

Peacemaking for Dummies

For Dummies is a prolific series of instructional books that are intended to present non-intimidating guides for readers who are new to the various topics covered. Despite the title, the publisher takes pains to emphasize that the books are not literally for dummies. The subtitle for every book is “A Reference for the Rest of Us!”

That is my intent for the time we have together this evening.

The scholars who have joined us for this weekend, including the one who will provide our keynote tomorrow afternoon, are an extraordinary group, and we are honored, even sanctified, by their time with us. The material they have already presented today has left my own head spinning a bit.

As a complete lay person in the business of making peace, I thought I’d offer a more mundane interpretation of what it means to be a Peace Practitioner® in our world today.

I often have said that peace is like the weather; we talk about it a lot but, generally, feel it is out of our control. I serve on the board of *Every Church a Peace Church* and am the president of *Hope for Peace & Justice*, so it is wonderful that these two organizations are able to present this weekend together. The thing that attracts me to both of these organizations is that they are taking very practical, tangible approaches to peacemaking. Both organizations are seeking to motivate, recruit, train and support people of faith in being peace practitioners.



Let me offer a few practical insights about what it takes to do that. The first challenge we face may be the greatest: resisting a culture of cynical realism. Aldous Huxley said:

Cynical realism—it’s the intelligent person’s best excuse for doing nothing in an intolerable situation.

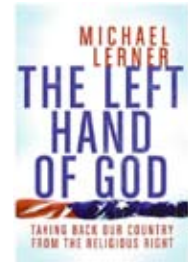
I must admit that, over the past several years, I have watched the actions of our own government and just shaken my head in disbelief and despair:

- Washington is actually debating whether water boarding is torture.
- Gasoline goes to \$3 a gallon because oil goes to \$100 a barrel, and, rather than objecting to oil companies adding to that by making \$120 billion more dollars in profit, our government gives them tax breaks.
- Who should be surprised by that, with two oilmen as president and vice-president and with oil company executives writing the country’s energy policy?

- We simply trash the Kyoto treaty and continue giving tax breaks to polluters as if no one in Washington plans to have grandchildren who will suffocate.
- We make up reasons to launch a preemptive war against a nation that did not, and could not, attack us, and, when the civil war that we started there subsides a bit, we label policies a success.

Am I the only one who feels like I have fallen through the looking glass? It is all so staggeringly surreal that cynicism seems to be the only realistic attitude. The result is that the majority of Americans simply have been immobilized into inaction.

In his great book *The Left Hand of God*, Rabbi Michael Lerner writes that much of our history has been a record of the struggle between two opposing views of what it means to be human. One view is that it is every man and woman is out for themselves, is looking out for number one, taking care of me and mine. It is fear of others who are different or with whom we disagree. Lerner calls this approach to life and living “cynical realism.” People consider themselves as just being realistic, but Lerner contrasts this with another view of a world. In this alternative reality, human beings genuinely desire connection and community. People want to cooperate, and they feel most fulfilled when they are needed by others and can generously provide care and assistance. He calls this view “spiritual consciousness.”



He also calls it speaking with the **voice of fear** or with the **voice of hope**.

While I cannot say who would make a better president, it does appear that Senator Barack Obama has had a meteoric rise based largely on his ability to speak with a voice of hope and call forth, or at least tap into, America’s spiritual consciousness.

Regardless of who either party nominates this election will be determined by which voice Americans respond to. I’m not sure this dynamic has ever been more clearly expressed. Will we decide our future based on our fears or based on our dreams? That jury is still out!

In a day when cynicism appears so omnipotent that it is regarded as reality, offering hope, a cause for optimism, or an alternative view of life is regarded by most politicians, and our puppet masters in the media, as unrealistic.

Religious right author Tim LeHaye’s *Left Behind* series of books has sold more copies than all the books by all the Presidential candidates combined. An extraordinary number of Americans subscribe to an apocalyptic view of the future that requires scant concern for the environment of a planet that is going to be left behind, and minimal motivation to make peace with those doomed to spend eternity burning in the fires of hell. We have had seven years of leadership by a president who subscribes to this worldview, and we know where that has gotten us.

The only possible explanation for resisting all efforts to end global warming, bringing a durable peace to the Middle East, or, for that matter, balancing the federal budget, has to be that the leader of our nation believes that Jesus is coming soon so none of that will matter.

This theology has provided the religious underpinning for cynical realism. Fundamentalism, whether Christian, Muslim or Jewish divides the world into **us or them, in or out, friend or foe.**

The tragic events of September 11, 2001 gave our leaders in both parties the excuse to use fear to manipulate and divide us. It also provided the opportunity to declare a war without borders and without end. Given the nightmares of any child, how could we ever win a so called “war on terror”? The military industrial complex of which President Eisenhower warned us seems to have won an absolute and total victory.

A different leadership might have addressed our security issues, but also focused on the amazing heroism of that day in September and the remarkable outpouring of international support and unity we received. That good will might have given us an opportunity to unite the world to address global issues like poverty and the economic inequality that has given rise to the hopelessness that has been expressed through suicidal terrorism.

A more noble leadership would have helped us keep our national tragedy in appropriate perspective, reminding us that other nations have suffered terrorist attacks, epidemics, plagues and natural disasters and that, in fact, more people die every day of starvation than died in the terrorist attacks of September 11. As tragic as that day was, it did not have to redefine our values and our vision of what it means to be an American.

Again, I do not know who would make a better president, and I cannot predict even who the eventual nominees will be. However, imagine that one candidate holds up for us a future vision of hope and unity and peace, while the other candidate talks about the need for security, a border fence, and winning the war in Iraq. Now that you have both of those candidates and their visions of the future in mind, ask yourself, “Which candidate will win election if there is another terrorist attack on American soil between now and the third of November?”

Such an attack is spoken of in terms of “when” not “if.” The next time around, the shock may be less, and the support around the world will be diminished, but I fear America’s war-mongering response won’t be any less.

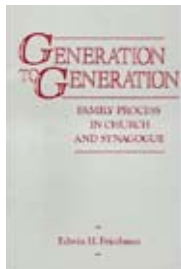
We will take it as an excuse to further reduce civil liberties, narrow the definition of torture, and cut social services so we can spend more money on a culture of militarism and endless war.

That is inevitable unless we who are people of resurrection become relentless missionaries for choosing **spiritual consciousness** over cynical realism; unless we learn to speak powerfully, assertively and courageously with a **voice of hope** rather than a voice of fear.

So, since this is Peacemaking for Dummies, perhaps I should suggest some specific, tangible ways in which we can do that. Peace on earth will never be more than a fantasy, unless people of faith learn to be peace practitioners. That is, in addition to the words of that old Christian chorus, “Let there be peace on Earth, and let it begin **with** me,” we also need to learn to sing, “Let there be peace on Earth, and let it begin **IN** me.



Becoming a Peace Practitioner requires that we first must learn the art of being a **nonanxious presence** in every situation.



I am sure my clergy colleagues and any therapists among us are familiar with that phrase, but the rest of us might not be. It entered into popular usage largely through the writings of Rabbi Edwin Friedman and his classic book *Generation to Generation*. This book is still required reading in most seminaries, because Dr. Friedman persuasively describes how dysfunctional family systems get played out in churches and synagogues. Actually, he could have written much of the same work about office settings, or social clubs, or any other identified community in which conflicts occur.

While it is not the solution to the conflict, it is vital that a Peace Practitioner learn to be a nonanxious presence in the midst of any conflict. If not we are either a contributor or a participant in the conflict.

Rabbi Friedman illustrates the connection between who the leader is and how he or she functions in a crisis, emphasizing that:

The leader's ability to maintain a nonanxious presence in the face of crisis is of vital importance to being able to effectively respond to that crisis—setting the tone, inviting collaboration, making decisions, mapping a direction, establishing boundaries, encouraging self-expression, restraining what threatens the integrity of the system, and keeping the system's direction aligned with its purposes.

To say this in the simplest possible terms: **Our effectiveness as Peace Practitioners is in direct correlation to our internal peacefulness.** We must constantly do our internal homework if we are ever to have an impact on the external world in which we live.

I think there are lots of ways by which we do that but let me offer my best suggestion. I think that **the best way for us to become Peace Practitioners is for us to practice peace.**



As you all know, the Cathedral of Hope has, for the past 20 years, been known as the world's largest predominantly lesbian and gay church. In more recent years, we have made the shift to being the largest liberal church in the south, which is just as queer.

There was a time in my career here that I felt like every time I turned around I was debating some fundamentalist pastor on TV or radio. Finally, I just refused to argue any more about whether or not gay and lesbian people could be Christian. Instead, we adopted a motto that was based on something Mother Theresa said:



Too many words. Just let them see what we do.

Each year for more than a decade this congregation has given away more than \$1 million in money, goods and services to the poor and those in need. Rather than trying to argue that we COULD be gay or lesbian and Christian, we simply were. We simply tried to act more Christian than the fundamentalist churches who claimed that we were not.

Now, I cannot claim that we converted a single fundamentalist; who we persuaded was ourselves. As our congregation acted with greater compassion and in ways more congruent with the life and teachings of Jesus, our own people suddenly began to feel differently about themselves and to act very differently in the world.

I know that I'm really slow, which is why I'm teaching Peacemaking for Dummies, but, in the midst of all this, I had a major "aha" about something that you all probably knew all along. That is simply this: rather than spend hundreds of hours in therapy and thousands of dollars on self-esteem work shops and books try this:

If you want to feel good about yourself, be a good person.

How simple is that? Yet we seem to try every other way to feel better about ourselves. I had been telling this congregation for years that they were children of God. What finally convinced them, though, was not my great preaching, but giving them an opportunity to act like they believed children of God would act.

Now, let me apply that to the subject at hand:

If you want to make peace on earth, be a peaceful person.

A peace practitioner is a person who works tirelessly to bring peace on earth and they start by being peaceful people. Let me offer some specific tangible suggestions of how:

- **Choose forgiveness.** It is a mandate of Jesus, and it is the only possible path to inner peace. If you are to be a part of resolving conflict then you must ruthlessly

eradicate all the conflicts in your heart. You must forgive regardless of whether or not you feel it. Exercise your will. Let it go and, as much as possible, move on.

- **Change your tone of voice.** Resolve to never use angry words except against injustices done to others. Yes, this includes words you say when you are alone in your car and the driver in front of you is an idiot. While it may feel satisfying at the moment, speaking violently only feeds your own anger and anxiety. Practice peace with your voice.
- **Consume less.** Rabbi Lerner wrote, “Greed is one of the pathological consequences of fear.” Practicing peace means being content with what you have because you know that there is enough. The Hebrew word “shalom” is most often translated simply “peace,” but it also means “well-being, tranquility, security and prosperity.”
- **Challenge fear.** That may mean that you listen less to the news because the media traffics in fear. When political leaders encourage you to be afraid, wonder why. Wonder who is profiting, who is gaining power, or who stands to benefit from our unquestioning fear-motivated obedience.
- **Create community.** It often is said that Jesus changed the world with just 12 people. That isn’t correct though. There were women and young people who were not counted among the 12 apostles, and one of those 12 sold him out to the fear-mongers of that day. Jesus didn’t change the world with 12 individuals. He did build, however, a community out of a group of diverse people, and that community created a new community called the Kingdom of God, or as Dr. Ruben Habito recently said in a Lenten meditation at Cathedral of Hope, the “Kindom” of God.
- **Commit acts of “Justpeace.”** It was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., of course, who said that “without justice there can be no peace.” Because, “True peace isn’t merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.” There are a myriad of ways in which we can work for a more just world, and, as we do, we become peace practitioners. We move the world inexorably closer to our vision of peace.

As a concluding act tonight, I’d like to ask you at your tables to make a list of just a few things that you can do to move the world a bit closer to justpeace. Things like writing letters, planting gardens, fostering children. Take just a few minutes to make a list of 10 things. Then we will come back together and share our lists as our benediction for this good day.

Practice Peace

Those gathered for “Peacemaking for Dummies” came up with the following ways in which we personally can make, and bring, peace to our world:

Forgive your friends and family members	Share an experience of hope
Be inclusive	Convert the word “enemy” to something else
Peaceful protest	Stop thinking of others as enemies
Become involved in community-based events and/or volunteer with charitable orgs.	Use less gasoline
Vote!	Ride your bike
Positive self talks	Mentoring children
Laugh	Volunteering in hospitals
Love everything, not just people	Contact elected officials
Be a vegetarian	Repair houses
Have faith in peace	Vote wisely!
Study	Learn something new
Listen to peaceful music	Pass the peace
Meditate	Witness peace
Count your blessings	Donate to a charity
Teach children the TRUTH about the Bible	Build a playground
Get a bumper sticker	Plant an organic garden
Listen	Learn to appreciate others point of view
Radically love your neighbors	Don’t interrupt
Speak up!	Don’t demonize your opponent
Feed and care for the poor	Don’t write in anger
Teach tolerance and understanding	Slow down
Forgive offenders	Step back
Develop a relationship with different	Nurture relationships
“Pray” for enemies	Speak softly