

Culture of Peace: Peace through cultivating compassion

By Bob Morse Ashland Culture of Peace Commission

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In the immediate aftermath of tragedy on 9/11, 2001, around the world complete strangers expressed genuine love and kindness, especially toward the people of the United States. It was an extraordinary outpouring of compassion and support. A year later the StarShine Academy in Phoenix, Arizona, began honoring the 11 days between 9/11 and Sept. 21 (the United Nation's International Day of Peace) through ceremony, education and celebration.

Following StarShine's lead, the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission (ACPC) holds its second annual Eleven Days for Peace, starting today, 9/11, 2017.

Ceremony and celebration will be woven into Eleven Ways to Engage Community each evening from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. (due to smoke, relocated to indoors at the Elks Club from outdoors at Lithia Park). Skill-building and heart-sharing will guide the Eleven Ways to Cultivate Compassion each midday from 11 a.m. to noon in the ACPC office, 33 First St., Suite 1, diagonally across from the Ashland Post Office.

All events are free, and everyone is welcome.

"The events of 9/11, like Ashland's 1997 flood, are great equalizers," says group facilitator Mira Sophia. "The challenge," notes Sophia, "is sustaining such mutual caring as a way of being."

I met with in the ACPC office with Sophia and the other Culture of Peace folks who will be facilitating the midday "Cultivating Compassion" sessions. We explored the varied paths to compassion and how compassion yields hope and gives rise to peace.

“The big picture — like the recent violence that erupted at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia — is so overwhelming,” recognizes Non-Violent Communication facilitator Joanne Lescher, “that I just go into inner mass chaos. What I bring (to cultivating compassion) is one-on-one and right in the moment, by asking questions, listening, not judging, and providing feedback.”

“I saw a black woman fall to her knees, keening, as I watched the events of Charlottesville unfold on TV,” shared Compassionate Listening facilitator Carol Hwoschinsky. “I’m not black and wasn’t in that place, yet I felt so deeply what she was expressing. I am aware of the capability of human beings to relate to each other, and that gives me great hope.”

“Things aren’t getting worse; they are getting uncovered,” says conflict resolution trainer Anna Cassilly. “Getting to see what is there so to feel the suffering of others gives me hope. I trust that the truth will set us free.”

Similarly, Sophia sees people waking up, having been asleep for a long time. “We have to start by being able to see, communicate with, and have compassion for each other. It’s more important than ever to be a bridge, and compassion is a huge container that embraces and stretches us.”

Facilitator Rich Schaeff concurs. “Compassion is the container that holds together the other culture of peace values of accountability, respect and inclusivity.”

“A major part of cultivating compassion,” says Hwoschinsky, “is cultivating awareness and taking responsibly for our shadows.”

“Compassion is an acknowledgment of someone else’s reality,” says Schaeff, “and a response to that reality. In our society, we value ‘being nice,’ and we tend to avoid negative feelings and discomfort. To be compassionate is to be willing to feel discomfort. I can hear what you’re saying and at the same time disagree. The same goes for respect. I can respect you and your choices and still ask you to get out of my life.”

The mention of discomfort reminds Hwoschinsky of her early-on association of peace with tranquility. “But it’s not how the world works. Instead everything is moving. Compassion is non-resistance to what is.” In Schaeff’s words, “Compassion is including everything.” To Sophia it’s an act of allowing.

“Compassion is seeing ourselves as the same instead of as different or separate,” Schaeff continues. “In compassion, I’m already with you. Compassion is seeing you and having you feel seen.”

The facilitators acknowledge how our society has reinforced our seeing people as the “other” and recognize that compassion grows gradually through practice. Lescher says, “Compassion is constantly building up as we meet and greet new people.”

Cassilly suggests growing compassion through practicing positive intent. “Positive intent is shifting from reaction to curiosity. It’s assuming that everyone is trying to do the best they can. In a culture of peace, instead of stereotyping, we would see that we’re all good people trying to make this life work for everybody. We would focus on the problem, not the person.”

Lescher reflected on how much we concentrate on “bringing” peace through compassion and other avenues. “People need to be acknowledged for all the ways that peace is already here. We forget that we all have peace in us.” Peace begins in each of our hearts.

— *Bob Morse is an ambassador of the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission. Email comments and questions to ashlandcpc@gmail.com. The ACPC website is www.ashlandcpc.org; like the commission on Facebook at www.facebook.com/AshlandCultureofPeaceCommission; follow twitter.com/AshlandPeace on Twitter. All are welcome to join the ACPC’s Talking Circle at 11 a.m. each Tuesday and Community Meeting at 4 p.m. each Wednesday, both at the ACPC office, 33 First St., Suite 1, diagonally across Lithia Way from the Ashland Post Office.*



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