

Culture of Peace: Swiss show us the value of peace

By Dennis Read

Posted Jan 15, 2018 at 12:01 AM

My wife and I spent the last two weeks of December in Switzerland. While there I had a special reunion.

In 1958 I left my home in Iowa to spend the summer with Hanspeter and Franny Hostettler in a little farm village outside Bern. I was an American Field Service student, one of several hundred sent around the world in an effort to promote intercultural learning. The Hostettlers lived on the second floor of the schoolhouse where Hanspeter taught the village children ages 8 to 14. Even though my host parents knew little English and I knew practically no German, we were able to manage a deep and lasting connection.

Franny died three years ago, but Hanspeter is still busy with life. With the help of two of his children, Anna and Otto, I was able to spend a day with my host father, now 86 years old.

When I spent the summer with Hanspeter Hostettler, I saw him inculcating values of peace and harmony — values sunk deep in the Swiss heritage — in the children in his classroom. He continued to do so as a teacher for more than 40 years until he retired. And when I returned to see him nearly 60 years later, I had the opportunity to hear him reflect with pride on those many years and those many students.

Among Western nations, Switzerland is remarkable for not having been in a state of war since 1815. No country has an absolutely clear conscience, but Switzerland has been able to maintain armed neutrality as far back as the Reformation. We can learn much from its example.

In the years since I was an exchange student the United States has waged three major military conflicts and carried out numerous other military actions.

The American Field Service has roots in World War I as a motorized ambulance service carrying wounded allied soldiers out of battle zones to field hospitals. It again served during World War II as a volunteer medical corps.

In 1946, one of its original members, Stephen Galatti, established the American Field Service student exchange program out of a desire to advance a more just and peaceful world. Before I left for Switzerland I met Mr. Galatti in the AFS office in New York, a requirement of any exchange student who was checking in. I wrote in my journal that he was “a very nice old man.”

That observation hardly does justice to Mr. Galatti. He had been awarded the Croix de Guerre from France, the Order of the British Empire from England and the Medal of Freedom from the United States and was recognized as bringing about profound transformations in the lives of thousands of young people around the world.

My dismissive comment is pretty consistent with the rest of my summer journal. Truthfully, I was an unformed teenager whose interests were overwhelmingly superficial. But in the pages recording the weather and what I ate, there are glimmerings of a deeper understanding.

That deeper understanding is badly needed among all of us. Beyond that is the need to put it into action. Recently I found a way to do that: the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission (ACPC). As I learn about its efforts to promote respect for all human rights, to ensure equality between men and women, to foster democratic participation and to advance understanding, tolerance and solidarity, I find myself resolved to participate in its work.

These goals are lofty. We are a far distance from achieving them. But by applying ourselves individually and collectively, we can make a start.

The Ashland Culture of Peace Commission is advancing these goals through its weekly talking circles and community gatherings, its volunteer work in Ashland's winter shelters, its forum for candidates of local offices and its workshops in bridging differences and communication training. Those who participate in these activities advance their personal values of authenticity, respect, compassion and inclusivity. And they contribute to making Ashland a better, stronger, more vital community.

Switzerland is a country that has long embraced a culture of peace and Hanspeter Hostettler has furthered that culture. Stephen Galatti has done likewise in the United States. They are examples we all should follow. The Ashland Culture of Peace Commission is one way that we can.

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