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Reflections on Peace Pilgrim's Life

by John Robbin

The state of peace in the world right now is not very peaceful. In the United States, we face these questions: How do you find inner peace? What is the meaning of self-realization, as a member of a society which produces most of the world's weapons? How do you express your conscience, in the face of a war machine that spends a billion dollars every twenty-four hours on destruction—money that could have gone to basic human needs that are going unmet?

In the United States today, the reality is that teenagers are carrying military assault rifles. We have more gun dealers than gas stations. And those of us who feel called to give our lives for peace, to see peace develop at every level—in people's individual lives, in relationships, in communities, and in the greater political sense—are faced with a very challenging time, a very difficult time. That's why we're here, because it is so difficult. Love is needed in the wounded places, in the dark places. We're not here because it's easy; we're here because it's important.

Our peace has to come forward in the arena we're given, where we find ourselves. However confusing or agitating or aggravating the situation is—and it can be very difficult—that's how much we have to work to bring a quality of peace, a quality of mental coherence and clarity, a quality of emotional peacefulness and acceptance, a quality of spiritual presence to the situation so that we don't become part of the problem, by not reacting to the problem in a way that's just perpetuating it. Instead, we're bringing a quality of peace, of love, of creativity, of positive responsefulness and responsibility to a situation that is in such dire need of adults—people who can lift the situation and hold it.

Peace Pilgrim's example inspires everybody who contacts her because of the depth of her commitment and the depth of her inspiration. She was not in any way a shallow human being. We need people who live deeply, who live fully, who sense the predicament that the human race is in and recognize how dire it is; recognize that the violent aspect of our natures has now been amplified by a technology that can do so much damage, and that is doing so much damage, and could do even vastly more.

Now what she did was to go on a pilgrimage. That won't be the form that the commitment to peace will take for most people—except as in so far as all of our lives are pilgrimages.

Peace Pilgrim's life is of extraordinary importance to our times. She was in many ways ahead of the times. She was not recognized as widely as she certainly deserved to be, and as we would all benefit from if she was. I don't think she needed to be recognized more widely for herself. But for the benefit of *life*, that we can acknowledge and honor her work, and her example; it's very important.

She taught continually by example, and through her words and teachings as well, that the end does not justify the means. In that sense, it harkens back to Gandhi, who spoke continually about the means being the seed and the end being the tree—and, to Martin Luther King, Jr.

I had the privilege of working with Dr. King, and marching with him, and following him, and listening to him in the 1960s, and loving him very much—both in the Civil Rights movement in this country, and also in the anti-war movement to try to put an end to the American shenanigans in Vietnam. He was adamant also about the critical importance of remaining nonviolent at all times. His message and Peace Pilgrim's are totally integrated with each other. You can oppose what someone is doing, oppose the act, without letting your opposition to that act get in the way of your love for that person—for that soul, for the underlying experience. Then you're working with that person, even if they may not know it.

So Martin Luther King would be working for, and with, Bull Connor, the sheriff of Birmingham, Alabama, who was releasing attack-trained German shepherd dogs on innocent people. He was also using fire hoses with such tremendous force that they could easily break bones in the bodies of peaceful demonstrators. Yet even while he was doing that, those of us who understood Dr. King's message and Peace Pilgrim's message, understood that this poor man is acting out conditioning and fear—that lives in our culture, that lives in all of us—racism in that case, violence in another. It's all of the same kind of quality, and our job is to transform that energy. Not to fight against it, not to antagonize the person, not to be rude, not to violate their sensitivities—but to uphold a higher standard and principle, one that they too will in time recognize. In the meantime, the greater public will certainly recognize the moral quality of that effort.

So, I don't think we're going to generate peace by going to the Pentagon and screaming at the generals, and calling them names, and saying they're bad people. We can recognize that their actions are things we want to change. Then we can say, "What is the most peaceful, authentic, creative, inspiring, powerful way we can come up with to mobilize community support to acknowledge the good in all beings and change things in a peaceful way?" I'm not someone who thinks I have the answer to those questions. I let those questions live in me and direct my actions. We all live with these questions: How do you live nonviolently? How do you live peacefully? How do you understand the universal wisdom that is inherent in all beings? How do you respect the inherent dignity and worth of all people, in a society that is so alienated from the laws of nature and the wisdom of the human heart?

Someone once said, that amongst friends, sorrows that are shared are halved and joys that are shared are doubled. In that spirit, it's very important that we befriend each other, and share the burdens that we carry, so that we don't carry them alone. We need to understand that we're in this with each other, and we can support each other and become friends in the Quaker sense of the word—friends of *life*—friends of the community of beings that are working to bring the human spirit alive, and to respect, and to live with reverence for life.

For me, living with reverence for life means watching what I eat. It's all one web of interconnected life. I try to understand how my choices and actions impact and influence other people and other beings. I try to ask whether that influence and impact is what my soul would want. Is it in alignment with my values? Is it peaceful? Is it life affirming?

As for Peace Pilgrim, I feel that she and I have been allies for a long time. I first came across her work in the very early 1980s. Someone gave me *Steps*. I could hardly believe that this little booklet carried so much power and potency and caused so much deep feeling in me. I felt that here was somebody who had really forged the trail that I was walking. I hadn't even known about her until then, but I could feel that on some deep spiritual level, she had made it possible and easier for me. It took someone of her strength to do it, so that then those of us who aren't so strong can also do it—because she had led. At workshops I've led I have often shown videos that were made of her speaking at various colleges or churches. In these videos, you get a sense of this older woman with white hair who spoke so passionately about something she clearly loved, with such *gusto*, that it absolutely shreds your idea of what aging is and of what peace is. Peace is not simply the absence of war. No, no, *no!* Peace is the *presence* of a *power of Love*, and it's so vital, and it's so joyful, and it's so meaningful to people to contact that, that people just love it.

The only thing that they don't love is comparing their own lives to an example that may be beyond their reach. They can feel guilty, thinking "I'm not doing enough." Or you might think: "Well, I know how many flaws and inconsistencies and superficialities there are in my life!" So a person like that can, people can react with that. But that's really just the surfacing of their own difficulties, and that's okay because we all need to accept where we are. Not all of us are intended by the greater life pattern to stand out. Some of us work in more quiet ways. It is very important for people to recognize and respect their particular form of love. It's so important that we accept where we are and not put ourselves down by comparing ourselves to something that we're not. Each of us is unique. The special and individual ways we have of loving and of respecting life and of cherishing life are our own and are very important. I think of Martin Luther King, and it would be easy to say, "Wow, he was such a stupendous, spectacular human being," and he was! Yet, there were all kinds of other people that made it possible for his light to shine.

Peace Pilgrim is of the same nature as people like Mother Teresa, and Martin Luther King, Jr., and Gandhi, and many, many beings whose names have not become so prominent that we can gesture to them and remember them and say, "Oh, yeah, that's that kind of people." There are people who generate a feeling of respect and reverence for life in every walk of life. There are people at every level of prominence and notoriety, from the most well known, as those we've just mentioned, to the least well known that no one knows their names, except the people that live with them. Yet, their message is their life; they have the integrity that comes with the

courage of their convictions. They lead by example. Their life is a statement of who they are; it is a testimony to what they believe in; it is an offering to the great Heart of life. As far as I'm concerned, these are the people that keep us afloat as a society.

These are the people who balance the negativity, the violence, and the destructiveness that can also occur in people's lives. These are the people who have the willingness to "walk their talk." There is no discrepancy between their words and their deeds. This is a very powerful thing for those of us who meet them to experience, because it speaks to that possibility in us to be whole—to be honest people, to be caring people, and to be part of a community of caring and a community of respect that is capable of bringing peace to this planet so that life will thrive.

Peace Pilgrim loved the natural world; she loved life. She saw the connection between human life and the web of life. Her way of living was stunning in its lack of consumption of resources. In America, we have this distorted idea of success. We define success as the acquiring and consuming of material things. It really is "Shop 'til the planet drops," and it's sad. It's very destructive. But she showed another way. Peace Pilgrim lived in a different way where we minimize our material needs in order to maximize our spiritual richness and maximize our sense of heartfelt connection to life. There was nothing ascetic, in the sense of deprived, about her. She didn't go around feeling sorry for herself, or feeling like she didn't get to have what other people did. She gloried in the richness of her inner life and the richness of her connections with people—because that's where true richness lives.

I was born into a family that became extraordinarily wealthy, and I had the opportunity of very first hand experience that money doesn't buy happiness. It is *very* important for our time and our culture to understand that the pursuit of money, as an end in itself, is destructive. It's really insane. The pursuit money as a means to support life and to give one's gifts, however, is totally legitimate.

The impact on the ecosystems that our level of consumption has reached is so disastrous. We are chewing up the planet. We are so good at converting paradise into merchandise—at selling the world and at exploiting and dominating the life support systems—that it's a tragedy. It's a tragedy that is amplified by the great numbers of people; it's amplified by our technological prowess; it's amplified by our mediums of communication which are so fast now, and all this is multiplied out. The result is a frightening one to somebody who loves the simple earth and the good earth, and who respects its ability to sustain life.

Peace Pilgrim led the way to understanding that by living more simply, others may live. By eating more simply, *more* others may eat. Not over consuming things. Just taking our fair share, and being happy with that and being grateful to share with others. Then we create a way of living that's sustainable.

There's enough on this Earth for us if we don't get greedy and selfish—and all of us do at times get greedy and selfish. The funny thing is that when we get greedy and selfish, those are our least happy times. No one enjoys being greedy and selfish. No one enjoys being destructive. They may get short-term pleasure and release and compensation out of it. But there's a great difference between short-term pleasure and abiding joy, fulfillment, and peace.

Peace Pilgrim stands as human being who found her way of living by honoring life, and speaking and honoring for peace. Her every breath became a call, to those of us who would hear it, to move to a way of living and a way of thinking and a way of connecting with each other that is truly and happily and creatively peaceful. It's a way that doesn't undermine each other, doesn't put anybody down, that doesn't violate anything, that doesn't seek advantage. But instead, it's a way that seeks the highest good for everybody.

She was the ultimate example of somebody who had found the joy of living for the good of all. And all of us can learn from that and become more ourselves and more fully capable of being responsible to that possibility. That has been her gift to so many of us. I would not ever try to estimate the impact of a person like Peace Pilgrim. Who can say how much good is done when someone lives so deeply in themselves, and shares so fully, and so easily, and so happily, and so generously with others?

In our little minds and in our restricted way of thinking, we tend to assess a person's influence, or the impact of a life, by worldly values. We say, "If someone was well-known, or widely read, or had a great deal of exposure in their lives; then their life had greater influence." But that's not the truth. I think the truth of a person's influence stems more from the degree to which they're anchored in the universal Truth of life, the great Truth of all of our lives—and she, Peace Pilgrim, was.

Peace Pilgrim was one of the truly great leaders of this century. We're approaching the millennium (1998), and there are going to be all kinds of discussions of who were the most important people of the century. There are some who'll say, "Well, it was FDR, or JFK," or whoever they'll think it might have been. And all these people have played a part. But it's been the people like Peace Pilgrim—and there aren't too many at her level—who are the true leaders, who are the guides of the human spirit, and who are our true spiritual mentors.

Peace Pilgrim has helped me in a variety of ways. She expanded the boundaries so much that I found I was a person who had a legacy; I had a lineage. I saw her as someone who had really made it possible for me to feel comfortable with what I was doing. I think the essential thing was that I felt in my own soul that what I was doing was respectful and appropriate. I felt very validated, in a sense, by her.

Her understanding that violence is never a means to anything good is really important. We can't hear that enough. Our movies other media influences are always showing fighting as a way of resolving conflict. It's no way of resolving conflict; it only leads to more conflict. Resolving conflict involves understanding each other, understanding where the other person is coming from, and understanding our own motives and the pressures that are at work within ourselves; self-understanding so that we're not acting out unconsciousness as much. That's what resolves conflict. Not who's mightier or more powerful.

This whole idea that might makes right—that you can resolve human conflict by force—is an old way of thinking. We've seen, again and again in history, the outcome of that way of thinking. This is the time, and we're the generation that's taking responsibility for transforming that way

of thinking into a different way of thinking and a different way of living. We can resolve conflict through appreciating our differences, and through respecting our differences. The symphony, the harmony, the coherence, and integrity of life emerges, not from somebody imposing their will on somebody else, but from all of us surrendering to the great Will, and the great Love that comes through us when we do live with peace.

I have been working my whole life to understand this and to surrender to it. At a certain point you get to a place where you don't say, "Not my will, but Thine." You say, "*Make* my will Thine!" so that I can be an instrument and a demonstration of what we're all called forth to answer to. I lose the ability to talk about these things at a certain place because my mind can't really get a hold of it, but my heart sings with it, and my soul vibrates with it. And when I see somebody like Peace Pilgrim—with every cell in her body clearly given over to it—I just fall in love again!

What I understand of Peace Pilgrim's diet is that she was a vegetarian. And that's really remarkable because she was staying wherever she was offered shelter and eating, presumably, what she was offered. I can imagine that that took a lot of commitment on her part, being in the various social situations that she would find herself in, and I respect that very, very much. Here again, she was ahead of her time.

Philosophically, to not eat meat was totally consistent with her attitude for respect for life. Why eat food that stems from violence if you're trying to create a peaceful world? It's that old prayer: "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me." When you take responsibility for your part in the great peace and the great healing that our times require, then you ask of each of your life choices, "Is this consistent with a peaceful way of being, or is this not?" If it isn't, you chuck it! It becomes very simple, really. Your choices become dictated by what generates more peacefulness, a higher quality of consciousness, greater life and vitality, and a greater ability to contribute to the well-being of others. That becomes the criteria of your life.

If you're thinking about your food choices, you're not thinking, "What would taste better to me?" You're thinking, "What would serve the unfolding of my Spirit? What would serve the unfolding of *Life* on this Earth?" It includes your pleasure in living, but it isn't limited to a narrow definition of what that pleasure is. It allows for a greater pleasure. The pleasure of living in a healthy body, the pleasure of living with a conscience that is affirming the way you're living, is so much greater than the pleasure of eating a broiled piece of cow flesh—I don't care how many mushrooms you put on it! To me, it's really a very clear choice. I find it's socially easier now than it was when Peace Pilgrim was paving the way.

Peace Pilgrim knew intuitively the connection between our diets and the level of violence in the world. I certainly sense that when we are drawing our energy from violence, the probability of us acting out violence in our own lives is increased. We've simply *got* to outgrow war as a way of living and resolving conflict, as a way of strutting our stuff, a way of displaying our egos, a way of trying to be better than other people, or rising to prominence or glory. I just think there are other forms of glory than war.

To me, the glorious thing about life is our ability to learn from our experience and to share with

each other in a way that all of us are able to grow in wisdom and understanding and joy. To me, that's the glory of life. I don't think military conquests are glorious; I think they're tragic, because they always involve a great deal of suffering and death and destruction. Peace Pilgrim understood this. She understood that to live in harmony with life, one needs to live as nonviolently, and eat as nonviolently as possible. I think that's a recognition that's part of the growth of awareness that will allow us to move away from military, violent, and exploitive ways of trying to resolve conflict to much more compassionate and productive ways.

The level of violence in our world is so great that sometimes it takes somebody who is really radical, somebody who really challenges all the assumptions of the culture, someone who steps outside of the typical ways of dressing and behaving and talking and conforming, and who just grabs the situation by the throat, and says, "I'm going to be different! I'm going to live a life that is so peaceful, and so happy, and so joyful—that I'm going to do my part. I'm going to find inner peace, and I'm going to share it, and *that's* what I'm going to do!" They don't have any other purpose. They don't have any other thing that they're about. They don't have any other game going. They're not trying to impress anybody. They're not trying to be seen as important. They don't really have any interest in how they're being seen!

They have an interest in upholding, inspiring, and supporting the part of each of us that knows what is right, and is capable of good, and is responsible to life. All of us benefit from that. All of us can become a little bit more respectful of others. All of us can become capable of expressing the joy, the love, and the peace that is in our hearts. All of us can become a little less stressed, a little less caught up in the reactivity of our culture, and a little more connected to the timeless and the universal. Peace Pilgrim understood what was truly important.

War is a failure. Even if we "win" there is tremendous destruction, tremendous cost and tremendous suffering. It's the failure of diplomacy. In a sense, it's the failure of civilization. It's the failure of us, as civilized people—which we certainly like to think we are—to find a way of living with each other, to find a way of resolving our differences and our conflicts that minimizes the damage and maximizes the value to life.

Some of us have sensed, as Peace Pilgrim certainly did, that "business as usual" all too often leads to war. We have in this culture a war machine. We have industries profiting *enormously* from the production of weapons and having the political power that that economic clout implies. The result is in our defense budget; the result is in the lack of spending in meeting basic human needs. The people who are employed in the defense industries could be employed in environmentally beneficial industries. There are other forms of employment. There are other forms of industry. There are other ways of being economically productive.

I don't think that safety, in the global sense, comes from having more guns than all the other people. Our guns have become so powerful. In 1945, we dropped bombs on two Japanese cities, and we saw a level of destruction that was historically unprecedented. Yet, what we can do technologically today, a half a century later, makes those bombs look like ping-pong balls. We have to recognize that, because we have to be responsible to the power that we now hold. Are we going to use it in a destructive manner and obliterate life on this planet? We might. That question remains to be answered.

But isn't it part of our possibility as human beings to do everything we can—each of us within the scope of our lives—to see to it that the energy shifts, and the direction of life on this earth shifts, so that we don't blow each other, and ourselves, to kingdom come? Wouldn't it be better to uplift each other, than to destroy each other? That's the simple question that Peace Pilgrim asked, by virtue of the way she lived. That's the question all of us have to ask. We can't escape it! We can try. But on our death bed, it's going to be right there in front of us. How did you live? You lived in this particular time, in this particular culture. Given these particular circumstances, was your life an answer or was it part of the problem? And for most of us the answer is a mixed one. There are ways in which we were part of the answer and ways in which we were part of the problem.

What I would like to see is that that balance shift. So that, sure, at any given moment, I can list a thousand ways in which the way I live is environmentally destructive and ways in which I don't live up to my own ideals. But I can also make a list, and hopefully one that's growing longer as I live and learn, of the ways that I am living that are environmentally and socially responsible, and that are contributing to peace. It's that shift, so that the list of the damage that we're doing gets shorter, and the list of the good that we're doing gets longer. You don't have to be perfect; you just have to be responsible. You just have to be honest with life. Then you're connected. Then you're fed by life. Then the energy that's available to you is so much greater—energy that enables you to take more responsibility and live with greater clarity and greater purposefulness and greater joy.

What impressed me about the *Steps* booklet was that this woman had lived so simply. She had stripped her life of all the distractions, and of all the amusements, and of all the conveniences, and placed herself in the hands of a higher power. She had a level of trust, a level of faith if you will, in life that was so inspiring and made me reflect on my own levels of anxiety and fear and defensiveness about life in a way that made it hard to perpetuate them. I saw how petty I was in so many ways, in contrast to her grandeur. For me, she was the epitome of a great human being. She wasn't great in the sense of political power, or like some military general. She was the 'inner general' who, by virtue of her principles and her commitment to them, and her willingness to give of herself, was a leader on the inner plane. She was a leader for those of us who hunger for a way of living that is in harmony with the greatest powers of life. So that was what touched me.

I appreciated what Peace Pilgrim said in that booklet: "I discovered that making money was easy, and that making money and spending it foolishly was completely meaningless." And I thought, "Yes! She has dealt with the money issue that runs our society." It's not like she was choosing her lifestyle because she was incapable of making money or incapable of making it in society. She was speaking for a higher possibility for all of us. And to me, there's always been something wonderful about Veterans for Peace, or business people who then go on to represent generosity and compassion, because clearly what you're talking about then is an inclusion: "I've been there." I understand it. It's not that I'm rejecting it; I want to love it, and embrace it, and take all the people who are there to something better.

She had been married. She had gone through the things that a woman growing up goes through, in order to be a powerful, dignified, self-actualizing person. She grew up in a patriarchal culture

which was very limiting to women—still is of course, but it was even more so in those days. Yet she emerged from that with the idea to go on this pilgrimage and to eliminate all these distractions from her life. She chose to eliminate all the ways that we have of keeping ourselves busy and occupied, and unable to attend to what's really important.

She was able to concentrate on peace and to generate a quality and a power of inner peace that was phenomenal, and to share that with people. I don't think she talked very much, in her conversations with people, about what clothes were in style, and what hairdos were in style, and what new cars were fashionable, or what was the latest stock to invest in. Not that she wasn't human and kind and congenial with people, but she always was returning to the central issues of life. She did not lose track for one minute of the deep powerful issues around which our lives truly revolve. Not the things with which we distract ourselves, but the things with which we fulfill ourselves. The things that make our relationships work. The things that make our lives feel inspired and inspiring.

To people who are engaged in a form of livelihood that is very destructive, Peace Pilgrim is a reminder of their own conscience. We need to honor life in the way that we live, or else we will cause great damage to ourselves. You can drink to try to dull your experience of that damage. You can try to avoid actually experiencing it. But it's going to come up and get you—in terms of ill health, in terms of bad relationships, in terms of a feeling in your soul of wretchedness, of cheapness, of death. Peace Pilgrim is a ray—a shot of light, saying, “You don't have to be this way. There are other ways of being. Look! And it doesn't take a lot of money. I don't have any! And you don't have to be young and beautiful. I'm not! I'm *old* and beautiful. You don't have to play into the culture's ideas of what success and power are about. There are all kinds of other ways.

Then you realize that there are people that will meet you more than half way when you take the steps to become a more responsible person, a more loving person, a more honest person, and a more generous person. Then life meets you, and people meet you and make it easier for you. That's the wonderful thing that you learn when you take steps towards inner peace. You learn that other people are taking those same steps, and the feeling of connection is really wonderful.

Peace Pilgrim promises, and her life exemplifies, a path that leads to true fellowship, reconciliation, forgiveness, and companionship—all the good things in life that we want. The way we lower the level of violence—in the world, in our culture, in our lives—is by reducing the amount of fear and by increasing the amount of trust. By choosing love, rather than fear. By choosing to support people, rather than put them down. By choosing to be honest, rather than withholding. By choosing to be creative and expressive, rather than stagnating and stifling of our energies. To be alive—with a sense of respect for life. Each of us will go about that in our own unique ways. But the net result is that everything we do to reduce the level of fear and the level of violence reduces the idea that you can get somewhere in life by pushing others around. It's a whole different way of life that honors the idea that you get places in life by respecting others and what they need and want. I think that we're finding this path now as a culture. I think this is the time to do it, and we are the generation that is taking responsibility for doing that.

There is within us a power that is up to the challenge. It is greater than any of us can identify

with, or comprehend or grasp. It is something so immense, that when we are filled with it we know. We know what our place in life is. We know what our role is in the unfolding of love on this planet. We know what we're to do. We know how we're to go about it. We know the next step—we may not know too far in advance—but we know what's in front of us, and we know what we need to do. If we give ourselves joyfully to that step, then the next step, and the next, unfolds. We take responsibility for who we are. We live with as much peace and trust and joy and love as possible—then we know that action will lead to the unfolding of the next step.

We do both inner and outer work at the same time. One of the fabulous things is when you get involved in social change, in political change, you have many opportunities to react, and to see your own reactivity, and to see your own agitation, and to see your own violence. You get a lot of opportunities to work with that, and face that, and resolve that. Then doing that work—that inner work of contacting inner peace and referencing to inner peace—what that does is it then gives you greater energy and capacity to do more work. So it's a cycle that continues to fulfill, at both a personal level and in a sense of the greater contribution.