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Blessed Peacemakers: 365 Extraordinary People Who Changed the World

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Blessed Peacemakers: 365 Extraordinary People Who Changed the World

Abstract

Peacemaking is hard work because violence is the norm in our world. The going assumption in our school, popular culture, governing bodies, and (sadly) religious institutions is that violence is inevitable and necessary: inevitable because evildoers will always try to harm good people, necessary because defensive or retaliatory violence is the only thing that will dissuade or stop them. The inconsistency of seeing violence as a tragic fact in some contexts but a virtue in others apparently doesn't trouble most of us. Violence remains our default assumption, peace but a fleeting interlude or interruption in the normal course of events. So peacemakers who deny that violence is either inevitable or necessary have their work cut out for them. Swimming against the current is a daunting and overwhelming task.

That's why we offer this book of peacemakers. In profiling the lives, thoughts, and deeds of people from all over the globe who offer alternatives to violence, we hope to inspire others who yearn and work for peace and justice. It helps to be reminded that one isn't alone in the task, and that people of good will from ancient times to the present have labored to become instruments of peace in a world that too often settles for violence. It helps to hear the stories of fellow peacemakers. We learn from them, we gain strength from them, and we pass their wisdom on to the next generation. A daily reading of how they swam against the tide and created new currents can be an uplifting tonic. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Peacemaking, violence, peace, justice

Disciplines

Peace and Conflict Studies | Philosophy

Comments

This is the introduction to Dr. Kerry Walters' and Robin Jarrell's complete book, *Blessed Peacemakers: 365 Extraordinary People Who Changed the World*.

INTRODUCTION

Becoming Instruments of Peace

PEACEMAKING IS HARD WORK because violence is the norm in our world. The going assumption in our schools, popular culture, governing bodies, and (sadly) religious institutions is that violence is inevitable and necessary: inevitable because evildoers will always try to harm good people, necessary because defensive or retaliatory violence is the only thing that will dissuade or stop them. The inconsistency of seeing violence as a tragic fact in some contexts but a virtue in others apparently doesn't trouble most of us. Violence remains our default assumption, peace but a fleeting interlude or interruption in the normal course of events. So peacemakers who deny that violence is either inevitable or necessary have their work cut out for them. Swimming against the current is a daunting and overwhelming task.

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The lives of peacemakers are richly diverse. They share certain core convictions, but the various contexts in which they work make each of their stories unique. Profiled in these pages are men, women, and children from all points of the compass and whose lives span twenty-five hundred years of history. Many are persons of faith—Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Bahai, Jain—but some are totally secular in their outlook. Some have familiar and even household names, while others are relatively unknown. They are human rights and anti-war activists, scientists and artists, educators and scholars, songwriters and poets, film directors and authors, diplomats and economists, environmentalists and mystics, prophets and policymakers. Some are unlettered, but all are wise. A few died in the service of nonviolence. All sacrificed for it.

What are some of the core convictions that peacemakers bring to the table?

First, peacemakers believe that peace and justice are so intimately linked that one is impossible in the other's absence. Justice is the establishment of right proportionality or fairness. When men, women, nonhuman animals, and the earth herself are treated

fairly and with respect, justice reigns. Peace, as theologian Walter Brueggemann says, is characterized by a “persistent vision of joy, well-being, harmony, and prosperity.” It is a healing of fragmentation and disunity which allows justice to flourish.

Second, peacemakers understand that violence is essentially a violation, transgression, or infringement that assaults and shatters well-being. When it comes to violence, there is a frighteningly wide spectrum that includes the global environmental devastation caused by unsustainable lifestyles and public policy, the large-scale destructiveness of warfare, unjust economic and political institutions, and the turmoil of self-hatred or neurotic guilt. Moreover, violence is indiscriminate, cutting a broad swath of destruction that engulfs everyone and everything in its path. It brutalizes those who wield it, even when they do so with good intentions.

Third, peacemakers agree that a genuinely fruitful response to violence must model the proportionality and resulting concord that are the ultimate goals. Peace sustains an organic relationship between means and ends, method and goal. Justice and peace can't be lastingly achieved through unjust policies or violent methods. To presume otherwise not only ignores lessons of history; it also violates right proportionality. As pacifist A. J. Muste famously put it, “There is no way to peace. Peace is the way.” Responding violently to violence *could* lead to a temporary lessening of oppression or aggression. But it's bought at the terrible price of perpetuating the cycle of violence that breeds oppression and aggression in the first place. Genuine justice and enduring peace can't be imposed violently, because violence by its very nature fragments and destroys.

This doesn't mean that peacemakers turn a blind eye to injustices that rupture peace. The nonviolence most of them embrace is an active force rather than a passive acquiescence to injustice. Some peacemakers actually dislike the word *pacifism* because it sounds too much like “passivity.” But nonviolence as both a lifestyle and a liberating strategy of resistance is powerful enough to convert cultures of oppression; witness the American civil rights movement and the “velvet revolutions” against Soviet domination that took place in Europe in 1989.

The fourth conviction shared by peacemakers is that conflicts between competing interests don't magically disappear. Pacifist author Aldous Huxley and civil rights giant Martin Luther King Jr. both pointed out that whitewashing inner turmoil and oppressive social structures for the sake of surface tranquility is a phony peace doomed to collapse. For genuine justice and peace to flourish, conflicts must be faced with honesty and courage whenever they arise. The key difference is that a solution will be sought through peaceful rather than violent means. Discussion, arbitration, and reconciliation are the tactics of nonviolent conflict resolution, and they're applicable to both international and interpersonal disputes.

Finally, most peacemakers, especially religious ones, believe that peace is both an external state of concord and an internal state of tranquility. Some twenty-five centuries ago, the philosopher Plato drew an analogy between political justice and individual virtue. Both, he argued, are defined by a right proportionality, or justice, that establishes harmony, or peace. His point was that the inner and the outer are mutually dependent. The lesson for the peacemaker is the importance of cultivating a harmony in her inner world similar to the one she hopes to nurture in the outer world. Without this integration

of inner and outer, the strain of peace work becomes too burdensome. To paraphrase Gandhi, “You must be the [nonviolent] change you wish to see in the world.”

Fortified by these five convictions, peacemakers from a mosaic of cultural perspectives continue to strive for a world in which, as pacifist Peter Maurin once said, it’s a bit easier for men and women to be good. All peacemakers bring different talents and temperaments to the task, and each has something valuable to contribute. What links them—and us—together is the shared desire to be, as a prayer attributed to Francis of Assisi puts it, “instruments of peace.” Our hope is that the entire year’s worth of peacemaker stories offered in this book helps sustain and focus that desire.



When we began thinking about this book, one of our worries was that we’d have trouble finding enough peacemakers to fill up an entire year’s calendar. It was a silly concern. As we progressed, we realized that our real problem would be figuring out how to hone down the hundreds and hundreds of candidates to a mere 365. It was exhilarating to discover so many fascinating and worthy peacemakers who have made the world a better place, but it was challenging—not to mention humbling!—to decide which ones to include and which ones to leave out. So we want to acknowledge here what will be apparent to discerning readers anyway: there are hundreds of celebrated peacemakers not included in this volume and unsung thousands who labor every day to end violence and promote justice. We know that many of you who will read this book could easily have been profiled in it, or that you know someone who could have been included. Our apologies, and our gratitude, to you all.

The 365 profiles are snapshots rather than fully developed biographies. Sometimes we’ve offered a biographical summary, but more often we’ve focused on a particular event or theme in the individual peacemaker’s life and work that especially reveals his or her character. In preparing the profiles, we combed through multiple resources: biographies and autobiographies, essays, letters, award citations, speeches, news articles, and obituaries. Readers wanting more information may consult the “For Further Reading” bibliography at the end of the book.

In organizing this book, we did our best to match up peacemakers and calendar days according to either their birth or death dates. We were usually successful. But because more than one peacemaker sometimes fit a single date, a few profiles had to be moved to nearby days of the calendar. Then, of course, there are a few other peacemakers, typically ancient but a few more recent, for whom we could find no definite birth or death days. We’ve scattered these throughout the book in a loving but calendrically arbitrary way.

We’re grateful to many people for their advice and encouragement. First and foremost, we’re glad to acknowledge that the initial inspiration for *Blessed Peacemakers* was Robert Ellsberg’s wonderful book *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time*. What he did for saints we hope, in a much more modest way, to do for peacemakers.

We are immensely grateful to our copy editor, Jacob Martin, for his expert and conscientious grooming of our text.

Becoming Instruments of Peace

In addition, our families and friends have been enthusiastic and helpful supporters of the project from start to finish. It was a rare week when one or the other of them didn't suggest a new candidate for inclusion in the book or ask us who we happened "to be working on" at the moment. More specifically, Kerry thanks Karl Mattson and Sara Tower for their patience in listening to him think aloud about this project, and for their own inspiring peace work. But the bulk of his gratitude goes, as usual, to his wife, Kim, and his son, Jonah. Robin thanks the group PeaceWay for their continued inspiration and loving example in their daily working for justice and peace. Robin would especially like to thank Chris, Janine, and Sedona.