

## **Ashland Culture of Peace Commission: Nurturing a sustainable culture of peace**

**By Eric Sirotkin / Ashland Culture of Peace Commission**

Posted Jul 18, 2016 at 2:00 AM

Updated Jul 20, 2016 at 6:51 PM

When I was young, my father would read me “The Story of Ferdinand,” about a bull who was more content lounging in the field, staring at daisies, than bullfighting. For me, growing up in a Cold War under the constant threat of nuclear annihilation, Ferdinand modeled a peaceful way of being. He refused to accept that he was supposed to fight. But years later, with climate change threatening the planet, I’m left wondering where the peaceful bull fits when the daisies are dying.

In founding the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission, we felt that to create a true culture of peace, we needed to examine our relationship not only to each other, but also to the natural world. This is rooted in the understanding that we are all connected and that violence toward one another, or toward the planet, creates a culture of violence toward us all.

Breaking a cycle of violence is never easy. In South Africa, I observed black freedom fighters making the historic decision to join with their white oppressors to transition from apartheid to freedom. The resulting Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, guided by the wisdom of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, expressly premised this path to peace on the notion of “ubuntu” — a deep understanding that we are only human through our relations with others. As Tutu told me, “the solitary individual is a contradiction in terms. We are corporate.” Long after, I discovered that ubuntu would be the key to creating both a culture of peace and a sustainable planet.

As a young lawyer, sustainability became fighting to clean up toxic dumps or ending our nuclear chain of horrors, and eventually organic farming, alternative energy, and recycling. After Jackson County successfully banned GMO crops, sustainability and the notion that my field could affect your plot, expanded

ubuntu from simply human relationships to everything around us, including animals, plants and the earth. Separation was the illusion that paved the path for environmental neglect and indifference. What we've been doing to the planet, we've intrinsically been doing to ourselves.

All human beings depend upon the environment in which we live. To be fully human, to live with one another in peace and equanimity, we must have a safe, healthy and sustainable environment. A culture of peace grounded in ecological awareness involves choosing to embrace a new story of connectedness, a deep ecological and sustainable view of each other and Planet Earth.

Pope Francis's historic Encyclical on the Environment reflected this ubuntu thinking, calling on us all to model new ways of thinking about sustainability, that reflect our "interdependence" and "common home" in order to face the unprecedented challenges of our changing planet. He told the United Nations that "any harm done to the environment, therefore, is harm done to humanity ... The climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God."

Awakening from the dream of our separation, we are left with the choice to live a sustainable life by consciously rejecting the culture of violence and destruction that has brought the planet to the brink. When John Lennon and Yoko Ono placed billboards around the world proclaiming: "The war is over. If you want it," John explained, "All we have to do is remember that: we've all got the power ... Don't believe that jazz that there's nothing you can do, 'just turn on and drop out, man.' You've got to turn on and drop in."

Watching my grandson play in the yard with such hope and innocence, unaware of the projections of climate tipping points and dire forecasts, the message shouts in my ear: The planet can be saved. If you want it. It's time to "drop in," and create a new culture of peace and sustainability.

Support the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission as it helps our community to experience Walt Whitman's anthem: "For every atom in me, as well belongs to you." Ashland can "be the city we want to see" and model a new story for the world, "if we want it." As we reshape our collective imagination, we shift the future. By examining our choices as a society, business or community through the lens of ubuntu, we build a sustainable culture of peace.

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