

Voicewalkers, a Crow Poet, and the Table: Cultivating Peace Daily

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Last semester when I did the Oregon Extension program we took a field trip to listen to stories of several persons from the local Klamath tribes. Like many Native Americans, the Klamath have a long history of mistreatment by the U.S. government. After hearing about children forced into boarding schools, drug and alcohol addictions, and the deterioration of communities, Helen Crum Smith and Smokey, our speakers, finished by saying, "thank you all for listening. We enjoy talking with young people who want to know about our lives. We love you and hope that God blesses you in your life." This seemed an extravagant farewell for a first meeting, but it hit me harder than I expected. I felt forgiveness for a guilt that I didn't know I held until that moment. I felt unworthy of this love. These people had suffered devastation by my people.

As I saw with Helen and Smokey, our lives are interconnected with many around the world. Our lifestyles in the U.S.--the clothes we wear, the food we eat, the gas we use-- may hurt and humiliate others in the world with violence as a result. In his essay "The Burden of the Gospels," Wendell Berry writes,

We ought to be a little terrified to realize that, for the most part and at least for the time being, we are helplessly guilty. ... We certainly do know how to apply better measures to our conduct and our work. ...But we don't know how to extricate ourselves from our complicity very surely or very soon (Berry, 136-7)

He continues by asking how we could live without our war centered economy and "endangering species, including our own." All of our culture encourages and is structured around speed, wealth, comfort, and efficiency, but these values in action often cause injustice around the world. As Christians, knowing Jesus' call of justice for the oppressed, we want to find ways of living differently. So how do we, who seek peace as

the hope and beauty of the gospels, find inspiration and sustenance for a lifestyle that feels like, to quote one of my professors, “pushing a noodle up a hill?”

First, we've got to get our groundings solid. Peace-seekers who see their complicity in the violence of the world often run into two unhelpful extremes. On the one hand we may let our feeling of guilt carry us into despair or avoidance, and on the other we may let our dreams carry us above finding practical solutions and seeing the dire realities of some in the world. In particular, I wonder if as U.S. citizens today, we carry more guilt in ourselves than we realize. Despite the fact that many have thrown passionate effort into projects like eating locally and reducing driving by biking and carpooling, no one can claim a totally sustainable, just, and therefore peaceable lifestyle. But a rootedness in guilt over this may motivate us in unhealthy or unsustainable ways.

In his book, *The Moral Imagination*, John Paul Lederach talks about people who have the internal means to work at peace consistently. He calls them voicewalkers—

You may notice them first for the things they don't confuse. They don't confuse their job or activities with who they are as people. They don't confuse getting credit with success, or recognition with self-worth. They don't confuse criticism for an enemy. They don't confuse truth with social or political power. They don't confuse their work with saving the world. They don't confuse guilt with motivation. (Lederach, 167-8)

These people live and work out of a deep sense of who and where they are. They realize their guilt but don't let it run them. Instead their actions grow out of a strong sense of being or voice-- their love and longing for people and a home. This kind of grounding can give people the wholeness they need to pursue a lifestyle of peace.

Second, we must listen to and cultivate our own and other's creativity. In his book *Radical Hope* Jonathan Lear talks about what happened to the Crow Indians and their way of living when the Europeans took over. When killing buffalo and their battle

practice of counting coup for honor no longer made sense, what did they do? Lear writes that they needed to listen to a visionary idea in order to move beyond their current way of thinking. He writes,

What would be required, though, would be a new Crow poet: one who could take up the Crow past into vibrant new ways for the Crow to live and to be. Here by “poet” I mean the broadest sense of a creative maker of meaningful space. (Lear, 51)

And though our situation today varies greatly—we have caused our own downfall—we need to find ways to hear and value this “Crow poet.” Who speaks to us as peace churches beyond the structural, and administrative institutions such as MCC and Mennonite church USA?

During my cross cultural in the West Bank I interviewed people as part of a project. I talked to a clarinet player named Mohamed Najem who played both traditional Arabic music and classical Western music. When asked why he did music and what it offered to his life as a Palestinian, he replied, “if I did not do music, I would explode.” I believe this literally and metaphorically. I remember waiting in a van at a checkpoint for an hour where a young girl in the vehicle behind us needed to go to the hospital. I got angry after one instance of waiting. Mohamed was able to use music to create a meaningful space in which he could find life amidst frustration. If we practiced listening to our hymns and artists, and using our own creativity in whatever ways we could, we might find something inspiring and worthwhile to live by.

Finally, we cannot live a lifestyle of peace by ourselves. We need neighbors and friends to go with us when we take the risks of living differently and creatively. One of the coolest things about the early church was their commitment to each other as well as to a new idea of life and spirituality. Acts 2:46 says, “Day by day, as they spent much time

together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people” (NRSV). This verse indicates a daily way of living that helped people to support each other’s growth. Anabaptists traditionally embraced a more community oriented way of living although in recent years as Mennonites have transitioned to being more a part of the U.S., technologically and culturally, we may have become more individually oriented. Also, some remember the hurt of strict, patriarchal communal living and wish to stay far from it. Is there a way that Mennonites today can give a breath of fresh air to supporting each other for risking to live daily in peaceful ways?

I recently began going to a church in Harrisonburg called The Table. Every Sunday after the service one or two people open their homes to anyone interested in eating together. And while there is no set agenda to talk, think, or support each other in living a certain way, the gathering, eating, and sharing has been incredibly life giving for me. We can connect with each other and ask what it means to live in this nation at this time as follows of Jesus. Also, I’ve heard about a group of people in Harrisonburg who do a voluntary gas tax as a way of encouraging themselves to use less gas. Together they decide on their tax rate per gallon, collect taxes, and then give it to an organization.

So as we make choices in our daily lives to risk being creative for peace, we can hold onto a rootedness and gatherings of people that brings us life. Because as humans we are limited, we realize what we can’t do, but also appreciate the ways that we love and strive to bring good into the world. Lear describes humans as finite erotic creatures who, by nature, take risks living in the world and says,

As finite creatures we are vulnerable: we may suffer physical and emotional injury, we may make significant mistakes,...—and yet as erotic creatures we reach out to the world and try to embrace it. (Lear, 120)

In this broken yet beautiful way we can nurture peaceful living with ourselves and others and daily declare, with the poet Muriel Rukeyser,

I say across the waves of the air to you:
today once more
I will try to be non-violent
one more day
this morning, waking the world away
in the violent day