

From the Inside Out

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Most of us search for meaning. We often try to find jobs that will be “fulfilling” and give us a sense of purpose. The peace building field attracts many of us who want to make a difference in the world. We sometimes define our purpose as being a peace builder without actually asking how we can be a peace builder beyond the title. We forget that our purpose can only be defined broadly by a field and must be further defined by what we have to contribute. We will find our purpose to the extent that we hear our calling and know our unique contribution. In my interview project, I sought to find out what it is that informs why and how individuals do effective work that has made a difference.

I chose people to interview who I perceived to be aware of how their uniqueness contributed to their work. Two of the people I interviewed would call themselves peace builders and the other person would call herself a historian, however, using a broad definition of peace building would certainly include her work. Each person has done different kinds of work, but each has made a significant contribution. From my perspective, the world is a better place because of their how they have brought who they are to their endeavors.

This topic is particularly important to me because I believe that one of the primary reasons of being is to discover and express that which is unique to us. I have also seen

that when we disconnect from our uniqueness and try to work to fulfill others' expectations, we maintain systems other people have created and inhibit the contribution we could be making. I have witnessed programs and methods in the peace building field, that were born out of someone's commitment to bring their highest sense of right based on their unique experience, turn into blue print projects. They were disseminated and lost their spirit and the good they were intended to do. I think it becomes confusing and harmful to do work that has been labeled as peace work that is not connected to ones' own sense of inner peace.

On the other hand, when we do discover our unique motivation and individuality, we will not go into work to accept what has already been done but will contribute to our field of endeavor. Another benefit from working from the inside out is that our energy is derived from that which most drives us. When we try to work from outside expectations always asking, am I doing this right (based on what others have defined as right) or what would my boss think about what I'm doing, we loose our source of energy that comes from our center. That leads to burn out.

To find our unique contribution requires a process of seeking. No one can give us the "right" answers. This is why I have presented the interviews as a discussion even though I did the interviews separately. The dialogue represents the process of asking questions and seeking deeper meaning. Also, what came out in the interviews were things that really would only come out in dialogue. To preserve their thoughts in that context seemed most honest to me. I added an imaginary setting for the conversation and

a few transitions that I put in italics, so the reader would know my additions. However, I was amazed by how well the interviews turned into a dialogue. I hope that what my interviewees shared will possibly spark ideas and questions for others. The following conversation is between Ron Kraybill, Dianne Swann Wright and Amy Gopp.

Setting: A retreat lodge in the mountains – a place of beauty that inspires reflection. The three individuals involved in the conversation have already spent a day with each other at a meditation retreat and are enjoying a free afternoon in a corner of the great room in the main lodge. Dianne, Ron and Amy didn't know each other before the retreat, but having spent a day together, know some general information about each other and are in a deeply reflective mode as a result of their activities involved in the retreat.

Dianne: (to Amy and Ron) *You both said your work was peace building. I'm curious. What was it that set both of you down that path?*

Ron: I feel like the inner interest in peace issues has always been in me. Initially, I think my interest in peace building came from parental teaching. One story I grew up with was about my father inviting gas thieves who had stolen gas from the tank on our farm over to our house. He had seen their car and recognized it and was able to figure out who the guys were and invited them over. My dad went to a youth hangout where he saw them and he sat down with them and ordered them coffee without saying who he was and invited them home to meet my mom. My mom gave them some ice cream and when they left, they left a five-dollar bill under the plate, which would have bought a number of

tanks of gas. So that's a story I heard various times when I was a boy. So there was a deep seed of awareness that was planted quite early.

Amy: *Interesting. I would have to say that for me it also goes way back.* I definitely knew when I was younger that I wanted to do peace work. I used to call it being a missionary. For some reason that's how I thought of it when I was a very little girl. My mom tells stories about me wanting to go to Africa and how I was fascinated with Africa. I don't know where that came from, but I've always, always known that I wanted to do something overseas with people who were different from me. Then it became clearer to me that I wanted to work specifically as a peace builder in college. I knew a bit in high school but in college I started taking classes in peace and conflict resolution, and I did a whole intensive semester where we only did peace and conflict. That changed my life, and I knew that this is what God called me to do. It was so clear, and every decision since then has been based on that.

Diane: *So, you just knew from an early age? Did your family have any influence?*

Amy: *Yes.* I think because of the way I was raised. I'm a child of divorce. My dad left when I was seven. I was the oldest of three and the only female. Therefore my role in the family was very defined. I always felt in middle between my parents between my brothers and so my whole life I've been practicing being a peacemaker. My mom was a social worker and all of her mental health clients were our friends. They would come over for Thanksgiving dinner. We had this very open house. My mom really taught us

that people that are different from ourselves are not people we should be scared of. They are normal people that are just different, and that's beautiful. The town crazies would hang out at the Gopp house. That was just normal. And then we'd have foreign exchange students, and my mom became a foster mom when she remarried. So we were constantly having people stay in our home. I always remember being around different people, different from me from my culture. That was why it also seemed really natural that I always wanted to work with people. I think it's also personality. I'm an extrovert and gain energy from people. I'm also curious about people that are different. It's about love and friendships. When you meet people suddenly you're not scared of them. You know they're like you. Perhaps it's just learning that there was more to life. That life is not linear. *Dianne, what about you? Where did your interest come from? How were you drawn towards being a historian?*

Dianne: I've always been interested in history. I think that's because I come from a family of people who took history very seriously. We really respected the people who came before us and tried to learn from their experience. Even though I'm the only historian in the family, I think that there are other people who have done history for a long time. I think I could also trace it back to junior high school when I first realized that I loved museums. I didn't just like museums, I loved museums. Museums held a certain beauty and a certain peace. They were very respectful places because they paid attention to others. Museums could take me to other parts of the world that I couldn't just find in my everyday life.

Ron: *So you knew you loved history, but how did you know you were supposed to be doing the kind of history work you're doing right now?*

Dianne: I think that for whatever reason, and I don't know what it is, I think that I was meant to be here with my particular strengths and weaknesses at this point in time. I really don't understand it, but I'm willing to believe that it has something to do with God.

Amy: *I can really relate to that in terms of my decision to do peace work in Bosnia. It was such a crazy decision to go to a war zone at age 23. I was a young single woman! I can't explain it other than that it was completely based on faith. I knew that I had to do it. It's still not clear to me why, but I knew that I had to do it. That's what I was called to do. It's not that I'm not a questioning or critical thinker. I'm a questioning person, but I didn't question that. I just knew that I needed to follow that.*

(Amy and Dianne look over at Ron).

Ron: *I remember an experience that called me down the path of peace building. It was the first major church conflict that I worked with, and I came into it with fear and trembling. I still feel it was a gift from God that it worked out great. I still look back and see it as one of the cleanest and most straightforward interventions of my career. I just loved it, the challenge it involved, working with people, the intensity of it. I loved the way in which it gave me a sense of immediate connection to God as an instrument in the day-to-day work, and the gratitude of people as things began to come around. So I think*

for me a lot of my love of the work is related to the great joy and inner satisfaction I feel when things are going well.

Amy: *(To Ron) So for you it was the incredible feeling you had while being involved in the work.*

Ron: *It's that, but I think it's more.* What I'm seeing increasingly is the need in the Christian community to help people see the connection between this work of peace building and the gospel. I think some view this kind of stuff as "do gooding." It's just a nice thing to do. For me it's far, far different from that. This work that we're doing, I believe is absolute on the cutting edge of the Kingdom of God to put it in theological terms. We're out there right at the front of the place where God longs to see the world go. I'm increasingly seeing it as much more than a question of seeing people reconciled. I'm seeing it as connected to the ways in which institutions function and leaders function. It all comes back to the awareness that how we function in relationship to other human beings has a profound impact on the ability of people in a given community to rise to the sacred potential that God has put in every person. And that to function in hierarchical ways of decision making fundamentally blocks people from reaching that full potential. It perpetuates alienation and grumpiness and bitterness and in the end brings death and greed and inequities. In the end we do what we're what we're called to do. We live with the knowledge and insight we have and we long for that to be shared, but this work, doing God's work in the world, is not something in which you make success the primary criteria. You do it because in your heart of hearts you know you're called to do it. *(To both Amy and Dianne) What do you want to accomplish with your work?*

Dianne: *For me there are a few levels.* I think that what I'm working with here is the issue of slavery. I'm studying slavery at Monticello because I want to understand what the lives of those held in bondage were like, and I want to be able to make sure that the public understands it as well. I see Monticello as a place where people can come and actively become engaged in understanding an important chapter in our country's history and this would be a chapter that would involve African Americans being held against their wills at a place that was away from where they were taken. I'm trying to understand a time that's long gone, and I'm trying to understand it in ways that the people who lived during this time would have understood it. It's about searching for understanding that's probably beyond truth because I think there are many, many different true facts, but it's really bringing those true facts together and sort of blending them so you can understand a way of life that happened long ago. I think it's about the basic understanding that yes if we learn enough about slavery and how, for example, it was lived out at Monticello, we'll see that people had families; that people had communities; people had headaches; people laughed; people were beaten; people had children; people married. People didn't speak to each other; people did speak to each other. People made friends. They made enemies. So I guess it's really recognizing the nature of what happened.

On another level, I have another purpose.

I think that this country is really built on something that was not good. It was built on the concept of freedom and the concept of choice but at the same time there was this institution, this way of life called slavery that held a huge portion of the population in bondage. It's a problematic foundation, and as a Christian I see it as being a ramification of sin. I think that slavery existed because of a number of sins. And the sins weren't just

committed by one people. From what I understand, there were a number of Africans who engaged in the slave trade because they wanted wealth, because they wanted to get rid of their enemies, because they weren't concerned enough to understand what was going to happen at the other end of the road. And so I think that it isn't saying that all white people are bad, because all white people were involved in this. All white people were not involved with the slave trade, but I think that enough people were involved in the whole issue of slavery to really taint and corrupt what we have in today's society. I think that what's happened is that slavery existed and it was abolished, but there are still ramifications that last until today. I think that in the same way that as with any type of sin, if you don't acknowledge what you did, and if you don't say hey that was something that just wasn't right, I don't think that you can really have a new day. I don't think that you can have, for the lack of a better word, redemption. So what I try to do is to get people to acknowledge the ramifications of slavery and acknowledge them in a way where they don't just see slavery as being a horrible, horrible institution that existed for more than 200 years but see it as a reality and something that we have to acknowledge and then work past. I think that in order for this country to really recognize and achieve the greatness that's in it's potential; you really have to deal with this problem of slavery. I think that until we address the issues of slavery and the ramifications of slavery, I don't think we'll ever be a truly great nation. We may be the best nation in the world, but I don't think it will fully be great.

(Both Dianne and Ron look at Amy)

Amy: After doing peace work in Bosnia, I realized my biggest mission was not in Bosnia but here educating my own people. We're not compassionate people because we think that we're invincible and we don't have all these problems they do in the Balkans. That's not true. We're not dealing with issues of our own like school violence. When I came home, Columbine was happening. That happens in African American schools and urban schools all the time, and nobody reports it. We are fighting wars in our cities, and we have huge demons that we haven't even begun to look at. So I think part of it is the fact that we contribute to the violence in the world and should acknowledge that. That can be part of the healing process. I want to bring pastoral skills and peace building together. It's a matter of heart and mind, and I think we've really intellectualized it. You can't go to a Palestinian on the street and say, lets sit down and I'll explain these conflict resolution skills so you can reconcile with your neighbor. No, I guess that's why healing is so important. It's got to first happen here in the heart and then you can go from there. I'm also interested in the arts and how creative arts: plays, my choir, poetry can be used. Those are also very important. I don't know how all that will work together, but I want to somehow integrate those as forces for healing.

I saw that happen when people came together. When I was in Sarajevo I worked with an interfaith choir. That was my baby. It was bringing Serbs, Croats, Orthodox, Jewish, Catholic, Protestant and Atheists together. We were doing it because we wanted to create music. We loved to sing, and there was nothing else that got in the way. It was also so important to me to be in a place where I was fully alive. I loved Bosnia because the people were wholly alive and knew what it meant to live each day, each moment. I've never been around people who have laughed so hardily and sang and danced and didn't

care about what other people thought about them. They've confronted death. They know death and hatred, and I think appreciate life because of it. They have an overwhelming spirit of survival and what it means to be alive.

Ron: (to Amy) *Yes I think what you point out is important. There are certain underlying things so important to each of us that we must express or find in our work.* You've got to be personally fed by the enjoyment of the work. I think that personal sense of awe is really basic to survival in peace work. I can't imagine making a life time out of work that's so frustrating and discouraging at times if you didn't have a deep personal sense of enjoyment in the certain phases of it. And one of the things I've said in workshops at times is that I think I view a deep personal enjoyment of being in the middle as one of the pieces of the calling. I'd be reluctant to say to somebody that they're called to do this if they didn't find that fundamentally challenging. I find that there are a significant percentage of people who don't like being in the middle at all. I think those folks are going to have a hard time with having the staying power in this work.

Amy: *(to both) I've found that having patience is also so important.* When I worked in Bosnia, I first had to learn patience and learn what it meant to go at their pace. Coming in as an outsider, it wasn't good enough for me to say sit down and talk about how much we have in common and lets look at what bonds us and our similarities. They just weren't at that point. So it was about learning to just step back and be an observer and just take it all in. That took two years, just building trust and relationships, listening and waiting. I learned to wait, and that's a skill we don't learn very well in North America.

And learning how to wait for a very, very long time. *What are some other things you've learned about what you personally need to bring to your work?*

Ron: The one that comes very quickly to mind is that I think there is a style of operating that characterizes how I feel about what I'm doing and I hope characterizes how I actually do function. That, I think, is very much an inheritance of my childhood, my parental modeling, and to a substantial extent the larger Mennonite community that I work in. Namely I guess I would capture it in the word humility.

I think we, the Mennonite community, have always had a sense that we don't go around telling others what to do. I believe that most of the time it's a very useful place to work from as an intervener. I don't think you can do a significant intervention without making mistakes, without just seeing it wrong and stepping on peoples' toes sometimes. You often have to make quick judgments about things you don't have any way of knowing. So you make mistakes. This is what happens when I do this work. So I'm not knocked heavily off balance if I make someone mad or if I pick an issue that turns out not to be one that needs to be addressed. It's like, ok I called it wrong there, so lets retry it and get things back on course. I think if you're coming with a sense of humility, people don't hold your mistakes against you. I would add to that an elicitive training method and empowerment are also important in this work. I see all those as bringing out the instinct to keep a pretty firm grip on your own ego and keep a real focus on other people and your role as just a catalyst and a tool to something that belongs to others. Those are ideas that I think a lot of people in the field respect and are drawn to. I can't imagine being in this work without that basis of humility. (*Looks at Dianne*)

Dianne: *I can connect with the concept of humility.* I think that what I've come to realize through my work is that I'm here to learn as much as I am to teach, and what I'm learning are some very great personal issues. The learning isn't always pleasant. Sometimes it's painful. At one point I was pompous enough to feel all I needed to do was the history and present it in such a way that people could respect it and then accept it. What I've learned is that I'm learning some real issues about myself. I remember a time when I was doing a presentation to interpreters at Monticello, and there was one interpreter who was just sulking the whole time. He was very, very disturbed that I was talking about the enslaved experience at Monticello. I remember him pointing his finger at me and saying, "Thomas Jefferson didn't enslave anybody. They were slaves when they came here and he couldn't free them." I could see that he was angry and was really pointing his anger in my direction along with his finger. I remember thinking, this man is teaching me something. And he was also making me very angry, but he was teaching me something. I had to take time, several days, to try to figure out what that was. *(looks at Amy)*

Amy: *Yes, it is so hard to detach ourselves from our work.* I've learned that neutrality is in no way a possibility. We can learn to be impartial, but I don't think we can learn to be neutral. If we claim to be neutral, I don't think we're very connected to our hearts. Once we are deeply connected emotionally with people and you live with them and work with them and hear their stories and take on their pain, it's impossible to be neutral. I think that as peace builders we kid ourselves into somehow thinking that we're going to be a third party neutral. That's just too difficult for me. I think that's why I'm not ending up doing mediation. I get too emotionally involved. Staying detached is a

discipline I'm trying to work on, but I don't really want to do. That's not where my gifts are. Being emotionally involved is just too much me. Part of it has been learning that my emotiveness is a gift in this work because it comes out of my compassion. I've learned that I really have the gift of compassion. No one in my family understood why I would go overseas and help these people who I had no clue about. Who are they? Why? And like I said before, it really didn't matter. It was just important that I was there. So I'm glad I have a sense of being merciful and feel like I have a real capacity to feel someone else's pain.

Ron: *(in response to Amy) Focusing on others is important.* I think that there was some kind of really clear family teaching around sharing that I benefited from and helped me create a kind of moral radar screen. I've also found that one of things that has made it easier for me to make the right choice [in terms of others] is that my experience has been pretty consistently that unselfishness ultimately benefits me. For example, when I worked for the Mennonite Conciliation Service, there were times when I could have insisted that I be the one to speak on behalf of the organization, or insist that others stay in my shadow. However, I felt like I shouldn't make a selfish decision. I wanted to make a decision in reference to others and the welfare of the institution. What I discovered over time is that when you live your life that way, other people are grateful, and you don't have to go out there clamoring for praise and credit because others come and pour it over you in embarrassing amounts. And I've just had that experience time and again, so I think that has made it easier with time to kind of instinctively make the right decision. I have a certain instinctive faith that if I do what is right, I'll be taken care of somehow.

However, this was greatly tested when I went to India. We spent ten months in India and one of the things I saw there is how much harder it is to do the right thing [and be unselfish] as I understand it. The illustration that brings it home most simply is my experience going to a train station waiting in cue for a ticket. Soon after I arrived, I let a two-foot gap between me and the person in front of me, and someone comes and stands right in front of me, just takes that two-foot gap. My initial thought was well look at that what kind of a jerk is that? If he's going to be such a jerk, I'm not going to get all upset about loosing my spot, so let him be a jerk. But then I began to realize that it was happening repeatedly. Then you realize that it's not just he who's going to be a jerk. It's the person after him and the person after him and the person after him. You would literally wait all day in India if you worked by principles and reciprocity. It would have made no particular moral point to anybody for me to be a nice guy and say I'm just going to stand back. People wouldn't even notice. And I saw it in the traffic patterns. It's literally the biggest vehicle on the road has right of way in all circumstances, whether it's a red light or stop sign. It can be a busy highway with traffic going at 60mph, and if you're a big truck, you will scarcely even look out your side as you pull on that highway. It's up to the small guys to stop, and people don't even get cross about it. Power runs things. You see it constantly. Doing the right thing might be different there than what I view it to be here. I'm not sure just how to put all this together?

Dianne: *I had a similar experience that taught me a powerful lesson.* I remember once I was on a train with a group of EMU students in East Africa. We were taking a train from Nairobi to Mombassa. The train broke down, and we had to wait for the bus to come and

to take us to where we needed to be in Mombassa. We had hotel reservations, and we had been traveling for about 8 hours. So people were really very tired. Then the train master let a group of people get on the first bus and the crowd just rushed and got on the bus. Another bus came, maybe an hour later, and he let the people who just rushed get on the bus who had gotten out of line. The bus would come and, people would break out of line and just go. I realized that I needed to speak up. I walked up to the train master and I said, I am getting on the next bus that comes and so are all of my students, and I meant that. I said, “we have waited patiently. We have stood in line. We’ve done what it is you told us to do, and every time you forget about us. The next bus that comes, we’re getting on.” Two of the male students in the group we’re standing with me and they said that they have never seen such fire come from me, but I knew that I needed to have that fire in order for him to take us seriously because nice had not worked. Now if I’m confronting something, my daughter will say to me mom, you’re being like you were with the train master on the way to Mombassa. And I say, yup you’re right.

If you understand something to be right, you realize that you have to speak up, and you do. I try to do that when it comes to my work here and speaking about things in public and representing people. I’m going to say it’s no nonsense. Let’s just cut to the chase. This is what’s going on here, and this is what needs to happen. It’s courage.

This may be really abstract, but I think that in my 40s I learned a lot about courage. I used to say that I wasn’t a very courageous person. I would be afraid that if I said something or did something that I might get fired, for example. Now what I understand is that I just simply need to be brave. If you’re brave and you’re doing what you think is

right, then you really are going to be okay. So I don't really fear a lot now. That's a wonderful feeling.

Amy: (to both) So how do we make sure we are learning these lessons and expressing our deepest values on a consistent basis in our work?

Ron: I've found it helpful so many times in my careers to be able to stop and say, why am I doing this? It's not because I'm building an empire. It's not because I want to be famous even though that might be nice. But I'm doing it because this is what I feel God calls me to do, and I know that with all, or at least most of my heart. So many times that simple question makes choices clear to me.

Dianne: I've realized that there's not a division between who I am at work and who I am personally. I think that what I do is what I do. So I'm not a different person here than I'll be at 11 o'clock tonight. I'm still the same person, and so I still have the same values. I still have the same concerns. It's sort of like being a mother. I don't stop being a mother because my daughter is 24 or because I come to work. I'm always a mother.

It is also a part of my family philosophy is to ask yourself, what's really going on here? You know where you are. You know the day of the week. You know the person you're talking to, but what does this really mean? I guess I learned when I was a child that things are not always as they appear. I think of the biblical saying that our battles are not with each other but are against principalities and so if something is really difficult and it

doesn't appear to make sense, I do ask myself that question, what's really going on here and what am I supposed to learn?

(Break time is over, and they all head back to their next retreat session).

Although this dialogue was cut off due to the time limit of my interviews, the end of the dialogue is artificial. In reality, it's one that continues within ourselves and between each other indefinitely. I don't want to suggest that when we are able to articulate what we think we bring to our peace building work, our direction and work will be laid out in a smooth path stretching before us. However, I believe we must start with articulating the connection between ourselves, our work and our calling. It will be a guide that will influence our decisions and remind us to work from our center, which will give us energy and direction. Along the way, there will be plenty of room to learn about ourselves through experience and the wisdom of others.