

The 22nd A. J. MUSTE LECTURE at HOPE COLLEGE
THE WEAKNESS OF WAR, THE POWER OF PEACE

Thomas Arendshorst, February 27, 2007

Thank you very much. I feel very honored to be here, and to have been asked to deliver the 22nd A.J. Muste Lecture. A.J. Muste was a driving forefather and guiding light of the modern peace and justice movements in the United States, and past Muste lecturers have included prophetic American leaders. Martin Luther King credited Muste as the mentor of American nonviolent direct action. Hope College is justly proud of this great American, A.J. Muste. I'm pretty intimidated.

I'm not an academic or a professional speaker. The only chances I get to be heard for a half-hour or more are long solitary walks and driving trips by myself. On the other hand, that means that I'm used to an appreciative audience, so you've got your work cut out for you.

The title of my talk is "the Weakness of War, the Power of Peace." In addressing these topics, I want to make one personal bias clear. Peace, and war, are not inherently partisan issues. Indeed, my core points are that peace is in everyone's interest, and war serves nobody's interest --- except for people with imperial or criminal intent. Peace and war are not just American problems, but I will use examples that are familiar to us Americans, examples that should hit home. My hopeful goal is to shed light, not blame. Every one of us has done violence to others.

There's a Cherokee story about an old man who sat with his grandson by the fire one evening and told him about a battle that goes on inside the hearts of all people.

"My son," he said, "two wolves battle for all people's hearts. One is Violence. It is anger, arrogance, fear, jealousy, greed, self-pity, guilt, lies, and superiority. The other is Peace. It is joy, love, hope, humility, kindness, generosity, truth, compassion and faith."

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: "Which wolf wins?"

The old Cherokee answered, "The one you feed."

For more than a generation, the greater American Dream of opportunity and justice for all has taken back seat to values centered around individualism and the power of short-term profits. As the pendulum of social sentiment and political leadership has swung toward a more dominating, judgmental set of biases, those biases have narrowed our approach to the values that define who we are. Our United States has moved insistently toward magnifying privileges for its most wealthy elite, neglect of disadvantaged Americans, and toward a false American dream of militaristic global empire.

For those of you who were born after 1960 or so, it's important to understand that our American political culture has not always been this way. From the 1930s into the '70s

our United States invested strongly in economic and political opportunity for neglected and disadvantaged Americans. It was a time when public policy embraced hopes for justice in the form of the recovery from the Great Depression, the postwar Marshall Plan, the American Civil Rights Movement, the War on Poverty, and initiatives like the Peace Corps. Economic prosperity accompanied these investments --- the historically consistent “Trickle-Up” effect of increasing aggregate demand.

Real peace encompasses a wealth of positive values, like the Good Wolf in the Cherokee story. This is peace in the biblical sense of Shalom, the Islamic sense of Salaam. It is also crucially real: if you talk about “peace” with people living in areas of violent conflict, they will tell you that peace is inevitably, invariably connected to Justice: fairness, freedom, equality, and opportunity. Finally, peace as a way of life is profoundly powerful, able to humble cruel tyrants and move the world toward justice.

The cultural shift in American values has also shifted America’s impact on others around the world. We need to constantly critique ourselves. What are our highest personal values? It’s not possible to value community and competition equally. What are the dominant values of our broad society? What do we want and hope for them to be? The values we choose to serve determine whether our actions will serve conflict and violence or justice and peace.

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What is “Peace”? One person might say that “Peace is the absence of war.” But another

The numbers don't lie. At the beginning of the twentieth century, aggressive war "succeeded" --- that is, defeated the opposing army and gained conquest --- 50% of the time. By 2000, after the aggressors in both World Wars lost everything and others like Soviet Afghanistan and American Viet Nam ended in debacles, the odds of successful aggressive war had plummeted to 20%. And these are the results of military powers who chose to attack, fully confident of easy victory.

The paradoxical truth is that war is terribly ineffective at accomplishing its purported aims. Can you think of a war, other than World War II, that didn't spawn further violence over time? Can you think of a modern-era war that actually produced

myths:

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The charge to war is ADD-impatient, immature, hormone-glutted futility. War's hope for legitimate goals is a desperate gamble against frightening odds.

Active peace, on the other hand, works. Nonviolent action wins. Peacebuilding replaces violent conflict's breeding grounds with just, harmonious processes and systems. Peace is wise, mature, strong behavior. Peace is always appropriate, and always offers hope. Peace is the winner's gamble.

PERSONAL PEACEBUILDING

If nonviolent resistance and transformative peacebuilding are remarkably safer and more effective than armed violence, why are we so willing to wage war? Why don't we approach security as a justice issue, working toward harmony and durable peace? How does all this connect with our individual lives?

It is my belief that the critical connector between the values we claim and the values we live is the vital connection of learning to see the common humanity, the "us" and "we" in all people.

Our relationships with others form circles of concern. Our closest circles are those of family and dearest friends. Outside them are circles of broader community that we claim as "ours." Any close group resists force and selfish behavior. We treat those inside our close circle of concern with cooperative behavior that seeks the common good. Think about your own experience: What makes a "good" parent, brother, or sister? What makes a "good neighbor"?

So, what happens when we interact with others outside our families and close communities? In primitive human societies, "first encounters" between groups who perceive each other as "not us" almost always trigger murderous responses. This is human instinct. Taking a broad view, it might be said that the project of civilization is to overcome this instinct for violence against those who are "not us."

In Christian terms, this is Jesus' theme in the story of the Good Samaritan, when he identifies himself with "the least of these" in Matthew 25, and in his expansion of God's chosen people to include all people everywhere. This inclusive concern is voiced, too, in Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, native American cosmologies, and virtually all religious traditions.

We behave one way with those we know and accept as "us" --- with empathy and cooperative actions that serve the common good. But, despite our polished veneer of civilization, we behave very differently toward those outside our circle of concern. Political leaders and ambitious profiteers manipulate these "othering" instincts all the time. When you hear empire builders getting excited about "making war for democracy" and "defending our American way of life," forgive them: they are responding to

perceived threats out of their primitive instincts. They just haven't gotten the civilization thing down yet.

This hope to stretch our circles of concern is, perhaps, the core challenge of both peace and justice. It challenges us in our relationships with people we see as "different" in our own towns and cities. It challenges us in the ways our decisions and lives interact with disadvantaged Americans of all stripes. It challenges the policies we allow our government leaders to pursue against aliens and enemies far away.

Bigger circles, better world.

We expand our circles of concern. We include more of God's creation as "we" and "us." We reject simplistic approaches and answers. We respect everyone's need and right to determine his or her own life decisions. We risk being unselfish and nonviolent, non-dominating. We question and resist manipulations of power. We invest what we can of ourselves in the justice of helping people who are poor, hurting, or oppressed.

Can we do this? Do we want to live this way, personally and as a society?

In the end, war, and peace are about values. We choose which values we place highest, and shape our lives.

Which wolf wins? The one we feed.
