

A Pacifist Dictionary

By **Kate Maloy**

Someone recently said to me: My pacifism stops when someone declares war on me. She is apparently a pacifist only until the condition that actually calls for pacifism arises. She wants to know how we can protect ourselves if we don't return violence for violence. She wants to know what we should do.

No wonder she is at a loss. The human race has almost no experience with lasting peace or its strategies. Our default has always been war. When at risk, we want to destroy the enemy that has put us there. This is not our noblest option—it comes from reflex, not reflection—but we nearly always resort to it, first or last.

Those of us who hang onto pacifist ideals, even in times like these, are dismissed, attacked, and mocked. We are dismissed by the likes of NPR's Cokie Roberts, who, when asked whether there is any opposition to this current war, answered: None that matters. We are attacked in editorials and sometimes by our own friends or relatives as unrealistic, simple-minded, airy-fairy, even dangerous. We are mocked in mainstream media like Newsweek, in which there recently appeared a snide comment about anachronistic, bead-and-Birkenstock types.

The fear sparked by recent horrors intensifies suspicion toward pacifism. People don't want their traditional forms of defense—the only ones they know—called into doubt. It makes them too afraid. And in turn it makes them scorn us “peaceniks,” as if our ideals deepen their risk, as if we would sacrifice the world before relaxing our principles.

The fact is, we see real safety as possible only through our principles. The more surprising fact is, we can state our principles just like everyone else. We are patriots, and we believe in defense. We love our freedoms, desperately mourn the violence against our country, and long for justice. We recognize the need for sacrifice and courage in these terrible times. We pray for peace. It's just that we define the relevant nouns a little differently.

Excerpts from a pacifist dictionary might read something like this (though not in alphabetical order):

- **Patriotism.** Unswerving loyalty to the first and foremost principle of our country, which is also the first principle of humanity—All people are created equal. Because violence betrays this principle, true patriotism must seek nonviolent ways both to extend it and defend it.
- **Defense.** Protection against violence achieved by eliminating its causes, including hatred, intolerance, injustice, and fear. This is accomplished through the universal application of humanity's first principle. When all people are treated as equals, there remains little reason for warfare.

- Freedom. A human condition that arises from a generous sufficiency of food, clothing, shelter, education, health care, civil and religious liberties, and employment opportunities. It is a self-limiting condition; it breeds no desire for excess, whether material, behavioral, or political. A truly free person or nation sees that in a world of finite resources the drive for disproportionate wealth and power necessarily exploits or subjugates others and thus betrays humanity's first principle.
- Justice. All actions and policies that ensure and protect humanity's first principle and guarantee to all people and nations an equal right to freedom.
- Sacrifice. Forgoing any over-use of resources by countries or individuals so that the first principle can apply worldwide. The only alternative to material sacrifice is blood sacrifice—the continued endangerment or death of the young to save the old or the greedy.
- Courage. The quality that overrides personal fear in order to keep faith with ideals and act upon them.
- Peace. An enduring condition that can come about only when patriotism, defense, freedom, justice, sacrifice, and courage—the concepts defined above—prevail among all people and nations. This condition is deeper and stronger than history's periods of uneasy quiet between wars.

We pacifists know that our definitions are not in common usage. We know we are a tiny minority. We know this war will run over our ideals like a tank. We know we must either take the long view or despair altogether. Pacifism, in the long view, is far from being illogical and powerless, as most people think. It is the only logic and the only power.

The long view sees, for instance, that the use of ever more lethal weapons—from teeth, feet, and elbows to chemical, biological, and nuclear threats—has never increased security but rather has led us into the ultimate danger. It sees that all weapons are powerless against hatred, as our country's massive arsenal was powerless against militants with knives and boxcutters. It sees the most terrible lesson of war, which is that it does not neutralize peril but doubles it. War creates two kinds of danger—the kind embodied in our global destructive power and the kind embodied in the hatred that first spawned that power.

The only way to extinguish both hazards is to put humanity's first principle first—to make that, instead of war, our default. The human race has probably needed its wars in order to see the limits of war, but we reached those limits at the end of World War II. That was when the world truly changed. That was when we should have seen that we had forever ruled out either war or humankind.

Thus in answer to that earlier question—What should we do?—pacifists would say: In every moment, act, vote, speak, and choose not for that moment but for what it can give rise to—hatred or compassion, war or peace. Be alert for the old ways and the old rhetoric and recognize what they truly stand for, which is more and deeper peril. Uphold humanity's first principle at every personal and national decision point, not just when it is convenient. Do these things, and peace will fall into place, slowly no doubt, but with infinite grace.

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