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The Peace Pilgrim

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and I have
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Those that call themselves pilgrims have launched various quests for various reasons, and in the case of a silver-haired woman dressed in blue tunic, pants and sneakers who visited central Illinois last week, stated goal was peace. Across her chest, in hand-cut and hand-stitched lettering, was her adopted name, “Peace Pilgrim” (speaking later, she referred to herself simply as “Peace”) and in the brochures about her, prepared by a group of devotees in Cologne, N.J., was the explanation for that name. In 1953, prompted by strong feeling of protest against the Korean War, she began a cross-country trek for peace that turned into a life-style. By 1965 she had walked 25,000 miles, at which point she stopped counting. Carrying all earthly possessions in her pocket (a comb, folding toothbrush and ballpoint pen, to be exact), accepting food and shelter (never money) from people along the way, Peace Pilgrim says, using the biblical phrase, “I felt like a voice crying in the wilderness” and that happily today, “I’m on the popular side.” Her printed message to people across the country has been: “The world situation is grave. Humanity with fearful, faltering steps, walks a knife-edge between complete chaos and a golden age, while strong forces push toward chaos.”

The world has always had soothsayers, seers, self-styled prophets and harbingers of doom, but Peace Pilgrim is different from many of her fellow crusaders because her rhetorical base, at least, is common sense. Hers is a folk wisdom, the kind of reasoning that they say grandparents used to parcel at the kitchen table or on the front porch. Witness, for example, a sampling of her advice during her talk at Sangamon State last week: “I talk about love and peace; nothing new about that except the practice of it.” “It does not bless you to waste when others are starving.” “If you want to make friends,

you need to be a friend.” “A little bit of truth goes a long way.” “Life is a series of choices and I have chosen freedom.” Most people attempt a physical, emotional growing up — but not a spiritual growing up.” “You can’t be too pushy; don’t be impatient.” “I have health, happiness, inner peace; unnecessary possessions are unnecessary burdens.” “I’m a member of the clean-plate club; I never take anything that I can’t eat.”

Peace Pilgrim’s message, however, is not all adage and epigram. She stands at the blackboard in the Sangamon State Conference room where she is addressing an audience of about thirty-five individuals, and draws a chart of her inner growth. She describes the spirit growing up, leaving the

self-centered life, then the process of reaching higher illumination and finally the elation of “a universe of complete oneness, oneness with earth itself which some would call God.”

Her appellation of “Peace” has specific meaning when she speaks about the need to curtail conflict and warfare. She has suggested to congressmen and many audiences a “Peace Department” in the United States government (for which she received much applause) and speaks zealously against national defense, saying, “I would say to the military, yes, we need to be defended; our air is polluted, and farmlands eroded — yes, we need you. The Air Force can take care of the air, the Marines the despoiled forests.”

Peace Pilgrim was in Springfield over two days. During her stay she spoke to groups and visited in towns. She is a picture of health, with ruddy complexion, clear blue eyes and sturdy frame. Only her feet, stuffed into crepe-soled children’s sneakers and swollen ankles reveal any evidence of physical stress. She no longer walks as much as she did during her original quest for peace, and says that today rather than walk she mostly travels “by thumb, by faith.” Her life-style, however, is as nomadic as it was when she walked twenty-five miles a day for peace. She told the group, “You’re more apt to be called into a family unit. *I have not.* My entire life has prepared me for my pilgrimage and kept me free of ties.”

—Victoria Pope