

What is a 'culture of peace'?

By Bob Morse / Ashland Culture of Peace Commission

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*Editor's Note: This is the second in a series of columns from the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission about its work in the community. **The first, which appeared Feb. 20, is online at www.dailytidings.com**. Future columns will appear biweekly on Mondays starting April 11.*

A culture of peace is a new paradigm. It's a new model for society, a new way of being, of interacting, of resolving conflict. Crafting a culture of peace is challenging in a world where language has tended to reflect a culture of war.

A culture of peace was declared in Ashland last September with the launching of the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission (ACPC) on the UN's International Day of Peace. Working to support the United Nation's mission to avoid the "scourge" or curse of war, UNESCO begins its Constitution by asserting that "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed." But most of us fall short when trying to think our way into a new mindset. It's hard to rely solely on our brains to shift the attitudes which result in stereotyping. It's difficult to overcome the habit of distinguishing ourselves from others by casting "them" as different from and less than "us."

A culture of peace invites us to engage our hearts. It encourages us to slow down our knee-jerk reactions by feeling before we think and then thinking before we act. Compassion means to feel another's suffering, and a culture of peace brings such empathy to both conversations and systems. Describing the strength it takes to face struggles without fear, the word "courage" derives from an ancient word for heart. It takes courage to recognize the inherent value and basic needs of each member of our city, while remaining mindful of the diverse gifts which we each bring to our community.

Culture consists of the beliefs, customs and way of life in a society. Culture underlies the functioning of such societal institutions as schools, businesses, courts, media and governments. How would life in Ashland change if being inclusive became a priority, if inviting everyone's participation became the norm and if respecting our common humanity became commonplace? Could we imagine embedding compassion into our listening so to grasp not just the words but also the emotions and deep-down values of fellow Ashlanders? What might be the outcome of all residents and visitors feeling truly safe, heard and empowered?

Peace is not the absence of conflict. In a culture of peace, disagreeing parties would collaborate to discover solutions, possibly conclusions that neither could have realized on their own. In its Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace, the UN recognized that peace "requires a positive, dynamic participatory process where dialogue is encouraged and conflicts are solved in a spirit of mutual understanding and cooperation." The cost of such peace-building would be the requirement that all persons be responsible for their actions. The anticipated result of such accountability would be deepened trust.

The seeds of peace have already been germinating in Ashland. In our musical and theatrical city, it wouldn't be a stretch to picture an emphasis on art and beauty, nor would it be a challenge in a town so filled with care providers and life coaches to envision outbreaks of nurturing and curiosity and influxes of kindness and generosity. In Ashland there's an awakening to the role of humans in the web of life, ushering in more harmonious partnerships between humankind and the environment and a greater respect for natural resources.

In a culture of peace, bridges would be erected connecting all the players already contributing to the wellness of the world, of which Ashland has many, while windows would open to let in larger truths and broader perspectives to better grasp local and world affairs. In a culture of peace, a living model for thriving together would continue to emerge and evolve.

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