

Culture of Peace: A day of independence, a lifetime of interdependence

By Bob Morse Ashland Culture of Peace Commission

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“Independence is the freedom from tyranny,” says Trish Broersma, a certified equine specialist who founded and directs the local Riding Beyond program. This week, the United States celebrates Independence Day, commemorating the adoption of the Declaration of Independence 241 years ago on July 4, 1776.

Curious as to the relationship between independence and interdependence and their bittersweet affiliation with a culture of peace, I invited several Ashlanders involved with coaching, public speaking and healing into a conversation at the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission (ACPC) office.

To seasoned Toastmaster Walter Carlisle, independence is both plural and singular: “Both nationally and personally, independence is about standing on our own two feet.”

“Independence is a necessary part of our development,” says Debra Sheetz, a Compassionate Listening devotee, “that helps us know who we are — our gifts and our shadows — so that we know how to interact with the rest of the world.”

Peggy Dean, executive director of the Jean Houston Foundation, experiences independence and interdependence as intrinsically connected. “They lead to each other, and I don’t see them as separate.”

“What we do has an effect all the way across the world,” says Broersma of interdependence. “We’re all one world, one community.” Sheetz references Broersma’s work with horses in helping cancer survivors as an example of interdependence. “We’re learning to become a partner instead of a dominator with our environment.”

The conversation turned to evidence of interdependence in Ashland, windows into a culture of peace. “People are willing to see each other in a genuine sense,” observes Carlisle. Dean agrees. “People look into other eyes and listen at a deeper level. When we’re recognized, seen, and heard, then there’s a respect for each other as people.”

Broersma admitted to feeling compelled to console a woman sitting on the curb, uncontrollably sobbing, and Sheetz felt moved to approach an older woman wandering the railroad tracks, lost, seemingly demented. “There’s an essence of random acts of kindness in this town,” says Sheetz.

Broersma described Ashland as a community that embraces people in transition and a place where people are supported in taking their own path. Sheetz explained, however, that it was only members of our homeless subculture and their advocates who recently held a memorial for John Thiry, a homeless man believed to have been mentally ill.

“There’s not a real sense of community embracing all. The homeless, the students, the ‘other,’ are (considered) a problem,” Dean noted. “We don’t treat them as though they are our neighbors. We don’t help them and listen to them.”

Sheetz added, “We can get so attached to our own opinions that it prevents us from becoming more open and from challenging our own viewpoints. We hold onto our points of view with tenacity.” She posed the question, “How do we create interdependence (and a culture of peace) if we don’t know the people around us?”

Dean responded, “We create interdependence not by being responsible for everyone else, but by having each other’s back.”

Broersma addressed the all-too-common scenario when people don’t agree with one another. “Then they want the independence that’s part of our (sense of) freedom in this country, but they don’t honor interdependence when they turn their backs on others. A culture of peace needs to be attentive to how difficult interdependence can really be.”

Carlisle turned to music as a metaphor for the greater challenges of interdependence over independence, noting that, “A (lone) singer doesn’t harmonize.” Only when two or more are singing together does harmony come

into play.

Broersma continued, still thinking about disagreement. “Peace is not the absence of conflict. It’s the process of handling conflict. There are resources in the community to turn to that lead to peace — Resolve, Compassionate Listening, (Non-Violent Communication), others.”

Then, upon further reflection, an insight arose within Broersma. “Battered women, for instance, hold in their (interpersonal) conflicts. I never thought about working with battered women as part of the peace culture.” She mused on a culture of peace offering transformational guidance to people in the community. “Peace doesn’t just mean tranquility.”

Sheetz concurred. “There is no peace unless all aspects of our society and our city are addressed — battered, homeless, racial.”

Dean observed, “In this conversation, there (surfaced) a lot more good than lack in Ashland.” Reflecting on the thousands of people who come here as visitors, Dean recognized all the potential exchanges. “When we access our best self, we see someone transform in front of us. We have (thousands of) opportunities to demonstrate peace.”

— *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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