however, helps us see that we are not expected to take on healing the whole world, but only those actions God nudges us towards and calls us in prayer to undertake. In prayerful meditation we listen for messages from God, and in discernment we try to figure out what those messages mean. If prayer provides us with a nudge to practice peace, discernment helps us know more specifically what God would have us do.

Why is spiritual renewal part of practicing peace?

Author E.B. White mused, "I arise in the morning torn between a desire to save the world and a desire to savor the world. This makes it hard to plan the day." God encourages us to find a balance in our daily lives between saving and savoring the world. These are not opposite choices, but are part of God's plan whereby spiritual renewal inspires us to both enjoy God's creation and work to restore it to peace and wholeness.

How do we know that what we do will make a difference?

God does not call us to be successful; God calls us to be faithful. And over the centuries Quakers and others have responded as best they could to God's call to stand in the gaps between how life is and how life could be. Through their faithful, but imperfect, obedience to God's summons, 350 years ago they were among the leaders in challenging religious intolerance; 200 years ago they helped lead the struggle against the injustices of slavery, 150 years ago they were on the forefront of working for women's rights. They did not set out to change the world, but the world, in fact, did change as a result of their willingness to stand in the gaps.

Does a "just" war bring peace?

When a cruel despot is toppled by warfare, many of us are inclined to say that the war was justified. The problem with this perspective is that it lacks imagination, ignores the growing number of successes of nonviolent revolutions against formidable tyrants, ignites vengeance, defies God's commandment that we shall not kill, and ignores a crucial, haunting question that echoes down the corridors of time in the aftermath of each war: "Could there have been another way?" Today, as genocide, terrorism, nuclear and biological weapons of mass destruction grow ever more deadly, this has become a question we can no longer afford to ignore

Does nonviolence work?

During the 20th Century 64% of humanity was touched by major nonviolent struggles. We saw nonviolence bring new governments to India, Czechoslovakia, Philippines, Russia, South Africa, and effect social changes in the United States through the labor, women's and civil rights movements. The practice of nonviolence, of course, is not always successful in addressing violent behaviors or oppressions. But I believe that acts of violence are never successful in bringing about true justice or peace. History reveals that violence sows seeds of vengeance that in turn take root and initiate new cycles of violence. Nonviolent actions, however, leave no need for vengeful reprisals and have the power to mediate love, transform hearts, and restore relationships.

Is peace possible?

A central vision of peace in the gospel is that of the Commonwealth (traditionally called Kingdom) of God. Jesus refers repeatedly to this peaceable Commonwealth as being near and even says that it lies within us. Most of us have already experienced the immediate presence and peace of God's Commonwealth at the most human and personal level when holding a newborn child, watching a seed

sprout from the earth, or looking into the calm immensity of a starry sky. In addition to our personal experiences, we may also have communally experienced living in that peaceable Commonwealth when responding to a neighbor's call for help, receiving consolation from a friend, supporting a colleague, or settling a serious disagreement through open and loving dialogue. Economist and peace educator, Kenneth E. Boulding, says that he knows the peaceable Commonwealth of God on earth is possible, because he has experienced it. And he reminds us that: "What exists is possible!"

Can we learn to live peaceably?

The most recent research concludes that we are not predetermined to be violent. This gives rise to the expectation that we can, in fact, successfully learn to practice nonviolence and resolve our conflicts without spiritual, emotional or physical violence. However, we do not come into the world knowing how to live nonviolently. The seeds of nonviolence may lie within our hearts, but we have to be awakened to their presence and taught how to cultivate and nurture them. And most of us were never taught how to respond peaceably to the challenges of cultural and racial diversity, to resolve conflicts creatively, or to settle personal and international conflicts without resorting to some form of emotional or physical violence. Peaceable living like any other skill--playing the piano or speaking Spanish--can be taught, but it requires learning and practice.

Why is it important that we learn to practice peace?

There are now approximately six billion members of the human family, who live in one billion different households, in 189 nation states, and who are represented in over 10,000 different ethnic groups and communities of various sorts. As our nuclear and biological weapons of mass destruction grow ever more lethal, our swelling populations exponentially increase the possibilities for violent conflicts. We have arrived at a critical moment in history, where our technologies and our numbers make it increasingly risky to rely on the old strategy of trusting bombs and the threat or use of violence to grant us peace. It is now crucial that all of us practice peace by seeking new, nonviolent means for resolving our conflicts.

How do we love our enemies?

Since only God can know the contents of a human heart, we can never fully comprehend what impels others to acts of desperation and cruelty. However, we can know from looking within ourselves, that the capacity for evil is in us all. So instead of passing judgment, we can express loving kindness to those who find swords within their hearts and choose to use them. The challenge of loving those traditionally considered enemies lies at the heart of the Quaker peace testimony because when we are able to extend our love—even to those who would frustrate, terrorize or harm us—we bring God's grace of transformative love into our homes, communities, and a world weary of violence. The future of our planet may ultimately depend on our ability to enlarge our capacity for redemptive love and our willingness to extend that love even to those who threaten us.