

Fijian Peace Traveller¹

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What I will say this morning is probably about how I got here talking about peace thinking. I have called this address 'Fijian Peace Traveller', and it begins with an epigraph from Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* (1912); it reads:

*The traveller has to knock
at every alien door
and he has to wander
through all the outer worlds
to reach the inner most
shrine at the end.*
Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)

I thought that in this over-explored field of peace building, how one might add newness to the subject is musing on it from the perspective of a Fijian who for many years now has been inventing imaginary accounts of social life and the human condition hoping they would make a difference. Peace odyssey like the act of writing is a complex journey involving risks, setbacks, and eventual success. We set out with the hope that a happy ending is within your karma. During the course of this address I hope it will become apparent why I believe peace building is essentially an individual responsibility, and it has many parallels with creative life of an artist. Peace is a light that is born in the individual consciousness, like the spark in the artist's imagination that produces an aesthetic object. I shall expand on this gradually. I'd like this talk to be viewed as stages in the consciousness of someone who has come some way in the peace journey and in his writing.

First, I provide some theoretical considerations to give us direction; this is an underlying framework so that we don't waver too far away from

¹ Keynote Presentation at a workshop on Peace, Suva, June 2017.

our concern. The simplest model of peace, close to how most people think about peace, is represented in a triangle with the individual thinker at the apex, and at the bottom at one end thoughts and idea on peace; at the other end the social and political reality. Although the three are interconnected, the focus here is on the individual because it could be said that peace begins and ends with the individual. Of course, there are many more models of peace; one research lists thirty-five theories of peace. Inevitably most theories are intellectual constructs. The intellect dissects and analyses. But peace is not a matter of intellect alone; it requires passion and dedication, thus the individual, like the protagonist in fiction, is the main agency of change, and change comes through conflicts and struggles.

Classic speeches on peace like J.F. Kennedy's American University 1963 address is largely an intellectual analysis of social and political reality with generalised reference to examining one's own 'attitude towards the possibilities of peace'. This speech is still a useful reference point in talking about peace. Nearly half a century later a different kind of peace orator and President looked for a middle path between just war and pacifism, traditional means of achieving peace through the state and global systems, and individual and group initiatives by fusing non-violence, conflict resolution, advancing democracy, repentance and forgiveness, economic growth, human rights, international unity, reducing offensive weapons, and grass root peace building. What is remarkable about Barak Obama's Nobel Prize acceptance speech is that he goes beyond the tension between realist and idealist approaches to peace and has the audacity to embrace 'the law of love' in peace struggle. And towards the end comes that inspiring line from the writer we admired in the book *Dreams From My Father* (1995): 'Let us reach for the world that ought to be – that spark of the divine that still stirs within each of our souls'.

Although here are many positive ideas about peace in that speech, there is that questionable assertion that 'War, in one form or another, appeared with the first man'. Perhaps it wasn't violence but an ocean of peace that existed at the dawn of history, that peace is more basic to human nature than Obama assumes. It is necessary to believe that if we want to dream of 'new heaven and new earth' not in the distant future or within our lifetime but at the present time, we have to be convinced that peace is not something we build or create; peace is eternally present in the universe.

I will focus on the brief remark that Obama made on our moral imagination a little later; he had spoken on 'continued expansion of our moral imagination, an insistence that there's something irreducible that

we all share. Presently I wish to return to the question at I began with: how did I get here in my thinking about peace? I want to step away from becoming narrowly abstract and academic by re-introducing personal history, and reinforcing the view that peace begins in the individual consciousness and expands into the world. The personal narrative has to begin in the outback of these islands where deprivation imposed its own kind of negative peace and passive outlook on things; and then in my twenty-first year to be hurtled into the bewildering experience of a metropolitan university invaded by an array of ideas from counterculture movement of the 60's: flower people and protest marchers carrying the slogan 'Make love not War', the psychedelic fantasies of anti-establishment youth, the Beatles singing 'All you need is love' and 'Give peace a chance', student rebellion escalating into an intellectual revolution, and there were some angry young men of the fifties still hanging around, shaking their fist at everyone and everything: my participation in all this was naive and half-hearted, you might even say quixotic, but these were formative years. Besides I was making my own discoveries that was transforming my thinking: the existentialists who deepened my understanding of the human condition. (Freedom is a seminal concept in existentialism: I'm free to the extent you are free, it had much meaning later in peace thinking). And there was Gandhi who in his *The Story of My Experiment with Truth* (1925) was telling us about means and ends: As the means, so the end. Not quite a Fijian yet, I was knocking at alien doors, groping for meaning in different worlds.

The counterculture of the 60's was in tatters by the time I had turned to serious writing. Nonetheless, the romance with that era continued till this day. Through reading and writing what was evolving in the mind was something akin to Obama's moral imagination. Here is in full what he said about moral imagination in his Nobel speech:

Agreement among nations, Strong institutions. Support for human Rights. Investment in development. All these are vital ingredients in bringing about the evolution that President Kennedy spoke about.

And yet, I do not believe that we have the will, the determination, the staying power, to complete this work without something more - and that's the continued expansion of our moral imagination, an insistence that there's something that all share.

The speech doesn't really focus on moral imagination; it moves on to other themes, to globalization and 'cultural levelling of modernity'.

When I started to pursue writing more consciously and tried to explain what I was doing, I realized it was the same creative principle. Writing that is born out of our moral imagination has the power of self-transformation, and is intricately connected to what is possible and to visions of peace. For peace scholar John Paul Lederach moral imagination is identifying possibilities in unknown paths and generating what does not exist, thus peace-building approximates the artistic process. Peace enquiry, like the artist's search for expression, means looking for metaphors and stories to stimulate the imagination. Obama had talked about alternatives to violence; those alternatives can be reached through cultivating the moral imagination which enables those trapped in a cycle of violence to suspend judgement, experience multitude of interconnectedness, accept complexity and seek 'something beyond'.

All those metaphors and alternatives are at work in the story of the Buddha's encounter with a terrorist. The book *The Buddha and the Terrorist* (2006) makes a powerful statement that 'it is easy to engage in dialogue with those who are friendly and those who pose no threat. The real challenge is to talk to those who are violent, those who disagree, those who oppose and those who intend to harm'. The Buddha seeks out the terrorist named Angulimala because he wore a necklace of fingers of the victims of his violence. Through conversation with him, the Buddha wins his trust by exposing the root cause of his wrath, and showing an alternative life for him. The encounter between the monk and the terrorist demonstrates the possibility of radical change in a most violent person when he is made to examine the terror that is within him. It is the reason why Western democracies are not able to deal with terrorism as they aren't prepared to accept what the search for the root cause might lead to or reveal. It is the Buddha's moral imagination that enabled him to take the risk involved and arrive at the complex answer that lies deep within the intricate inter-relationships.

The 60's taught us not to rely on the state to generate peace. We were reading Mahatma Gandhi, himself engaged in forming a new nation, who admitted that 'The State represents violence in a concentrated and organized form. The individual has a soul, but as the State is soulless machine, it can never be weaned away from violence to which it owes its very existence.' Of course, there are many kinds of states: relatively stable states and fragile states; free or democratic states and fallen states; dictatorial states, belligerent states and the so-called rogue states. The nation state world-wide is attended by leadership that generally supports force, both internally and externally, for a cause that is posited as just. It is assumed that unadulterated peace is unattainable. There are none that are

prepared to disavow violence unconditionally. Sometimes the state even condones certain degree of agitation and instability to detract attention from internal problems in governance. Most states are satisfied with negative peace, that is, absence of collective violence. These observations are meant to argue that the state, by its very nature, is incapable of just and lasting peace.

The history of almost all states is progressive monopolization of power and force to perpetuate itself which makes it difficult for it to be protector of free expression or to maintain trust in public institutions, the institutions that both Kennedy and Obama said must evolve for peace to become properly established.

One such institution is education, high in the agenda of the 1968 student rebellion, which the state controls to sustain its political and economic systems and not necessarily for enlightenment or peace and healing. The 1968 student protest movements that erupted in Europe, the United States and Japan happened against the background of the Vietnam war, thus had connection to demand for universal peace, and education with moral imagination was seen as essential for students to examine their lives and realize their full potential as human beings. The state wanted appeasement but was unequipped to give what the students really demanded.

This experience of student protest of the 60's, re-thinking about it later, turned my gaze to our own education system with its cluttered curriculum in which there is hardly the space to innovate, to offer something like values education which is the most critical need of our time. The universities speak of quality in its discrete offerings without truly striving to bring knowledge together to address our permanent concerns, and contributing to the evolution of human consciousness. I have pondered on this theme in a recent publication entitled *Reclaiming the Nation* (2016). I wish to quote briefly from it. For us to realise the grand vision we have of a peaceful and vibrant new Fiji, we need to

attend to the greatest national need of the moment, that is, to address the wounds, real or assumed, that different communities have been nurturing. All segments of society carry their own peculiar hurts from history, be it the scars of pre-contact animosities, the bruises of indenture, the psychological damage caused by colonialism, the traumas of the coups, the acrimony arising from the recent elections. These injuries cannot be easily erased or repressed. Real or symbolic wounds (various forms of true and false consciousness) are stored away in human memory and resurface at moments of crisis and confronta-

tion. If healing is the most urgent national need, and we are talking here about aligning our education to true national needs, avoiding puerile economism or vocationalism as ideologies, the curriculum becomes the location in which solidarity and healing assumes priority (2016: 19-20).

This is not to suggest that education is the panacea for all our ills, but we have believed that the kind of society we want depends on the kind of education we are imparting now.

The question is sometimes asked: who is to gain from all this struggle? Although the peace journey is for everyone – men, women, children – it is said that the main beneficiary is the future generations. But what if the generation that is emerging doesn't really care? Education's next great challenge is to re-engage the disaffected generation numbed by modern technology, who are becoming our new illiterates.

The state has its own versions of ego and desire which it cannot transcend in order to evolve. Peace activists, however, have to continue to influence state policies in regard to inequities of power and wealth, and the most effective means of doing that is to work with strategically placed individuals in the state machinery who have the capacity to evolve.

The Vietnam War in the 60's demonstrated to us how helpless the world organizations can be in promoting universal culture of peace. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, was no doubt a significant triumph. The endorsement of it however hasn't deterred nation states from actively following the culture of war. Human rights would have gained true strength if it was reinforced by another right: human right to peace. Western nations have resisted the inclusion of human right to peace simply because that would make it difficult for them to wage war. A crucial moment in peace history was lost in 1999 when the draft culture of peace did not find support from the most influential countries. The campaign for culture of peace through the Manifesto 2000, signed by 75 million people, failed in a similar way, not unlike numerous peace accords.

In the Buddhist narrative in *The Buddha and the Terrorist*, the terrorist who wore the gruesome necklace, and later becomes *Ahimsaka*, the Humble One, offers us the path to individual peace and liberation through the practice of non-attachment and engagement:

Attachment means clinging, being tied to a person or a place or an idea. Engagement is to realise that we are all related and connected yet we are not bound to each other. There is no possessiveness in my heart; I am not 'I', and nothing is 'mine'.

Detached from desire and carving for personal gain and gratification, we monks act from compassion, not out of attachment.

Ahimsaka's life is a parable of attachment, release and re-engagement. His transformation is an inspiring saga because it gives us hope that terrorists as human beings can undergo sudden or gradual awakening.

Our moral imagination reveals that there are countless agitated selves with our being, not all of them striving for the same goal. The maker of fiction understands this, as does the peace activist with an advanced consciousness, and that it is a constant struggle and requires inner discipline to quell the ego and desire that distract us from reaching the subterranean flow where authentic peace resides. This experience isn't accessible either to the state or the system of states, where peace which is attainable, is an erratic episode. So making the earth a place of peace is an unhurried, slow-moving process, one person at a time, though it might be accelerated by means of peace curriculum and collective initiative. The anthropologist Margaret Mead has said on this that 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has'.

The reflections in the address are of course part of the journey within. Reflection however isn't the end; reflection must result in engagement with the world in a steadfast way, and in spite of all the noise the journey continues. As a maker of fiction, I now understand that peace is inseparable from who we are as humans. Therefore to turn away from peace is counter to our true nature. The creator of the universe urges us to be creative and the very goal of creativity is to reach for harmony. The peace activist, creative writer, ordinary men and women with evolving consciousness, are all conduits through which a higher purpose is finding expression.

Reference

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