Contemplation, Preparation, and Action: Peace Pilgrim’s Prophetic Witness for Our Time

At George Fox University, we teach a capstone general education course required of all students entitled Liberal Arts and Critical Issues. The course is designed to encourage students to integrate their specialized knowledge and general education with Christian faith, in the context of addressing a public issue of current significance.

When I teach the course, I ask students to study and reflect on the historical examples of individuals who put their beliefs into action. While names like Henry David Thoreau, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, and Wendell Berry are popular choices, I also introduce them to a figure that might not come to mind so readily: Mildred Norman, better known as the Peace Pilgrim.

In this paper, I propose to explore aspects of the life and teachings of Peace Pilgrim as an example of one who acted on her beliefs and became a powerful witness for peace. Specifically, I wish to suggest that her practices of contemplation, preparation, and action can provide a model for anyone seeking to contribute to the common good by putting their beliefs into action. I will also argue that while the woman called Peace Pilgrim is best known for her nationwide walks for peace, her roles as a spiritual teacher and prophetic witness for peace may be her most enduring and significant contributions.

Peace Pilgrim: Her Life and Pilgrimage

Mildred Lisette Norman was born July 18, 1908, in Egg Harbor City, New Jersey. Little is known about the first 45 years of her life. She was married and divorced, reportedly because her husband refused to forego military service. According to her
account, somewhere around the age of 30, she began a fifteen-year period of preparation, which she referred to as her spiritual “growing up.” At some point, she rejected her legal name and henceforth called herself “Peace Pilgrim.”

After becoming the first woman to hike the entire Appalachian Trail, she set out on her first walking pilgrimage on January 1, 1953, from Pasadena, California, at the Tournament of Roses parade. Peace Pilgrim walked ahead of the parade talking to people and handing out peace messages. She carried with her three peace petitions. The first was a plea for immediate peace in Korea; the second a petition directed to the President and congressional leaders requesting the installation of a Peace Department; the third a plea to the United Nations and world leaders for world disarmament and reconstruction. This last petition read,

If you would find the way of peace you must overcome evil with good and falsehood with truth and hatred with love. We plead with you to free us all from the crushing burden of armaments, to free us from hatred and fear, so that we may feed our hungry ones, mend our broken cities, and experience a richness of life which can only come in a world that is unarmed and fed.

(Peace Pilgrim: Her Life and Work in Her Own Words, 28; hereafter cited as PP)

Peace Pilgrim was amazed at the amount of publicity she received and the opportunities her walk afforded her to share her message of peace through newspaper and radio interviews and impromptu presentations at schools and churches. At the conclusion of her first walk across the country, almost a year later, she presented her petitions to officials at both the White House and the United Nations.
The compilers of the book honoring her describe her pilgrimages:

Peace Pilgrim walked alone and penniless and with no organizational backing. She walked 'as a prayer' and as a chance to inspire others to pray and work for peace. She wore navy blue shirt and slacks, and a short tunic with pockets all around the bottom in which she carried her only worldly possessions: a comb, a folding toothbrush, a ballpoint pen, copies of her message and her current correspondence. (*PP* xiii)

And she kept it up. This was no one-time, publicity-seeking event. By 1964, she had completed 25,000 miles on foot for peace. She vowed "to remain a wanderer until mankind has learned the way of peace," and she was faithful to her promise. Before her death, in 1981, she would walk in all 50 states and complete seven cross-country pilgrimages. She died, ironically, while riding in a car on her way to a speaking engagement on July 7, 1981.

Peace Pilgrim talked with thousands of people on her journeys and was often interviewed on radio and television. Wherever she went she carried a comprehensive message of peace: in her words, "peace among nations, peace among groups, peace within our environment, peace among individuals, and the very, very important inner peace--which I talk about most often because that is where peace begins" (*PP* 25).

Peace Pilgrim never wrote a book; her pilgrimages were her message. But after her death, friends compiled many of her words from her speeches, interviews, and letters. Published in 1982, this book, *Peace Pilgrim: Her Life and Work in Her Own Words*, is the primary source for information about her. Her friends also published a shorter volume, *Steps Toward Inner Peace*, a compilation of her spiritual teachings. A 2002
Documentary, *Peace Pilgrim: An American Sage Who Walked her Talk*, captures the spirit of her walks as well as the historical context. The documentary includes comments by psychologist Elizabeth Kubler Ross, poet Maya Angelou, actor Dennis Weaver, and The Dalai Lama.

Before turning to the spiritual teachings of the Peace Pilgrim, her comments describing her own aims and methods are worth noting. She defined a pilgrim as “a wanderer with a purpose” and noted that a pilgrimage can either be to a place or for a thing, in her case, for peace. In describing her approach, Peace Pilgrim referred to Jesus’ disciples, who were sent without money, without food, without adequate clothing (Luke 10:4, NRSV). Of herself, Peace Pilgrim said, “I have no money. I do not accept any money on my pilgrimage. I belong to no organization. . . . I own only what I wear and carry. There is nothing to tie me down. I am as free as a bird soaring in the sky” (*PP* 25). She continued, “I walk until given shelter, fast until given food. I don’t ask—it’s given with asking” (*PP* 25).

As to her purposes, she noted: “Now, a pilgrim walks prayerfully, and a pilgrim walks as an opportunity to come in contact with many people and perhaps inspire them to do something for peace in their own way” (*PP* 26). In a real sense, Peace Pilgrim was her own advertisement. She walked in a short tunic with the words “Peace Pilgrim” on the front and “25,000 Miles on Foot for Peace” on the back. She did not approach people but allowed them to approach her, which she saw as the kindest way to interact with others. When people approached her, she shared her one sentence peace message: “This is the way of peace—overcome evil with good, and falsehood with truth, and hatred with love” (*PP* 26).
As to the timing of her pilgrimage, Peace Pilgrim noted that she began her walk at the height of the Korean War and during the McCarthy era, when, to her mind, the prevailing feelings in America were fear and apathy. She noted that historically “when there is great apathy in the face of a crisis situation, a pilgrim comes forth. The role of the pilgrim is to rouse people from their apathy” (Peace Pilgrim Documentary). Perhaps like Henry David Thoreau, Peace Pilgrim saw her walks as a form of “shouting to wake her neighbors up” (Walden, 636). Maya Angelou suggests, “Every age provides a peace pilgrim. They may not walk, they may sing or write or dance” (Peace Pilgrim Documentary).

**Peace Pilgrim as Spiritual Teacher**

As noted earlier, Peace Pilgrim’s message was comprehensive and covered much more than a plea for non-violence and the cessation of military conflicts. In fact, readers of her collected sayings will notice that she spent much more time talking about inner peace than she did about global peace. She believed strongly that peace began within the individual and that only when enough individuals achieved inner peace would outer peace be possible.

Like other mystics, Mildred Norman's journey began with a vision, one she experienced while walking in the early morning. She later described it like this:

> All of a sudden I felt very uplifted, more uplifted than I had ever been. I remember I knew *timelessness* and *spacelessness* and *lightness*. I did not seem to be walking on the earth. There were no people or even animals around, but every flower, every bush, every tree seemed to wear a halo. There was a light emanation around everything and flecks of gold fell like
slanted rain through the air. This experience is sometimes called the illumination period.

The important part of it was the realization of the oneness of all creation.

Not only human beings--I knew before that all human beings are one. But now I knew also a oneness with the rest of creation. The creatures that walk the earth and the growing things of the earth. The air, the water, the earth itself. And, most wonderful of all, a oneness with that which permeates all and binds all together and gives life to all. A oneness with that which many would call God. (PP 21)

Peace Pilgrim's vision is beautiful and impressive, but what fascinates me even more than the vision is what she did next. I imagine that if I were the recipient of such a vision, I would want to write about it, speak about it, find some forum to publicize it--immediately. (Perhaps this is why, to this point, I've been granted no such visions.) But Peace Pilgrim responded differently. She recognized that good spiritual practice requires study and reflection and processing. Spiritual growth requires intentionality and time. It can't be rushed. Most of all, Peace Pilgrim knew it requires preparation.

So rather than leaving on her walk for peace immediately, Peace Pilgrim spent 15 years in preparation. In this process of waiting and prayer and contemplation, she discovered four specific preparations that were required of her.

1. 
   Adopting a right attitude toward life

2. 
   Bringing our lives into harmony with the laws that govern this universe

3. 
   Finding our special place in the Life Pattern
4. *Simplifying our life*

I’ll expand on two of these preparations.

*Preparation #2:* Peace Pilgrim believed there were fundamental laws in the physical and psychological realms. As we are able to understand and bring our lives into harmony with these laws, our lives will be in harmony. As we disobey these laws, we create difficulties for ourselves. She writes:

> I recognized that there are some well-known, little understood, and seldom practiced laws that we must live by if we wish to find peace within or without. Included are the laws that evil can only be overcome by good; that only good means can attain a good end; that those who do unloving things hurt themselves spiritually.

> ... So I got busy on a very interesting project. This was to live all the good things I believed in. . . . If I was doing something that I knew I shouldn't be doing I stopped doing it. . . . And if I was not doing something that I knew I should be doing, I got busy on that. It took the living quite a while to catch up with the believing. . . . As I lived according to the highest light I had, I discovered that other light was given; that I opened myself to receiving more light as I lived the light I had. (*PP 10*)

*Preparation #4:* As Peace Pilgrim sought inner peace and began to find her place in the Life Pattern, she discovered another principle that would guide her practice: simplicity. She became convinced that she could "no longer accept *more* than she needed while others in the world had *less* than they needed" (*PP 12*). As a result, she experienced "a
wonderful sense of peace and joy, and a conviction that unnecessary possessions are only unnecessary burdens” (PP 12). Peace Pilgrim found a need level that was so low it would seem absurd to most Americans, living on a budget of ten dollars per week, but she acknowledged that those in different situations (those with family and children, for example) would have a higher need level. What was important, she warned, is that "anything beyond physical needs tends to become burdensome” (PP 13).

In the following passage, she writes about how simplicity is not just a principle that applies to individuals but also one that applies to society:

> There is a great deal to be said about such harmony, not only for an individual life but also for the life of a society. It's because as a world we have gotten ourselves so far out of harmony, so way off on the material side, that when we discover something like nuclear energy we are still capable of putting it into a bomb and using it to kill people! This is because our inner well-being lags so far behind our outer well-being. The valid research for the future in on the *inner* side, on the spiritual side, so that we will be able to bring these two into balance--and so that we will know how to use well the outer well-being we already have. (PP 13)

In addition to the four preparations, Peace Pilgrim identified four practices of purification for those seeking inner peace:

1. *The Purification of the Body*
2. *The Purification of Thought*
3. *The Purification of Desire*
4. *The Purification of Motive*
In the first purification, Peace Pilgrim discusses physical living habits, noting that some five years after her vision, she changed to a diet of "mostly fruits, nuts, vegetable, whole grains (preferably organically grown) and perhaps a bit of milk and cheese." She describes her motivation for her vegetarianism like this:

I began to realize that I was disobeying my rule of life which says: I will not ask anyone to do for me things that I would refuse to do for myself.

Now, I wouldn't kill any creature--I wouldn't even kill a chicken or a fish—and therefore I stopped immediately eating all flesh. (PP 14).

From our perspective today, Peace Pilgrim, writing about the 1940s, seems decidedly ahead of her time. Personally, as a child of the 1950s and 1960s, I know the diet I was raised on was radically different than the one she describes. She was also ahead of the curve on the environmental benefits of vegetarianism:

Then I learned from a college professor . . . that it takes many times the land to raise the creatures we eat as it would to raise fruits or vegetables or grains. Since I want the maximum number of God's children to be fed, that also would make me a vegetarian. (PP 14).

Included in her discussion of physical habits, Peace Pilgrim recommends getting as much "fresh air and sunshine and contact with nature" as we can as well as getting sufficient rest and exercise (PP 15).

Under purification of thought, Peace Pilgrim recommends the releasing of bitterness and anger and the practice of forgiveness. Here she notes the importance not only of forgiving others but also of forgiving yourself. Purification of desire involves
rejecting superficial, material desires and adopting a oneness of desire, which is to
discover and fulfill your role in the Life Pattern. In discussing purification of motive,
Peace Pilgrim provides an insight that even the pursuit of inner peace can be useless if
undertaken for the wrong motives. She states:

I talk to groups studying the most advanced spiritual teachings and
sometimes these people wonder why nothing is happening in their lives.
Their motive is the attainment of inner peace for themselves—which of
course is a selfish motive. You will not find it with this motive. The
motive, if you are to find inner peace, must be an outgoing motive.
Service, of course, service. Giving, not getting. Your motive must be good
if your work is to have good effect. The secret of life is being of service

(PP 17).

Finally, keeping the numerical but breaking the alliterative pattern, Peace Pilgrim
identifies four relinquishments necessary for the seeker of inner peace.

1. The relinquishment of self-will
2. The relinquishment of the feeling of separateness
3. The relinquishment of all attachments
4. The relinquishment of all negative feelings

Peace Pilgrim saw the first relinquishment as the most important. She believed
that humans have the choice of following the lower self or the higher self. She says:

You can work on subordinating the lower self by refraining from
doing the not-so-good things you may be motivated toward—not
suppressing them, but transforming them so that the higher self can
take over your life. If you are motivated to do or say a mean thing, you can always think of a good thing. You deliberately turn around and use that same energy to do or say a good thing instead. It works! (*PP* 18)

Peace Pilgrim begins her discussion of the second relinquishment by noting that our human tendency is to feel very separate and judge "everything as it relates to us, as though we were the center of the universe." But she suggests that the reality is quite different:

In reality, of course, we are all cells in the body of humanity. We are not separate from our fellow humans. The whole thing is a totality. It's only from that higher viewpoint that you can know what it is to love your neighbor as yourself. From that higher viewpoint there becomes just one realistic way to work, and that is for the good of the whole. As long as you work for your selfish little self, you're just one cell against all those other cells, and you're way out of harmony. But as soon as you begin working for the good of the whole, you find yourself in harmony with all of your fellow human beings. (*PP* 18-19)

Under the third relinquishment, attachments, Peace Pilgrim first deals with non-attachment to material things but then addresses a unique kind of possessiveness. She states:

*You do not possess any other human being*, no matter how closely related that other may be. No husband owns his wife; no wife owns her husband; no parents own their children. When we think we possess people there is a tendency to run their lives for them, and out of this develop extremely
inharmionous situations. Only when we realize that we do not possess
them, that they must live in accordance with their own inner motivations,
do we stop trying to run their lives for them, and then we discover that we
are able to live in harmony with them. Anything that you strive to hold
captive will hold you captive—and if you desire freedom you must give
freedom. (PP 19)

Here Peace Pilgrim seems to be on the same page with Christian writers of spirituality
like C. S. Lewis. Lewis’s fictional works including The Great Divorce, The Screwtape
Letters, and especially Till We Have Faces are populated with characters who manifest
selfish, possessive love, which inevitably diminishes the lover and harms the beloved.

In discussing the relinquishment of negative feelings, Peace Pilgrim concludes
with some helpful comments about who controls our emotions:

No outward thing—nothing, nobody from without—can hurt me inside,
psychologically. I recognized that I could only be hurt psychologically by my
own wrong actions, which I have control over; by my own wrong reactions (they
are tricky, but I have control over them too); or by my own inaction in some
situations, like the present world situation that needs action from me. . . . Now
someone could do the meanest thing to me and I would feel deep compassion for
this out-of-harmony person, this sick person, who is capable of doing mean things.
I certainly would not hurt myself by a wrong reaction of bitterness or anger. You
have complete control over whether you will be psychologically hurt or not, and
anytime you want to, you can stop hurting yourself. (PP 20)
These are Peace Pilgrim's steps toward inner peace: four preparations, four purifications, and four relinquishments. She freely acknowledges that these steps are not new, and nowhere does she claim to be revealing new truths. Instead, she is talking about universal truths in terms of her own personal experience with them. She explains:

The laws which govern this universe work for good as soon as we obey them, and anything contrary to these laws doesn't last long. It contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction. The good in every human life always makes it possible for us to obey these laws. We do have free will about all this, and therefore how soon we obey and thereby find harmony, both within ourselves and within our world, is up to us. (PP 20)

While Peace Pilgrim occasionally quotes biblical texts and refers to the indwelling Christ, she is not a Christian teacher and did not present herself as one. Here is the way she described her own religious views:

I am a deeply religious person, but I belong to no denomination. I follow the spirit of God’s law, not the letter of the law. One can become so attached to the outward symbols and structure of religion that one forgets its original intent—to bring one closer to God. We can only gain access to the Kingdom of God by realizing it dwells within us as well as in all humanity. Know that we are all cells in the ocean of infinity, each contributing to the others’ welfare. (PP 85)

Peace Pilgrim says that she read all of the New Testament and selections from the Old Testament near the beginning of her pilgrimage. She does not, however, regard it as an authoritative source. She draws equally from other world religions, such as Buddhism,
which can be seen in her emphasis on relinquishments as well as in other areas of her teaching. Rather than citing biblical texts, she most often refers to the teachings of Jesus; she believed that Jesus was “a great spiritual teacher who walked the earth.” “His life,” she said, “was governed by the indwelling Christ. He taught us ours could be too” (PP 148). Peace Pilgrim seemed to reject traditional notions of personal salvation through Jesus as well as orthodox views of heaven and hell. She also believed in reincarnation. Yet she spoke frequently of “praying without ceasing” and believed that when we die those who have gone before us will come to welcome us to a new and freer life of the spirit. While she recommended listening for God in receptive silence, she rejected more formal meditation and breathing practices. Perhaps her most powerful statement about Christianity came in her indictment of those who claim to be followers of Christ yet do not do what he said:

Many people profess Christianity. Very few live it—almost none. And when you live it people may think you’re crazy. It has been truthfully said that the world is equally shocked by one who repudiates Christianity and by one who practices it.

I believe Jesus would accept me because I do what he told people to do. This doesn’t mean, though, that all who call themselves Christian would accept me. Of course I love and appreciate Jesus and I wish Christians would learn to obey his commandments. It would be a most wonderful world. (PP 86)

Ultimately, Peace Pilgrim’s vision was too all encompassing and universal to be tied to one religion. As she states:
Religion is not an end in itself. One’s union with God is the ultimate goal. There are so many religions because immature people tend to emphasize trivial differences instead of important likenesses. Differences between faiths lie in creeds and rituals rather than religious principles. If you are guided toward a faith, use it as a stepping stone to God, not as a barrier between yourself and God’s other children or as a tower to hold you aloft from others. If you are not guided toward a faith (or even if you are) seek God in the silence—seek within. (PP 85)

Peace Pilgrim’s focus on the inner nature led her to dismiss external authoritative sources such as scripture; rather she advised, “If you desire confirmation of a truth, it is best to seek it from within and not upon a printed page” (PP 86).

**Peace Pilgrim’s Prophetic Witness for Peace**

As noted above, Peace Pilgrim’s peace message was comprehensive, encompassing not just world peace, but inner peace, peace in relationships, and peace in the environment. In fact, one of her most insightful teachings for our time may be that world peace will only come when enough people have found inner peace. She states:

> Ultimate peace begins within; when we find peace within there will be no more conflict, no more occasion for war. If this is the peace you seek, purify your body by sensible living habits, purify your mind by expelling all negative thoughts, purify your motives by casting out any ideas of greed or self-striving and by seeking to serve your fellow human beings, purify your desires by eliminating all wishes for material possessions or self-glorification and by desiring to know and do God’s will for you.
Inspire others to do likewise. (PP 98)

A great deal of the power of Peace Pilgrim’s witness comes from the fact that she not only taught these principles; she also lived them. For example, she didn’t simply recommend non-violence as a principle for governments to implement; she practiced a non-violent life. She relates several interesting stories that illustrate her practice of non-violence:

Once I was hit by a disturbed teenage boy whom I had taken for a walk. He wanted to go hiking but was afraid he might break a leg and be left lying there. Everyone was afraid to go with him. He was a great big fellow and looked like a football player, and he was known to be violent at times. He had once beaten his mother so badly that she had to spend several weeks in the hospital. Everybody was afraid of him, so I offered to go with him.

As we got up to the first hilltop everything was going fine. Then a thunderstorm came along. He was very terrified because the thundershower was very close. Suddenly he went off the beam and came for me, hitting at me. I didn’t run away although I guess I could have—he had a heavy pack on his back. But even while he was hitting me I could only feel the deepest compassion toward him. How terrible to be so psychologically sick that you would be able to hit a defenseless old woman! I bathed his hatred with love even while he hit me. As a result the hitting stopped.

He said, ‘You didn’t hit back! Mother always hits back.’ The delayed
reaction, because of his disturbance, had reached the good in him. Oh, it’s there—no matter how deeply it is buried—and he experienced remorse and complete self-condemnation. What are a few bruises on my body in comparison with the transformation of a human life? To make a long story short he was never violent again. He is a useful person in this world today. (PP 32)

Here’s another story:

On another occasion I was called upon to defend a frail eight year-old girl against a large man who was about to beat her. The girl was terrified. . . . I was staying at a ranch and the family went into town. The little girl did not want to go with them, and they asked, since I was there, would I take care of the child? I was writing a letter by the window when I saw a car arrive. A man got out of the car. The girl saw him and ran and he followed, chasing her into a barn. I went immediately into the barn. The girl was cowering in terror in the corner. He was coming at her slowly and deliberately.

I put my body immediately between the man and the girl. I just stood and looked at this poor, psychologically sick man with loving compassion. He came close. He stopped! He looked at me for quite a while. He then turned and walked away and the girl was safe. There was not a word spoken.

Now, what was the alternative? Suppose I had been so foolish as to forget the law of love by hitting back and relying upon the jungle law of tooth and claw? Undoubtedly I would have been beaten—perhaps even to death
and possibly the little girl as well! Never underestimate the power of God’s love—it transforms! It reaches the spark of good in the other person and the person is disarmed. (PP 32)

These stories both illustrate Peace Pilgrim’s total commitment to non-violence. They also portray her belief that there is good in every person.

Another principle that Peace Pilgrim discussed frequently was the belief that conflict and war were often the result of fear. As one can imagine, a woman walking alone across the country, sleeping in roadside parks and truck stops, might experience many situations that could cause fear. However, Peace Pilgrim stated that if “you have a loving and positive attitude toward your fellow human beings, you will not fear them. ‘Perfect love casteth out all fear’” (PP 31). When she did encounter potentially dangerous situations, she called them tests. She described one such test that occurred in the middle of the night in the California desert:

The traffic had just about stopped, and there wasn’t a human habitation within many miles. I saw a car parked at the side of the road. The driver called to me saying, ‘Come on, get in and get warm.’ I said, ‘I don’t ride.’ He said, ‘I’m not going anywhere, I’m just parked here.’ I got in. I looked at the man. He was a big, burly man—what most people would call a rough looking individual. After we had talked a while he said, ‘Say, wouldn’t you like to get a few winks of sleep?’ And I said, ‘Oh, yes, I certainly would!’ And I curled up and went to sleep. When I awoke I could see the man was very puzzled about something, and after we had talked for quite some time he admitted that when he had asked me to get
into the car he had certainly meant me no good, adding, ‘When you curled up so trustingly and went to sleep, I just couldn’t touch you!’ (PP 31)

In Peace Pilgrim’s mind such experiences validated her belief in positive attitude, faith in humanity, and fearless living. She stated:

No one walks so safely as one who walks humbly and harmlessly with great love and great faith. For such a person gets through to the good in others (and there is good in everyone), and therefore cannot be harmed. This works between individuals, it works between groups and it would work between nations if nations had the courage to try it. (PP 31)

This last statement once again underscores Peace Pilgrim’s ability to see the vital connection between the individual and the global community, for, as she said, “We can work on inner peace and world peace at the same time” (PP 98). She explained further:

On the one hand, people have found inner peace by losing themselves in a cause larger than themselves, like the cause of world peace, because finding inner peace means coming from the self-centered life into the life centered in the good of the whole. On the other hand, one of the ways of working for world peace is to work for more inner peace, because world peace will never be stable until enough of us find inner peace to stabilize it. (PP 99)

Peace Pilgrim’s focus on the inner life did not prevent her from taking action to work for peace nor from calling on others to take action. She saw her pilgrimages as a concrete and constructive action through which she hoped to bring awareness and inspire others. She also encouraged others to find and undertake actions that would lead to peace:
There is such a great need for constructive peace action. We live at a crisis period in human affairs, and those of us who are living today face a very momentous decision: A choice between nuclear war of annihilation and a golden age of peace. All who are living today will help make this choice, for the tide of world affairs now drifts in the direction of war and destruction. So all who do nothing in this crisis situation are choosing to let it drift. Those who wish to choose peace must act meaningfully for peace. And become a part of the stirring and awakening which has begun and is accelerating. And help to accelerate it sufficiently to turn the tide. In this crisis situation peace is certainly everybody’s business! The time to work for peace is now. (PP 98)

Peace Pilgrim believed that the root cause of war and conflict was immaturity. She noted that “among mature people war would not be a problem—it would be impossible” (PP 102). However, she had faith that people can mature and that as people matured they would elect better leaders and set up better institutions that would promote the way of love and peace rather than the way of hatred and violence.

She also pointed to another cause of conflict: the tendency of nations to act only in their own self-interest. She suggested that, in order for a peaceful world to exist, this attitude would have to be changed and a world government would need to emerge that included all people. World thinking, as Peace Pilgrim defined it, would place the welfare of the human family above the welfare of any nation (PP 98).

While many of Peace Pilgrim’s ideas lie in the realm of attitudes, emotions, and spirituality, she did not shy away from practical solutions. In the course of her speeches
and interviews, she offered a number of concrete suggestions to help bring about a peaceful society. These suggestions included establishing one worldwide language to improve communications, creating a Department of Peace, increasing the powers of the United Nations to intervene in conflicts between countries, and redirecting the tasks of military away from war and toward public service projects, such as cleaning up the environment and protecting natural resources.

Also, while she called herself a pacifist, she noted that she had made the personal decision to extend her pacifism in three ways:

1. She extended her pacifism to include non-use of psychological violence as well as non-use of physical violence. For her this meant not only controlling angry words but controlling angry thoughts toward others.
2. She extended her pacifism to include non-payment for war as well as non-participation in war. Therefore, she no longer knowingly paid federal taxes.
3. She extended her pacifism to include non-harming of creatures as well as non-harming of human beings. This was the extension that led to her vegetarianism. (PP 112-13)

Peace Pilgrim called on her fellow pacifists to consider making these extensions as well.

During her lifetime though she gave many talks and interviews, Peace Pilgrim wrote little outside of the letters responding to her correspondents. Since most of her comments were transcribed from her talks, they retain an informality but also the freshness of the spoken word. Peace Pilgrim could not be called a rhetorician or stylist by any means, yet I find in her words a simple elegance and a depth of meaning that reminds
me of the best classical spiritual writers. Also, while Peace Pilgrim was soft-spoken and manifested a serene spirit in her speeches, her words often carry an evangelistic fervor as she speaks about beliefs she holds passionately. As an example, I quote a lengthy passage about the price of peace:

We seem always ready to pay the price for war. Almost gladly, we give our time and our treasure—our limbs and even our lives—for war. But we expect to get peace for nothing. We expect to be able to flagrantly disobey God’s laws and get peace as a result. Well, we won’t get peace for nothing—and we won’t get peace by disobeying the laws of God. We’ll get peace only when we are willing to pay the price of peace. And to a world drunk with power, corrupted by greed, deluded by false prophets, the price of peace may seem high indeed. For the price of peace is obedience to the higher laws: evil can only be overcome by good and hatred by love; only a good means can attain a good end.

The price of peace is to abandon fear and replace it with faith—faith that if we obey God’s laws we will receive God’s blessings. The price of peace is to abandon hate and allow love to reign supreme in our hearts—love for all our fellow human beings over the world. The price of peace is to abandon arrogance and replace it with repentance and humility, remembering that the way of peace is the way of love. The price of peace is to abandon greed and replace it with giving, so that none will be spiritually injured by having more than they need while others in the world still have less than they need.
People of the world, the time for decision is short. It is measured in a few years. The choice is ours as to whether or not we will pay the price for peace. If we are not willing to pay it, all that we hold dear will be consumed in the flame of war. The darkness in our world today is due to the disintegration of things which are contrary to God’s laws. Let us never say hopelessly this is the darkness before a storm; rather let us say with faith this is the darkness before the dawn of the golden age of peace, which we cannot now even imagine. For this, let us hope and work and pray. (PP 110)

At the beginning of this paper, I mentioned the Liberal Arts and Critical Issues capstone course at my university. As my students and I discuss the application of their faith in a 21st century society, I ask them to envision their lives five, ten, fifteen years into the future. What will they be doing? How will they be serving in their communities? How will they be contributing to the common good?

I wish Peace Pilgrim were still walking this land. I like to imagine teaching my LACI class some afternoon and seeing Peace Pilgrim walk by my classroom window in her navy blue slacks and shirt and tunic. I would love to invite her into my classroom. I think my students would be fascinated to hear the story of this woman who in a time before the American feminist movement decided she was not cut out to be a homemaker or a mother, this independent thinker who left her husband, family, and friends to set off on a journey that surely must have seemed bizarre and foolish to them. Her words would carry extra weight as they heard about her tests along the road including how she spent
several nights in jail for vagrancy and even how she was once imprisoned and interrogated by the FBI.

I can imagine my students being intrigued by her simple but powerful statements:

- I have taken a vow to walk penniless until mankind has learned the way of peace, walking until I am given shelter and fasting until I am given food.
- God is an all pervading essence or spirit that gives life and binds together everything in the universe.
- I shall not accept more than I need until others in the world have what they need.
- There is good in every human heart.
- World peace is the desire of every human heart.
- I have no home; wherever I am is home.
- I think no negative thoughts; I always think about all the good things that could happen. *(Peace Pilgrim Documentary)*

College students often worry about what they should do after graduation. I can imagine one of my students asking that question of Peace Pilgrim. I have a good idea of what she would say:

- Prepare yourself for service to others by seeking inner peace. Purify your body, mind, and spirit, and relinquish negative attitudes, possessive love, and attachment to material things. Discover your role in the Life Pattern. Wait in receptive silence. Once God reveals your task to you, do it. Let the center of your
being be one of giving, giving, giving. (PP, paraphrased from various chapters)

As the class time draws to a close, I imagine myself asking Peace Pilgrim if she has any final words to share with my students. Not surprisingly, she does:

- This is the way of peace: overcome evil with good, falsehood with truth, and hatred with love (PP 97).

- There is no glimpse of the light without walking the path. You can’t get it from anyone else, nor can you give it to anyone. Just take whatever steps seem easiest for you, and as you take a few steps it will be easier for you to take a few more (PP 91).

- Why do you look at me? Look at your own self. Why do you listen to me? Listen to your own self. Why do you believe in what I say? Do not believe in me or any other teacher, rather trust in your own inner voice. This is your guide, this is your teacher. Your teacher is within not without. Know yourself, not me! (PP 130).

Gary L. Tandy, George Fox University
Works Cited

