Poetry and Peace: Some Broader Dimensions

(1989)

IS THERE A POETRY of peace? A few years ago I participated in a panel at Stanford, on the theme of Women, War and Peace. During the question period, someone in the audience, whom I could not see—we speakers were on a stage, and the house lights were down—but whom I afterwards learned was the distinguished psychologist Virginia Satir, said that poets should present to the world images of peace, not only of war; everyone needed to be able to *imagine* peace if we were going to achieve it. Since I was the only poet on the panel, this challenge was mine to respond to—but I had only a lame and confused response to make. Afterwards I thought about it, and I remember discussing the problem—the problem of the lack of peace poems—with some poet friends, Robert Hass and David Shaddock, a few days later. What was said I've forgotten, but out of that talk and my own ponderings a poem emerged which was in fact my delayed response. In it, I wrote,

> . . . But peace, like a poem,
> is not there ahead of itself,
> can't be imagined before it is made,
> can't be known except
> in the words of its making,
> grammar of justice,
> syntax of mutual aid.

> A feeling towards it,
> dimly sensing a rhythm, is all we have
> until we begin to utter its metaphors,
> learning them as we speak.
> A line of peace might appear
> if we restructured the sentence our lives are making,
> revoked its reaffirmation of profit and power,
> questioned our needs, allowed
> long pauses . . .
> A cadence of peace might balance its weight
> on that different fulcrum; peace, a presence,
> an energy field more intense than war,
> might pulse then,
> stanza by stanza into the world, . . .*

This analogy still holds good for me. Peace as a positive condition of society, not merely as an interim between wars, is something so unknown that it casts no images on the mind's screen. Of course, one could seek out Utopian projections, attempts to evoke the Golden Age; but these are not the psychologically dynamic images Ms. Satir was hoping for, and I can think of none from our own century, even of the nostalgic or fantastic variety, unless one were to cite works of prose in the science fiction category. (And these, particularly if one compares them with the great novels of life as it is—with *War and Peace* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, with *Middlemarch* or *Madame Bovary* or *Remembrance of Things Past*—are entertainments rather than illuminating visions, because they tend to be works of fancy rather than imagination, at least in so far as they deal with human emotions and behavior.) Credible, psychologically dynamic poetic images of peace exist only on the most personal level. None of us knows what a truly peaceful world society might feel like. Since peace is indivisible, one society, or one culture, or one country alone could not give its members a full experience of it, however much it evolved in its own justice and

*From "Making Peace," *Breathing the Water*, New Directions, 1987.

positive peace-making: the full experience of peace could only come in a *world* at peace. It's like the old song,

> *I* want / *to* be happy,
> *but* I / can't be happy
> *un*less / you are
> happy too!

Meanwhile, as Catherine de Vinck (a Catholic writer all of whose work expresses her deep faith) says in her *Book of Peace*, "Right Now":

Right Now

Right now, in this house we share
—earth the name of it
planet of no account
in the vast ranges of the sky—
children are dying
lambs with cracked heads
their blood dripping on the stones.

Right now, messengers reach us
handing out leaflets
printed with a single word:
death
misspelled, no longer a dusky angel
death in the shape of a vulture
landing on broken bodies
torn flesh.

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How can we mix this knowledge
with the bread we eat
with the cup we drink?
Is it enough to fill these words
these hollow flutes of bones
with aching songs?

And terror is what we know most intimately—that terror and the ache of chronic anxiety Yarrow Cleaves articulates in "One Day."

One Day

When you were thirteen, thoughtful,
you said, "When
the bomb falls, I won't run, I won't
try to get out of the city like
everyone else, in the panic."

When I was a child,
younger than you, I had to
crouch on the floor
at school, under my desk.
How fast could I do it?
The thin bones of my arms
crossed my skull,
for practice. My forehead
went against my knees. I felt
the blinding light of the
windows behind me.
I knew what the bombs did.

"I'll find a tree," you said,
"and the tree will protect me."

Then I turned away, because
I was crying and because you are my child.

What if you stood on the wrong side?

What if the tree, like me, had
only its ashes to give?

What if you have to stand one day
in blasted silence,
screaming, and I can never,
never reach you?

Meanwhile, what we do have is poems of protest, of denouncement, of struggle, and sometimes of comradeship. Little glimpses of what peace means or might mean come through in such poems as Margaret Randall's "The Gloves."

The Gloves

Yes we did march around somewhere and yes it was cold,
we shared our gloves because we had a pair between us
and a New York city cop also shared his big gloves
with me—strange,
he was there to keep our order
and he could do that
and I could take that
back then.
We were marching for the Santa Maria, Rhoda,
a Portuguese ship whose crew had mutinied.
They demanded asylum in Goulart's Brazil
and we marched in support of that demand,
in winter, in New York City,
back and forth before the Portuguese Consulate,
Rockefeller Center, 1961.
I gauge the date by my first child
—Gregory was born late in 1960—as I gauge
so many dates by the first, the second, the third, the fourth,
and I feel his body now, again, close to my breast,
held against cold to our strong steps of dignity.
That was my first public protest, Rhoda,
strange you should retrieve it now
in a letter out of this love of ours
alive these many years.
How many protests since that one, how many
marches and rallies
for greater causes, larger wars, deeper wounds
cleansed or untouched by our rage.
Today a cop would never unbuckle his gloves
and press them around my blue-red hands.

Today a baby held to breast
would be a child of my child, a generation removed.
The world is older and I in it
am older,
burning, slower, with the same passions.
The passions are older and so I am also younger
for knowing them more deeply and moving in them
pregnant with fear and fighting.
The gloves are still there, in the cold,
passing from hand to hand.

In that poem (focussed on a small intimate detail—gloves to keep hands warm—and raying out from it to the *sharing* of that minor comfort, and so to the passing from hand to hand, from generation to generation, of a concern and a resolve) peace as such is very far off-stage, a distant unnamed hope which cannot even be considered until issues of justice and freedom have been addressed and cleared. Yet a kind of peace is present in the poem, too, the peace of mutual aid, of love and communion.

The very fine Welsh poet R. S. Thomas, who, though an Anglican priest, often seems more profoundly skeptical and pessimistic than many secular poets, offers in "The Kingdom" a remote and somewhat abstract view of the possibility and nature of peace and a basic prescription for getting there:

It's a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission

Is free, if you will purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.

But faith is not complacency; and is grossly distorted if it leads to passivity, to a belief that God will pull our chestnuts out of the fire or fix everything with celestial bandaids. Catherine de Vinck corrects any such mistake: we must *act* our faith, she says, at the end of the last poem in her *Book of Peace*, by practical communion with others, offering up and sharing our bodily nourishment, the light of our belief, the living-space we occupy. The time for *making* peace, for constructing or evolving it, the title of this poem makes us recognize, is now:

A Time for Peace

We can still make it
gather the threads, the pieces
each of different size and shade
to match and sew into a pattern:
Rose of Sharon
wedding ring
circles and crowns.

We can still listen:
children at play, their voices
mingling in the present tense
of a time that can be extended.

Peace, we say
looking through our pockets
to find the golden word
the coin to buy that ease
that place sheltered
from bullets and bombs.

But what we seek lies elsewhere
beyond the course of lethargic blood
beyond the narrow dream
of resting safe and warm.

If we adjust our lenses
we see far in the distance
figures of marching people
homeless, hungry, going nowhere.
Why not call them
to our mornings of milk and bread?
The coming night will be darker
than the heart of stones
unless we strike the match
light the guiding candle
say yes, there is room after all
at the inn.

That prescription is for a beginning, a change of attitude, a change of heart; but while it is true that if millions of people acted on it it would revolutionize society, it is *only* a beginning.

What about testimonies of peace on a personal level? Yes, I do believe that poems which record individual epiphanies, moments of tranquillity or bliss, tell us something about what peace might be like. Yet because there *is* not peace they have, always, an undertone of poignancy. We snatch our happiness from the teeth of violence, from the shadow of oppression. And on the whole we do not connect such poems with the idea of *peace as a goal*, but, reading them, experience a momentary relief from the tensions of life lived in a chronic state of emergency.

Muriel Rukeyser, in a poem begun on the trip to Hanoi she and I and Jane Hart made together in 1972, shortly before Nixon's Christmas "carpet-bombing" of the North, wrote of the paradoxical *presence* of peace we felt there in the midst of war:

It Is There

Yes, it is there, the city full of music,
Flute music, sounds of children, voices of poets,
The unknown bird in his long call. The bells of peace.

Essential peace, it sounds across the water
In the long parks where the lovers are walking,
Along the lake with its island and pagoda,
And a boy learning to fish. His father threads the line.
Essential peace, it sounds and it stills. Cockcrow.
It is there, the human place.

On what does it depend, this music, the children's games?
A long tradition of rest? Meditation? What peace is so profound
That it can reach all habitants, all children,
The eyes at worship, the shattered in hospitals?
All voyagers?
Meditation, yes; but within a tension
Of long resistance to all invasion, all seduction of hate.
Generations of holding to resistance; and within this resistance
Fluid change that can respond, that can show the children
A long future of finding, of responsibility; change within
Change and tension of sharing consciousness
Village to city, city to village, person to person entire
With unchanging cockcrow and unchanging endurance
Under the
skies of war.

On that journey I had felt the same thing—the still center, the eye of the storm: "Peace within the/long war" I called it, in a poem called "In Peace Province."

Yes, though I have said we cannot write about peace because we've never experienced it, we do have these glimpses of it, and we have them most intensely when they are brought into relief by the chaos and violence surrounding them. The longing for peace, however, is a longing to get beyond not only the momentariness of such glimpses but also the ominous dualism that

too often seems our only way of obtaining these moments. Experienced only through the power of contrast, a peace in any larger sense would be as false as any other artificial Paradise, or as the hectic flush of prosperity periodically induced in ailing economies by injections of war and arms-industry jobs and profits.

An important understanding we have belatedly begun to gain is that the issue of peace (in the sense of freedom from military conflict) and the issue of social justice (with its economic, racial, and educational dimensions, and its outstanding deficits such as hunger, homelessness, crime, violence, abuse, and lack of medical care) not only cannot be separated from each other but cannot be rationally considered without an equal focus on ecology. The poetry of ecology (and the related prose of a number of current writers too) is not a poetry *of peace*, in the depictive sense which I maintain is not possible "ahead of itself," but it is as important to the *cause* of peace as anything now being written.

John Daniel, in his book *Common Ground*, writes of the mystery of there being anything at all, and of love for the earth:

Of Earth

Swallows looping and diving
by the darkening oaks, the flash
of their white bellies,
the tall grasses gathering last light,
glowing pale gold, silence
overflowing in a shimmer of breeze—
these could have happened
a different way. The heavy-trunked oaks
might not have branched and branched
and finely re-branched
as if to weave themselves into air.
There is no necessity
that any creature should fly,

that last light should turn
the grasses gold, that grasses
should exist at all,
or light.

But a mind thinking so
is a mind wandering from home.
It is not thought that answers
each step of my feet, to be walking here
in the cool stir of dusk
is no mere possibility,
and I am so stained with the sweet
peculiar loveliness of things
that given God's power to dream worlds
from the dark, I know
I could only dream Earth—
birds, trees, this field of light
where I and each of us walk once.

This is a clear example of the kind of poem, the kind of perception, which must for our time *stand in* for a poetry of peace. It is an epiphany both personal and universal, common to all conscious humans, surely, in kind if not in degree. Whether they remember it or not, surely everyone at least once in a lifetime is filled for a moment with a sense of wonder and exhilaration. But the poem's poignancy is peculiar to the late twentieth century. In the past, the dark side of such a poem would have been the sense of the brevity of our own lives, of mortality within a monumentally enduring Nature. Eschatology, whether theological or geological, was too remote in its considerations to have much direct impact on a poetic sensibility illumined by the intense presentness of a moment of being. But today the shadow is deeper and more chilling, for it is the reasonable fear that the earth itself, to all intents and purposes, is so threatened by our actions that its hold on life is as tenuous as our own, its fate as precarious. Poets who direct our attention to injustice, oppression, the suffering of the innocent and the heroism of those who struggle for change, serve the possibility of peace by stimulating others to support that struggle. Yesterday it was Vietnam, today it is El Salvador or Lebanon or Ireland. Closer to home, the Ku Klux Klan rides again, the Skinheads multiply. Hunger and homelessness, AIDS, crack and child abuse. There are poems—good, bad, or indifferent—written every day somewhere about all of these, and they are a poetry of war. Yet one may say that they are a proto-peace poetry; for they testify to a rejection which, though it cannot in itself create a state of peace, is one of its indispensable preconditions. For war is no longer (if it ever was) a matter of armed conflict only. As we become more aware of the inseparability of justice from peace, we perceive that hunger and homelessness and our failure to stop them are forms of warfare, and that no one is a civilian. And we perceive that our degradation of the biosphere is the most devastating war of all. The threat of nuclear holocaust simply proposes a more sudden variation in a continuum of violence we are already engaged in. Oil spills are events in that ongoing war. Deforestation is a kind of protracted trench-warfare.

Our consciousness lags so far behind our actions. W. S. Merwin has written about this time-lag:

Chord

While Keats wrote they were cutting down the sandalwood forests
while he listened to the nightingale they heard their own axes echoing through the forests . . .
while he thought of the Grecian woods, they bled under red flowers
while he dreamed of wine the trees were falling from the trees . . .
while the song broke over him they were in a secret place and they were cutting it forever . . .
when he lay with the odes behind him the wood was sold for cannons
when he lay watching the window they came home and lay down
and an age arrived when everything was explained in another language

The tree has become a great symbol of what we need, what we destroy, what we must revere and protect and learn from if life on earth is to continue and that mysterious hope, *life at peace*, is to be attained. The tree's deep and wide root-system, its broad embrace and lofty reach from earth into air, its relation to fire and to human structures, as fuel and as material, and especially to water which it not only needs but gives (drought ensuing when the forests are destroyed) just as it gives us purer air—all these make it a powerful archetype. The Swedish poet Reidar Ekner has written in "Horologium" as follows:

> Where the tree germinates, it takes root
> there it stretches up its thin spire
> there it sends down the fine threads
> gyroscopically it takes its position
> In the seed the genes whisper: stretch out for the light
> and seek the dark
> And the tree seeks the light, it stretches out
> for the dark
> And the more darkness it finds, the more light
> it discovers
> the higher towards the light it reaches, the further down
> towards darkness
> it is groping
>
> Where the tree germinates, it widens
> it drinks in from the dark, it sips from the light
> intoxicated by the green blood, spirally it turns
> the sun drives it, the sap rushes through the fine pipes
> towards the light
> the pressure from the dark drives it out
> to the points, one
> golden morning the big crown of the tree
> turns green, from all directions insects, and birds
> It is a giddiness, one cone
> driving the other
>
> Inch after inch the tree takes possession of its place
> it transforms the dark into tree
> it transforms the light into tree
> it transforms the place into tree
> It incorporates the revolutions of the planet, one after the other
> the bright semicircle, the dark semicircle
> Inside the bark, it converts time into tree
>
> The tree has four dimensions, the fourth one
> memory
> far back its memory goes, further back than that of Man,
> than the heart of any living beings
> for a long time the corpse of the captured highwayman hung
> from its branches
> The oldest ones, they remember the hunting people, the shell mounds,
> the neolithic dwellings
> They will remember our time, too; our breathing out,
> they will breathe it in
> Hiroshima's time, they breathe it in, cryptomeria
> also this orbit of the planet, they add it to their growth
> Time, they are measuring it; time pieces they are, seventy centuries
> the oldest ones carry in their wood

Ekner causes us to perceive the tree as witness; and when we are stopped in our tracks by a witness to our foolishness, the effect is, at least for a moment, that which A. E. Housman described when he wrote,

> But man at whiles is sober,
> And thinks, by fits and starts;
> And when he thinks, he fastens
> His hand upon his heart.

No; if there begins to be a poetry of peace, it is still, as it has long been, a poetry of struggle. Much of it is not by the fa-

mous, much of it is almost certainly still unpublished. And much of it is likely to be by women, because so many women are actively engaged in nonviolent action, and through their work they have been gathering practical experience in ways of peaceful community. Ann Snitow, writing in 1985 about the Greenham Common Peace Camp in England, said that,

> . . . In a piece in the *Times Literary Supplement* . . . "Why the Peace Movement Is Wrong," the Russian émigré poet Joseph Brodsky [has] charged the peace movement with being a bunch of millenarians waiting for the apocalypse. Certainly there are fascinating parallels between the thinking of the peace women and that of the radical millenarian Protestant sects of the 17th century. Both believe that the soul is the only court that matters, the self the only guide, and that paradise is a humble and realizable goal in England's green and pleasant land. The millenarians offered free food just like the caravans now on the Common: Food, says one sign. Eat till You're Full.
>
> But the women are not sitting in the mud waiting for the end, nor are they—as Brodsky and many others claim—trying to come to terms with their own deaths by imagining that soon the whole world will die. On the contrary . . . the women believe that the dreadful sound [of the last trump] can be avoided, if only we will stop believing in it. . . . They, too, have imagined the end, and their own deaths, and have decided that they prefer to die without taking the world with them. Nothing makes them more furious than the apathy in the town of Newbury, where they are often told, "Look, you've got to die anyway. So what difference does it make how you go?" These are the real millenarians, blithely accepting that the end is near.
>
> In contrast, the women look very hardheaded, very pragmatic. . . . They refuse to be awed or silenced by the war machine. Instead they say calmly that what was built by human beings can be dismantled by them, too.
>
> . . . Where is it written, they ask, that we must destroy ourselves?

A poetry of struggle and vision must be informed by an equally passionate refusal to accept the worst scenario as inevitable—but only after facing the fact that we have come very close to the brink. And it is sobering to reflect that it may be harder by far to halt the ecological catastrophe we have brought about than to dismantle our arsenals.

There can be, then, a poetry which may help us, before it is too late, to attain peace. Poems of protest, documentaries of the state of war, can waken or reinforce a necessary recognition of urgency. Poems of praise for life and the living earth can stimulate us to protect it. (The work of Gary Snyder, of Wendell Berry, comes to mind among others.) Poems of comradeship in struggle can help us—like the thought of those shared gloves in the Margaret Randall poem—to know the dimension of community, so often absent from modern life. And there is beginning to be a new awareness, articulated most specifically in the writings of Father Thomas Berry, the talks and workshops of people like Miriam McGillis or Joanna Macy, that we humans are not just walking around *on* this planet but that we and all things are truly, physically, biologically, part of one living organism; and that our human role on earth is as the consciousness and self-awareness of that organism. A poem by John Daniel, who almost certainly had not read Thomas Berry, shows how this realization is beginning to appear spontaneously in many minds (perhaps rather on the lines of the story of the hundredth monkey):

> . . . a voice is finding its tongue
> in the slop and squall of birth.
>
> It sounds,
>
> and we, in whom Earth happened to light
> a clear flame of consciousness,
> are only beginning to learn the language—

who are made of the ash of stars,
who carry the sea we were born in,
who spent millions of years learning to breathe,
who shivered in fur at the reptiles' feet,
who trained our hands on the limbs of trees
and came down, slowly straightening
to look over the grasses, to see
that the world not only is
but is beautiful—

we are Earth learning to see itself . . .

If this consciousness (with its corollary awareness that when we exploit and mutilate the earth we are exploiting and mutilating the body of which we are the brain cells) increases and proliferates while there is still time, it could be the key to survival. A vision of peace cannot be a vision of a world in which *natural* disasters are miraculously eliminated: but it must be of a society in which companionship and fellowship would so characterize the tone of daily life that unavoidable disasters would be differently met. Earthquakes and floods do, anyway, elicit neighborliness, briefly at least; a peaceful society would have to be one capable of *maintaining* that love and care for the afflicted. Only lovingkindness could sustain a lasting peace.

How can poetry relate to that idea? Certainly not by preaching. But as more and more poets know and acknowledge (as I believe they are already starting to do) that we are indeed "made of the ash of stars," their art, stirring the imagination of those who read them (few, perhaps, but always a dynamic few, a thin edge of the wedge) can have an oblique influence which cannot be measured. We cannot long survive at all unless we *do* move towards peace. If a poetry of peace is ever to be written, there must first be this stage we are just entering—the poetry of *preparation* for peace, a poetry of protest, of lament, of praise for the living earth; a poetry that demands justice, renounces

violence, reveres mystery. We need to incorporate into our daily lives this psalm from the Hako (Pawnee, Osage, Omaha) tradition:

Invoking the Powers

Remember, remember the circle of the sky
the stars and the brown eagle
the supernatural winds
breathing night and day
from the four directions

Remember, remember the great life of the sun
breathing on the earth
it lies upon the earth
to bring out life upon the earth
life covering the earth

Remember, remember the sacredness of things
running streams and dwellings
the young within the nest
a hearth for sacred fire
the holy flame of fire

From a lecture given in the 1989 Boston University "Celebrating Peace" series. A version of the text is included in Volume II of the *Boston University Studies in Philosophy & Religion*, published by Notre Dame University Press in 1990.