
Global Peace Services USA

¼ an idea whose time has come

Vol. 5, No. 4

December 2002

ELDERS FOR PEACE: Building on Experiences

The Elders for Peace program opened in San Antonio, Texas, on Sunday evening, October 27, the day after a large and spirited demonstration against the war in Iraq was held in that city. In solidarity with the big march in Washington, DC, and those held across the nation, an estimated 500-1,000 people had gathered to oppose a preemptive strike by the United States against Iraq. The march was organized in part by the San Antonio peaceCENTER, co-sponsor of the Elders' seminar.

Sunday Evening

Following the potluck supper at the neighboring Mennonite Church, Elders' participants joined members of local peace organizations for a fast-paced presentation by Jim Fleming. Jim trains Palestinian and Israeli tour guides in Jerusalem. He spoke about a divisive phenomenon, hyper-fundamentalism, which can distort each of the major world religions and endangers us all as a real threat to peace. He identified hyper-fundamentalists by four characteristics: they have a literal view of scriptures with only one interpretation; they assert there is no place for women as religious authorities; they believe that clerics are the only ones who can correctly interpret the Holy Book, and they have no interest in interfaith dialogue. Their conviction that any faith apart from their own "is of the devil" and their lack of empathy toward all those who differ provide the climate that can breed hostility and rationalize violence.

Ann Helmke, the Director of the peaceCENTER, had also invited the religious leaders of the community to come together following the meal to reflect as people of faith on the challenges facing us at this time. After being welcomed and introduced, each of the nine members on the interfaith panel gave a brief presentation on what he/she considered to be the one or two most critical things happening locally or globally today.

The disconnection and isolation of people from one another (autonomous individualism) was a concern voiced by several speakers. "Not only do we not know others, we

are ignorant of who we are ourselves," said one presenter.

The devaluation and exploitation of human life; the fragility of the earth and the abuse and uneven distribution of its resources; the enlarging chasm between the rich (the "affluenza") and the poor were all cited as most critical situations.

The second question panelists addressed was, "How does one's faith speak to these problems?" Faith tells us that we are all created in the image of God. Simultaneous with the disintegration of relationships, there is a second process, that of integration and unity. It is God who is bringing the world of diversity together. We must trust that presence and let go of our fear and pain. We must find ways to empower moderates who share these values. However, this building of bridges with people who share other views can be risky. In the question and answer period following the panel presentations a Moslem participant stood up and declared, "It is also depressing to be a bridge as I am not always understood by my own community or trusted by others. I feel lonely many mornings." Many in the audience nodded in agreement.

The meeting, nevertheless, closed on a hopeful and appreciative note. Many expressed thanks for gatherings such as this one where people from different faith perspectives come forward with love and compassion, seeking justice and peace. In thousands of unreported ways across the country such encounters are truly prophetic signs.

Monday

Scripted for Violence: The Power of the Media

Research today suggests that the average American child has seen 200,000 violent acts on TV by age 18—16,000 of them, murders. Few dispute today the media's power to shape not only dreams and values, but also worldviews, behavior and economic needs. The media is a permanent houseguest and a powerful teacher. How can we become media literate and wise users? Susan Ives of the peaceCENTER has been asking such questions for years. Her probing led to the production of the resource

“Media Violence,” a publication that tells of the effects of media violence on children, that includes statistics showing how TV undermines family life, harms children and hampers education. She counteracts the myths of media violence and tells parents what they can do to TV-proof their homes.

In a session called *Cartoons: Violence 101 for Children*, Ann Helmke had the Elders examine the cycle of violence through cartoon characters, Popeye and Bluto, and Susan Ives brought out the positive values in an episode of *The Simpsons*. When critical thinking skills are developed, our youth are able to understand the cycle of violence and the cycle of non-violence. As Ann pointed out, Jesus broke the cycle of violence by very simple, human acts, all the while proclaiming the truth boldly. We must ask ourselves today, “What would Jesus do?”

Elders were encouraged throughout the program to tell their stories. Children must hear stories of nonviolence and creative inclusiveness, stories that affirm children and their cultures; stories that have innovative solutions to conflicts and that leave everyone standing at the end of the day.

Monday evening we attended a pre-release showing of Michael Moore’s latest film, “Bowling for Columbine,” a powerful statement on the effects of fear and violence in our country.

Tuesday

Land Where My Fathers Died: Visiting Violent Places

Using the Alamo as an example, Elders for Peace explored the geography of violence and sought ways to interpret the landscape without glorifying the bloodshed.

“Remember the Alamo!” Every school child in the United States learns that cry from his or her American history textbook. What did it mean then? What does it mean today? According to the Daughters of the Texan Revolution (DTR) who have owned and maintained the Alamo since 1905, it means that two hundred Texan soldiers died there in March 1836 while defending the site against a much larger Mexican army led by the General Antonio Santa Anna. Their blood sanctified the Alamo, which is revered today as the “Shrine to Texas liberty,” thereby making it one of the best known tourist attractions in Texas and in the country.

Through the thoughtful presentations of Susan Ives, peaceCENTER staff member, along with the discussions

and the excellent readings she provided, the Elders for Peace participants traced the history of the Alamo from its beginnings as an 18th century Spanish mission to its sanctification as a “heroic representation of a historical tradition.” The mixture of fact and myth that focuses exclusively on its “thirteen days of glory” fails to even consider the role of the issues of that day: slavery, politics and religion.

Particularly influential in forming public opinion over the years were three films: D.W. Griffin’s 1915 silent movie, “Martyrs of the Alamo,” which demonized the Mexicans; the very first “World of Disney” program in 1955 introducing Davy Crockett, and John Wayne’s “The Alamo.” Excerpts viewed from these films were excellent examples of how each generation creates its own interpretation of history in light of current events and attitudes. Indeed, whoever tells the story, defines the culture.

To Travel as a Peace Pilgrim: Ten Questions to Ask at a Historic Site

1. When did this location become a historic site?
2. Who sponsored it?
3. What were the sponsors’ motives?
4. Who is the intended audience for the site?
5. Did the sponsors have government support?
6. Who is left out?
7. Are there problematic words or symbols that would not be used today?
8. How is the site used today?
9. Is the presentation accurate?
10. How does this site fit in with others that treat the same era?

After spending an hour walking through the gardens and buildings of the Alamo, participants formed a circle near the entrance. Ann Helmke told the group of other times of prayer at other vigils in San Antonio. This reflective review both prepared us for our own petitions and silence and lodged the vigil in the tradition of public prayer at sites of violence in San Antonio.

Prior to the visit, participants had been asked to discover something or someone that touched them while they were there and enabled them to remember the Alamo in a unique way. Seeing an historical site with new eyes offers the opportunity to create an original distilled image. “Pennies at the Alamo” is one such reflection.

Pennies at the Alamo

Susan Ives

I am a penny
Bright, shiny
Dropped by a child in a slot
To be pressed by the pull of a lever
Into a commemorative oval
Stamped "Remember the Alamo."

A perfect circle,
Minted with the head of Lincoln,
(He freed the slaves)

In God we trust
Liberty
2000

Legal tender

The children line up
Legally tender

Unformed
All with their copper pennies
To abandon their common cents
To the great crushing machine
That mints memory.

Tuesday evening participants ate on the San Antonio River Walk and returned to La Casa where they shared their original images from the Alamo and favorite stories of nonviolence.

Wednesday

After a preliminary discussion of violence and nonviolence, Clara Doyle and Jean Martensen introduced Global Peace Services USA (GPS) and its mission to create professional peace services by promoting education and training based on a philosophy of active nonviolence.

"Nashville: Civil Rights and the Task Today," a portion of the video "A Force More Powerful" was then shown making a strong case for active nonviolence as a successful, if difficult, means of settling serious conflicts.

The program concluded with a Meditation prepared and led by an Elder, as had each day begun and ended in like manner.

Building Bridges of Peace

The highlight of Global Peace Services' annual membership meeting in October was the keynote address given by David Shipler and his daughter Laura Shipler Chico. Their theme, Building Bridges of Peace, pointed out the significant role of ethnicity in conflicts around the world and how to begin to deal with it.

When David Shipler arrived in Saigon in 1973 as a foreign correspondent for the New York Times, he asked his Vietnamese office manager where he could get his wristwatch repaired. The man didn't have a recommendation except to say, "Don't take it to a Chinese jeweler. He'll change the works and give you some cheap imitation." This initial exposure to the prejudice against the Chinese in Vietnam opened Shipler's eyes to the negative stereotyping found in many places, especially when a people are ethnically identifiable and distinct from the majority.

Shipler pointed out that stereotypes of hated images do

not disappear just because they are not talked about. Ethnic tensions rose to the surface very quickly in the countries in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union after the authoritarian governments were removed. The hatred of a particular people does not go away just because it is not permitted to be acted upon.

After listing many ethnic conflicts of our time, Shipler began an appalling litany of the millions of lives lost since World War II due to ethnic and religious warfare, concluding with today's Israeli-Palestinian situation. He ended by saying that news reporting of this and of other conflicts does not talk enough of the ethnic component, which is powerful, extremely difficult to deal with, and involves much more than the signing of treaties.

Laura Shipler Chico responded to the roll call of recent ethnic tragedies with an upbeat question, "What can we

do?" What she did was travel to Burma a year ago where she became acquainted with the Women's League of Burma. This inspiring group of women works to dispel the deep suspicion among the many ethnic groups, particularly between the Burmans and the non-Burmans. Conventional history strengthens this distrust of one for the other, yet acknowledging each other's different historical realities is very central to any reconciliation. The military regime in power had put the Burmans in a position over all those who are not Burmans, who now cannot accept that they are all on the same side in the struggle for a democratic, independent Burma.

Culture guides the way we see the world. Laura told the story of the Muslim woman who was offered a bed for the night by a Christian woman. In accordance with her culture to face a certain direction, the Muslim woman slept with her feet where the head should be. To the Christian who considers the head to be the sacred part of the body, this was a terrible insult. Cultural misunderstandings can cause us to misinterpret the actions of another, and there is no end to the trouble that results. The Women's League of Burma creates opportunities for these people, who live in ethnic-based refugee camps inside the Thailand border, to come together, to get to know each other, and to share their stories. If they can slowly, steadily, patiently, learn to humanize the other, they will indeed build bridges of peace.

Global Peace Services USA

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The newsletter of Global Peace Services USA is published quarterly. GPS-USA is incorporated in the District of Columbia and is tax-exempt. Current Board members are: Clara Doyle, John Eriksson, John Halpin, Mary Evelyn Jegen, Jean Martensen, Aura Martinez, Mindy Reiser, Tricia Sullivan, and Harry Yeide. We welcome contributions and comments. To contact us:

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