

FIELD NOTES

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fields of peace • communities of faith teaching peace and nonviolence

In this batch of *Field Notes* you'll find:

- *A way to practice peace offered by Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer
- *A sobering note about the New START Treaty
- *A small town story that may be useful in your teaching
- *Statistics about war and mental illness
- *A poem about “a word that changes poison into butter and honey”

We are adding a section of “teaching stories” to our web: www.fieldsofpeacepv.org. We would like to include your favorite story (or two) for teaching peace. Please e-mail: fieldsofpeacepv@charter.net. You may feel modest, but your words need to be shared.

Sincerely,

Cathey & Charles Busch

Quotes

If bullets were digestible there would be no hunger in the world.

-Ward Just, *The Translator*

Peace is not something you can force on anything or anyone...much less upon one's own mind. It's like trying to quiet the ocean by pressing upon the waves. Sanity lies in somehow opening to the chaos, allowing anxiety, moving deeply into the tumult, diving into the waves, where underneath, within, peace simply is...

-Gerald May, *The Dark Night of the Soul*

A morally neutral human being is a monster.

-Isaac Bashevis Singer

Without doing anything, things can sometimes go more smoothly just because of our peaceful presence. In a small boat when a storm comes, if one person remains solid and calm, others will not panic and the boat is more likely to stay afloat.

-Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action*

(Oct. 24, 1967, Washington D.C. Jail) For the first time, I put on the prison blue jeans and denim shirt, a clerical attire I highly recommend for a new church.

-Fr. Daniel Berrigan

A Questionable Start

Although the New START Treaty with Russia obligates each side to reduce the number of its city-busting or "strategic" nuclear warheads from 2,200 to 1,500, the U.S. Senate would not ratify without adding funding for "modernization." Billions of \$!

Nuclear Watch New Mexico reports that \$10 billion will go annually (for the next ten years) to three large nuclear bomb laboratories to "upgrade" U.S. warheads. This will fund a new \$4.5 billion "Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement" complex at Los Alamos, a new \$3.5 billion "Uranium Processing Facility" at the Y-12 lab in Tennessee and a couple billion more for a replacement "Kansas City Plant" in Missouri that will make nonnuclear parts for the warheads. This means that the U.S. will be able to quadruple its current warhead production capacity from 20 to 80 per year.

A Story from My Father

My father grew up in a small town in Nebraska. Among the many stories he told me (Charles), was the one about the town's only accountant, Earnest Svobota.

His office was downtown on the second floor above the Firestone Store. It was one room, shaped like a shoebox, and smelled of floor wax and rubber tires.

Each morning Mr. Svobota would enter at 8:15 on the minute. He'd hang his hat and coat on the rack, nod to his secretary, Mrs. Kovar, and sit at his roll-top desk. Reaching into his right front trouser pocket, he'd take out the desk key, turn the lock in the long center drawer, and pull it out.

For about 30 seconds, he would look down into the drawer, then close and lock it, put the key back into his pocket, and swivel in his chair, "Good morning Mrs. Kovar."

In the many years she worked for him, this routine never varied. And in all those years. Mr. Svobota never said a word about what it was he looked at in that drawer each morning. Because he was the kind of man he was, private and formal, she never asked.

As it turned out, Mr. Svobota died before he could retire, and it was left to Mrs. Kovar to straighten out the office.

On her first day there alone, she reported, it was some time before she realized that, among other things, it was now her's to clean out his desk. We can imagine that it was with some trepidation that Mrs. Kovar sat in his chair and turned the key in the lock and pulled out the drawer.

In it, she said, was a single sheet of ledger paper of the kind accountants use. And at the top, printed in large letters, were the words:

Debits on the left.

Credits on the right.

I like to return to this story for the question it asks: What would I put in my desk drawer? What is so basic to my work that it gives order to all else?

For peacemakers, there are many precepts from which to choose. Which of these can provide unfailing guidance in the midst of fear, confusion, change, threat, attack?

In the desk drawer I imagine and pull out and look at first thing each morning, printed at the top of a single page, is this set of three principles:

Each person's life is irreplaceable and sacred.

Each of us is part of an immense, intimate, interdependent whole.

Each peaceful thought/word/act is the end we seek.

Not the Same Cat

Quoting a Vietnam veteran, mystery writer Richard N. Patterson said:

“If you put your cat in your back yard and all day throw hand grenades around it, at the end of the day it's not going to be the same cat. You are going to have a different cat.”

Patterson, in an interview, was addressing the fact that there are 750,000 U.S. veterans with some degree of post-traumatic stress disorder or brain injury.

Numbers:

- “Each year, 12,000 U.S. vets attempt suicide and half succeed. Even larger numbers,” reports Dr. Ira Katz, Head of Mental Health for the VA, “are impacted by drugs and divorce and alcohol. The violence they were a part of ‘over there’ circles and infiltrates their lives at home.”
- Mental disorders caused more hospitalizations among U.S. troops than any other reason according to medical data released (2009) by the Pentagon.
- As many as 20 percent of those now returning from Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from P.T.S.D., but it is veterans from a war nearly half-century ago who dominate the VA's caseload. In 2008, of the 442,695 people seen at veterans hospitals for P.T.S.D., 59.2 percent were Vietnam era veterans.
- The most authoritative study conducted on this disorder and Vietnam veterans, the 1988 National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study, estimated that at the time, 500,000 of the 3.14 million Americans who served in Vietnam had P.T.S.D., and a total of 1 million had experienced it at some point.

Philip Van Cott, who served in combat with the Marine Corps in Vietnam in 1966, now receives therapy for post-traumatic stress disorder. Van Cott says, **“I thought you go to Vietnam and kill a few people and forget about it.”**

A Modest Practice

Years ago, I (Charles) attended a reading in Boston by Isaac Bashevis Singer. By that time he had received the Nobel Prize for Literature and was 80+ years old.

He was a short, thin man with white hair, and wore a black suit. “Tonight,” he said, “I’m going to read two short stories. The first you may know, but the second has never been published and, for me, is unusual. It has a moral.”

Throughout his reading, the auditorium, packed to capacity, was silent...a silence which held as he paused between stories to take a few sips of water.

When Singer finished---holding off our applause---he said, “There’s time for a few questions.”

A woman near the front stood and asked the first question: “Mr. Singer, would you please tell us the moral of the second story.”

“The moral is: If you can’t be a good Jew, act like one!”

An interesting instruction. There is a tendency to think that our motives must be pure for our actions to be effective, or at least commendable. But few motives are pure; most always there is something in it for “me.”

“If you can’t be a good Jew, act like one!” If I can’t be a good Muslim...a good Christian...a good citizen...a good spouse...a good activist...

We may be luke warm. Our forgiveness incomplete. Our personality severe, impatient, caustic. But we can do a bit of acting. We can act generous, patient, caring, more tolerant than we feel. This acting reaches out, and in. We become what we practice.

Singer said:

“When you read the Bible, it never tells you what a person thought. It’s always what he or she did.”

“When you are really hungry, you don’t look for the biography of the baker.”

A single word can brighten the face

by Yunus Emre (1238 – 1320)

translated from Turkish by Kabir Helminski & Refik Algan

A single word can brighten the face
of one who knows the value of words.
Ripened in silence, a single word
acquires a great energy for work.

War is cut short by a word,
and a word heals the wounds,
and there's a word that changes
poison into butter and honey.

Let a word mature inside yourself.
Withhold the unripened thought.
Come and understand the kind of word
that reduces money and riches to dust.

Know when to speak a word
and when not to speak at all.
A single word turns the universe of hell
into eight paradises.

Follow the Way. Don't be fooled
by what you already know. Be watchful.
Reflect before you speak.
A foolish mouth can brand your soul.

Yunus, say one last thing
about the power of words—
only the word "I"
divides me from God.