

CULTURE OF PEACE: Peace when conflict seems to rule the dialogue

By David Wick Ashland Culture of Peace Commission

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As our nation and community wrestles with real issues which impact our daily lives such as healthcare, housing and climate change, the question arises for me: How do I remain engaged, yet peaceful?

There are real issues at stake and it's important we lift each other up and focus on the direction we wish to go as representatives of peace. Yet the goal can become murky in apparent conflict all around.

How do we truly become the change we want to see in the world?

It's more and more challenging to keep an open mind and not become upset and reactive to what I see and hear. This is true even in some of my local conversations.

Given the work that I do with the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission, the question comes to mind, "How does one remain in a position of peace when conflict seems to rule the dialogue?" I see that this question has real consequences for us as individuals, and as a community.

I put the question to two longtime colleagues who have a national and international perspective on issues of conflict, personal well-being, and community resilience. Dot Maver is a Founding Trustee of the National Peace Academy USA, and is a founder and board member of the Global Alliance for Ministries and Infrastructures of Peace. James O'Dea is a former President of the Institute of Noetic Sciences, Washington office director of Amnesty International and CEO of the Seva Foundation.

"First and foremost, a personal practice of peace is essential, with a focus on mindfulness, to ensure one stays centered, calm and intentional, regardless of outer circumstance," Maver continues, "Second, it is key to stay focused on

solutions that benefit the common good rather than focusing on what we do not want.”

Her perspective is known in peace circles. Many of our great leaders have highlighted the need to work toward peace, not against violence. It’s from this point of view, she suggests, we speak to each other.

“This is the work of peacebuilding, including dialogue and deep listening, anger management, empathy, nonviolent communication, restorative justice, sharing, a willingness to cooperate on behalf of the common good, and an understanding that unmet needs drive behavior. Thus together we build safe, healthy, sustainable communities.”

Her advice in how to create more meaningful dialogue is not something to be learned or practiced quickly. But, as O’Dea explains, it can be accomplished through work.

“Dialogue takes practice,” O’Dea says. “We are so used to muddling feelings, ideas, beliefs, attitudes and opinions in the name of dialogue.” She tells me the purpose of dialogue is not to broadcast an opinion or win an argument, but when these elements become mixed together it can be unsatisfying and even enraging.

“Who wants a situation where you end up even arguing over facts?”

And now that the stage has been set for so called “alternative fact,” this becomes even more difficult. O’Dea continues: “Dialogue is designed for one central purpose and that is to practice listening deeply to each other, not debating each other. So the thing that has the power to bring people into peaceful dialogue is inviting them to share their experience and letting them know that their lived experience is of real value.”

This question takes us to a place of respectful conversation which focuses on what cannot be disputed — the lived experience of another. This, says O’Dea, is the way to peace.

“Listening to each other’s actual experience is what opens the heart and feeds understanding. It is not about who is right and who is wrong, it’s about what’s real for people. To really hear each other, we have to stop judging each other,

and when we do we can learn what's going on in people's lives. And, most importantly, we can meet as equals."

So as we move through the many difficult decisions ahead as a community of people with varied experience, the answer to the question may be in asking it, listening deeply to the response, and mutually have the willingness to cooperate in reaching a solution for the common good.

David Wick is executive director of the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission. 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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