

## **A Warless World**

**Susan McCaslin**

**“Jesus was the most active resister known perhaps to history. This was non-violence par excellence.”**

**Ghandi**

**It is an honour to be able speak about issues of war and peace on this Remembrance Sunday in the presence of our Canadian veterans and nursing sisters. I am the daughter of a WWII vet, Donald McCaslin, who served in the US Air Force and was buried in Seattle, Washington in 1987 with full military honours. My dad flew transport in the Philippines and could have been shot down at any time, but was lucky enough to never have occasion to drop bombs on anyone. Had my dad not died prematurely of ALS (Lou Gehrig’s disease), he would have been eighty-eight years old at this time. I’m proud of his willingness to risk his life in the War. Yet I also believe it is time to penetrate to the causes of war, putting our enormous collective creative potential into non-violent solutions to warfare.**

**My dad was a 6’ 5” gentle giant, an honest, hardworking engineer who instilled in me from an early age an awareness of the unjust discrepancies**

between rich and poor by driving me through the slums of Indianapolis where I was born. He was a Sunday school teacher who read me the Bible and later taught me to think about questions like whether capitalism conflicted with the principles taught by Jesus, a pretty radical question for his era. Yet when I hit university and became an anti-war activist against the Vietnam War, my peacenik ways and his patriotism collided. We never stopped communicating, even though I moved to Canada in 1969 to attend Simon Fraser University, but mostly because of my sense that the US was engaged in what seemed to me an immoral war. Our disagreements were over the bomb, the Domino Theory, and the actions of the “draft dodgers,” whom I saw as conscientious objectors and heroic “war resisters.”

Through all this, we never lost our loving connection despite our disagreements, and dad told me many times that though we clashed on foreign policy, he respected, loved and esteemed me, valuing my idealism. Not a day goes by that I don’t think of him and wish we could continue the conversation, even about our so called “generation gap.”

Not everyone who disagreed with the Hippies was quite as tolerant of difference as my dad. Peaceniks and pacifists are sometimes reviled and not taken seriously. My sense is that we have to get past seeing all peacemakers as naïve or unrealistic and look at non-violent peacemaking as the ultimate pragmatism, the only means of survival as a species. For peacemakers act out of a very visceral realization that violence not only

begets more and more violence, but that the cycle is unending and unsustainable. Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and other non-violent activists have become my heroes, people who devised effective strategies for resisting injustice without resorting to brute force. Studying their lives, I learned it takes enormous resolve, courage, intelligence, and strength to be a peacemaker in the world. Peacemaking, as the stories of their lives tell us, is not for the weak or faint-hearted.

One of these vital peacemakers is Canadian Memorial's own Colonel George Fallis (1885-1952), a Chaplain who served in the battlefields of France in WWI. When tending dying soldiers in the inferno of the trenches, he made a solemn vow to build a chapel entirely dedicated to peace in Vancouver on his return. He wrote:

It became perfectly clear that this chapel must speak a great message of peace rather than of war. There were those who actually opposed the building of a church as a memorial because they said it would tend to idealize war. The completed chapel dissipated these fears as one will search in vain to find any symbols idealizing war. On the contrary the whole chapel preaches a great sermon on beating "swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning-hooks."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fallis, George O. *A Padre's Pilgrimage*. Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1953.

Canadian Memorial United Church is that symbol in stone to peace with its magnificent stained glass windows representing each province conjoined with scenes from the Bible. The Colonel chose the scriptures for the windows while meditating on the beach at Point Grey. I have to confess that when I first saw the Colonel's formidable portrait (on my right), I considered him a stern curmudgeon, but after reading his evocative memoir, *A Padre's Pilgrimage*, I discovered all sorts of things about him that turned him into another of my heroes. Originally from Ontario, he had been a dashing eighteen-year-old home missionary in Saskatchewan, riding horses into the backwoods in pioneer times to build community and later encouraging young people to dance when dancing was frowned upon. He also served in the ministry in BC's interior in Kamloops. I have been facilitating a workshop here at Canadian Memorial on the mystics, so was delighted to discover that the Colonel had two significant mystical experiences in his youth that led him to the ministry; that he loved poetry and music; and that he was into "creative [or spiritual] evolution" and a defender of the right of educators to teach evolution in the schools way back in the 1920's when the Scopes monkey trial and Darwinism were controversial in religious circles.<sup>2</sup> The Colonel, who loved it when a child misspelled his name "KERNEL Fallis," was fun-loving, dynamic and a risk-taker. He tells us in his memoir that the turning of the first sod of Canadian Memorial Chapel by the President of the League of Nations Society of

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<sup>2</sup> Fallis, George O. *A Padre's Pilgrimage*. Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1953, 138-139.

**Canada on Dominion Day, Sunday 1927 was to assert that this church was to be “a memorial to those who died dreaming of a warless world.”<sup>3</sup>**

**My aspiration is to stand with those like Colonel Fallis whose deepest longing is to be “instruments of peace.” Yet I am not an absolute pacifist because I realize that there are times when force is needed to defend innocent people against genocide and other criminal violations of basic human rights. One such instance was in Rwanda, when international help was, shamefully, not forthcoming. Others that might be named are WWII and the Spanish Civil War. General Romeo Dallaire, who has written of the Rwandan genocide, points out that to address terrorism and the rage that breeds it we need to penetrate to its causes which he identifies as “the absence of human rights, economic collapses, brutal and corrupt military dictatorships, the AIDS pandemic, the effect of debt on nations, environmental degradation, overpopulation, poverty, and hunger.” Until we evolve collectively beyond the war-making impulse, a world federation like the UN that is truly supported, international, and not so much driven by the agenda of the west, will be necessary.<sup>4</sup>**

**The problem is that once anyone concedes that there are occasions when force or some form of global policing is necessary, people slide all too readily into the default position of violence without exhausting other more**

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<sup>3</sup> Fallis, 125.

<sup>4</sup> Dallaire, Romeo. *Shake Hands with the Devil*. Vintage Canada, 2003, 521-522.

creative alternatives such as diplomacy, dialogue, humanitarian aid, education, and sanctions. Yet the “just war” notion that applies to the defeat of Fascism in WWII continues to be trotted out to rationalize wars that are not analogous and where violence is counterproductive for all. We need, therefore, more thoughtful means of discerning when force is justified and when it is not. My suspicion is that the occasions when all out force is required are small in comparison to the instances in which more peaceful means of conflict resolution would be more effective. Since the development of atomic warfare at the end of WWII, the presence of nuclear weapons also transforms the equation. Given the havoc that war can wreak on all life on the planet, the term “just war” as it is usually applied, especially for war’s victims, becomes a contradiction in terms.

Because my area of expertise is not political science, but poetry, I have asked myself what gifts the poets and artists bring to the community as peacemakers. One important thing the poet does is to create an imagination of peace, reviving images from our spiritual traditions as emblems of a deep evolutionary impulse toward non-violence that counters and may even trump in the end our primal addiction to violence. By “imagination,” I don’t simply mean fantasy, but the creative mind within each of us to adapt and evolve to more refined ways of knowing and being. Poets allow “images” for the “nations” to be birthed within them. War, as has been said by many, is an immense failure of imagination.

**As humans, we are capable of imagining alternative realities. Once we imagine a better world, then we have the choice of willing the transformation, first in our own lives and then outwardly. I would urge that the symbols of the prophets and visionaries from our religious traditions can actually help us shift consciousness. To see the higher path and bear an image of it in our hearts is to become part of that path. Getting a taste of peace can lead to a commitment to peace.**

**Some of the images from Isaiah resonate in the heart in this way. Close your eyes and imagine the beating of swords into ploughshares. Instruments of destruction become means of growing food. Imagine men, women, and children gathering to dismantle nuclear weapons and using the materials and technology that produced them to create green technologies. Meditate on the phrase, “They shall not learn [or study] war any more,” and think of all the scientific research and money that has gone into warfare, and imagine those resources given over to studying how to transform our social systems to serve our poorest members, reducing the gap between the haves and the have nots.**

**My favourite image from the First Testament is that of the wolf lying down with the lamb and the leopard frolicking with the kid. The more familiar image of the lion resting with the lamb isn’t actually in the Bible, but you**

get the idea. The usually aggressive predator and his prey seem to be cohabiting beautifully in what seems a utopian vision of the future. Recently though, I've read these passages differently, seeing them as hints of what is possible now within each of us rather than a vision of the earth in the future. If you think of the wolf representing the old reptilian brain in each person and the lamb the more recently developed neo-cortex—centre of imagination and higher consciousness—the picture changes. The prophet may be saying that we don't need to kill off the lion, since the old flight-fight system is part of our evolutionary heritage. What his words might point to is that the old brain can be transformed to work in harmony with the new brain to create a new type of peaceful human being who is no longer the slave of his survival instincts and primordial cravings. The lion-lamb person just might be a peaceful activist.

And lastly, the saying of the just king as recorded in Jesus' parable in Matthew, "As you have done it unto the least of these you have done it to me," is much more than a statement about how God will eventually reward the blessed for their good deeds. It is remarkable, in fact, that Jesus of Nazareth, living in a nation occupied by the Romans and surrounded by Zealots and insurrectionists who believed violence was necessary, taught and lived a path of peace and forgiveness of one's enemies. Jesus points us to a profound law of interconnection that moves beyond them-us distinctions to assert his (and our) deep interconnection with others. We

are not as autonomous as we think, but part and parcel of one another, even those we consider strange, different, or our enemies. Every human is potentially a God-bearer, one who carries within the image of the divine.

Soldiers experience this reality of deep interconnection in a negative way when they are thrown into the killing fields. Sadly, in using violence, even for justice, damage or psychic mutilation occurs to the inner self (what the ancients called the soul), that requires healing or therapy. We now call the psychic aftermath of being in a war zone “post-traumatic shock disorder.” When I was a girl my best friend Dorcas whispered to me that her dad had something called “shell shock.” As girls who had never been in a battlefield, we didn’t understand why he was jumpy, would disappear sometimes, or yell at Dorcas’ mom. As the young soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are now discovering, such soul-damage cannot be cured by a few months of rehabilitation or even years of normalcy. A significant number of those who suffer such extreme psychic trauma from war resort to suicide. Desiring to become a peacemaker, then, is not naïve because it goes to the root of our mutuality. We are actually all one human family linked to the life of the planet but we don’t yet know it yet. Peacemakers act from this profound level of awareness. Once you see the oneness and feel it, it’s hard if not impossible to go back.

Often we tend to applaud peace in the abstract, but fail to apply our creative minds rigorously to the implications of the current and ongoing wars under our very noses. For instance, there hasn't been nearly enough public debate here in Canada about the war in Afghanistan, as many of us know very little about the history of conflict in that war-torn region. We seem to assume that with only enough troops, we can accomplish what Britain and Russia failed to accomplish. Yet even many military experts have become critical of the war.

My recent research on this issue suggests there are principled as well as pragmatic reasons for seeing the war in Afghanistan as a misguided, likely unwinnable and futile war, irresolvable through continued use of violence that affects adversely the lives of so many ordinary Afghan civilians. (I have added links to the website version of my sermon for those of you who wish to pursue further reading). Unfortunately, the rallying cry to "support the troops," is often collapsed into the idea of supporting the war, whether or not the war under consideration is one that should be continued.

The war in Afghanistan is a complex one that will not be won simply by increasing the numbers of troops and bringing in new counter-insurgency moves that involve using violence while naively hoping to build community. In fact, looking back at history, Afghanistan bears some striking parallels to Vietnam as an occupation of a third-world nation by

western powers that is unpopular at home and involves violence against civilians. Our presence there creates more enemies and terrorists in the Islamic world than friends and allies. A recent report indicated that Taliban membership is up fourfold. Keeping standing armies in third-world countries, in fact, is not sustainable for the west in the end. Trying to rebuild infrastructures while toting machine guns and navigating smart bombs doesn't make things better for the ordinary Afghan, whether man or woman, or increase security in the west.

One prominent Afghan woman, activist Malalai Joya, has expressed her disappointment with military interventions in her country. Joya, an elected member of the Afghan parliament, publicly denounced the presence of warlords and war criminals in the parliament and was subsequently physically attacked by her fellow parliamentarians. Joya has written a memoir which she will discuss at St. Andrew's Wesley Church here in Vancouver on Nov. 14 critical of the war.<sup>5</sup> Noam Chomsky, who has commended her for her courage, notes that her work shows “we can provide a helping hand—not with landmines, bullets and bombs, but with an invasion of hospitals, clinics, and schools for boys and girls.”

The warnings of such thoughtful leaders about the futility of violence, coupled with the news of widespread election fraud, increase my sense

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<sup>5</sup> Joya, Malalai. *A Woman Among Warlords: the Extraordinary Story of an Afghan Who Dared to Speak Out* (Scribner's, 2009). Joya, Malalai. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malalai\\_Joya](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malalai_Joya)

that it doesn't work to impose democracy on a tribal society from without, especially by force. Societies require decades to progress through the stages of cultural development necessary for democracy to thrive. Most of the major spiritual traditions teach that true change only comes from within and cannot be imposed from outside, and particularly not by nations that have their own agendas and lack sensitivity to the cultures they desire to influence and control. If we do not develop our understanding of the spiritual principles that apply to these situations, we risk perpetuating violence that only enhances the underlying social and political problems. There are real lives at stake here—both Canadian and Afghan—and the lack of careful, thoughtful, peace-seeking analysis in Canada is a matter for concern.

Whatever the complexities of our current war, peace cannot be achieved worldwide until we individually enter the state of peace in our everyday lives. So we need first to build peace within the inner self; peace in the family; peace in the local community; and then peace in the global or planetary community. My father told me that the hardest lesson in life was to learn to love yourself. That's the starting point.

What happens when we realize our intimate connection with others and step up to be peacemakers in the world? Not only do we practice loving kindness as individuals, but in groups we become creativity units, peace

**think tanks. It has been said before that we haven't yet begun to pour a fraction of our vast creativity into making peace. What if even half the money spent on guns, bombs, and weapons was given over to feeding people, helping them help themselves, educating, and supporting the arts? What if Canada truly invested heavily in defining its role as a peacemaking nation, as a people whose repulsion for violence intensified our innovative efforts to resolve international conflicts? Moving in this direction is by no means easy work—especially when dealing with other cultures that have a completely different history and way of looking at the world. It's far easier to throw our hands up in frustration and send in the drones. Yet we are committed to creative work here at Canadian Memorial in the coming Peace Conference slated for May, organized by Barb Quinn and others, when small groups will meet to brainstorm new forms of peacemaking.**

**Today we express gratitude to and empathy with our veterans who risked their lives to stand up against oppression and for peace. It is imperative that we remember the past in order to learn from it. Therefore we honour our vets today by mourning the grievous devastations of war, and by committing ourselves resolutely to a non-violent waging of peace in the world. Let us say with the ancient prophet Isaiah, "War no more." Let us donate our lives anew to Jesus' great dream of the building of the kingdom (kin-dom or community) of heaven on earth. Let us affirm that**

**Remembrance Day is a peace-making day, and stand with Colonel Fallis who dedicated his life to his vision of a warless world.**

**Web Links:**

canada.mcc.org

**Rethink Afghanistan**     [www.rethinkafghanistan.org](http://www.rethinkafghanistan.org)

**The Nation**     [www.thenation.com/sections/afghanistan\\_war](http://www.thenation.com/sections/afghanistan_war)

**PBS Frontline**     [www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/obamaswar/vie](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/obamaswar/vie)  
[w/](#)

**Christian Science**     <http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/1004/p06s10->  
**Monitor**     [usmi.html?page=1](http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/1004/p06s10-usmi.html?page=1)

**Woman of**     [www.rawa.org](http://www.rawa.org) (warning: graphic images)  
**Afghanistan**

**UN Afghan Mission**     <http://unama.unmissions.org>

**Ann Jones<sup>6</sup>**     <http://annjonesonline.com/Blogs.html>

**Andrew Bacevich**     [www.commonwealmagazine.org/article.php3?id\\_ar](http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/article.php3?id_article=2609)  
[ticle=2609](#)

**Government of**     [www.afghanistan.gc.ca](http://www.afghanistan.gc.ca)  
**Canada**

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<sup>6</sup> Author of *Kabul in Winter: Life without Peace in Afghanistan*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006.