

May 17, 2026  
Osler Mennonite Church  
Lois Siemens  
the opposite of war is.....

1

“I no longer ask why” my Grade 7 German teacher says as he holds up his hand that has a thumb and forefinger missing. “Now I ask “what?” “What can I do now?” I have pondered this for decades and it is the most useful thing I learned in Junior High. “Why?” puts people on the defensive. “What? what happened? what next” invites story and conversation.

2

Today I add another question, “How?” How do we make peace?  
And is peace really the opposite of war?

3

I am enjoying a memoir about home from an American living in Tuscany, Italy.<sup>1</sup> She is amazed at the generosity she daily encounters. Generosity that builds community: a basket of fresh vegetables, a jar of olive oil, a book, a scarf. Generosity that is contagious. Giving opens the heart, she says. It helps us feel at home in the world. What is behind it? She believes the Italians are generous because every day Italians are able to look at and encounter great art.

4

I think about it like this.  
Imagine yourself listening to an amazing musical prelude or offertory, or watching a beautiful sunrise or sunset. When you finally get a grip and are able to speak is it words of joy or gratitude, or words of criticism or scolding that come out of your mouth? Beauty opens something in us that is akin to gift and generosity, and in turn, community. So maybe beauty is the opposite of war?

5

You may have noticed this is not your normal sermon structure.<sup>2</sup> This is a form of contemplative writing that the desert mothers and fathers used in the 2nd century. They call it the centuries as it is 100 pieces of thoughts that flow together. We will not have time for 100 today. I have been invited to talk about peace and art using the peace banners I created in 2011 for a Remembrance Day art show at the Red Deer Public Library called “Words for Peace”. Each banner needed to measure 5 inches by 20 inches. These banners became a travelling art show among Mennonite Church Saskatchewan from 2012-2014 to promote peace.

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<sup>1</sup> Frances Mayes: A Place in the World. Audio Book in the chapter “I left a basket of figs....”

<sup>2</sup> a century poetic structure follows the contemplative writing of the dessert fathers and mothers. John Paul Lederach <https://www.johnpaullederach.com/2026/01/the-centuries-wrap-round-us/>

6

SLIDE: image of door in war

“War is easy, it is peace that is hard.”

These are the words of General Raymundo Ferrer of the Armed Forces of the Philippines. He said this to Jack Suderman and others gathered at a meeting. During the meeting the General had to leave to take a phone call. When he returned he said he had just been given the opportunity to start a war. “War is easy,” he reflected. “It is peace that is hard.”

The flourishes at the top of this peace banner were made with a flick of the wrist. So easy. The road and brick work on the bottom part reflects the difficult journey of peace. The words of Romans 12 using Tom Yoder Neufeld’s translation which Terry read earlier reflect the contrast between the easy and the hard. Notice the cross.

7

Making a mess is easy. It can take no time at all.

What takes the time is the clean up.

Clean up, whether its dishes, yard work or a conflict takes time, effort, thought, prayer, tentative steps, risk, agreements, conversations, choices, willingness to see another point of view and with people it also takes a rebuilding of trust. Is clean up the opposite of war?

8

Sometimes we have unintentional conflict: a fender bender in a parking lot, a word spoken out of turn, an unwanted hug. Here’s the thing: even if you didn’t intend to hurt someone or something, if it is received as hurtful, damage was done and there is a mess to clean up.

9

How?

How to clean up this mess

this broken relationship

this tangled knot

10

My brother and I had a conflict and when confronted with his behaviour he actually apologized. But, stay for the cleanup? The acknowledgement, cost, and rebuilding of the damage I had to live with? No thanks, he said.

11

How to clean up this mess

this broken relationship

this tangled knot

12

The question of how is a vulnerable place we would rather not be.

The question of HOW lives in the land of uncertainty, ambiguity, uncharted waters, and let's face it we like certainty. A map, 3 steps to a peaceful resolution.

13

Exploring the 'How' question needs, among other things observation, making connections, looking for creative solutions, using words in new ways, searching for meaning in the midst of pain, risk, trying, failing and trying again.

14

Guess what...

the tasks to explore the how question are the same as the tasks to create poetry, drawing, music, calligraphy, ceremony, ritual and art.

15

So maybe the opposite of war is art.

War is destruction and art is construction.

16

Destruction is fast "BOOM!"

Construction is slow... and we prefer to go fast like in an argument saying, yes, but...

17

If you find yourself saying, "yes, but...."

you might still be mad and unable to hear the other.

18

Janet Boldt, former professor at Columbia Bible College in Conflict Resolution says: "behind every mad hides a sad." I used the traditional colours for mad - red, for sad - blue, and let them mingle to get a third colour. What is the sad, the loss, behind *your current* mad?

19

Mother Teresa puts it like this: If we have no peace it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other. To show belonging I added a thin, vulnerable line to connect the words.

20

Destruction often dehumanizes and sets up polar opposites

Construction and the arts look for a third way.

Charles Sumner (1811-1874) <sup>3</sup> a politician who advocated for racial equality and the abolition of slavery famously said:

"Give me the money that has been spent in war and I will clothe every man, woman and child in an attire of which kings and queens would be proud. I will build

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<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles\\_Sumner](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Sumner)

schoolhouses in every valley over the whole earth. I will crown every hillside with a place of worship consecrated to the gospel of peace.”

21

Problem!

One cookie, 2 kids

How will you solve it.... what do you think? You can come up with options during coffee time.

How about this

one piece of land, 2 nations

A little more complicated to solve.

22

The visual arts are not the only artistic way to get at the issues of conflict and peace building. Ceremony and ritual also play a role.

I'll recount a story of ceremony at the end.

Here is a ritual I experienced at my aunt's church in Ontario at Easter communion.

We received the cup and we had to nod to the person on our right and left to say, "all is well between us." before we drank the juice.

23

Mennonites have used music in Sunday morning ritual of worship to express their experiences, values and faith: Mennonite songwriter and musician Gerald Derstine wrote this lovely round song:

"Sing out peace to all the world, God is here."

I lettered it in three's to reflect the round song.

24

This banner was a huge challenge: we know the song as a prayer:

"Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred let me sow love.

Where there is injury pardon. ...it goes on and on. There are so many words I could not fit them all on this odd sized banner. Here is what I came up with after many tries:

There are lots of choices in this song: hatred-love,

injury-pardon, doubt-faith.... so I set these beside each other with the one in a simple monoline and the contrasting word using a weightier italic letter.

I bordered the piece with all these choices as they surround us daily!

25

What will we choose?

How will we move forward?

26

One way is to decide to make love and peace a daily choice. This is a quote from Gordon Allaby who was a pastor here in Osler Mennonite and the energy behind the

peace committee. I took my inspiration of this daily choice from week 1 of the creation of the world in Genesis 1: there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

SLIDE: 27

(Garfield comic strip) 'Attention, Lounge Lizards! This is your week in the sun. Today we begin celebrating National Lazy Week! What's so great about being lazy you say? What if war were declared and nobody showed?'

SLIDE: 28

John Paul Lederach, Mennonite Peacebuilder discovered that healing the mess of conflict was most successful when the arts were involved:<sup>4</sup> "Most of what happens in our relationships, he said, is actually the work of art, the work of creating something that is unfolding and not fully known how it will turn out, but you keep moving forward.' We use ceremony, ritual, story telling, music, and poetry, along with any arts that work with the hands.

Why hands? because when people are acting inhumanly, working with their hands reminds them of their humanity.

29

**Ceremony:** I heard another story which is too long to tell but many of you have heard of the peace treaty in 1978 between Egypt's Anwar Sadat and Israel's Menachem Begin (meh NACH em BEG-in). In front of the world the two enemies, along with US President Jimmy Carter signed a treaty and shook hands, which is a modern way of ratifying a treaty.

Here's where it gets interesting. A *ceremony* took place 8 months after the signing where these two men enacted the treaty in the way their ancestors had done for centuries. Jay McCarl reports after the Camp David Accords Sadat and Begin went to Beersheba, May 27, 1979. What is the significance of this place above all places? The well of Beersheba called "the well of the oath" is the place where Abraham made a treaty with his enemy the Philistine King Abimelech as recorded in Genesis 21.<sup>5</sup> There, in that historic place these modern enemies reenacted the peace treaty by breaking one loaf of bread and eating together. Not only the bread of hospitality, but the bread of peacemaking. This gives me hope.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://peacepolicy.nd.edu/2010/04/09/engaging-the-military-in-building-peace-in-mindanao/> The Art of Peacebuilding: podcast. around the 50 mark; also conversation on the Corrymeela website between Pdraig O Tauma and John Paul Lederach <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5daeee9a317b5e0d4e2c35c3/t/6601d939c52b697e62722a94/1711397178815/S03E01+John+Paul+Lederach+transcript+-+The+Corrymeela+Podcast.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 21:22-34

<sup>6</sup> Incident at Abraham's Well: Ancient Beersheba <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tE4cB8vXKyc> starting at about 4:20; Sadat's notebook from May 27, 1979 Beersheba on the Internet Archive: <https://archive.org/details/sadats-visit-to-beersheba-1979/page/n41/mode/2up>

end with this poem by Ann Porter

A short testament:<sup>7</sup>

Whatever harm I may have done  
In all my life in all your wide creation  
If I cannot repair it  
I beg you to repair it,  
And then there are all the wounded  
The poor the deaf the lonely and the old  
Whom I have roughly dismissed  
As if I were not one of them.  
Where I have wronged them by it  
And cannot make amends  
I ask you  
To comfort them to overflowing,  
And where there are lives I may have withered  
around me,  
Or lives of strangers far or near  
That I've destroyed in blind complicity,  
And if I cannot find them  
Or have no way to serve them,  
Remember them.  
I beg you to remember them  
When winter is over  
And all your unimaginable promises  
Burst into song on death's bare branches.

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<sup>7</sup> Ann Porter from " Living Things: Collected Poems. Zoland Books, 2006. p 94