“Right now many people feel so vulnerable, not sure if they will have access to healthcare or enough funds to live in Ashland,” said Lucy Edwards, a 21-year resident of Ashland who works for social justice in Central America and worries about injustice locally. “Neighbors who have been here for years are now targeted for deportation.”

At my invitation, Edwards was joined by other long-time Ashlanders in the Ashland Culture of Peace (ACPC) office to examine how Ashland has changed over the years. Out of our discussion, relationships with oneself and others emerged as elements that endorse a culture of peace.

Shirley Patton arrived in Ashland in 1958 to begin her acting career at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. “There were five grade schools, each with an egalitarian sense that no neighborhood was better than another.” Students in every school represented the full range of economic standing. “It breaks my heart that working families are getting squeezed out.”

“Ashland has changed tremendously over the years,” says 27-year resident Gabrielle Leslie, a counselor and consultant. It’s no longer the family-oriented town it once was. “There isn’t as much allowance, diversity and inclusivity.”

Leslie continues with a question. “What’s kept me here despite all the changes? I still find like-minded people.”

Mike McGuire, who has been in service to his spiritual and geographic communities for longer than his 27 years of living in Ashland, concurs. “In Ashland, I feel like I can be my authentic self and practice peace every day. I’m encouraged by those around me to know myself. There is a movement here toward a culture of peace. There are not many places I can say that about.”
Jim Phillips, currently retiring from 20 years of being a professor of anthropology at Southern Oregon University, reflected on some problems inherent in Southern Oregonians seeing Ashland as different from the surrounding region — an “oasis,” even.

Phillips honors how much he’s learned from his students. “They couldn’t care less about your gender and sexual orientation, but they do feel the social class difference. Guys who come to class in their pickup truck are the most open to hearing about social justice. How can we learn from the rest of our region and the rest of the region learn from us?”

Patton admitted to having known for years about privilege. “But just last week, I realized that I am the ‘elite.’ I have lived a life of great privilege. I’m not comfortable with ‘We are superior’ (personally, locally, or globally).”

“I’ve been thinking about the number of people who have felt like they failed because they were put down by the elite,” said Patton, reflecting on her sorrow. “How to reach them and show that they are respected? There has to be a large group in our country that is very wounded. Some of us have been arrogant to make them feel that way.”

“Woundedness is informed by the trauma underlying it,” noted Edwards, as she described her years of living in a war zone and accompanying war-traumatized people. Witnessing for Peace in Honduras and Nicaragua is possible because the privilege of the “international” provides security for the accompanied person. “When people have been harmed by trauma, it’s very hard to fix anything. Something has to fall apart.”

“We as a (US) culture are not prepared for falling apart,” Edwards asserted, then asked, “How can we be compassionate and allow for change and allow for other people’s anger?”

McGuire acknowledged his sadness for the people of Latin America as Edwards spoke and addressed the role of the heart in a culture of peace. “Things that have the deepest meaning are not in our logic. Feeling takes us beyond successes and failures.”
“How we feel affects our courage, and it takes courage because we’re going to have conflict,” says Edwards, emphasizing her focus on relationships. “I’m okay when (knowing) we’re all (in this) together.”

Edwards’s words echoed the values of a culture of peace — compassion, accountability and inclusivity. “I have felt the most afraid when I felt disconnected from the person (I was accompanying), even as I maintained compassion for the trauma that caused the disconnect. If we’ve isolated anyone, we need to look at who and why.”

“When I get confused or afraid, I find time for silence,” added McGuire. Patton described the courage and comfort derived from standing silently with Women in Black.

“I’ve found that it takes courage to be vulnerable, and it’s important to stay vulnerable,” says Patton, bringing the discussion full circle from the “lack of security” aspect to the “inner, open” aspect of vulnerability.

“All of my outward (peace) work is inward,” says Edwards. “I’m always looking for the human being. It’s my work everywhere.”

—Ashland Culture of Peace Commission ambassador Bob Morse has resided in the Rogue Valley since 1977 and in Ashland since 1988. 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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