

BREATHING PEACE

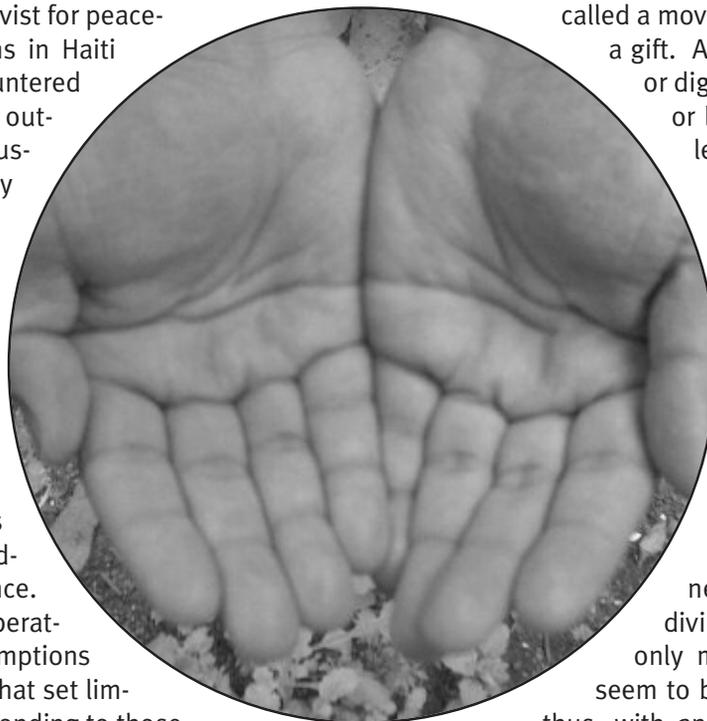
What does spirituality have to do with being an activist for peacemaking?

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What does our “breathing” have to do with cultivating peace? What does spirituality have to do with being an activist for peacemaking?

Allow me to share a personal story of my time in Haiti to illustrate “breathing peace” and the relationship of spirituality to being an activist for peacemaking. I spent five months in Haiti during 1999. When I encountered the tragic poverty and the outcasts, questions of social justice intensely arose in my mind. As a middle class citizen of the U.S., I was dumbstruck and confused. It was only when I turned to and transformed my style of meditation and prayer into a more contemplative listening, that I was drawn beyond the construction of finite thoughts or questions into a sense of greater boundlessness and interdependence. In other words, spirituality liberated me from ingrained assumptions about the “deserving poor” that set limits on my giving, and for responding to those in need as a way of “being gift” in an interdependent cosmos. I was now asking “how I can empower” along with “what structures are preventing the movement of gift?”

These questions born of direct experience invite us into deeper reflection. The peace I, and perhaps many of us, seek is a “way of life.” It is not a mere momentary flash of light that stirs us to dream of what might come in the far-off future. Nor is it merely an instrument for temporary calm, while we continue to participate in the dehumanization, oppression, injustice, and violence that suffocate our vitality. Peace is a “way of life,” a “breathing” that moves deeply within and throughout all of life.



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In terms of describing the logic of breathing peace, we can reflect on what seems to be a common experience. For instance, it seems that my life was not created by my own power, but rather that some other power (whether parents, God, or ultimate mystery, etc.) had moved or “given” me life. This movement of giving or offering that led to my life

seems to imply that my humanity is reasonably called a movement of gifting, or simply put, a gift. As a gift, my nature has a value or dignity that can never be changed or lost by what we do or have, at least in terms of being created as a gift.

Although this dignity seems inherent, the value of our dignity may be experienced at different levels depending on how we are sensed as a gift. For instance is our being from mere biological forces, parents, God, or ultimate mystery, etc. and is our being for mere survival, consumption, reputation, happiness, love, participation in divine life, etc? Nevertheless, not only myself, but all humans would seem to be at least created as gift, and thus, with an unalterable dignity. Further, animals, plants, and perhaps all that is, except God or the first mover, has been created as a gift, and thus seems to share in a kind of cosmic dignity. Humans, as self-conscious gifts, have a unique role to play in both affirming the cosmic dignity and cultivating the general movement of gift in the cosmos.

In light of this experience, it seems that being gift and having unalterable dignity create a certain orientation to life. When one affirms such an orientation by seeking the depths of our being and the implications for some kind of “way of being” in the cosmos, we enter into the realm of spirituality. We seem to awaken and create a space for the movement of spirit, understood as being of the self

but also more than the self. A certain flow, sometimes sensed as a movement of love, gradually affirms, invites, and guides the inner and outer dynamic of life. Such spirituality is the “breathing” that moves deeply within our being and throughout our life. We move

more by way of principle than by strategy, as means and ends become one and the same. For instance, if our “end” is a nonviolent loving society then our “means” is nonviolent love.

In this spirituality, we may “breathe” peace and become peacemakers by seeking to live in accordance with being a gift. To live in accordance would seem to include: valuing one’s self, since one is a gift; living with gratitude and attention to the source of one’s being, especially through meditation and prayer; realizing that all people are also gifts; affirming the common cosmic dignity of all existence by caring for the whole environment; being willing to offer oneself (time, effort, skills, playfulness, etc.) as a gift to others, especially to those who suffer from a lack of gifts in their life; and being willing to practice both forgiveness and reconciliation in order to restore broken relationships so that one can try to be gifts again in a new way after we have fallen short. As a peacemaker, one would also be a gift of love even to those who hurt, injure, or want to kill; not to weakly allow them to hurt, but to strongly resist them with the power of love that is willing to suffer in order to challenge the logic of humiliation. One seeks conversion rather than destruction. One would try to be a mirror for the violent one of who they really are deep down, that is, a gift, in order to expose their violence and restore them to the way of gift, even if it means giving one’s life. As a peacemaker, one would similarly challenge all systems of non-gift, i.e. oppression, that fail to value and cultivate the gift of each person.

However, to live in discord with being a gift seems to be acting possessive, as if one made and solely owns one’s self. If one were possessive, non-gift, then one would feel a lack of security and worth; and sense the same lack of worth in others. For instance, if one lacks a sense of worth then one would tend not risk being vulnerable, i.e. being a gift, in a relationship, and thus struggle to experience friendship or love. One could easily get caught up in being possessive of ideas, methods, things and even people for one’s own benefit. One could easily develop a habit of reactivity and fear by trying to falsely defend oneself or others by the “way of violence,” which disregards others, oneself, and the cosmos as gifts that offer and empower rather than anxiously cling to and destroy.

In closing, with the light of these reflections on living as a gift I invite us to return to the experience in Haiti where

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spirituality liberated me from ingrained assumptions about the deserving poor and for responding to those in need as a way of being gift. When one begins to consistently ask questions such as “how I can empower” along with

“what structures are preventing the movement of gift,” one is responding to the invitation to “breathe peace.” Along with the practice of mediation or prayer, one is drawn deeper into this spirituality of peacemaking within the horizon of gift, dignity, and non-possessiveness.

“What If?” Scenarios

Let’s challenge ourselves to creatively imagine alternative responses to violence! You may participate in the dialogue by emailing: whatif@calpeacepower.org. Submit a direct response for our next publication, or write your own “what if” scenario.

What if... Someone starts yelling at you and putting you down? Rather than responding out of anger, hatred, or a sense of humiliation, try to respond with empathy, love, and dignity. One can maintain a firm tone of voice by transforming the logic of humiliation into an invitation for conversion. One could say, “I’m disappointed you feel it’s necessary to put me down in order to express or maintain your dignity.” Also, “my dignity is not dependent on your approval. Perhaps you can share the source of your anger, and we can discuss the issue with a hope for understanding and reconciliation.”

What if... Someone starts pushing and punching you? If someone starts pushing and punching you, one way to respond is to think merely of physical defense and to respond out of a kind of self-preservation or possessiveness. However, another option is to consider the good of our whole person and of all people involved; to act in light of us all being gifts. One could protect the body by covering up, blocking, or holding the other. At the same time conversion-seeking, dignity-illuminating statements could be made. “How do you think the others watching this are effected?” or “Is this the deepest desire of your heart?” or “I still love you and am willing to forgive you.” or “You are a child of God, and God loves you” etc. One could also take challenging and inviting positions, such as lotus meditation or prayerful kneeling. Once one gets their attention, perhaps a conversation can be engaged. But throughout the ordeal, a willingness to suffer would remain constant as a way to clearly expose the violence, and thus, have the best prospect at seeing truth.