

## PEACE

When I considered the topic of peace and how I wanted to write about it, I was overwhelmed.

If humanity desires peace so greatly then why does it never seem to last? Looking back at two hundred years of history and at our breakthroughs in science and medicine it seems that our advances in technology, while marvellous, have been matched only by our ability to wage ever more alarming and widespread war. Conflict rages on in the Middle East and in Africa and at the time I am writing this, it is threatened in our own corner of the globe as North Korea squares off against the United States.

It seems that at any given time, some part of the world is on fire. The periods of peace appearing more fragmented and further apart. Our ability as a species to wage war used to be contained by events and circumstances beyond our ability to influence like weather, economics and geography.

However, modern warfare has seen the rise of weapons that can be fired at any country, from anywhere and in the most remote and harsh terrains. There are now no limits on our power to inflict damage on each other. Enormous amounts of money are made from the manufacture and sale of sophisticated weapons. War may be hell but, it seems, it is also big business.

Let's not kid ourselves. We know what peace is and we know we need peace in order to survive as a species. That is a simple, logical fact. So why does it seem so elusive? Some philosophers argue that human beings are just hardwired for conflict. That may be so but even with that pre-disposition we can still choose to use our heads rather than our fists.

I believe we all know what we need to do to promote peace. We just aren't willing to own it as individuals. We like the idea of setting up organisations like the United Nations and the Security Council and giving the enormous responsibility of maintaining international relations to what basically amounts to a handful of diplomats and representatives. We might sponsor a child or give money to organisations like UNESCO or donate to disaster relief as a one off, but the day to day graft and the hard work of spreading and keeping the peace has been outsourced. Meanwhile, we sit back, pontificate about how much we want peace, applaud our own right minded thinking, grumble about the state of the world and sigh as we shrug our shoulders and tell ourselves that it's all too hard.

I'm not suggesting we be naïve. History shows us that we must be prepared to defend our families, our countries and the shared values that underpin our democratic way of life. Sometimes it's not possible despite our best efforts to resolve disputes peacefully. There has to be a willingness on the part of all those involved to be prepared to compromise if peace is to be achieved and maintained.

There is no gold medal for peaceful conduct. I'm not talking about the Nobel Peace Prize. I'm talking about what we value in our schools and universities and workplaces. Everyone loves a winner, right? Winning resonates with us. It's measurable and visible. But, by comparison, what recognition do we give those who every day labour and sacrifice for peace and refuse to let it remain just a far-fetched ideal? We need to realise that not everything that is worthwhile doing comes with a built-in prize. We absolutely must continue to educate people. Nelson Mandela said that "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world". However, it can't just be the kind of education that tells people what to think and how to think unless we are first prepared to listen to their stories. To have

empathy for them and be prepared to be changed by them and learn from them ourselves. In that way, peace can become no longer just a desire but a reality.

A desire for peace should never be confused with cowardice. During World War I conscientious objectors were imprisoned and shunned. Some suffered painful and humiliating punishments but still refused to fight. At Kent State University in 1970, four students were killed and nine injured when the Ohio State Guard fired into a rally held to protest the Vietnam War. Sometimes it is more difficult and more dangerous to hold onto an ideal of peace than it is to take your chances in battle.

I would like to issue a challenge. It's a challenge to those of us who have the privilege of living in a country that already has the ingredients necessary for peace. A democratic government, freedom of the Press and the rule of law. To those of us who exist within the framework of the Commonwealth and who enjoy shared values, opportunities for education, the maintenance of human rights and the privilege of assisting other members to continue to develop their societies. We may not be able as individuals to influence directly the outcome of negotiations between warring countries but we can draw on those values that we all share within our Commonwealth community and pledge to take individual responsibility for peace. As Mahatma Gandhi said, "Peace between countries must rest on the solid foundation of love between individuals."

The Commonwealth Charter sets out the values by which peace can be maintained. Every Commonwealth member has pledged to uphold these values. We have already have a framework to enable us to put peace into effect, we just need to do it.

If we want peaceful relations internationally, we have to practice peaceful relations in our own lives and in our own societies. This is hard in an on-line era that makes it easy to bully and belittle people without having to face them and hear and see the repercussions of our handiwork on them. Social media feeds the mistaken ideas that popularity is the same as personality and visibility the measure of virtue. Where a software program tells us how many likes we have attracted for our posting and how we translate that into a measure of how likeable we are. Where opinions are taken as fact so we don't have to question and challenge the reality of our beliefs. We can pick and choose the truth that suits us and reinforces us, not the one that really informs us.

When I look at my own country of New Zealand I am proud of our bi-cultural heritage. The effort that Maori and Pakeha have made to engage in peaceful co-operation with our Treaty of Waitangi partners, to redress historical grievances, to forgive past wrongs, to make and accept apologies and to engage with each other on the future of our country. We don't always get it right. But we keep trying and we keep talking.

If I am honest we still have a lot of work to do as a country. Our child abuse statistics shame us. We need to work on our own act while we continue to reach out to others and promote peace. I think that each and every country within the Commonwealth can also look to itself. See what it can do better at home and challenge itself to bring peace to its own society while continuing to reach out and promote peace both in the Commonwealth; and as a Commonwealth to promote peace to other nations.

Peace is more than just an absence of war. It must become as valuable and as necessary as oxygen. We need to actively live the virtues that promote peace- tolerance, empathy and forgiveness. True

forgiveness may be hard but as Mandela also said, “Courageous people do not fear forgiving for the sake of peace”.

People have done and continue to do wonderful things. We have conquered disease, created masterpieces and flown to outer space. It’s just that somewhere along the line we have forgotten the need to master ourselves. And we are going to need to do that to be able to make use of all the great achievements we have made.

Peace is now the last frontier and it’s time to make our stand.

Meg Roberts