

What is Peacemaking?

by Douglas Noll

Peacemaking is a complicated concept because peace can be defined in so many different ways. For our purposes, peacemaking is not a process of passive acceptance of mistreatment, a turning of the other cheek in the face of clear injustice or abuse, or other weak images of meekness or nonresistance. Instead, peacemaking is a vibrant, powerful concept. At its best, peacemaking creates relational and structural justice that allows for social and personal well being. This is an ideal objective, perhaps not attainable in all conflicts. Nevertheless, peacemaking implies the use of cooperative, constructive processes to resolve human conflicts, while restoring relationships. Peacemaking does not deny the essential need for adversary processes, but peacemaking places adversary processes into a larger perspective. Litigating disputes is not seen as a primary dispute resolution mechanism, but as a last-resort process.

When we speak of peace, we understand it in two ways. First, there is negative peace. Negative peace means the absence of violence, typically through coercion rather than cooperation. When Mom tells Sally to stop beating up on Sarah, she is imposing a negative peace in the household. Sally's conflict with Sarah is not resolved, but merely suppressed. The concept of negative peace extends not only from our mundane example in the home, but also to international peace. International peace is said to exist during a cessation of violence and hostility. This form of peace is often imposed by U.N. peacekeepers. Again, peace is defined as an absence of war and is imposed coercively. Our law enforcement mechanisms, euphemistically called criminal justice, create another form of negative peace. The bad guys are taken off the street so that crimes are reduced. Thus, law enforcement officials are called "peace" officers even though they use extremely coercive and sometimes violent means to achieve their ends. Finally, the legal system perpetuates a form of negative peace. At best, the civil justice system renders a fair and impartial decision. However, the result is just a decision, not a resolution to or transformation of the conflict. Upon judgment, the legal conflict is finished and people are expected to get on with their lives. Generally speaking, however, the underlying causes of the conflict are left unresolved. How satisfied are a father and daughter after a judgment in favor of one or the other after a bitterly contested trial? So, the legal system does not provide for peace; it only provides for decisions.

The second way of understanding peace is as positive peace. Positive peace implies reconciliation and restoration through creative transformation of conflict. In positive peace, Mom sits Sally and Sarah down and invites them to exchange stories about what led to their fight. Mom and Sarah learn for the first time that Sally feels angry at the way Sarah ignores her. In five minutes, they work out a plan that allows Sally the safety and security to speak out about what she is feeling. Sarah promises to listen more carefully to Sally. Sally promises not to hit Sarah when she, Sally, becomes frustrated. The fighting has stopped, but more importantly the relationship has been reconciled and restored. In the process, Sally and Sarah have grown morally just a little. In the same way, a lawyer as peacemaker looks at conflict not just as an abstract, intellectual exercise in analysis and persuasion, but as an opportunity to help people reconcile. When reconciliation is not possible, separation and resolution is possible with a minimum of hostility and acrimony.

So peacemaking concerns a deeper way of looking at conflicts than just winning or losing. It looks at conflicts as opportunities for people to grow, to accept responsibility for the relationships they are in, and for the potential of apology and forgiveness.

Idealistic? Not at all! Time after time, when people are placed in a safe and secure environment, they naturally seek out their capacity for goodness. Even the most cynical, hardened business people have recognized the importance of relationships when they are invited and allowed to do so. We don't see this side of people often only because they are not given the space, safety and security to express their anger, their true concerns and their interests. Furthermore, they are not placed in a position where they can honestly listen and hear the perspectives of others. Perhaps the greatest difference between peacemaking and other forms of conflict resolution is that opportunities for exploitation are taken away. Once the fear of vulnerability is neutralized, people can aspire to their higher good and really find excellent solutions to their conflicts.