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12/23/09

Beyond War and Peace

When we think of just peace theory, we think about it in relation to war and peace. It is the middle way between just war theory and pacifism. However, the three core principles of just peace theory – truth, respect, security-- may be applied to other problems facing humankind. In fact, if we were to apply just peace theory to these other problems, we could assuage the conditions that lead to war.

Truth. Respect. Security. These three attitudes are necessary to a peace with justice. Peace is deeper than the absence of violent conflict. A negative peace is the condition where people are not actively involved in violent conflict, but where enmity and distrust remain. One considers the Other as evil, someone who ought to be suppressed and contained by any means necessary. Fear fills the imaginary space between the one and the Other. Violent conflict can erupt at any moment. These conflicts are often characterized as just wars. However, no war can meet the criteria of just war theory. No war is the last resort. No war protects innocents.

Conversely, a positive peace is one where the fear, hatred and suspicion of the Other no longer exist. Violent conflict is not engaged because there is no desire to do harm to the Other. Just peace theory proposes methods of just peacemaking that can craft a positive peace. A just peace is a positive peace and this is its distinguishing feature from the idea of peace as simply the absence of war.

A just peace is only possible through the presence of justice. No justice; no peace. Justice exists in many forms. At its core it is righteousness, moral rectitude, rightness, fairness, giving to others their due. It is commutative, distributive, contributive and retributive. We owe justice to each other; it ought to be distributed equitably; we all contribute; it is a kind of reparation. When we think of moral acting as right relationships, with ourselves, humanity, all of nature and creation, with the transcendence that connects us, the Divine Love that is the consuming fire, passion and meaning of life, we have no choice but to consider justice. Justice speaks the truth. Justice respects self and others. Justice finds security in itself.

Justice asks and answers practical questions. What does a just peace mean for how we face the everyday struggle of living? How can this thinking influence policy decisions on the economy or healthcare or climate change? First it requires a paradigm shift from me/mine thinking to us/ours thinking. It requires an understanding of our identities as extending beyond our individual selves. We are individuals embedded in multiple families, communities, natures, worlds, histories. When we think about what is good for us, we ought to also think about what is good for the whole. The zero-sum, “I win, you lose” thinking has no place in a just peace paradigm.

So, when we think about solutions to an economic crisis, there ought not to be a Wall Street versus Main Street mentality. When any nation finds itself at the brink of economic disaster, the solution ought to be a policy that is just for all. It ought to be a solution that considers the just distribution of wealth and that makes economic reparation when necessary. The shared values and beliefs of a society ought to make just peace thinking the moral norm.

In economics, truth requires transparency about who pays and who benefits from economic policy. Respect requires a regard for the dignity of all and no class of people ought to be exploited by any other class. Security requires that there is a safety net that assures that everyone will have the basic needs of life—food, shelter, clothing, education, healthcare.

The debate about healthcare reform has dominated the public discourse in the United States this past year. The nation has basically divided into two camps – those who want government involvement in healthcare and those who do not. There are those who want the society as a whole to understand health care as a human right that is a social, national, governmental responsibility. There are those who believe that health care is a personal responsibility, and who think that a “government takeover” of healthcare would deprive people of basic liberty, raise taxes and be too costly for the national government to sustain over time.

A just peace solution to healthcare requires the truth about the current state of the healthcare system in the United States. This nation may have some of the best doctors, hospitals, teaching facilities and technologies in the world, but all this does not lead to optimal health outcomes when far too many people do not have access to care or when their care is limited by the limits of a for profit insurance industry.

Moreover, the truth also is that far too many Americans are careless about our health. We want to overindulge, practice no physical fitness regime, give little or no thought to stress management and think we are going to lead healthy lives. This is foolishness of the first order. This is an abdication of our moral responsibility to ourselves. If we each do not take responsibility in this area, healthcare costs will eat up our personal and national wealth while everything else –the environment, schools, the arts – go begging.

Respect in the healthcare debate recognizes health care as a human right. Respect requires us to honor the international declarations and conventions that say health care is a right and that citizens of the various nations have a responsibility to insist that their governments provide universal care. A lack of health care is an assault on human dignity. Every human being has a right to have h/er dignity respected, thus providing a universal healthcare system is a moral imperative that we ought to respect.

Truth and respect leads to security. Security is safety. It is assurance. It is the freedom from fear. Most human beings find safety in the relationships we build, including the relationship of citizenship, including the human to human relationship we have with undocumented immigrants. When we apply the principle of security to healthcare, we ought to think of it as a national security issue. The nation faces threats not only from enemies without, but from enemies within. Gross disparities between those who have their basic needs met, including health care, and those who do not can cause violence. The violence may begin within poor communities, but violence knows no boundaries and will sooner or later spill over to affect the society as a whole.

Thus our shared value ought to become one where we know that our personal health security is linked with that of our neighbor. When we understand this, we will want to see our neighbor receive good quality health care. This means we all ought to pay our fair share to cover the cost of a universal healthcare system. And to whom much is given, much is required. Our security is found in our solidarity.

The solidarity that security requires ought to extend beyond national boundaries and identities. It is a human solidarity that begins within our borders and extends to the circumference of the globe. It is a human solidarity that works together for the preservation of the planet. On the matter of climate change, truth says the overwhelming scientific evidence demonstrates that climate change is a reality. Human activity is a factor in this reality. Rich countries and poor countries have a moral responsibility to work together to solve the problem. Rich countries ought to help poor countries to meet the basic need of their people while cooperating in creating economic development that is environmentally sustainable.

A healthy respect for the Earth will compel us to change our behavior. This Earth is our mother. She provides the food and water that keeps us alive. The air we breathe is her breath. Our actions affect the delicate protective layers around her that protects us from the harmful rays of the sun. And, if we desecrate mother Earth, we desecrate our own lives. Today, we face both drought and rising ocean levels. Humanity is taking more space away from the wild things, the herd-runner, and the predators, the wild flowers and rain forests. Respect for the Earth means we ought to respect Earth's other species and discipline our lives with these Others in mind.

Security when it comes to climate change means we ought to think about the sustenance, the safety and security of other species when we order our lives, our political-economies, even our religious rituals. Overindulgence is immoral. Abundant life does not mean personal overconsumption. Much too much is violence.

When we apply the just peace principles of truth, respect and security to the problems of the economy, healthcare and climate change, we put the well-being of others at the forefront of our considerations. Just peace knows that local acts have global consequences. Just peace is a moment by moment, inch by inch, day by day process of reconciling our personal needs and desires with those of others both near and far. Just peace is sustenance and joy. Just peace is a serenity that comes from clarity, the clear-eyed vision that what is good is good for everyone.

Just peace is the promise and the hope of the coming of the light, the miracle of provision of the stuff that fuels the light, the coming of living, breathing love in human flesh, the offering of the first fruits, the gifts of the magi. Just peace is peace on earth and good will toward men and women and nature and creation.

Just peace is a Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays for everyone every day of the year.