

Peace Pilgrim *Fusion* Interview – 1981

Transcript

This interview took place between Peace Pilgrim and David Weisbard around May/June 1981.

Welcome to Fusion, I'm David Weisbard, Senior Minister of the Unitarian Church in Rockford, Illinois, your host for this series. Fusion is dedicated to encouraging the exploration of questions of religious significance. It's our beliefs that religion is not a set of answers, so much as it is a question of greater understanding, understanding of ourselves, our ideals, our communities, our universe, most importantly the relationship of all of these.

Today on Fusion I would like to turn to one of the greatest privileges I've had, what I consider one of the outstanding programs in our entire series, the day when we welcomed a most special guest, a woman who went by the name of Peace Pilgrim. She was a woman who in January of 1953 vowed to remain a wanderer until humanity learned the way of peace. Her original goal was to walk 25,000 miles for peace, a target which she had long succeeded. I had met her 13 years before and was touched by her commitment to a simple ideal of peace in the human community. When I had the opportunity to invite her to spend time in Rockford, I leapt at it. She appeared on Fusion, on news programs, in the pulpit of the Unitarian Church and in a variety of meetings during her stay, touching the lives of hundreds of people in a very profound way. She continued her pilgrimage visiting in Wisconsin and then in Indiana. A month later we received word that she had been killed in a car in which she was being given a ride crashed.

Today I would like to share with you once again the opportunity to meet or to be reminded of the most powerful and gentle woman, Peace Pilgrim. As our conversation began I asked her where her travels had taken her.

PP: Well this year I have covered Texas and also Louisiana, and `course the rest of Illinois too. Then I'm going on to Wisconsin, and then over to Michigan, Indiana, down through Kentucky, Tennessee and Mississippi. That will complete my year. You see I travel with the seasons. I'm always north in the summer and south in the winter. And considering that I travel with the seasons, I can wear the same clothing indoors and out, summer and winter. My body has learned to make the necessary adjustments to changes in temperature.

DW: How did you begin your pilgrimage? When did it begin? Let's start with that.

PP: It began January 1st of 1953. It's my retirement project, and I finished counting the 25,000 miles toward the end of 1964. I have not counted miles since then. However, I will say that the real turning point in my life came 15 years prior to that, about 43 years ago, when I came out of my empty life of money and things and began to live to give instead of to get. Oh, it was just the most wonderful change in my life. My life just blossomed out. I remember three things happened. I attained the great blessings of good health. You know I haven't had an ache or pain, or headache since. I knew my life work was going to be work for peace. Not only the outer peace but the inner peace which I talk about the most because that's where peace begins. It's very good to know what your life work is because then you can get busy on it. And the third thing, long after I had finished the physical growing up and I had finished the mental growing up - I had enough knowledge to get along. I could make my own decisions, and I had finished the emotional growing up - I could get along with people, and with myself, I began the spiritual growing up, which takes you from the SELF-centered life into the life where you see yourself in proper perspective as part of the whole and work for the good of the whole. It was doing that growing and finding inner peace that prepared me for the pilgrimage that I walk today. And when I started out my hair had turned to silver. My friends thought I had taken leave of my senses. But I walk on that ENDLESS energy that comes with inner peace. It never runs out.

And of course a Pilgrim walks on faith. I have no money. I don't accept any money. I belong to no organization. There is no organizational BACKING behind me. I own only what I wear and the few things I carry in my pockets. I just walk until giving shelter, fast until given food. I don't even ask. It's given without asking. Aren't people good! You know there's a spark of good in everybody, no matter how deeply buried. It's right here, it's waiting to govern every life gloriously. In fact and this is something I would really like to emphasize, that spark of good is the real you. I identify with

that and I hope you do also. Because when I say "I," I'm not referring to the body, I'm just wearing that. Nor I am I referring to the self-centered nature. Now your self-centered nature can be all mixed up and full of difficulties. It's not the real you. I'm referring to the divine nature, the spark of good that I talk about. That is the real me, and that's what I mean when I say "I." That is the real you and that is what I see when I look at you. That's why to me all people are beautiful.

Now a pilgrim walks not only prayerfully, but as an opportunity to contact people. And that's why I'm wearing my short tunic with "Peace Pilgrim" on the front and "25,000 miles on foot for peace" on the back, because it makes my contacts for me in a very kind way. I don't need to approach people. They approach me. And my message - one sentence, "This is the WAY of peace, overcome evil with good, and falsehood with truth, and hatred with love." You see it isn't new, just the practice of it would be new. But I consider it the lesson for today and it becomes therefore the message of my peace pilgrimage. And that's the other thing I would really like to emphasize. The basic conflict

in our world today is not between nations. It is between two opposing beliefs. The belief that you can overcome evil with more evil, and `course those people are busy multiplying the evil. Now this is the official position of every major nation in the world. This is the war way, and the belief which is my way, and I'm sure it's your way, I'm sure many people relate to this - the belief that evil can only be overcome by good. That's the basic conflict in our world today.

DW: That really does sum it up in a nutshell - that the government says that only way we can be stronger, that we can be secure is if we're stronger than everybody else. And of course if we're stronger than everybody else, then they can't be secure. And they have to build up their forces and we have to build up our forces and we get a spiral that just keeps building.

PP: An armaments race, yes.

DW: An armaments race, that means that there isn't money for the people who have the greatest need.

PP: That's so true. You see you don't have to be good at arithmetic to figure out that if the nations of the world move to stop manufacturing implements of mass destruction they could provide for every human being who lives in this world, the basis for a very good life. And also I think it's becoming increasingly clear to us that we are making a very momentous choice today. It's a choice today. It's a choice between the worse that could happen which would be a war among major nations using modern weapons and the best that could happen would be if we begin to use our resources constructively. Now everybody is helping to make this choice. I'll tell you why. Because the trend of things, the tide of world affairs is drifting on the down grade. You see we have not attained disarmament. We are sitting on a powder keg with a lighted fuse. So all who do nothing at this point in history are choosing to let things drift toward destruction, and those want to choose peace. It's a time for action. It's a time to become a part of the stirring and awakening in the direction of peace which has begun and is accelerating and help to accelerate it sufficiently to turn the tide. We live in a very challenging time in human history.

DW: Where, I, there's a piece of me which is skeptical about those seeds of hope that you see. I hope they're there. Where do see some of those, about this gathering tide that you're talking about?

PP: When I started out things were very different, actually. I can remember the Korean War was on at that time, January 1 of 1953. And it was the height of the McCarthy era. There was such fear at that time, and therefore great apathy, because the safest thing to do is nothing. I was speaking at a college and the professor had prepared a questionnaire to be answered after I spoke. And the first question was: what in our society calls forth a

Peace Pilgrim? because at anytime in any culture where there is great apathy in the face of a crisis situation a pilgrim is apt to step forth, and a pilgrim's job is to arouse people from their apathy and make them think. They're doing more thinking now. I'm still trying to make them think about their own potential and living according to their highest potential. Because those who make estimates say that we live at from two to five percent of our actual potential. Why, there are so many people, because we do have free will of course, who choose not even to finish the mental and emotional growing up, and most people choose not even to begin the spiritual growing up. Because the beginning of it is the time when you feel completely willing without any reservations to give your life, to leave that self-centered life.

Now they're a couple of other things I would like to mention. When I started out people accepted war as a necessary part of life. Now they're looking for alternatives to war. And this a gain. When I started out, there was very little interest in the inner search. Now there's an almost universal interest in the inner search, which to me is the greatest gain of all. Now there is darkness in our world today. It's quite natural. It's due to the disintegration of things which are contrary to the law of love. They cannot endure. They contain within themselves the seeds of their own destruction. So let us look at these things in proper perspective and we will see that amid the darkness there is also some light.

DW: What's fascinating for me is the relationship that you draw between the inner life and also with something which is obviously the outer life. As I look at some of the people who have turned to a search for inner peace, it's been as an

escape from the world, but your search for inner growth has let you out into the world.

PP: Oh, YES.

DW: For some people there's a conflict there. For you there doesn't seem to be any at all.

PP: There is no conflict whatsoever, you see, when you have found inner peace naturally you go out into the world to attempt to inspire the world to find inner peace. Now, I realize that in working for the outer peace being who finds inner peace of course will bring the world right where you are, in your own surrounds. You can be a peace maker of course wherever you are. And every time you succeed in bringing harmony into any inharmonious situation, right where you are you have made a contribution to the total peace picture. So I would say you begin a working in your own life and when have found peace there, you begin working in your own surroundings.

Eventually, you see enough of us will have found enough inner peace to affect for the better our institutions and then the bettered institutions will in turn through better example affect for the better those who are still immature. And instead of the small child watching the hero shoot the villain on some film, which trains the little child to believe that shooting people is heroic, the hero just did it, effective, it seemed to work, acceptable

he was well thought of afterward, the little child will see the hero do something significant to help people - a different hero image. So you see.

DW: It would be different.

PP: Yes, you keep on working in any way that you can for peace.

DW: It would help to understand your pilgrimage a little bit more if you would say something about how you go in - what led you to start it.

PP: Well after I had found inner peace, you might just say a thought struck my mind. I felt this strong inner motivation. DW: What were you doing at the time? What were you doing before you started?

PP: I was working with people who had problems. I am very good at working with people who have problems, because I know we live in a very orderly universe. If you have a problem, with a proper attitude you can not only solve that problem, but you can learn and grow through solving it. Problems are really wonderful learning and growing experiences. And that applies not only to personal problems but also to collective problems. If you see we would solve our collective problems we would discover that we had done a great deal of learning and growing. Now, I therefore was able of course to inspire many people toward a proper attitude for their problems. And to inspire them toward a good lifestyle. You know if you're the bread winner, you would need to have a useful task in society that would provide enumeration. And most people are called into the family pattern by this thing referred to as falling in love. And then of course they would act as a family unit, and that would go into their lifestyle. That is not in my lifestyle. You see I could never have left anyone who might worry about me or depend upon me to walk a pilgrimage. And so my entire life prepared me and kept me free of all close ties. Although, I feel that are my beautiful kinfolk. I love them all.

Then there are three other things. You could divide them into three. One of them is sensible living habits, sensible eating, rest, exercise, and especially sensible thinking, because you can absolutely destroy yourself through negative thinking. Every moment of your life you are creating through thought. I'm always thinking about the best that could happen, the good things I would like to see happen, solutions to problems. And if someone does a mean thing to me I would just feel the deepest compassion for that out-of-harmony person who is hurt by having done a mean thing. I don't hurt myself by a wrong reaction of bitterness or anger. So I tell people, I practice prevention. I don't eat junk food and I don't think junk thoughts.

And then you need to have in your life something inspirational. Something that will lift you up and inspire you and awaken that higher nature within you. Now, I believe of course that that's one of the functions, certainly of a church service, to lift you up and inspire you. And of the arts and so on.

Now you also need a path of service, something you do to help somebody. Because in this world you are given as you give. And so you see I used to also inspire them toward a good lifestyle.

DW: Okay, so then finding this peace. See what we're talking about partly is one of things that I feel of fundamental concern is that people sometimes use religion and say what I will do is find inner harmony and then after I have accomplished all of that I will go outside. But what you're saying now that part of that inner harmony comes is reaching out in service right along. That you're not going to find it inside until you're also reaching outside.

PP: That's correct, you see, nobody finds inner peace except one who had done a lot of giving. I dedicated 15 years of my life to just solid giving, before I found inner peace. It was working with those people who had problems. Just as we I hope enjoy our other growth patterns, the physical growing and the mental growing, etc. we should also enjoy the spiritual growing. I did. In other words my life became better and better, but this is the best of all, and I believe retirement years should be the best of all.

DW: So you have just incredible number of new experiences every day since your retirement. **PP:** Of course. Oh yes, I think I learn something every day.

DW: Which is the retirement? It seems that you began living a full life at the point that you stopped working in that other framework.

PP: As, what the world would call retirement time, you see. But yes, it's been the most active time of my life. And it should be so actually. And of course, in this time of my life, I'm still in a sense working with people who have problems. Only now I talk to them in groups about solutions to problems rather than working with them individually. And every experience that comes to me, I have discovered is a worthwhile experience in my life. It either teaches me something, or inspires me, or gives me a chance to somehow to be of service.

DW: Have you been in this area before? **PP:** Oh, yes.

DW: In Rockford?

PP: Oh, yes.

DW: Because what I noticed was after our church newsletter mentioned that you were coming, I started getting phone calls from people, TV stations and the radio stations, that we heard Peace Pilgrim was coming. I can't figure out how so many people had heard about you. You must have an awful lot of people around this country who know you are around.

PP: There are about 10,000 on the mailing list. And of course they're notified when I'm coming to an area and I was here about five years ago. This is my seventh pilgrimage route or my seventh pilgrimage across the country. And I have covered the 50 states, the ten Canadian provinces, parts of Mexico. Yes, I go to the 49th and 50th state.

DW: You didn't walk to Hawaii though?

PP: Oh, I'm not quite up to that yet. Maybe in a little while, but not quite now. It requires more growing. But a wealthy man heard me speak and he wanted his relations in Alaska and Hawaii to hear me, so he took me. That's how I got there in 1975. And now that I've been there I can lead tours there so I led a tour to Alaska the summer before last, last summer to Hawaii, and I will lead tours to Alaska and Hawaii again in 1984. It's just a beautiful retreat situation. We're together for a couple of weeks in the beautiful surroundings. And everybody comes back, inspired and uplifted, everyone ready to work for their good cause.

DW: But it literally, people may wonder about what kind of organization. As you said before, there is no organization, the organization is in your head. Your mailing list and your sense of who these people are. But there are no underwriters. There's no money involved. You're coming to an area they're no collections at any of your appearances. You strictly and literally work on the basis that you stay where you're invited to stay, you're fed when you're invited to eat.

PP: Yes, and it has to be offered. I don't even ask. You see I, it is quite true, go according to invitation now. But even when I was completely on my own starting out as a penniless pilgrim absolutely unknown, even then I was offered shelter by total strangers about three-fourths of the time and seldom skipped more than maybe three or four meals in a row. People are good.

Now, some people have offered to help me. It's not an organization. But a lady offered to forward my mail and I'm very grateful. And then there are three ladies who offered to get out some literature for me if I would write it. And I'm very grateful for that. But you see it's set up so that if I had to operate alone, I could operate alone. The Post Office would forward my mail.

DW: I got a letter about a year and a half ago from somebody in California I don't even know who, said I noticed you have a Unitarian Church in Rockford, would like to have Peace Pilgrim come sometime and I wrote back and they gave me your address and I wrote and said I'd be happy to have you come and we've been corresponding for a number of months and here you are. It happened relatively informally.

PP: Yes, you see sometimes people think that the church of their denomination should be notified of my coming. Actually the lady is a Quaker but she offered to send out letters also for this college professor who was a Unitarian. He wrote the letter you see.

DW: So, have you had any experiences which have made you wonder about people, or do you always get treated hospitably?

PP: Oh, people are good, there's no doubt of that. I'll really have to think back to my tests if I want to tell you anything that might be considered an adverse experience. And I don't consider it an adverse experience. Life is a series of tests, but if you pass the tests you look back upon it as a good experience.

I was hit once in my first test by a disturbed teen age boy. He was terrified by a thunder shower. I had taken him for a walk. I thought it would do him good. And he went off the beam when the thunder shower came along. He came for me. And I didn't even try to run away which I guess I could have done. He had a heavy pack on his back. And even while he began to hit me I could only feel the deepest compassion for him. How terrible to be so psychologically sick that you would be able to hit an old woman. I faced his hatred with love even while he hit me. And as a result it reached that spark of good in him. Oh it's there no matter how deeply buried and he experienced remorse. And to make a long story short what are a few bruises on my body in comparison with the transformation of a human life. He never was violent again. He's a useful person in this world today.

Now one more, and that is the time I had to defend a frail little eight-year-old girl from a large man who was about to beat her. And the girl was terrified. Well I knew her danger because of her fear. You attract what you fear so I put my body between the man and girl. I just stood and looked at that poor psychologically sick man with loving compassion. He came close, he stopped, he looked at me for quite a while. He turned around and walked away and the girl was safe. Now what was the alternative? Suppose I had been so foolish as to attempt to use the jungle law of tooth and claw. I would undoubtedly be dead today and so would the little girl. Let us never underestimate the great power of the way of love, which reaches that spark of good in the other person and the person is disarmed.

This morning today we've had the opportunity to experience once again the presence of one of the most remarkable persons I've ever met - Peace Pilgrim who visited us, last time, in 1981 just before her death. During Peace Pilgrim's visit I had the opportunity to accompany her and to observe her in a variety of situations. There were several people who expressed the initial impression that she couldn't possibly be real. She was in a sense larger than life. Peace Pilgrim had an incredible power about her person. I came to the conclusion that her power came from the fact that she was in fact most real. She was a

living demonstration of the potential that can be unleashed when persons are fully engaged in doing what they believe to be the most important thing in the world.

It was impossible to learn the particulars about the person. Her name, her age, her background. She was known by us only as Peace Pilgrim. And insisted that she had stopped counting her birthdays long ago. And when she did she stopped feeling older every year. The report of her death gave her given name, and her age. They're erased from my memory because they simply are not relevant. What was important about Peace Pilgrim was the message that she shared in her inexhaustible way and the power of her presence.

I treasure the opportunity to have met and to be touched by her as I hope that you have.