

Give Peace a Chance

Published in Santa Monica Business Journal in July 1996

By Lee Jay Berman

We have all seen the bumper stickers and bus benches: "Give Peace a Chance," "One World, One People," "Peace on Earth." We have heard the songs, seen the T-shirts. In fact, Peace may be one of the most successfully merchandised themes in the last 30 years.

If you think about it, it is an easy concept to market. I think we all believe in Peace. Just to be sure, however, I took a formal poll. On a recent flight to Las Vegas I conducted a poll of all the (awake) passengers on the aircraft (they were, after all, a captive audience). When asked, "Do you support or oppose Peace?" the final tally was unanimous: 30 supporting Peace, none opposing. Six laughed at me. "What are you nuts? Everyone supports Peace," said one passenger. "Is this a trick question?" asked another. Another responded, "That's silly!" One gentleman said he'd "like to meet the ones that don't" support Peace!

Those polled were a random sampling ranging in age from seven to eighty-two, representing many different ethnic and cultural orientations. People had different reasons for supporting Peace, from religious motivations to environment concerns. Clearly, Peace was the decisive winner. Everyone supports Peace. Everyone preaches it.

Now, the difficult question. Do you live it? Do you walk the talk? Most people haven't dropped an atomic bomb lately. Most people haven't personally invaded another sovereign state. Most people haven't even started a simple fistfight (though some may have been tempted). Look at how you handle day-to-day conflicts. In your adult life, how many times have you waged the war of litigation against another? Have you threatened to sue someone to frighten them into meeting your demands? Perhaps you have been on the receiving end of such an action or threat.

Our society is war torn, but not in the way we commonly think of the word. Every day in Los Angeles County, hundreds of people file lawsuits and thousands more threaten to do so. I wonder how many of them sit down and have a rational conversation and actually listen to each other instead of arguing. How many of them make a calm, peaceful attempt to resolve a dispute versus those who speed dial their lawyers with the intent of starting a war? I do not condemn the lawyers. Many of the best peacemakers I know are attorneys. Like any profession, there are good practitioners and bad ones. I condemn people who "Sue first and ask questions later." I recognize the need for a legal system to prosecute criminals and to act as a big brother when we need our rights enforced, or when someone wrongs us. There are some cases that need to be decided by a jury of our peers (if that is still an accurate characterization.)

On a global scale, our society is blamed for exporting litigation. The Japanese and Europeans say we have spread it like a disease into their hands. China, historically considered a Zen-like, peaceful society, has an estimated 6,000,000 mediators and 18,000 attorneys. I fear the United States to be the reverse.

How do you handle conflict? Do you support Peace? How do you deal with being wronged? Is your knee-jerk reaction to call a lawyer and sue? Mediation is the process of sitting down with the person or company with whom you have a dispute and talking about possible solutions. Brainstorming, negotiating, talking about the problem with the goal of resolving the dispute cooperatively, collaboratively, with the help of a professional, unbiased third party. You retain control of the outcome, instead of rolling the dice and hoping that a judge or jury will see things your way. It is the peaceful way to resolve a dispute, the civil way, the new American way.

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