

## **Culture of Peace: Peace is more than the absence of war**

**By Bob Morse Ashland Culture of Peace Commission**

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When a reporter for Japan's largest-circulation newspaper witnessed President Obama speaking in Hiroshima this past summer, she became curious. How motivated are US citizens to bring about peace?

Sonoko Miyazaki, a reporter for The Asahi Shimbun, carried this question to America where she visited both Ashland and the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission (ACPC). At the end of her discussion with the Culture of Peace, she admitted, "I have dedicated my life to a nuclear bomb-less future, believing that peace was merely the absence of war, but here I've learned that peace has many facets."

During her visit, we discussed how peace occurs when community members recognize each other's inherent worth, acknowledge the value in meeting each person's basic needs, or speak transparently from their heart without pretense or deceit. Peace is enhanced when we look into the eyes of the other members of our town without assuming or questioning how they became so rich or so poor; noticing each other erases invisibility and invites empathy.

As the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission enters its second year, it reflects on its own first-year trajectory and early-on spoken and written words, such as "The culture of peace is a new paradigm, defying precise description as our language has evolved from the culture of war in which we've all been raised."

The Ashland Culture of Peace Commission recognizes the significance of each person's taking responsibility for their own actions. But the ACPC had come to realize that a war mentality had been held accountable for ways that we objectify and exclude others: It's us vs. them, and somehow we're never wrong, and they're always to blame.

Actually, war can appear abstract — too far away, never ending, and politically complex — to form the basis of our exclusionary and objectifying attitudes. As the Ashland Culture of Peace evolved over this past year, it became clear that not everyone characterizes our current culture as simply one of war. Like the Japanese journalist, ACPC recognized that peace is more than a state which emerges from the lack of war.

The nightly vigils ACPC held in September during its Eleven Days For Peace illuminated many of the faces of violence that we humans inflict upon others and ourselves. Such shadow obstacles to peace included genocide, racism, addiction, abuse, sex trafficking, combat trauma, food disparity, environmental degradation and the patriarchal treatment of women and men.

Compared to war, these obstacles hit closer to home, searing our hearts with emotional shrapnel, reminding us of the myriad mini-battles raging in our own backyard. The invited hosts for each vigil, local individuals or groups, articulated statistics and shared anecdotes which made visceral the pain of aggression emerging from the many ways that we fail to see each other's humanness, allowing fear to displace love. To remain present to this suffering, vigil facilitators introduced the Tibetan Buddhist practice of Tonglen: Breathing into the pain and transmuting it into compassion.

The evening vigils were balanced by midday talking circles on values which underlie peace — such as compassion, forgiveness, respect and love. Just as naming the many near-to-us cruelties painted a more recognizable portrait of violence than the massive canvas of war, the diamond of peace is less elusive when its many facets are named, savored, felt and articulated in terms of each speaker's own experience.

From her own experience, the Japanese reporter had developed a sense of how a culture of peace grows out of the debris of war. Over time our sense shifts, deepens.

From a place of curiosity, a culture of peace utilizes inquiry to listen to each person's own rendition of how peace develops. Out of our collective unknowing how to think our way into this new mindset of peace, we rely instead on our hearts.

As our community examines the extensive barriers to peace, compassion emerges. Breathing into our shared discomfort, the path to mercy becomes illuminated. Each reflection on an underlying value launches a movement toward a culture of peace.

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