

REFLECTIONS ON WAR, PEACE, AND HEALING

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By circumstances unknown to me, I inherited a manila envelope containing about a dozen pamphlets on prayer and healing. I surmised that Bar Cummings had collected the pamphlets because she had the reputation for being a wise elder and because one pamphlet had the inscription “Bar—with love from mother, Aug. 1957.” It hurt a bit to read that message, because I knew that my mother could never have sent me such a gift. I did not know Bar well at all. She was about the age of my mother, and I was new to Friends. She left Friends Meeting at Cambridge sometime in the 80’s when she became Barbara St. John and transferred to Midcoast Meeting in Maine. I don’t know who was inspired to entrust me with these treasures, but the spirit works in mysterious ways in a Friends meeting. I am thankful that the meeting has provided a spiritual family for someone like me, who was coming in from the cold.

I was reviewing the pamphlets in preparation for a workshop in April on prayer and healing. My leading was to provide care for caregivers—those who are providing care for a loved one or pastoral care for meeting members. The level of stress and busyness and the need for healing are increasing noticeably in our meetings. Our pastoral caregivers, which include many of us formally and informally, are on the front lines for meeting this need. I hoped to create a day of rest and recreation by providing healing touch with John Calvi, deep listening, singing, and a meeting for worship with attention to healing. Yearly Meeting Ministry and Counsel fully supported this opportunity.

The pamphlet with the inscription was a series of sermons by Leslie D. Weatherhead on “The Will of God” (1944, reprinted in 1999). Rev. Weatherhead (1893-1976) was one of Britain’s leading Methodist preachers and a prolific author. In this small pamphlet, written during World War II, when so many prayers were unanswered, Weatherhead proclaimed that terrible things are never the will of God. It is totally inconsistent to believe in a God of love and then to attribute misfortune to the will of God. God wants us to be happy, and is working in every circumstance to bring that about. The happiness that comes from God brings the peace of mind that is necessary for us to become channels of healing love. This was the message I wanted to bring to the workshop. Weatherhead’s last sermon, a reflection on a quotation from Dante “In his will is our peace,” contains an important mirror for our time.

You have to be at least my age to remember World War II. I was a few days shy of my fifth birthday on December 7, 1941, the day that changed everything. We were living at Fort De Lessups on the Panama Canal. The base went into blackout that same night. We were sitting in complete darkness, because we did not have time to set up blackout curtains. I remember asking my mother for a glass of milk. She had no sooner opened the refrigerator than there was an MP (Military Police) pounding on our door yelling, “Turn out that light!” Suddenly, we were accused of guiding enemy warplanes to the canal. My father, a 27-year-old Lieutenant in Military Intelligence, began working 24-hour days to protect the canal from sabotage. My mother took a job as censor in order to avoid immediate deportation. And, I had a full-time baby sitter. Eventually, we were forced to evacuate. Mother and I returned to the States to live with my grandmother. That was my first plane ride. We were told to keep all the window curtains closed on takeoff to prevent anyone taking an aerial picture of the Canal Zone.

When the war ended, we were already living in Bogotá, Colombia, where my father was the military attaché at the embassy. Colombia was neutral during the war, so there was no national celebration for

its end. The only political event that I remember was that Japan closed its embassy in Bogotá. Their building became the American School, where I attended fourth grade. When we returned to the States, my father retired from the Army as a Lt. Colonel. That was his finest hour.

“How to find peace during war?” is the topic of Weatherhead’s last sermon. I quote:

We may feel that it was all very well for Dante to say, “In his will is our peace”; but there are so many things happening in the world today that are outside his will—at any rate in the sense of being outside his intention—that we may feel debarred from peace. Exactly! That is why we do not find peace, but instead war without and restlessness within. After these years of war, it is not surprising to find so many people ill. If not incapacitated in body, thousands are anxious and worried and sleepless. But on top of it, if a man has any imagination or sensitiveness left, and lets his mind brood over the slaughter and suffering, the worry and unhappiness of this war-stricken world, his mind is continually wounded, and the power of the mind over the body is so great that one almost feels it is true to say that only those can feel well who are living both mentally and physically, remote from the horror of war, or who somehow, by virtue of their temperament or their indifference or by the skillful practice of looking the other way, have built up a wall of defense between themselves and the bleeding world around them.

How eerily this is like the condition we find ourselves in now! If the war were over, why would so many of us feel this way today? World War II was like a great fire that was put out by an even greater fire. But the embers have spread everywhere slowly burning, sometimes flaring forth into armed conflict between states, and always threatening a return to world war. Our global consciousness and this threat along with day-to-day violence pervade our civilization and create our current condition.

A quote from George Fox was my constant inspiration while preparing for the workshop on caring:

Sing and rejoice you children of the day and of the light; for the Lord is at work in this thick night of darkness that may be felt.

The workshop was everything I had hoped for in terms of renewed awareness of the power of love to heal. I know because this is what I experienced. I also know that there were a lot of folks who wanted to come to the workshop but did not because of the busyness of their lives. How to reach them? This work is important for the spiritual health of our meetings.