
Capturing a Haitian Moment

Picture this: In late December, about six weeks ago, our son Jordan, our daughter Leah, and I were sitting on the porch of a modest wood-framed house in Haiti, above the capital of Port-au-Prince, looking over the plains on which the African slaves once labored to produce sugar cane for their European masters. We are surrounded by trees that were planted as seeds of hope within the last decade and now rise 20 feet or more to provide shade. In our group are three drummers, bringing together African rhythms. One drummer is Ron, a Caucasian, a man we worked with in the 1980s whose family has stayed and worked in Haiti for over 20 years. Another drummer is Maputo, an African from Ghana, now a professor of African rhythm and dance at the University of Colorado, who is on retreat in Haiti. The third drummer is Welele, a young Haitian man who says he never learned the rhythms, he was born with them.

These three men, European, African, and Haitian, weave incredible rhythms in the first Black Republic in the world, where slaves banded together and demanded independence from France in 1804. It is now New Year's Eve, the day before January 1, New Year's Day, and also Haitian Independence Day. Others joined us: an African American woman from Indiana University; a young Haitian man who started a neighborhood service organization for high school youth; the widow of Guy Mallory who was assassinated when he was serving as Minister of Justice under President Aristide in Haiti; a young man with his family who refuses to give his birth certificate to his mother to process his application for U.S. citizenship because he is proud to be Haitian; and other friends from Haiti and North America.

We gathered together on New Year's Eve to join in a tradition they began last year, of starting a fire to represent the year that is ending, then as it burns out to light a second fire to represent the year that is beginning, and then to keep those ashes in a vase buried in the ground until exchanging them the next year. In this setting oral traditions are kept alive as stories are told. Can you picture the scene? It was a special moment. In that moment, a Haitian man named Dja posed a riddle. In Haiti this is a common form of keeping oral tradition alive and of reflecting on lessons. Dja said he has two dogs in his yard, one is aggressive and mean, and the other is friendly and welcoming. Which of the two dogs will be dominant, Dja asks. The real question was, if these two dogs fight, which one will win? We all reflect on the obvious answer, and on the symbolic meaning, and try to extract something interesting or profound, until Dja answers the riddle

– the dog that will win is the dog that I feed! He explained that we all have capacity for good and for evil, and that which prevails is what we nurture and feed.

Can you capture that moment with me? You can't just tell the riddle, you have to capture the moment. No one was thinking about actual dog fighting or animal cruelty. The metaphor is what spoke. In this setting of persons of European decent and African decent and now Haitian slave decent, where beautiful rhythms have sung through the night air, in this context of poverty and pain but also liberation and trees and other signs of hope, the message for independence day and for the new year focused on recognizing our own capacity for evil and thus on the importance of feeding our capacity for good. I wish you could have been there!

Involvement with NAPC

I think, at its core, that is what the persons who started the Newton Area Peace Center 25 years ago envisioned – a concrete way to feed our capacity for good. It is exciting for me as I see how the Newton Area Peace Center has been sustained and transformed into Peace Connections and that we can join together in this way tonight.

I came to Bethel College in 1980 with a plan! I had enjoyed debate in high school and was good at it, so my plan was to come to Bethel, get a pre-law degree, and go straight to law school. I didn't know what I wanted to major in, so I took the general education classes and other classes that looked interesting. That ended up leading me toward majors in math, peace studies, and Bible and religion. That is not a traditional pre-law combination, but there is no set prerequisite to law school, so I could still have been on track.

But what happened as I pursued my interests is that I started to learn more about other methods of resolving conflict. I had courses in mediation, the church as a change agent, communication skills, and other courses related to conflict management. My focus changed as I was feeding those interests. Law school no longer seemed like the natural path for me.

Many things influenced my journey at that point. One of them was an increasing involvement with what became the Newton Area Peace Center. As I recall, the group was forming and in its early stages, and I had the opportunity to get involved and then to become one of the first board members. I also did an internship for my Peace Studies major at Bethel during my fifth year, 1984-1985, during which time I served as President of the Board and was coordinating our efforts to offer services in communication skills training and mediation. The Newton Area Peace Center provided an opportunity to link my education with the community in concrete, practical ways.

I wonder if the kinds of issues we discussed were much different than the issues other community peace groups dealt with, or even whether they are much different than the issues the current Board discusses:

- How do we expand our support base? Many of the initial supporting churches were Mennonite.
- What is the proper balance of activities and activism? We were involved in witnessing as the White Train came through Cassoday. Did that cause some to stay away from our other activities?
- How do we pursue good stewardship? We conducted an energy audit to be more efficient.
- What is our long-term vision? We held a retreat at the Stutzman Retreat Center to reflect together.
- How can we be most effective in offering mediation services? We applied for grants when that seemed appropriate.
- How broad or how narrow should our focus be? So many issues and ideas captured the passion of persons in our group.
- How do we sustain the Peace Center as an organization? We obtained tax exempt 501(c)(3) status.
- What should our structure be? We changed the Board structure and met less often as a full board so we could concentrate more on activities.
- What is the right balance of events? They are important, but in a community with many other activities, we worked to find the right balance so we would have good turnouts.
- How do we balance the budget and pay the expenses? It was a challenge to pay the utility bill at times, and yet we also were committed to paying a coordinator.
- How do we get the word out? We had a newsletter, and of course we hadn't heard of the internet yet!

I would guess there are similar questions being asked today, in a different way, perhaps on a different scale. It is gratifying to review the web page and newsletter and see activities in many areas, from The Giving Garden, Bridges Out of Poverty, Kids Summer Food Program, Asset Building Coalition, Heartland Peace Tax Fund Group, The Breathing Room, Card Making Station, Community Room, and classes on responding to crisis, caregiving, listening, and prayer.

I would like to highlight eight things that seem significant about how the Newton Area Peace Center influenced me and how Peace Connections can continue to be an influence:

1. **Modeling is Key:** As a college student, I remember being part of a group of committed community members. They served as role models for me. They planted seeds.
2. **Peacemaking is Integral:** One thing that is vivid for me in the experience of the beginning of the peace center is that the people involved in the peace center were not peacemaking professionals. That is, the people

were business people, people involved in church leadership, and educators; busy people with other professions, but also passionate about peace. The peace center was not the primary work of anyone; nor was it completely separate from what people were doing. Rather, it was a natural extension of who the people were. They were people who chose to feed the good.

3. **Small things matter:** It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the needs around you. But the most inspiring experience can be to hear an individual story, to realize that you touched one person's life. Tell the stories. Listen to them and gain energy.
4. **Effectiveness matters:** Individual stories matter, but we constantly worked to define our effectiveness. Did what we were doing make a difference? But just as importantly, are we doing what is right and just?
5. **Keep in touch:** Although we chose to work overseas in Haiti and Bolivia, I have often said that in many ways it is easier to travel to other countries and work for peace and justice. The hard work is in our own neighborhoods, because here in Newton or Goessel or Hutchinson or Wichita or Denver it is easier to separate ourselves from the needs around us. A place like Peace Connections helps us stay in tune, to stay connected, to take on the hard but rewarding work of cultivating peace in our hearts, homes, community, and beyond.
6. **We are inspired by others:** We have often heard profound words from Martin Luther King, or Mahatma Gandhi. But we have profound insights from those in our midst and those who helped start this organization, some of whom are no longer with us: Paul McKay, and Mary McKay, and Norma Wiens, and Gordon Houser, and Muriel Stackley, and Wayne Swartzendruber, and Ruby Moore, and Gary Moore, and Jean Hershey, and Loren Reusser, and Peggy Reusser, and Willard Unruh, and Rosemarie Matsuda, and many others since.
7. **Peace work is broad:** It touches individuals and families and communities and national and international issues of communication and justice and poverty and immigration and environment and much more.
8. **Feed the good.** I wish I knew more about drumming. When Ron, Welele, and Maputo were drumming on that porch in Haiti, each had a different role. One drummer beat out the core cadence so that the others could make the music above it. But this core cadence was the backbone of the rhythm; without it the song would die. There is an essential goodness that we all can tune in to. For me it is a faith in God. If we feed the good it will grow.

Feeding the Good That Is In Us

My journey has taken me to many places. I wouldn't be called a peacemaking professional. But peace making and concern for justice, inspired and nurtured by the early days of the Newton Area Peace Center, informed and shaped my journey through international service in Haiti and Bolivia, selection of a law

school after working in Haiti with a focus on alternative dispute resolution, work for the Oregon Supreme Court, law practice in Denver, involvement in non-profit organizations devoted to conflict mediation and to economic development, and commitment to the church as an agent of change. It ultimately led me to my position as president of Bethel College, where I can live vicariously through the lives of our students and then of our graduates. It truly is gratifying to see how concern for others permeates the core of so many of our graduates and is reflected in their life's journey. Many seeds are planted by places like Bethel College, Newton Area Peace Center, and now Peace Connections.

Peace Connections is connected with the broader campaign known as the Season for Nonviolence, a national 64-day grassroots campaign "dedicated to demonstrating that nonviolence is a powerful way to heal, transform, and empower our lives and our communities." It reminds me of taking Nonviolence Seminar class at Bethel, and of studying Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Our nation celebrated the life of Martin Luther King Jr. on January 21. In the book *The Universe Bends Toward Justice: A Reader on Christian Nonviolence in the U.S.*,¹ the editors claim that "[n]othing in the collective literature of Christian nonviolence is more incisive than the letter which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., (1929-1968) wrote on paper scraps and newspaper margins while sitting in the Birmingham city Jail in 1963." Hear these words from the "Letter from a Birmingham Jail,"²

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere in this country.

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¹ New Society Publishers 1990 at 171.

² <http://www.historicaltextarchive.com/sections.php?op=viewarticle&artid=40>

depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. * * * * *

Dr. King was accused of being an extremist. He responded:

But as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a bit of satisfaction from being considered an extremist. Was not Jesus an extremist for love -- "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice -- "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ -- "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist -- "Here I stand; I can do none other so help me God." Was not John Bunyan an extremist -- "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." Was not Abraham Lincoln an extremist -- "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." Was not Thomas Jefferson an extremist -- "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." So the question is not whether we will be extremist but what kind of extremist will we be. Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice--or will we be extremists for the cause of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill, three men were crucified. We must not forget that all three were crucified for the same crime--the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thusly fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. So, after all, maybe the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

Profound words, yes. Yet it is what we know. We will be transformed if we feed the good that is in us. We need each other. As Dja reminded us, we all have capacity for good and for evil, and that which prevails is what we nurture and feed. May Peace Connections continue to enable us to feed the good that is in us as we seek to transform the world toward justice and peace.

Thank you.