

Ellen Ott Marshall

Peacebuilding in Violent Times

What does it mean to be a peacemaker in this interesting era? How can we be responsible to a faith tradition that calls us to this vocation and be responsible to a world that is so fraught with violence that violence seems necessary?

In the throes of war, horrified by the threat and reality of terrorism, our nation is grappling with vulnerability in a classic though unfortunate way. We deny the real depth of our vulnerability and the ways in which our behaviors worsen it. We focus on the threats that are visible and localized instead of those that are invisible and diffuse. We simplify complexity, draw a distant line between good and evil, and dehumanize the enemy, much as our predecessors did with the Germans, the Japanese, and citizens of the former Soviet Union. We illustrate Reinhold Niebuhr's assessment of the human condition as framed by anxiety and the vain attempts to overcome it. We have become Niebuhr's man who climbs the mast of a ship during a storm at sea, unable to do otherwise yet terrified of the growing chasm beneath him.¹

And, in the midst of this, many people of faith feel called to be peacemakers. But what does peacemaking look like in this context? Should we carry Reinhold Niebuhr into this paragraph as well and say that peace requires a certain amount of coercion, given political reality? Or do we hold firm to the conviction that means and ends are organically related, such that one cannot achieve peace through violence? If we believe God to be the cre-

ator and sustainer of life, then we know that the destruction of any life alienates us from God. If we believe God to be the one creator of all life, then we cannot assume that some lives have more value than others. And, if we believe that Jesus Christ reveals God's will to us, then we must take his words with utmost seriousness. "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil" (Matt. 5:38). And so my own United Methodist denomination joins others that declare war to be "incompatible with the teachings and example of Christ" and "reject war as a usual instrument of national foreign policy."²

These teachings seem so clear. For a minute I feel as certain as Leo Tolstoy, who insisted without wavering that one cannot be a Christian and support the use of violence. We may envision all kinds of scenarios in which this teaching is impractical, Tolstoy said. And we may devise more agreeable interpretations of Jesus' hard sayings. But we cannot deny that the law of nonresistance stands. In Tolstoy's words, "As a [person] cannot lift a mountain, and as a kindly [person] cannot kill an infant, so a [person] living the Christian life cannot take part in deeds of violence."³

Tolstoy felt the conflict between the law of God and the law

The task never ends, nor can it be pursued in isolation. Peacebuilding requires the ethic of the cathedral builders that Bill Shore described in his book *The Cathedral Within*. Here, we see people who are committed to labor for something that they know they will not realize. Building peace is like that. We build with and on the labor of others, contributing to a vision without assuming that we will be present for its completion.

of human beings so keenly that he believed that the Christian must withdraw from participation in society in order to live according to the teachings of Christ. He was not unique in his assessment and conclusion. Past and present are filled with people who live separately from the world in order to live faithfully to God. And even those of us who remain engaged in the world know the conflict that Tolstoy described. We are just more apt to refer to it as a tension, the tension between what God asks and what society requires.

Nearly one hundred years ago, Ernst Troeltsch described the ethos of the Christian faith as ongoing negotiation between ideals and history.⁴ The interaction of the two pieces, faith and history, makes ethics possible. Indeed, the Christian moral life is precisely this: an ongoing negotiation between faith claims and lived experience. And this life is filled with moments in which a satisfying outcome to such negotiation seems out of reach. We find ourselves torn between conviction and circumstance. Let me be clear: I do not support the global war on terror currently waged by President Bush and his administration. I am not that torn. But I do see a world that is so broken that innocent people are in constant jeopardy. And I wonder if we can responsibly participate in this world without turning again to Niebuhr, who urged us to acknowledge the need for some violence in order to prevent our entire project from “issuing in complete disaster.”⁵

What does it mean to be a peacemaker in this interesting era? How can we be responsible to a faith tradition that calls us to this vocation and be responsible to a world that is so fraught with violence that violence seems necessary?

Many of us who feel called to be peace-

makers enter conversations on war by describing the rules, principles, and laws that bind us to an authority beyond the state. We cite Jesus’ text on nonresistance or we cite the just-war tradition. Either way, our focus is on rules derived from a faith tradition and applied to this particular moment in history. While I do not mean to jettison these guiding principles of the faith, I do want to advocate for a different path. Instead of applying faith-based rules to this historical situation, can we think about infusing our personal activities with a religious sensibility? Can we begin to see our every action as a habit that cultivates a certain disposition? And can we try to identify and practice those habits that cultivate the disposition of peacemaker?

From Peacemaking To Peacebuilding

We must acknowledge from the start that peacemaking has a negative connotation for some who associate the word with a shallow and superficial effort to “make nice” or “keep the peace.” Such peacemaking shoves conflict under the rug, sets aside points of disagreement, and subdues calls for justice. We are reminded of the words of the prophet Jeremiah, “You have healed the wounds of my people lightly, saying ‘Peace, peace’ when there is no peace.” This kind of superficial calm is what we call “negative peace.” It is the absence of conflict rather than the presence of justice. The underlying causes of conflict remain unaddressed. Surely, our call to labor for peace involves more than keeping the peace while injustice rages beneath the surface.

Peacemaking truly involves laboring

for positive peace. Johan Galtung, a formative figure in peace and conflict studies, helped us with this definition by understanding violence to be much more than physical abuse. He described violence as anything that impedes one’s ability to flourish. Violence is the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual, anything that prevents you from being who or what you could be. Positive peace is a similarly rich concept. Here, the underlying causes of violence and the persistent forms of injustice are addressed. Positive peace is not only the absence of violence, but also the presence of those conditions necessary for all people to realize their potential.⁶

Peacemaking does call us to this deeper, substantive effort. But the negative connotations are weighty enough to prevent many from envisioning the practice in this more athletic way. So, I suggest that we substitute the word “peacebuilding.” Peacebuilding gets us away from the negative connotations of making peace as making nice. There is nothing superficial about the task of building peace because we need to think about the foundation, which means that we must unearth all of those things that make the project unstable. We have to deal with the hidden tensions, expose conflicts, and address their causes.

The task never ends, nor can it be pursued in isolation. Peacebuilding requires the ethic of the cathedral builders that Bill Shore described in his book *The Cathedral Within*.⁷ Here, we see people who are committed to labor for something that they know they will not realize. Building peace is like that. We build with and on the labor of others, contributing to a vision without assuming that we will be present for its completion.

Peacebuilding As A Virtue

Peacebuilding is not an occasional activity, but an ongoing effort. It involves practices performed not only as a response to needs in the world, but also as a means to character formation. Spirituality and the imagination bring sustenance and hope to peacebuilding and our activities shape our inner life as well. Peacework takes on the nature of a virtue in the classical sense, a habit that disposes us to act well, according to a suitable end.

Aristotle and Aquinas taught that moral virtues are “formed by habit.” We are, by nature, “equipped with the ability to receive” the moral virtues, writes Aristotle, but “habit brings this ability to completion and fulfillment.” The opposite holds true also. We acquire bad, unjust, fearful, indulgent habits by performing those kinds of actions. In sum, “the actions determine what kind of characteristics are devel-

she becomes so focused on habits that she loses sight of their larger purpose, which really is not about her at all. Through peacebuilding practices, we do want to cultivate a particular disposition in ourselves. But there is also a goal that stretches far beyond us. In a very real sense, we want to make ourselves instruments of peace, to use St. Francis’s lovely phrase. That is, we offer our bodies for the purpose of crafting a world that is less violent and more loving. We need to tune the instrument not for its own sake, but for the part it plays in the symphony.

Our focus on practices does not simplify these interesting times. We continue to struggle with the demands of conscience and society and feel daunted by the call to peacebuilding. But a focus on practices is helpful (and thus worth commending) for two main reasons. Primarily, this emphasis on practice is empowering. Recent events have left many of us feeling utterly powerless. Even the outpouring of opposition at governmental and grassroots levels could

We want to make ourselves instruments of peace,
to use St. Francis’s lovely phrase.

oped.”⁸ This means that moral virtues are not acquired by performing any kind of action, but only by performing those actions which a virtuous person would perform.

We refer to these actions as practices.⁹ A practice is an action performed repeatedly so that it cultivates a particular disposition. For the sake of clarity, let us unpack this definition before returning to the particular disposition of peacebuilding. First, the word “action” is not intended to distinguish a practice from a reflection. Indeed, as we will see shortly, reflection is part of practice, not separate from it. By action, we really mean any form of activity, any thing that one does. It does not require a certain amount of movement. Nor does it require a public forum. In other words, action may include but is not restricted to activism. Thus, some practices are meditative and solitary while others involve more movement in a public sphere.

We are not called to a practice for its own sake, but rather for the effect it promises in our life and worlds. I have a friend who is very intentional about what she eats, wears, and buys. I respect her convictions tremendously. But she admits to a tendency to lose the vision for the virtues. That is,

not stop the Bush administration from bombing Baghdad in March 2003. An emphasis on practices is empowering not because it convinces us that our actions will have their intended effect. Rather, an emphasis on practices is empowering precisely because it infuses an action with a meaning that is not solely contingent on its effect on the world. As a practice, the act has meaning in and of itself. This does not mean that effect does not matter, but it does mean that effect is not the only thing that matters. For example, it is important that I write a letter to President Bush even though he will not read it. The act itself has value. I am no longer paralyzed by the question: is it possible to be a peacebuilder in a world that so easily convinces us of the necessity for violence? Of course it is. We become peacebuilders by practicing peace. The practice itself has value.

In classical terms, a practice has value because it disposes us to act in a certain way. This brings us to the second great contribution of practices language: it reminds us that we become what we do. Character is formed, not implanted. This idea is certainly familiar to those of us in the United Methodist tradition and any faith that has been influenced by pietism.

We do our best to abide by the teaching of Christ not because we have to, but because we see this life as a striving toward Christ-like behavior. Our faith tradition does provide us with rules that proscribe the use of violence and with visions of a time when no one will hurt or destroy in all God’s holy mountain. But peacebuilding requires more than abiding by rules and articulating visions. It also requires practices whereby we cultivate the disposition of peacebuilding. We need to infuse our every action with this kind of meaning, to see each act as contributing to the kind of person we are becoming. In the beautifully succinct words of a great peacebuilder, Mahatma Gandhi, we must be the change we wish to see. □

1. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1: *Human Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1964), 185.
2. *The Social Principles of the United Methodist Church—2000* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2000), 165.
3. Leo Tolstoy, “Letter to Ernest Howard Crosby,” in *Approaches to Peace: A Reader in Peace Studies*, ed. David Barash (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 178.
4. Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, vol. 2, reprint (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 1004-6.
5. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*, 1st Touchstone ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 22.
6. Johan Galtung, “Violence and Peace,” in *A Reader in Peace Studies*, ed. Paul Smoker, Ruth Davies, and Barbara Munske (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1990), 9-14.
7. Bill Shore, *The Cathedral Within: Transforming Your Life by Giving Something Back* (New York: Random House, 1999).
8. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1962) 2.2.1103b.
9. For a more formal discussion of the link between practice and virtue, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). We also want to acknowledge the work of Dorothy C. Bass and her colleagues. See Dorothy C. Bass, ed. *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), and Dorothy C. Bass and Miroslav Volf, eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

Ellen Ott Marshall is an associate professor of Ethics at Claremont School of Theology. Dr. Marshall has worked with the refugee resettlement programs of Church World Service and the United Methodist Committee on Relief. This article is



excerpted from “Introduction: Peacebuilding in Violent Times” in *Choosing Peace Through Daily Practices* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 3-13. Reprinted by permission.