From War to Peace

LEARNING THE LESSONS OF WAR  Peter van den Dungen
MAKING PEACE REAL  Betty Reardon
CULTIVATING A NEW ERA OF PEACE  Adolfo Pérez Esquivel
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The misery of war and conflict has been deeply etched into the history of humanity, perhaps never more so than in the past century. Is war an inevitability that humans are fated to suffer? The answer lies surely not in the nature of our biology but in the strength of the human spirit and our capacity to exercise wisdom.

In 2014, the world marked 100 years since the start of World War I, and this year we ring in 70 years since the end of World War II and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The incomparable destructiveness of these conflicts compelled a collective self-reflection as a global society that was perhaps as unique in history as the scale of the tragedies themselves. While commemorations are now being held across the world to contemplate the shadow of these catastrophic events, war and conflict continue to claim countless lives and cause unimaginable suffering.

In the face of this stark reality, the observance of these anniversaries offers the opportunity to ask what lessons we have learned from the wars and conflicts of the past and to embark with renewed determination toward the realization of a truly peaceful world, reminding ourselves that, in the words of the Preamble to the UNESCO Constitution, “Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.”

SGI President Daisaku Ikeda writes: “The future is determined by the depth and intensity of the vow or pledge embraced by people living in the present moment. As human beings, we possess the capacity to take steps to ensure that no one else, including future generations, must endure the sufferings that afflict us today.”

This issue of the SGI Quarterly brings together a diverse selection of articles that demonstrate how people the world over have been energized by their experiences of war and conflict to dedicate themselves to building a lasting future of peace. It is our wish that readers will be inspired by these articles and filled with a sense of hope that a peaceful future lies within our reach.

From War to Peace

A peace mural in South Sudan

Photo credit: © Sven Torfinn/Panos Pictures/Uniphoto Press
Hegel’s “We learn from history that we do not learn from history” is a well-known saying. Given the continuing prevalence of war, it can also be said that we certainly do not seem to learn from war, such a pervasive feature of history. However, Immanuel Kant, another great German philosopher and one of the most profound thinkers on war and peace, argued in the late 18th century that humankind learns from history and war, but only the hard way.

After the Napoleonic Wars (of which Kant witnessed the beginning), the main European powers instituted a “concert” system to prevent a similar violent disruption of the established international order. A century later, the horrors of World War I resulted in the creation of the League of Nations, the first organization of its kind, which was meant to limit the recourse to war. It also established agencies and the Permanent Court of International Justice in order to address issues that otherwise might result in war. These new institutions proved too weak to prevent another world conflagration, which occurred a mere two decades after the first one. During World War II, plans were laid for a successor world organization. The onset of the Cold War, the antagonism between the main powers since then and inherent weaknesses have made the United Nations a rather ineffective instrument for keeping the peace. At the same time, it cannot be denied that it pioneered new techniques (not even foreseen in the Charter) to limit or prevent war, such as UN peacekeeping operations.

The end of World War II also saw the beginnings in Europe (where France and Germany had been fighting each other in three wars since 1870) of a process of economic and social cooperation that resulted in a new political entity, the European Union. The need for this, as the surest way to abolish war and poverty, was urged by the organized peace movement in the 19th century, and similar ideas had been put forward in peace plans formulated by visionaries in earlier centuries. Victor Hugo’s prophetic presidential address at the Second General Peace Congress, held in Paris in 1849, proclaimed the coming of a United States of Europe from which war and poverty had been banished. Ridiculed at the time, it still makes for inspiring reading today. Europe, or at least many of its countries, got there in the end, but at what cost? The European Union’s success in forging peace and prosperity through regional cooperation stimulated the creation of similar, but far less successful, organizations in other parts of the world.

How can we learn from history to build a peaceful future?
World War II had other profound consequences, particularly for the two countries that were widely regarded as responsible for it—Germany and Japan. Apart from the terrible loss of civilian life and destruction of their cities, Germany was divided and Japan became the victim of the use of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Both countries adopted peace constitutions with self-denying ordinances regarding their military capabilities and intentions. But in other respects, Germany learned lessons and pursued policies with the aim of achieving peace and reconciliation with its erstwhile adversaries, which have largely been lacking in Japan. They involve elements of apology, compensation, repair and restitution—expressed in moral, material and symbolical terms. Without such a deliberate and sincere strategy on the part of Germany, the project of European unification (of which the country has been the main pillar, together with France) would have been impossible.

If Japan has learned lessons from the atrocities and crimes committed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the same cannot be said of the world as a whole. In his stimulating reflections on the change in the character of war and in people’s attitude toward it, Arnold Toynbee writes (in his autobiography, Experiences) that he had been jolted out of the traditional accepting attitude to war by the slaughter of half of his friends in World War I. The same revulsion against war was widespread in its aftermath. He noted that such revulsion “ought [to] have been total and universal from the moment . . . the world entered the Atomic Age.” He found that the American people, victorious in two world wars, had succumbed instead to militarism. Toynbee wrote this during the Vietnam War. Since then, the trauma of that war has been overshadowed by the events of 9/11, and militarism has become even more pervasive in American society.

The Role of Peace Museums

The mere fact that leading politicians and historians argue that what happened in August 1914 could be repeated today—for instance, in Asia, or Europe, where conflicts involving major powers could easily erupt into full-scale war—seems prima facie evidence of the truth of Hegel’s maxim. States continue to threaten each other with force (now including nuclear weapons), notwithstanding prohibitions enshrined in the UN Charter and international law and despite the availability of institutions and mechanisms for peaceful conflict resolution. Then, as now, voices cautioning reason, moderation, compromise and nonviolence are ignored or belittled. In this connection, it is interesting to observe the nature of the commemorations of the centenary of World War I that are presently taking place in many countries around the world. They provide us with an extensive case study of what lessons, if any, are being drawn from that catastrophe.

Jay Winter, one of the leading authorities in the field of war remembrance, has argued that “commemorating the Great War necessarily has a pacifist character.” However, in practice this seems to be largely confined to the expression of pious sentiment. For instance, we do not hear the complaint of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon: “The world is over-armed and peace is under-funded.” Yet, this goes a long way to explain not only the danger the world is in today, but also what is vital to turn a corner.

An appropriate, meaningful and fruitful remembrance would amount to the initiation of nothing less than a worldwide program of peace education as part of the development of a comprehensive culture of peace. Only this would provide any possibility of overcoming the culture of violence that remains pervasive in societies around the world. That peace is possible—indeed, that it is imperative for human survival—should be taught and learned in schools and universities and through peace museums.

In the modern world, museums are preeminent institutions, widely regarded as guardians of high culture that fulfill a major role in public education. It is telling that, whereas war and military museums are widespread (with hundreds of such museums in the US and UK alone) and often well-funded, peace museums are hard to find, with the singular exception of Japan. Likewise, war monuments abound, whereas antiwar and peace monuments are far less numerous. History textbooks have traditionally been dominated by war and its pretended heroes, with opponents of war and advocates of peace at best relegated to footnotes. The “invisibility” of peace in education, institutions and public life generally is a great hindrance to learning about peace and working toward it. In particular, museums honoring peacemakers of the past and present would inspire and encourage visitors to believe in peace and recognize their role in helping bring it about. In this way, perhaps, Hegel’s somber maxim may yet prove to be wrong.

It is telling that, whereas war and military museums are widespread, peace museums are hard to find.
From Humanitarian Awareness to Banning Nuclear Weapons

By Rebecca Johnson

A schoolgirl’s charred blouse and a child’s melted lunch box in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum brought home to me the realities of nuclear war. It was 1981, and I was a young teacher in Tokyo. Tears welled up as I felt a deep, visceral understanding of the horror of that bright August morning, when the “Little Boy” bomb incinerated a city full of people. I vowed that such inhuman weapons must never be used again.

A year later, I was back in Britain and getting involved in mass protests against a new generation of nuclear weapons. Invited to speak in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1983, I was by then a feisty, determined peace activist, living at the Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp where NATO planned to deploy the first cruise missiles in Europe.

Having recognized the inhumanity of nuclear weapons and war, I felt impelled to become an active peace campaigner. As a scientist, I researched the effects of nuclear detonations, blast, burns, radiation and nuclear winter. I also analyzed governmental justifications for nuclear weapons. Amazed by the flaws and irrationality embedded in nuclear doctrines, I felt that this was too important to leave up to politicians and militaries who had a vested interest in keeping nuclear weapons going. Their pro-nuclear assurances were unconvincing, especially as so many retired leaders confirmed our arguments about the risks and insecurities inherent in nuclear policies.

Taking to heart the feminist recognition that “the personal is political,” I put my career on hold and worked determinedly for disarmament and human rights. With millions calling for nuclear disarmament, Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in December 1987. This groundbreaking treaty banned and eliminated the ground-launched cruise missiles from Greenham Common, together with Pershing and SS-20 missiles from across Europe and Russia.

That success gave me an inspiring taste of what we could achieve if we worked globally. The INF Treaty enabled changes that brought the Berlin Wall down. That showed me the dynamic power of multilateral disarmament strategies—involving nonviolent activists, academics, diplomats, faith leaders, elected representatives and willing states, creating conditions to bring reluctant governments to act in accordance with international agreements. By 1988, I was working with campaigners, nuclear test victims, parliamentarians and governments to realize another treaty that would end another humanitarian obscenity. The long-sought Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty was concluded in 1996. It was an important achievement, but carried sobering lessons. Government negotiators overloaded the treaty with technical and political conditions that reduced its chances of entering into force. If our objective is genuine disarmament, it is not enough to make partial bans that allow the nine nuclear-armed states to keep modernizing their nuclear weapons in perpetuity.

To prevent proliferation and eliminate nuclear arsenals, we need to unequivocally prohibit nuclear weapons, thereby taking away their political status and value. When a nuclear-ban treaty is in place, the nuclear-armed states will have to stop modernizing their arsenals and undertake genuine steps to fulfill disarmament obligations. History shows that an active, inclusive campaign like the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) must work with all nations—possessors and non-possessors—as we all have responsibilities to initiate and negotiate disarmament treaties.

It has been 70 years since atomic bombs incinerated Hiroshima and Nagasaki. If we do not want this to happen again, we must bring about a universally applicable treaty that clearly prohibits the use, deployment, development, production, stockpiling and transfer of nuclear weapons and devices, requiring and leading to their total elimination. If not now, then when? If not us working together, then who? A nuclear-ban treaty has to be the next step toward our future security in a world without nuclear weapons.

Rebecca Johnson, internationally recognized expert on nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation, is director of the London-based Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy, vice president of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and former cochair of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons.
In 1946, I had the good fortune to be born into a pacifist Christian family. My father was a religiously inspired conscientious objector to World War II and spent four years in detention instead of serving in the New Zealand armed forces. He experienced a lot of personal discrimination for this unpopular position, but his courageous stand was an important factor in my development as a peace activist.

From a very early age, I was conscious of the negative consequences of violence and the beneficial effects of nonviolence. Like many others, I was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi’s principled nonviolence and its power to transform colonial and repressive regimes. I was also inspired by Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement in the United States. I was particularly impressed by the discipline of civil rights activists because they chose to suffer and make sacrifices for their beliefs instead of inflicting suffering on their oppressors. My father, Gandhi and King, therefore, were all critical determinants of my own commitment to peace and justice by peaceful means.

Being born in New Zealand, however, meant that I was not directly involved in grappling with peace or justice issues as were my mentors in India and the United States. This relatively benign position of New Zealand in the world was soon challenged by the nuclear arms race and the development of more and more diabolical nuclear weapons. This affected me very personally.

On July 9, 1962, for example, I witnessed the way the sky changed during a high-altitude nuclear test called “Starfish Prime” conducted by the United States. The bomb, launched from Johnston Atoll, southwest of the Hawaiian Islands, exploded 400 kilometers above the ground, knocking out communication systems all around the Pacific. The aurora it generated could be seen from New Zealand and many other islands in the southwest Pacific Ocean, turning the sky red and yellow. I still remember the feeling of tremendous dread it stirred in me.

The fact that the bomb had such a profound effect on the electromagnetic nature of the atmosphere underlined how cavalier nuclear scientists were about playing with nature. I was shocked by the insanity of the scientific establishments of the US, USSR, UK, China and France in their dedicated pursuit of increasingly deadly bombs. From that moment, I became a dedicated antinuclear activist and member of the Youth Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

During my university years, the Vietnam War was a further motivation for me to become a peace activist.

I have never flinched from my commitment to the transformative and disarming power of principled nonviolence. In the face of persistent brutality and cruelty, I am able to maintain my optimism and idealism through a deep religious belief in the power of love, altruism, care and compassion and through working with many others from all around the world in the never-ending struggle for justice, peace and the integrity of all creation. It is in solidarity with those committed to personal and collective transformation that we discover our common humanity. I always feel most alive when engaged in meaningful positive social change with all those committed to making the world a more equal, more compassionate and more peaceful place. There are signs of hope everywhere. Wherever human beings are listening to the needs and deepest concerns of others and acting to promote their interests, peace is being generated.

Despite what looks like a rocky start, I am optimistic that the 21st century will indeed be one of maturity and peace, rather than violence and disaster. It is to this goal that I, along with many others, dedicate our lives, creativity and energy.
Human dignity is intrinsically part of all human beings, but it has to be realized, and to be realized, it has to be actualized. What I mean by that is we must come to the awareness, the realization that as human beings we are endowed with dignity, which at its essence means that we are worthy of life, we are worthy of respect and we are responsible to give respect and affirm life, so that it might be actualized. Unless there is this process of reflection and action, dignity doesn’t truly exist in our experienced world. I would argue that many people are denied dignity, convinced by their experience and argumentation made by those who see themselves advantaged by some not having their full dignity. I see that there is a component of the peace process that should be related to the realization of human dignity. That is, when we say we are about building or making or negotiating peace, we should be about building, making and negotiating the realization and actualization of human dignity.
The genius of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is that the drafters, although they didn’t put it in those terms, had that intuition. They were thinking politically, legally in terms of the specific assaults on human dignity that occurred before and during World War II, so that in many ways, the document says: “If we do this, this and this, we won’t have World War II again.” This gives us a very good idea, when we say we are building, negotiating peace, of just what that would be.

**A Problem of Design**

This also means that human rights are intrinsic to peace, and the Declaration recognizes the fact that “the foundation of peace in the world” is human dignity. But where we need more—in terms of recognizing the interrelationship between human rights and peace, and working for the actualization of human dignity—that work is a political process. I think of peace as essentially something that is made real through political process and peacemaking institutions. We need institutions that will enable us to achieve without violence what we thought we had achieved through violence for most of organized human history.

My notion of the major political obstacle to peace was the lack of international institutions which had compulsory jurisdiction for conflict settlement, methods to keep the peace and to assure citizens’ rights. I think about it as essentially a design problem. We have to design and strategize to bring into being appropriate institutions.

One of the things of the post–World War II period that is a recognition of human rights as essential to peace is the International Criminal Court, but the overall problem is that there isn’t a general system design. We have this one really good institution, and there are others, but how do you fit them together? It comes together as a common system problem when you see that the core of those institutions must always respect human dignity and that they must be in accord with the basic norms of human rights. They’re all of a piece.

But there’s one piece that isn’t there, and that’s the major political problem, the problem of a highly armed international system, which is in fact a kind of international anarchy, every nation for itself, each making itself secure by trying to be scarier than the other. Until that is solved, we will not fully have human rights because the major obstacle to human rights, and to what we now think of as human security, is the militarized security system. I don’t think you can think about only one without thinking about the other. They all have to be put together in systemic relationship, one to each and all of the others. This necessity is why peace education takes a holistic approach.

**SGIQ: October marks the 15th anniversary of the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which recognizes the impact of war on women specifically and affirms their important role in building and restoring peace.**

**BR: UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security is the most significant international document since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.** If it were fully implemented, it would drastically change the politics of peace and security. The exclusion of women has contributed toward the perpetuation of war.

Civil society organizations, the originators of 1325, are working to bring it into force through education and lobbying for national plans of action that will emphasize women’s participation. The objective is to end the violence women suffer in war by avoiding armed conflict and ending war. Some are also working on people’s plans of action, actions to be taken by citizens as models to show states how to include women fully and equally into security policy-making at all levels.

There will be no end to armed conflict so long as decisions about security are made solely within the mindset of armed force as the ultimate arbiter of national security—security of the state rather than the well-being of the people of the nation, actual human security. Including women and other excluded citizens in security policy-making would be one way to take some steps toward ending that narrow state-centered definition of security and the constant cycle of armed conflict.

**Militarism and Sexism**

**SGIQ: You have written on the connections between war and sexism, arguing that both are part of a patriarchal system based on the threat of force. Could you elaborate?**

**BR: In 1985, I published a book called Sexism and the War System.** It occurred to me that the institution of war was organized around what I called in the book “the primal wound,” the separation of male from female in the human person as a social being. I saw the institution of war was something that derived out of human beings believing that other human beings could be harmed and controlled...
“The major obstacle to human rights, and to what we now think of as human security, is the militarized security system.”

to gain and keep a position of advantage. One of the first instances was that men could harm and control women in the interest of the order of the community.

In peace research, people talked about the war system, which I saw manifest in the role of men to defend and protect the community, especially property and women. In return for that protection, women would carry the load of the daily security of the people, even to doing the agriculture at certain stages—they would provide for the daily needs. But there were strict restrictions on what they were allowed to do, and as the societies became more elaborate, those restrictions became more elaborate and women more vulnerable. The maintenance of armed force to sustain that system required an enemy from whom the vulnerable, the women and resources such as land must be protected.

The socialization into the notion of enemy also manifested in women being seen as the temptress, as the troublemaker and so forth. Then I began to look at things such as the situation in Chile in the 1970s, when the military took over and all the so-called progress of democracy in women’s rights was swept away. That happened over and over again with the rise of 20th-century militarization. But this was in essence a playing out of the central core institution around which societies were built, which was patriarchy, based on the belief that the old wise men were the ones who should run the show.

The fields of women’s studies and feminism have long defined gender as the socially derived roles of men and women, rooted in cultural norms. I started to look at the whole organization of world society, and it seemed that what I could see was one big patriarchy. At each level of what I call the power pyramid, there were men and women, women almost always subservient to men at every level, but women above some men in the lower levels. I began to see that gender is the position that patriarchy assigns persons to in the whole power order. And the way that evolves is by buying into the social differential between men and women in the first place, and from other “isms” besides sexism. I see colonialism, where you have the Western wise men taking on the right to rule the rest of the world, and then racism, which is an invention to rationalize that power. It’s all interrelated in that way and highly gendered.

**Complete Disarmament**

I am currently working on a gender lens on global violence, in which the manifestation of the gender difference is perpetuated through violence of one form or another—structural violence, physical violence, systemic violence—an elaboration of the basic concept at the center of the argument put forth in *Sexism and the War System*. I now see gender as an organizing principle of hierarchy maintained by force. This makes the patriarchal problematic more addressable. We can then begin to change the current sexist concepts underlying the specific forms of violence that characterize the patriarchal gendered order of the international system.

The other piece of this is that those who are benefitting from that system seem to believe that they would be threatened by a real democratic order, so they have continued to depend upon not just the threat of force but also the unleashing of actual force, even on their own populations, to maintain that order. Some people will say, “Oh, well, that’s capitalism,” or this, that and the other form of injustice, but it’s all just different versions of patriarchy. I feel it’s very important to see the links between gender and all world problems.

One of the key entry points into overcoming that is not just disarmament, as such, but general and complete disarmament, which has various definitions, but in essence it means we change the whole system so that those arms are no longer necessary because the threat has been removed through values and institutional change. So peace is a design problem, but it’s also a learning problem, especially the education of the elites. The advantaged have to come to understand that their advantage is very fragile and that if they insist on perpetuating it, the consequences are utter disaster for the whole human race. To me, general and complete disarmament isn’t pie in the sky. It’s a concept that we can use as a way to approach the patriarchal problematic. And if the emerging designs for it turn out to be kind of pie in the sky, we just keep working on them until we get something that will be acceptable, just and viable.
Cultivating a New Era of Peace
By Adolfo Pérez Esquivel

Nobel Peace Prize laureate Adolfo Pérez Esquivel writes about the power of young people to lead us away from an obsession with war.

This year, humankind remembers World War II and the beginning of the nuclear age, the turning point in history when two atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Today, we are collectively appalled by the increase in armed conflict, the result of ever-increasing irrationality and the belief that violence is the solution.

How many civilians and how many soldiers, how many women and children, how many people, young and old, will die today? And how many more are to figure on this atrocious list tomorrow? The macabre repetition of horrors appears as a modern-day myth of King Sisyphus, whom the unforgiving Olympian gods condemned to roll a heavy rock up to a mountaintop. The tortured king never reached the summit, and the rock would roll downhill again and again, for eternity. Much like Sisyphus in his endless toil, humankind is caught in a cycle of moral failings which it repeats time and again. We have lost balance—the ability to comprehend that war is a tragedy for all. No matter their side, even the winners are losers, victims of their own violence. Their arrogance, born of power, incites them to further cruelty and blinds them to the consequences. They tread paths of no return, using any means that justify their ends. How long will people continue killing one another? How long will they continue advocating “righteous wars,” “low-intensity conflict” and “collateral damage,” allowing the killing of defenseless women and children, young and old alike? In the words of the American poet and philosopher Thomas Merton: “Power has nothing to do with peace. The more men increase military power, the more they violate and destroy peace.”

War is born in the minds of men, and if we are to find new paths toward the resolution of conflicts, we must disarm the armed conscience. We must change the course of events through collective action and by nurturing solidarity among nations. The foundation of life on a personal, social, political, economic and spiritual level and in which atrocities such as the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, concentration camps and wars are never again repeated.”

The ones to open the gates of tomorrow will be the young. They may do so bearing arms, or with arms outstretched, filled with hope and strengthened by brotherhood. As I noted upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in December 1980: “To create this new society we must reach out our hands, fraternally, without hatred and rancor, for reconciliation and peace, with unfaltering determination in the defense of truth and justice. We know we cannot plant seeds with closed fists. To sow we must open our hands.” Young people are not the future. They are the present, and it is today that they must vow to lead the way toward a profoundly changed world. True hope for the future consists of shaping young minds capable of making a difference.

Adolfo Pérez Esquivel is an Argentine human rights activist, community organizer, pacifist, painter, writer and sculptor. He was the recipient of the 1980 Nobel Peace Prize.
On that fateful day, August 6, 1945, I was 13 years old and a member of the student mobilization program. We were at the army headquarters, 1.8 kilometers from ground zero. At 8:15 a.m., as Major Yanai was giving us a pep talk at the assembly, suddenly, I saw in the window a blinding bluish-white flash, and I still remember to this day the sensation of floating in the air. As I regained consciousness in the silence and darkness, I found myself pinned by the collapsed building. I could not move and I knew I faced death. I began to hear my classmates’ faint cries: “Mother, help me.” “God, help me.” Then, suddenly, I felt someone’s hands touching my left shoulder and heard a man saying, “Don’t give up! Keep moving! Keep pushing! I am trying to free you. See the light coming through that opening? Crawl toward it and get out as quickly as possible.” As I crawled out, the ruins were on fire. Most of my classmates in that room were burned alive. A soldier ordered me and two other girls who had survived to escape to the nearby hills.

Outside, I looked around. Although it was morning, it was as dark as twilight because of the dust and smoke rising in the air. I saw streams of ghostly figures, slowly shuffling from the center of the city toward the nearby hills. They did not look like human beings; their hair stood straight up, and they were naked and tattered, bleeding, burned, blackened and swollen. Parts of their bodies were missing, flesh and skin hanging from their bones, some with their eyeballs hanging in their hands and some with their stomachs burst open, their intestines hanging out. We students joined the ghostly procession, carefully stepping over the dead and dying. There was a deathly silence broken only by the moans of the injured and their pleas for water. The foul stench of burned skin filled the air.

We managed to escape to the foot of the hill where there was an army training ground about the size of two football fields. It was covered with the dead and injured, who were desperately begging, often in faint whispers, “Water, water, please give me water.” When darkness fell, we sat on the hillside and all night watched the entire city burn, numbed by the massive, grotesque scale of death and suffering we had witnessed.

My father left town early that morning, my mother was rescued from under our collapsed home, my sister and her four-year-old son were burned beyond recognition while on their way to the doctor’s office, and an aunt and two cousins were found as skeletons. My sister-in-law is still missing. We rejoiced in the survival of my uncle and his wife, but about 10 days later, they died with purple spots all over their bodies, their internal organs seeming to have been liquefied. My own age-group of over 8,000 grade seven and eight students from all the city’s high schools were engaged in the task of clearing fire lanes in the center of Hiroshima. Many of them were killed instantly by the heat of 4,000 degrees Celsius. Many were simply carbonized or vaporized. Radiation, the unique characteristic of the atomic bombing, affected people in mysterious and random ways, with some dying instantly and others weeks, months or years later from its delayed effects. And radiation is still killing survivors today.

Thus, my beloved city of Hiroshima suddenly became desolation, with heaps of ash and rubble,
skeletons and blackened corpses. Out of a population of 360,000, most of them noncombatant, women, children and elderly became victims of the indiscriminate massacre of the atomic bombing. By the end of 1945, some 140,000 had perished. As of now, at least 260,000 have died in Hiroshima alone from the effects of the blast, heat and radiation. As I use the numbers of the dead, it pains me deeply. Reducing the dead to numbers trivializes their precious lives and negates their human dignity.

Not only did people have to endure the physical devastation of near starvation, homelessness, lack of medical care, rapidly spreading social discrimination against survivors as “contaminated ones by nuclear poison,” total lack of service by the Japanese government, the collapse of the authoritarian, militaristic social system and the sudden introduction to a democratic way of life, but also they suffered from psychosocial control by the Allied Forces Occupation Authority following Japan’s surrender. The Occupation Authorities established the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but the sole purpose of this commission was to study the effects of radiation of the bombs on human beings, and not to provide treatment to the injured. Needless to say, the survivors felt they were treated like guinea pigs not once but twice, first as the targets of the atomic bombing, then as the subjects of the medical research. The Occupation Authorities also censored media coverage of survivors’ suffering and confiscated their diaries, literary writings, films, photographs, medical records, etc.—32,000 items in all. The triumphant scientific and technological achievement in making the atomic bomb could freely be written, but the human suffering inflicted by the atomic bomb was not to be heard by the world. Following the massive trauma of the bombing, survivors had to repress themselves in silence and isolation, and were thus deprived of the normal process of grieving.

With the return of full sovereignty to Japan in 1952, a flood of political, scientific, medical and historical information became available, enabling scholars, researchers and journalists to see survivors’ experiences in historical perspective and global context. They became aware that the main motive for the atomic bombings was political rather than military. They rejected the American myth that the use of the bombs was necessary to avoid a costly invasion of Japan and saved lives: firstly, because the invasion (Operation Olympic) was not scheduled until November 1, almost three months after the actual bombings; secondly, the American government knew that the Japanese military organization had practically ceased to function; thirdly, they also knew that the Japanese government had made initial overtures for a negotiated surrender; and fourthly, that the unclarified status of the Emperor in an unconditional surrender was the main stumbling block for the Japanese. Also extremely important was the US desire to position itself as the dominant power in East Asia in the postwar period. In addition, some American decision makers wanted to test the new weapons of two different kinds on two cities that had been purposely left intact. With the understanding of the historical perspective, the survivors saw themselves as pawns in the opening moves of the Cold War rather than as sacrifices on the altar of peace.

**Speaking Out**

On the cenotaph in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park is an inscription which reads, “Rest in peace; the error will not be repeated.” What error and whose
error were purposely left ambiguous. Although some wanted to point an accusing finger at the US, a consensus was reached to view the issue on a higher philosophical plane, as a universal need for nothing less than a cultural transformation away from our obsession with violence and war.

We hibakusha, survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings, are convinced that no human being should ever have to experience the inhumanity, illegality, immorality and cruelty of the atomic bomb as we did, and that our mission is to warn the world about the threat of this ultimate evil. We believe that humanity and nuclear weapons cannot coexist and that it is our moral imperative to abolish nuclear weapons in order to secure a safe, clean and just world for future generations. With this conviction, we have been speaking out around the world over the past several decades for the total abolition of nuclear weapons.

In the summer of 1954, I arrived at a college in the US on a scholarship. At a press interview, I gave my frank opinion about the US hydrogen bomb test conducted at the Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands, which caused the islanders severe public health problems and environmental damage. In addition, the test caused radiation-induced illness to every member of the crew on a nearby Japanese fishing boat, as well as the death of one member. As a result of my remarks, I began to receive unsigned hate letters. This was my introduction to the US. This hostile reaction forced me to do some soul searching. It was a temptation to quit and remain silent, but I came out of this experience with a stronger resolve to work for peace and disarmament.

I was deeply disturbed by the way many Americans uncritically and blindly followed the government line justifying the atomic bombings. It was a chilling reminder for me of the wartime behavior of Japanese in unthinkingly swallowing government propaganda and brainwashing.

During this lonely time, I was able to come across the writings of some scholars with profound analyses of the issue. One of them was Richard Falk, professor emeritus of international law at Princeton University, who said: “The bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki were viewed as contributions to the ending of a popular and just war. Therefore they have never been appraised in the necessary way as atrocities. They have never been understood as they certainly would have been understood had Hiroshima and Nagasaki been located (in an Allied country). Somehow we have got to create that awareness, so that Hiroshima is understood to have been on the same level of depravity, and in many ways far more dangerous to us as a species and as a civilization than was even Auschwitz.”

The failure to see Hiroshima and Nagasaki as atrocities, regarding those two 1945 bombs as “good bombs” that contributed to winning and ending a just war, helped the American conscience accept the subsequent development of nuclear weapons, thus linking the justification of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the disastrous nuclear arms race and the Cold War.

Examining the current reality of the world’s efforts for nuclear disarmament, we hibakusha are dismayed and disturbed at the lack of tangible progress toward that goal. We see the nuclear-weapon states’ lack of political will for nuclear disarmament demonstrated by the non-ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty; noncompliance with Article VI of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons; the 17-year deadlock in the Conference on Disarmament; the failure to negotiate a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East; the continued modernization of nuclear arsenals, etc. Thus, a small number of nuclear-weapon states have kept the world hostage in fear and anxiety while squandering trillions of dollars away from meeting human needs in order to build ever more destructive weapons of mass destruction. This is an intolerable and unacceptable reality.

What should be our response to the nuclear status quo? I have shared my painful memories of the impact and consequences of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. In the 70 years since then, nuclear-weapon states have developed much more sophisticated nuclear weapons, 17,000 of them, enough to kill every one of us on the planet many times over. Is it not about time we do some soul-searching, critical thinking and positive action about the choice we make for human survival? I urge you, younger people in particular, to do just that. ©
During a shift as a young doctor in 1998 at a hospital in Lusaka, Zambia, my service received a patient who had been shot in politically motivated circumstances around 2:00 a.m. that day. The man was bleeding profusely. We did all we could to save his life. We replaced his blood, operated and tried to stop the internal bleeding, after which he was transferred to the intensive care unit, but, alas, he died around 2:00 p.m. the same day.

On yet another day, a doctor colleague was returning home after a challenging time in the operating room at our hospital. As she approached the gate of her house, she was accosted by gun-toting carjackers who asked for her car keys. Before she could react, one of the lawbreakers pulled the trigger. She passed out and only came to after a frantic surgical intervention. Police sources traced the thieves to the war-ravaged neighboring Democratic Republic of the Congo.

And while helping refugees fleeing conflict in Somalia in a town called Garissa in northeastern Kenya in December 1992, a horde of rebels from Somalia opened fire on our convoy. Later, we were told two female doctor colleagues working with an international medical organization were gang-raped at gunpoint.

That is a short synopsis of why I decided to join the peace movement.

Wars of conquest fought using bare knuckles, bows, spears and arrows have advanced to the use of modern weaponry of every sort and sophistication. Mass murder and horrendous killing are no longer a taboo. Day after day, we witness war and conflict over human settlements, grazing land, burial grounds and holy sites, mineral resources, water, religious beliefs, or to gain political or economic liberation.

As a doctor, I see the broken bone, marrow and blood of men, women, boys and girls, old and young, caught up in war and conflict. Why kill to make a point? Are civilians, especially women and children, a legitimate target?

Terrorism must be a manifestation of mental illness. For how can one explain such behavior? How can a sane person take pleasure in killing a fellow man or woman, whatever the motivation? No one deserves to die in such circumstances. Perpetrator and victim both deserve dignity and humanity.

The status quo is not acceptable. To build peace, men and women of goodwill need to become actively engaged. We can start by tackling the everyday causes of war and conflict—intolerance, injustice, differences in belief and ideology, greed.

My own work has been in peace advocacy, education and research and monitoring work in the areas of banning nuclear weapons, cluster munitions, anti-personnel mines, small arms and light weapons, as well as interpersonal violence. I have served as both a campaigner and board member.

Much of my work is in broad coalitions, including the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), Control Arms Coalition, International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), Cluster Munitions Coalition and Injury Prevention Initiative for Africa.

It is by working together with others that we begin to find hope. Together, we can and have made a difference. Both IPPNW and ICBL have won the Nobel Peace Prize.

Peace education is vital to empowering people to awaken to their responsibility and ability to build peace. We need curricula that focus on the coexistence of different religions, the nonviolent resolution of war and conflict, mutual appreciation and the building of friendships in diversity.

By awakening to our power to be part of a force of positive change and working together as members of civil society, we can influence governments and engender a paradigm shift away from war and conflict to peaceful coexistence.

Robert Mtonga is a medical doctor from Zambia, a former copresident of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, and leads Zambian Healthworkers for Social Responsibility.
Looking back, we can say that the 20th century has been stained by the all too common slaughter of humanity at human hands. Our century has been termed a century of war and revolution; aptly so, for with two world wars and countless revolutions, it has been an unprecedented and bloody torrent of conflict and upheaval.

What has 20th-century humanity gained at the cost of this staggering sacrifice of human life?

Under the sway of the 19th-century cult of progress, in this century we have feverishly devoted ourselves to enhancing the structures of society and the state, laboring under the delusion that this alone is the path to human happiness. But to the extent that we have skirted the fundamental issue of how to reform and revitalize individual human beings, our most conscientious efforts for peace and happiness have produced just the opposite result. This, I feel, is the central lesson of the 20th century.

Our task is to establish a firm inner world, a robust sense of self that will not be swayed or shaken by the most trying circumstances or pressing adversity. Only when our efforts to reform society have as their point of departure the reformation of the inner life—human revolution—will they lead us with certainty to a world of lasting peace and true human security.

With this as my major premise, I would like to offer some ideas regarding three transformations that we face on our way toward the 21st century: from knowledge to wisdom; from uniformity to diversity; and, finally, what I would term “from national to human sovereignty.”

Knowledge and Wisdom

The first transformation I would like to discuss is the need to move away from our present emphasis on knowledge toward a new emphasis on wisdom. Piercing, I feel, to the heart of the matter, President Toda stated that confusing knowledge for wisdom is the principal error in the thinking of modern man.

Clearly, the volume of information and knowledge possessed by humanity has seen an extraordinary increase compared to 100 or even 50 years ago. It can hardly be said, however, that this knowledge has led to the kind of wisdom that gives rise to human happiness.

Rather, the suffering generated by the grotesque imbalance between our knowledge and our wisdom has seen an extraordinary increase compared to 100 or even 50 years ago. It can hardly be said, however, that this knowledge has led to the kind of wisdom that gives rise to human happiness.

The same communication technologies, for example, that can be used to incite terror and hatred in whole populations, could just as easily produce a dramatic expansion of educational opportunity worldwide. The
difference lies solely in the degree and depth of human wisdom and compassion.

The wisdom of Buddhism enables us to break the confines of the “lesser self,” the private and isolated self held prisoner to its own desires, passions and hatreds. It further enables us to contextualize the deep-rooted psychology of collective identity as we expand our lives, with overflowing exuberance, toward the “greater self,” which is coexistent with the living essence of the universe.

This wisdom is not to be sought in some distant place, but can be found within ourselves, beneath our very feet as it were. It resides in the living microcosm within and wells forth in limitless profusion when we devote ourselves to courageous and compassionate action for the sake of humanity, society and the future.

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The Buddhist principle of dependent origination reflects a cosmology in which all human and natural phenomena come into existence within a matrix of interrelatedness. Thus we are urged to respect the uniqueness of each existence, which supports and nourishes all within the larger, living whole.

What distinguishes the Buddhist view of interdependence is that it is based on a direct, intuitive apprehension of the cosmic life immanent in all phenomena. Therefore, Buddhism unequivocally rejects all forms of violence as an assault on the harmony that underlies and binds the web of being.

Valuing Diversity

The second transformation I would like to discuss is from uniformity to diversity.

As exemplified by modes of economic development which aim exclusively at the maximization of profit, modern civilization tends to the elimination of difference, the subordination of both natural and human diversity to the pursuit of monolithic objectives.

The result of this process is the grievous global problematic that confronts us today, and of which environmental degradation is but one aspect. It is vital that we pursue a path of sustainable human development based on a profound sense of solidarity with future generations.

The wisdom of Buddhism can also shed considerable light on the question of diversity. Because one central tenet of Buddhism is that universal value must be sought within the life of the individual, it works fundamentally to counter any attempt to enforce uniformity or standardization.

The fulfillment of the individual, however, cannot be realized in conflict with, or at the expense of, others, but only through active appreciation of uniqueness and difference, for these are the varied hues that together weave the flower gardens of life.

In the course of our dialogues held in 1972 and 1973, the British historian Arnold Toynbee defined nationalism as a religion, the worship of the collective power of human communities. This definition applies equally, I feel, to both sovereign states and to the kind of nationalism which, in its more tribal manifestations, is fomenting regional and subnational conflicts throughout the world today.

Relying on the eternal law within to rise above the sway of evanescent authority in pursuit of nonviolence and humanity—it is in the course of this grand struggle that one experiences an indestructible life condition of comfort and security.

The three transformations which I have outlined come together in the process of human revolution, the reformation of the inner life, its expansion toward and merger with the “greater self” of wisdom, compassion and courage. It is my firm conviction that a fundamental revolution in the life of a single individual can give rise to the kind of consciousness and solidarity that will free humanity from its millennial cycles of warfare and violence.

Human Sovereignty

The third transformation I would like to discuss is from national to human sovereignty.

Undeniably, sovereign states and issues of national sovereignty have been the prime actors in much of the war and violence of the 20th century. Modern wars, waged as the legitimate exercise of state sovereignty, have involved entire populations willy-nilly in untold tragedy and suffering.

It is essential that we effect a paradigm shift from national to human sovereignty.

From the viewpoint of Buddhism, the transformation from state to human sovereignty comes down to the question of how to develop the resources of character that can bravely challenge and wisely temper the seemingly overwhelming powers of official authority.

“It is vital that we pursue a path of sustainable human development based on a profound sense of solidarity with future generations.”
Preserving Humanity in Conflict

By Knut Dörmann

Knut Dörmann describes the central role of the Geneva Conventions and the International Committee of the Red Cross in constraining the brutality of warfare.

It is 70 years since the last world war, but we are far from being a world at peace. It is more than 150 years since the signing of the original Geneva Convention, designed to ensure humanity does not descend into barbarity during conflict, yet the world is far from upholding that ideal conscientiously and wholeheartedly.

People have always resorted to violence to settle disputes. And historically, cultures across the world have always believed that there must be limits on that violence. Scriptures dating back to the first century BCE allude to rules of war and rules protecting civilians, prisoners and the wounded. Today, these rules are codified in international humanitarian law, whose cornerstone is the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols of 1977 and 2005. Yes, even wars have limits; limits that need to be enforced for the sake of what it means to be human.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been closely linked to the Geneva Conventions and international humanitarian law right from the start. Henry Dunant, who founded the ICRC, was also the driving force behind the original Geneva Convention “for the amelioration of the condition of the wounded in armies in the field,” which was adopted in 1864. Since then, the ICRC has been an integral part of the dynamic process of developing and strengthening this body of law, adapting it to ongoing changes in warfare at the same time as the organization deals with the reality of armed conflict and its consequences for the victims on the ground.

While international humanitarian law was successfully strengthened over time, thus adapting it to ongoing changes in warfare, there is a continuous challenge to ensure its observance, sometimes even of the most fundamental rules. Today, in some of the many armed conflicts unfolding around the world—particularly in parts of the Middle East and Africa—the humanitarian impact of violence on entire populations within and beyond national borders is brutal and simply overwhelming.

No amount of words can adequately convey the scale and depth of suffering of many of those civilians—nor, in all honesty, will they offer a way to end it. When practically every man, woman and child in a country has been directly or indirectly affected by violence, and every family you meet has
a heartbreaking story to tell, the need for decisive action rather than just words really does become a matter of life or death.

While the search for political solutions continues, it is the role of humanitarian organizations like the ICRC to help alleviate the consequences of violence rather than to question its causes. But this role is becoming increasingly difficult to fulfill in many of today’s most complex and violent crises. Reasons for this include:

- the overt politicization of aid and the polarization of states around humanitarian issues (reinforcing the need to clearly distinguish and separate principled humanitarian action from other aid initiatives)
- the widening gap between humanitarian needs and the ability to deliver an effective response
- the decreasing proximity of many humanitarian actors to the people they try to help
- parties to armed conflicts—including complex webs of armed groups—that in many cases do not respect or accept impartial humanitarian action
- the ever-present security risks, administrative hurdles, unjustified or arbitrary restrictions and delays for impartial humanitarian action

The Rules of War

The issue of humanitarian access can be extremely contentious, as ongoing debates at the highest political levels have shown. For the ICRC, however, the issue is quite clear. Humanitarian access in armed conflict is regulated by international humanitarian law, the rules of which must be respected by all parties to the conflict, both state and non-state. These rules unambiguously specify that states and other parties to the conflict have primary responsibility for the safety and well-being of populations in territories under their control. Where the basic needs of the population affected by the conflict are not met for whatever reason, the parties must allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief, which is impartial in character and conducted without any adverse distinction, although the parties retain a right of control.

This means that the offer of humanitarian services by a neutral, impartial and independent organization, such as the ICRC, cannot, and should not, be interpreted as a challenge to a state’s sovereignty, nor as recognition or support to any party to the conflict, and the offer cannot be refused on this basis. For the ICRC, it is a critical aspect of our approach to engage with all parties to a conflict, including non-state armed groups, to remind them of their obligations under international humanitarian law and urge them to comply.

One of the most widespread and daunting humanitarian problems arising from violations of this law—at least in terms of numbers—is that of internal displacement. This problem not only affects the millions of displaced people themselves, but also countless host families and resident communities. The number of internally displaced people worldwide has reached an unprecedented level.

Better respect for international humanitarian law is key to preventing this problem in the first place, as well as protecting people who have been displaced and easing their suffering. Humanitarian law, for example, prohibits the parties from causing the displacement of people except if it is necessary for imperative military reasons or for the protection of the civilians themselves. If there were better respect for the rules prohibiting direct attacks on civilians and civilian objects, and for those prohibiting indiscriminate means and methods of warfare, to take another example, fewer people would be compelled to flee their homes.

The ICRC considers that explosive weapons with a wide impact area should be avoided in densely populated areas due to the significant likelihood of indiscriminate effects and despite the absence of an express legal prohibition against specific types of weapons. States are encouraged to share information on their respective policies, operational practices and lessons learned on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. This would foster informed discussions on this important humanitarian issue and ideally the development of operational guidance by states.

Ultimately, it all boils down to one thing: regardless of the context and the cause of the fighting, compliance with international humanitarian law is nonnegotiable. The survival of countless vulnerable people may depend on it. Compliance with international humanitarian law provides protection both during armed conflict and after the fighting has ended. Yet, we watch in dismay as parties to conflict continue to flout the very rules that could lay the groundwork for recovery and an eventual return to stability.

All of us have a role to play in improving compliance with international humanitarian law. However, it is ultimately up to states and non-state armed groups to show the political will to translate legal provisions into actual deeds; to turn words into action; and to ensure that the principle of humanity is preserved in the midst of conflict.
It was the day before Mothering Sunday 1993, the beginning of spring in Northern England, when the two IRA bombs exploded, killing Tim Parry and Johnathan Ball and injuring 54 people, with thousands of others impacted. The incident led to a global reaction.

Motivated to make sure nobody ever experienced what they had gone through, the parents of 12-year-old Tim formed a charitable trust and opened the Peace Centre in Warrington, UK, a multipurpose building with facilities for sports and arts and special spaces for conferences and project work. The foundation has become one of Europe’s leading organizations working in the discipline of peacebuilding and conflict resolution. It has a very simple premise: that conflict is inevitable but that what is not acceptable is the use of violence. Its work is motivated by a desire to help shape a social movement to break the cycle of violent conflict with projects that address root causes.

An example of this is THINK, a program aimed at people aged 14 to 19. The program equips participants with the skills to think critically and consequentially, and in the process, they develop the skills to play a positive role in managing conflict.

The influences that can lead to radicalization start early—in the playgrounds, in classrooms—when a young person is often most vulnerable to warped ideas and pernicious bad influences. Such work with young people reduces vulnerability to extremism and increases resilience.

The importance of THINK in preventing violent conflict was brought home to me in conversation with a young man while working with schools in the area where the London 7/7 bombers came from. He told me he was “on a bad path.” I didn’t need to ask him what he meant—it was clear. But after coming to the Peace Centre and participating in the project, he told me he was “no longer a sheep but a shepherd,” that now he could think for himself. Those words stay with me. He is now running a business, while his friend who was following the same route is now a manager with a national supermarket chain. It could have been so different.

Work takes place with other “sensitive” groups besides youth and uses approaches including theater, experiential learning and Internet-based tools. Programs address topics such as racism, hate crimes, immigration and community cohesion.

The Women Building Peace program, as a further example, brings together women from a variety of communities and equips them with the skills to resolve conflict and create a social movement for change from within their homes and communities.

Resolution work is often commissioned to bring opposing parties together in dialogue. This is brave work, often bringing victims face-to-face with ex-combatants or sitting violently opposed groups in the same room.

The foundation also operates the UK Survivors Assistance Network, helping people who are victims, survivors or who have been affected by terrorism cope and recover from trauma.

A key learning of the foundation is that it does not confine itself to one aspect of peace work such as being a “victims” organization. It works with the before, during and after of violent conflict—what it calls prevention, resolution and response. The biggest impact comes in combining this work, such as through the power of victim advocacy to work with vulnerable young people.

Extremism is not new although in the last few years, we have seen the greatest decline in peacefulness since World War II. The motivation for the work comes from a real belief that peace can be achieved by enabling individuals to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the world, and by accepting that conflict exists but encouraging dialogue to achieve resolution without the need to resort to violence.

Laying the Foundations for Peace

By Nick Taylor

Nick Taylor describes how the tragedy of the March 20, 1993, Warrington bombing gave rise to an ongoing effort to transform the roots of violence and extremism.

Nick Taylor is chief executive of the Tim Parry Johnathan Ball Foundation for Peace, UK. He is a marketing communications professional specializing in advanced stakeholder management and corporate, social and environmental governance.
Poetry in relation to war and peace could be categorized as poetry of war, antiwar poetry and poetry of peace.

Poetry of war is centered on the destruction of life and wealth of others and is usually accompanied by chivalry and creations of epic stories. It is the tool of warmongers, written with the purpose of creating a long line of brave and fearless fighters. Infused with a sense of hardship and sacrifice, it proclaims the defense of honor and country. But where is the honor in assaulting women and children, who are usually the first casualties of war? Such poems, glorifying martyrdom, helped fuel the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq with its copious casualties.

Antiwar poetry attempts to make sense of wars gone past. But after the damage of war has been done, the people, freed from their trance, every dark reality speeding through their minds, do not want to remember the bloody war zones. This is the outcome of war—its profound emptiness and inhumane and conniving character revealed. However, warmongers continue creating epics, the public heroes remaining anonymous and the ones tied to those in power heralded as legends. The ethos of poetry of war is to undermine people’s expectations for a normal postwar life. But intellectuals, poets and free thinkers find opportunities to speak of the ignorance and militaristic culture of those in power. They invite society to take pride through art and literature, wise poets writing poems against the destruction.

Poetry of peace, with its progressive culture and quiet style of objection, slowly and intelligently moves forward. Poetry of peace does not create heroes and epics about brave and fearless people; it discourages all-consuming beliefs, the polarization of differences and the obedience of people. Poetry of peace instills courage, clarity, common sense, imagination and, finally, the strength to awaken justice.

It is necessary to educate governments in accordance with the needs of civil society, and it is the free thinkers of every society who are the connecting loops of this education. Poetry of peace is joy and common sense in the protection of justice and prosperity.

*The Earth Sings White*

When you become a mother words go beyond dear dear
The dearests wear their hats, their scarves and leave and the letters of the alphabet on the blackboard write themselves in white:
When you return home write in white on the walls, on the doors: Mother When you go to the sea with the men, write in white on every black net: Peace With a friend write in white on every land: Home When the earth sings light, joy rises from equality snowflakes fall like butterflies and the earth takes delight in peace the earth thrives lovingly on peace

Translated from Farsi by Fariya Mohammadkhah

Rira Abbasi is an Iranian poet, fiction writer and peace activist. Acclaimed as Iran’s Lady Poet Laureate, she is the winner of the 2005 Parvin Etesami Poetry Award. She is the founder and has been director of Iran’s biennial international festival of peace poetry since 2007.

Rira Abbasi

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Translated from Farsi by Fariya Mohammadkhah
I was born and raised in India to a middle-class Hindu family. Growing up, I was very aware of the India-Pakistan conflict. My grandparents and parents moved to India as refugees from present-day Pakistan during the 1947 Partition of India.

My grandmothers shared stories about the brutality caused by the Partition. They witnessed the killing of their loved ones, lost their homes and belongings and were forced to flee to a new land. In every story, Pakistan and its people, the Muslims, were always depicted as the other. This narrative was reinforced by the media, Bollywood films and our history textbooks. My young mind absorbed these messages, and I grew up with fear and mistrust of Pakistani people.

I was introduced to Nichiren Buddhism and the SGI in 1990 in Mumbai. In December 1992, violent riots between Hindus and Muslims broke out in Mumbai. I was reminded of my grandmothers’ stories. I was frightened and felt helpless; I needed to do something.

In January 1993, I read “The sun of jiyu over a new land,” a poem that SGI President Daisaku Ikeda wrote in response to the 1992 Los Angeles riots. In the poem, he encourages us to transcend our differences of race, ethnicity and religion and seek what he calls the “primordial ‘roots’ of humankind.” “Here is a world offering true proof / of our humanity. / If one reaches back to these fundamental roots, / all become friends and comrades.” Deeply inspired by these words, I determined to work toward peace in the region.

I moved to the US in 1995. Motivated by President Ikeda’s poem, I pursued a master’s in intercultural relations followed by a PhD in peace education. At university, I met someone from Pakistan, the first time in my life. We discovered that we had much in common and became close friends. We had profound and challenging conversations about our shared histories, the conflicting narratives we had learned and the prejudices we held about each other. Words by President Ikeda describing elements of global citizenship became my cornerstone for these dialogues: “The courage not to fear or deny difference; but to respect and strive to understand people of different cultures, and to grow from encounters with them.” We realized that just as we needed each other to continue the conflict, we also needed each other to make peace.

Our commitment to peace became the driving force for us to collaborate through writing and conducting dialogue workshops between Indian and Pakistani youth and educators. In 2003, personal exchanges between the citizens of the two countries were rare. Despite opposition from the governments and our families, we accompanied a group of high school students from India to Pakistan. No one from my family had been back for three generations. I took this journey on my family’s behalf as a link between generations and a bridge between enemies.

I was touched by the warm hospitality of the Pakistanis who helped me find my father’s childhood home. I also visited places whose names were etched in my memory from my grandmothers’ stories. Since then, I have returned several times with full support from my family. I continue to research and work with youth and educators from both countries, challenging the conflicting history textbook narratives and mutual prejudices. Many of the youth with whom I have worked now conduct peace initiatives in India and Pakistan and engage their communities in dialogue. I am convinced these small but meaningful steps will lead to a strong, sustainable foundation for peace.

I have come to understand conflict as a deep, inextricable connection with the other. It is a connection that can be transformed through willingness and courage to face our own prejudices and a deliberate sustained engagement to understand the other.
I was born in Lebanon in 1982 in the midst of civil war. Love, violence and disappointment were the same thing to me. Outside, people killed each other, and at home, my parents were desperate and filled with fear. They often showed that they loved me, but they could also be violent. The relationship between my parents suffered due to the stresses of war and poverty. My mother hardly ever stopped crying.

I was a very sensitive child, identified as being musically gifted at an early age. I wanted to be a pianist, composer or singer. But the violence disappointed and disillusioned me until I couldn’t dream anymore and only wanted to run away from Lebanon, my parents and even from my life. After I completed my schooling, I decided to travel to Germany to study piano.

When I arrived in Germany in 2002, I wanted to leave the violence that I had experienced behind. But I quickly realized how that would be impossible because all my previous life experiences will always remain with me. My lack of hope grew with the passing of each day. The civil war in Lebanon had officially ended in 1990, but nobody can imagine how long war lives in the hearts of children and inflicts on them an invisible pain.

At the end of 2005, I was introduced to Nichiren Buddhism. I felt inexplicable joy when I first heard the chanting of “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo,” and decided to start practicing immediately. Buddhist practice affected my life on a deep level. Having spent my childhood surrounded by war, I had lost hope and the ability to trust people, but now I felt the return of hope and the strength to trust others again. I began to see myself more clearly and to understand my life better. For the first time, I felt that I was experiencing true friendship, beginning with friendship toward myself. I was able to encourage myself to start afresh, and suddenly the war that had been raging in my heart stopped. This was unbelievable for me.

With this development came a change in my relationship with my parents, allowing us to speak openly about the past and positively about the future. With a new sense of optimism in my life, I also experienced a surge in my life force, giving me the energy to tackle my circumstances. This new strength of heart began to reflect in my surroundings. I started to meet people who helped me with my career and who remain supportive of me to this day. During my dark past, I never imagined having so many good friends. I then met my wife, and we have a marvelous daughter now.

In 2013, I determined that I would complete my studies, obtain a position as a university lecturer and become successful with my band. I applied for and was appointed to a lecturer position at Music Academy Düsseldorf. I was also able to successfully complete my dissertation and was soon after awarded my double diploma.

Whereas war made me feel that human beings are fundamentally ugly inside and that I am ugly, too, SGI President Daisaku Ikeda taught me that I am beautiful and that I can admire this inner beauty. He also taught me that all people are beautiful and that this beauty unites us.

I am very proud and happy that through my Buddhist practice I have been able to create such a constructive life. I am determined to change the destructive force of war through the strength of my heart. I know what war does and how it destroys not only houses but also the ability of people to rebuild their hearts. I also know the strength of Buddhism, that it can help every wounded heart overcome the past and remember that life is eternal and full of hope. For that, I am very thankful.
The following is excerpted from
Choose Life: A Dialogue (I.B. Tauris, 2007), a record of the wide-ranging
dialogue between influential historian
Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975) and SGI
President Daisaku Ikeda and the carried
out in London in 1972 and 1973. First
published in 1976, it has since been
translated into 28 languages.

Daisaku Ikeda: Biologists tell us that
Homo sapiens is the only species known
to kill its fellows with systematic violence
and cruelty. Do you believe that war is
something humanity is destined to suffer?
How do you think we can avoid a global
nuclear war and achieve lasting peace?

Arnold Toynbee: Our present knowledge
about human feelings, thoughts, value
judgments and actions extends backwards
in time no farther than the most recent
period of human history; that is, no farther
than the period for which there are
surviving contemporary records in writing.
This period is only the latest five thousand
years, and our ancestors may have become
human one million years ago.

It is certainly true that, during the last
five thousand years, war has been one of
the major institutions of mankind. We have
spent on war by far the greatest part of our
surplus product; that is, the greatest part
of what we have produced in excess of the
product spent on bare subsistence—spent,
that is to say, on keeping ourselves alive
and on saving our species from becoming
extinct. But surely war is impossible
without the production of a surplus,
because war requires the uneconomic use
of working time, food rations, materials
and industry for the conversion of these
materials into weapons and other military
equipment.

War is not identical with violence and
cruelty. It is a particular manifestation of
human violence and cruelty. I believe that
these evil impulses are innate in human
nature and are intrinsic to life itself. Every
individual living organism is potentially
violent and cruel. War is an organized
and institutionalized commission of cruel
violence. In war, human beings fight and
kill each other under orders from public
authorities—governments of states or
improvised government in civil wars.
Soldiers fight without personal animosity.
Most of them are not acquainted with each
other personally.

Ikeda: You have said that man has spent
much of his surplus product on war,
but I think he has in fact spent much
more than surplus in terms of destroyed
homes, ravaged agricultural lands and
the common necessities of life that are
taken from ordinary people in wartime.
An interesting example of the amount of
a people’s production that must be spent
on military matters is the samurai of
medieval Japan. Considered the highest of
all Japanese social classes, they exploited
the agricultural and commercial classes.

Even in modern Japan a not completely
dissimilar situation exists. As the self-
defense forces grow larger, improvements
in the living conditions of ordinary people
must be sacrificed to support them. I
suspect, however, that all countries in
the world that have some kind of military
preparedness face a similar dilemma.

Toynbee: Without doubt they do, but let
me return to your earlier question. Is war
part of the fate of human nature? For the
historical reason that I have mentioned, I
think that it is not. I do think that violence
and cruelty are innate in human nature. As
you point out, biologists tell us that man is
the only known species of living being on
this planet that fights fellow members of
his own species to the death. When male
animals of other species fight each other
for winning the females, one combatant
eventually surrenders and the victor then
spares his life. Crimes of violence, not
stopping short of murder, have, we may
suppose, been committed by our ancestors
ever since they became human. But, even within the last five thousand years, human violence and cruelty have not manifested themselves in the form of war at all times and places.

Japan, for instance, seems to have been free from domestic warfare, though not from aggressive border warfare against the Ainu, for more than five hundred years, ending in the 12th century of the Christian era. After that, Japan tormented herself with incessant civil wars for more than four hundred years. Under the Tokugawa regime from the early 17th until the middle of the 19th century too, she was at peace, both at home and abroad. Since 1945 Japan has renounced war.

The Norwegians were not at war at any date between 1814 and 1940, but in the Viking age they were one of the most warlike peoples in the world, and they fought vigorously in World War II after they had been attacked and invaded.

During the periods of Japanese and Norwegian history that were free from war, there were still private murders and public executions in both nations. This shows that we must distinguish war from our nonmilitary killing and violence.

Ikeda: You are absolutely correct in insisting on this distinction. Execution for crime is perhaps different, but murder is always an act of the individual. Murder occurs in all lands, and all nations forbid it strictly and punish it severely. The same nations that punish murder, an individual act, however, have no systems of punishment against warfare, a criminal act committed by nations. The barbaric law that has obtained throughout the ages is that he who wins is just. But the contradiction inherent in this idea is so blatant that no one can find such a definition of justice tenable. Nonetheless, man has given tacit assent to this irrational law for thousands of years.

Tacit approval seems to suggest that people regard warfare, or conditions based on warfare, as the normal circumstance among nations. It is apparently thought essential to be prepared for war at all times and to be at sword point with all neighboring nations. Peace, then, becomes no more than the interval between wars. I do not believe that this is the way things ought to be.

In my view, all people must come to think of peace—the time when no human beings fear any others, when all trust and love each other—as the natural and ordinary way of life.

Toynbee: War can be abolished, even if it were to prove impossible to cure all human beings of committing nonmilitary crimes of violence. I think the invention of nuclear weapons makes it probable that we shall succeed in abolishing war, in spite of the difficulty of giving up a habit that is five thousand years old. The assumption underlying the institution of war was that one of the belligerents would win, that the other would lose, and that the advantage of victory for the winner would be greater than the cost. This calculation often proved wrong. Wars were often disastrous for the victors too. But it is clear that, in a war fought with nuclear weapons, there can be no such thing as even a costly victory. The prospect deprives states of a rational incentive for going to war.

However, human nature is only partially rational. It is conceivable that we might irrationally commit mass suicide. The institution of war cannot be abolished without replacing it by a new institution: world government. War, even in the nuclear age, will remain a possibility so long as the present 140 local states have not subordinated themselves to a single worldwide authority equipped with effective power to compel even the most powerful local states to keep the peace.
SGI Joins Events at Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction

From March 14 to 18, the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction (WCDRR) was held in Sendai in Miyagi Prefecture, Japan.

The SGI co-organized two side events: one on March 15 focused on the contributions of faith-based organizations (FBOs) to disaster response, and one on March 16 highlighted the possibilities for increased collaboration in disaster management in Northeast Asia.

The March 16 event was titled “Strengthening Resilience in Northeast Asia through Cooperation for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR)” and brought together a panel of civil society speakers from China, South Korea and Japan. Co-organizers were the Korea NGO Council for Overseas Development Cooperation, the China Association for NGO Cooperation and Next Stage Tohoku. The event was supported by the Japan NGO Center for International Cooperation and the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat.

On March 17, the SGI organized a parallel event on women’s leadership during the 59th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) held at the UN Headquarters in New York from March 9 to 20. The theme of the event, “Living Women’s Leadership, Living Global Citizenship—Strengthening the Beijing Platform for Action,” marked the 20th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. The event was held at the Church Center for the United Nations, and 75 people attended.

Cosponsors of the event were the Bahá’í International Community, the Salvation Army, Soroptimist International, the Global Movement for the Culture of Peace and the United Religions Initiative.

In his keynote speech, Ambassador Anwarul K. Chowdhury, former UN Under-Secretary-General and High Representative, stressed that to achieve gender equality it is necessary to dismantle patriarchy. He called for more women in decision-making positions, starting at the UN, and for a female UN secretary-general. He stated that the world has a lot to learn from the leadership of African women who have faced the heaviest odds and have great energy, creativity and initiative.

Other speakers included Lopa Banerjee, chief of UN Women’s Civil Society Section; Jean Krasno, lecturer in the Department of Political Science at the City College of New York; and Selamawit Adugna Bekele from Ethiopia, global youth ambassador for A World at School.

The presentations were followed by small discussion groups where participants discussed women’s leadership and the culture of peace.

On March 9, as part of the SGI-USA Culture of Peace Distinguished Speaker Series, Ambassador Chowdhury gave a talk titled “Equality of Women’s Participation: Essential Foundation for the Culture of Peace in Today’s World” at the SGI-USA New York Culture Center.

The March 15 event was a symposium titled “Community based DRR from a faith-based perspective—sharing best practices,” held at the Sendai Civic Auditorium. It was co-organized by ACT Alliance and the SGI in cooperation with the Japan Religion Coordinating Project for Disaster Relief.

In his opening speech, Rev. John Nduna, general secretary of ACT Alliance, stated that the role of FBOs in DRR is not always recognized. Presentations were given by Soka Gakkai member Kimio Ohashi, a 71-year-old survivor of the March 11, 2011, Great East Japan Earthquake, and Rachel Kyozira of the Inter-Church Organization for Development Cooperation, an ACT Alliance member.

As an outcome document of the symposium, 13 FBOs issued a statement calling on governments to recognize the unique role of local faith communities and FBOs and to prioritize the engagement and collaboration of both in the implementation of the post-2015 framework on DRR.

On March 18, SGI Peace Affairs Program Director Kimiaki Kawai gave a presentation at the WCDRR’s IGNITE Stage on the Soka Gakkai’s relief efforts in Tohoku following the Great East Japan Earthquake. He highlighted the ability of FBOs to utilize their existing networks of communication and their local facilities in disaster response. He emphasized that the strengths and resources of FBOs could complement those of other DRR stakeholders.
**Senzatomica Events in Rome**

On March 10, as part of the SGI-Italy antinuclear weapons campaign Senzatomica, the multimedia exhibition “From a Culture of Violence to a Culture of Peace: Toward a World Free From Nuclear Weapons” opened at La Pelanda in Rome. The opening ceremony was attended by dignitaries including Nicola Zingaretti, president of Lazio Region, Rome Mayor Ignazio Marino, and Father Marco Gnati, representative of Cardinal Agostino Vallini, Vicar General of the Diocese of Rome.

Leading up to the event, SGI-Italy members in Rome organized various events such as presentations on disarmament in libraries and at schools, promotion corners at theaters and flashmobs throughout the city.

A series of videos connecting the campaign for disarmament to a deeply personal concurrent struggle for positive change, or “internal disarmament,” helped promote the exhibition.

Videos of the interviews and flashmobs and other information in Italian can be viewed at [www.senzatomica.it](http://www.senzatomica.it).

![A child viewing the exhibition](image1)

**Lecture Series Begins in France**

On March 5, the Soka Cultural Association in France (ACSF) held the first lecture in a three-year series titled “Knowledge of Buddhism.” The lecture was held at the Soka center in Paris. Guest speaker Dominique Trotignon, director of the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Paris and president of the Theravada Buddhist Association Vivekarama, focused on Buddhism in its Indian context.

Mr. Trotignon discussed the origins of Buddhism and spoke on the relationship between Buddhism and Brahmanism, the transmission of Shakyamuni’s teachings by his disciples, the role of King Ashoka, and the evolution of monastic Buddhist practice and Mahayana Buddhism.

The “Knowledge of Buddhism” lecture series will include presentations by a range of experts and will run until 2017. In 2015, the series will cover the transmission of Buddhism in specific geographical areas—India, China, Japan and Southeast Asia. In 2016, the series will introduce the main Buddhist schools and, in 2017, the lectures will focus on the links between Buddhism and other religions, as well as its connection to fields such as the sciences and arts.

![Dominique Trotignon delivering his lecture](image2)

**Min-On Music Research Institute Launched**

On February 26, the official launch of the Min-On Music Research Institute (MOI) was held at the NS Building in Shinjuku, Tokyo. The establishment of the institute was announced on October 18, 2014, which marked the 51st anniversary of the founding of the Min-On Concert Association by SGI President Daisaku Ikeda.

At the launch event, the institute’s team of researchers introduced its initial five-year research program that will investigate what music can contribute to peacebuilding from the perspectives of psychology, sociology, education and ecology.

Dr. Olivier Urbain, director of the Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research and senior research fellow at MOI, gave an overview of current research into music and psychology. The new institute’s research fellows each introduced their area of research, which included music education, the use of music in conflict resolution and the link between music and ecology.

![MOI Director Hiroyasu Kobayashi (center) with the research fellows](image3)
What inspired you to pursue a career in the field of peace and conflict studies?

Yaliwe: In my late teens, I was involved in work to support Zambian women through local advocacy campaigns on women’s rights. This was an empowering experience for me and gave me insight into what it means to overcome adversity and exclusion.

Jason: As a student of Middle Eastern languages and culture in the early 1990s, I spent a summer teaching English to Palestinian children. Many of these young people shared personal experiences of political violence that were shocking to hear. Yet, I was also deeply inspired by their strength and determination. This sparked an interest to learn more about how young people engage with the challenges of living amidst conflict. As time went on, I also became keen to understand how humanitarian organizations think about the impact of war on the young and how they seek to promote peace with and through them.

In what capacity are you currently involved in the field?

Jason: I am a researcher, writer and teacher, and also act as an adviser to humanitarian organizations.

Yaliwe: I am currently working on my PhD research, which entails a feminist analysis of peace by drawing on narratives of women who formed peace groups during the war in northern Uganda. Additionally, I conduct conflict resolution training workshops.

What are the most challenging and rewarding aspects of your job?

Jason: I’ve learned over time that the biggest challenge always lies in winning over myself—becoming “the master of one’s mind,” as the 13th-century Buddhist priest Nichiren explained it. That often means using my Buddhist practice to ensure that anger is transformed into a force for inclusive and creative change. This is a battle that I don’t always win! However, when I do and when I see the positive results in terms of the empowerment of others, it is immensely rewarding.

Yaliwe: The most challenging aspect of my work is remaining positive and optimistic despite hearing people’s experiences of pain, anxiety or anger. The most rewarding part of my work is holding deep dialogue with a wide range of people. I recently began life coaching sessions that entail reflecting on one’s mission or life purpose. During these conversations, I am able to stay connected to people’s dreams, including my own.

Being constantly exposed to the harsh realities of conflict and violence must be difficult. Where, amidst this, do you find inspiration?

Jason: Nichiren and the first three presidents of the Soka Gakkai have given countless illustrations of how extreme hardship, when challenged head-on, can cause an individual to draw out incredible strength. Witnessing this principle in action—in the lives of young people living amidst the worst of circumstances—is truly inspiring. I have a treasure chest of memories of courageous and creative youth in various war zones that I share with my students in the hope of inspiring them in turn.
“It is tempting to charge headlong into efforts for peace on the national or global stage. However, it is vital to base such endeavors firmly on efforts to transform ourselves.”

Yaliwe: I realize that in situations of conflict or violence, one can easily be drawn into focusing on experiences of pain, anger or cruelty. It takes courage and a sense of possibility to focus on people’s creative responses to adversity. During my PhD research, I listened to women who were abducted by militia groups, stories of forced marriage and rape. I also listened to women who embraced those who were abducted, those who killed and those who bore children during their time as militia fighters. I listened to women who fed, bathed and cared for people who were forced into fighting against their own communities. This is what continues to inspire my work.

SGI President Daisaku Ikeda refers to the value of people working together to resolve issues. He discusses what resilience is and points out that “if we are to realize the rich possibilities inherent in the concept of resilience, we will need to expand and recast our understanding of what it means.” I have found that my research and conflict resolution work is inspired by people’s ability to imagine an alternative positive future, no matter how adverse the circumstances.

What do you aim to achieve through your involvement in this field; what are your future ambitions?

Yaliwe: My plans are to contribute to international efforts to foster peace, especially in Africa. I am keen on working for mediation teams at the United Nations and/or the African Union. I believe that African women’s experiences of transforming adverse situations can offer creative alternative approaches to peace and security policies that are put in place by governments. Once I finish my PhD, I plan to work with women’s groups in East Africa and link their efforts with those of international bodies such as the United Nations and the African Union.

Jason: My immediate aim is to influence the thinking and practice of organizations that support young people living in settings of armed conflict by assisting them to become more attuned to the situation of war-affected youth. In my experience, justice is often vitally important to young people. Yet it is an aspiration that is often poorly understood and addressed by humanitarians.

Seeing brutal injustice at close quarters has shaped my long-term goal of raising greater awareness and concern across society. I seek to do this through all aspects of my work as a researcher, writer and teacher. I’m especially passionate about working with students to help them develop a critical, inquiring outlook, and the ambition to work for a more just world.

How has your Buddhist practice influenced your approach to work?

Jason: My practice enables me to access resources of hope, courage and determination. Sometimes, I have to dig very deep in order to achieve this, but over nearly three decades of practice and study, I have had the immense good fortune to overcome each situation that might otherwise lead to despair.

Yaliwe: When I worked for the Centre for Conflict Resolution, I began to draw more consciously on Buddhist principles to prepare for and run conflict resolution workshops across the continent. I have found that my Buddhist practice enables me to stay positive and spiritually focused on resilience and creativity—that which makes peacebuilding possible. In facilitating dialogue sessions or conflict resolution workshops, I draw on a central Buddhist principle of peace that emphasizes the transformation of one’s own heart over that of external factors. As stated by President Ikeda, in order to transform one’s heart, one needs to keep an open mind so that all contributions can really be heard. This is the only way to have genuine dialogue. My Buddhist practice also helps me consciously suspend my own judgment so that I can authentically hear people’s concerns and be able to respond.

What can we do as individuals in our daily lives to create a more peaceful and conflict-free society?

Yaliwe: We can listen to one another and become more aware of and seek to change our assumptions about ourselves and others, which may be contributing to the creation or escalation of conflict or violence.

How has your Buddhist practice influenced your approach to work?

Jason: It is tempting to charge headlong into efforts for peace on the national or global stage. However, it is vital to base such endeavors firmly on efforts to transform ourselves. I constantly return to President Ikeda’s words: “A great revolution in just a single individual will help achieve a change in the destiny of a nation and, further, can even enable a change in the destiny of all humankind.” Most importantly, we cannot afford to write off the humanity of another individual or group of people.
Having received life, one cannot escape death,” writes Nichiren. “Yet though everyone, from the noblest, the emperor, on down to the lowliest commoner, recognizes this as a fact, not even one person in a thousand or ten thousand truly takes the matter seriously.” The inescapability of death may seem tragic, yet it is this certain fact of death that compels us, ultimately, to ask, “How do I live a meaningful and joyful life?” This question is at the heart of the Lotus Sutra and the parable of the skilled physician and his sick children.

The parable begins with a skilled physician who has many children. While he is away from home, his children drink poison. He returns to find them writhing on the ground in agony. He quickly gathers and mixes various fine herbs to prepare an excellent medicine. Some of his children take the medicine and are immediately cured, but others, who have been severely poisoned, refuse the medicine despite the pain they are experiencing.

The father devises a plan. He tells them, “You should know that I am now old and worn out, and the time of my death has come. I will leave this good medicine here. You should take it and not worry that it will not cure you.” Having given these instructions, he goes off to another land, where he sends a messenger home to announce, “Your father is dead.” Stricken by grief, his befuddled children come to their senses, take the medicine and are cured. The father, hearing that his children are all better, returns home.

“This is the seventh and final in a series introducing the parables of the Lotus Sutra.”

Buddhism teaches that life is in a constant state of flux and that everything will ultimately change and fade. It is when the children awaken to this stark reality that they finally come to their senses and begin to seek a cure to their suffering, represented here as the good medicine of the Lotus Sutra—the essential teaching left by Shakyamuni Buddha for an ailing world. Like the confused children in the parable poisoned by mistaken beliefs, our lives can easily fall into patterns of deferment, avoidance, escapism or resignation. We are often unable to change our lives and our negative tendencies despite recognizing a need to do so. Sometimes it can take a crisis, such as the sudden passing of a loved one, to awaken us to the impermanence and preciousness of life and make us earnestly seek something more meaningful.

“It is when we are mindful of death that we begin to earnestly seek ‘something eternal’ and resolve to make the most valuable use of each moment of life,” writes SGI President Daisaku Ikeda. This seeking spirit, the willingness to strive, is the basic condition for awakening to the eternal Buddha nature that exists within one’s own life. In the parable, this awakening is represented by the father’s return after the children take the medicine.

Coming to believe in our Buddhahood, however, does not magically elevate us above life’s challenges or alter the fact of life’s impermanence. Rather, with confidence in our Buddha nature—this vast, untapped internal reservoir of hope, courage, wisdom and compassion—we are able to squarely face up to the challenges of life and meaningfully transform them. What drives this dynamic process is the spirit of earnestly desiring to “see” the Buddha. In President Ikeda’s words, “The mind of an ordinary person who seeks the Buddha becomes the mind of the Buddha itself.”

This is the seventh and final in a series introducing the parables of the Lotus Sutra.

The Parable of the Skilled Physician and His Sick Children

“We are often unable to change our lives and our negative tendencies despite recognizing a need to do so. Sometimes it can take a crisis to awaken us to the impermanence and preciousness of life.”

“The mind of an ordinary person who seeks the Buddha becomes the mind of the Buddha itself.”

Photo credit: © Francesca Romana Perazzelli
Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.
—Preamble of the UNESCO Constitution

To respond to evil by committing another evil does not eliminate evil but allows it to go on forever.
—Václav Havel (1936–2011)

War is only a cowardly escape from the problems of peace.
—Thomas Mann (1875–1955)

For it isn’t enough to talk about peace. One must believe in it. And it isn’t enough to believe in it. One must work at it.
—Eleanor Roosevelt (1884–1962)

Wars are poor chisels for carving out peaceful tomorrows.
—Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968)

One little person, giving all of her time to peace, makes news. Many people, giving some of their time, can make history.
—Peace Pilgrim (1908–1981)
The Soka Gakkai International (SGI) is a worldwide association of 94 constituent organizations with membership in 192 countries and territories. In the service of its members and of society at large, the SGI centers its activities on developing positive human potentialities for hope, courage and altruistic action. Rooted in the life-affirming philosophy of Nichiren Buddhism, members of the SGI share a commitment to the promotion of peace, culture and education. The scope and nature of the activities conducted in each country vary in accordance with the culture and characteristics of that society. They all grow, however, from a shared understanding of the inseparable linkages that exist between individual happiness and the peace and development of all humanity.

As a nongovernmental organization (NGO) with formal ties to the United Nations, the SGI is active in the fields of humanitarian relief and public education, with a focus on peace, sustainable development and human rights.