

## Peace, and the Practice of Peace

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H a r r i s o n   O w e n

Peace. It is a wonderful word in just about any language. And strangely, it seems to be most commonly used in that part of the world where there is no Peace, by whatever definition. In the Middle East, virtually all parties greet each other with "Peace." *Shalom* in Hebrew and *Salaam* in Arabic. At time of meeting and again at departure, both Jew and Muslim invoke Peace. And they are not alone in the practice. Christians know The Kiss of Peace, and politicians run on Platforms of Peace. And people everywhere have gone to war in search of Peace.

Obviously the word, and what it connotes, has great importance in our lives, but its meaning, at least in common usage, is more than a little elusive. It is possible to understand the universal Semitic practice as more in the nature of a hope or prayer than a confirmation of present reality, but the meaning of the word remains a will-of-the-wisp. Like the word *Love*, the meaning of which stretches all the way from raw fornication up to and including "the essence of divinity," so also Peace seems patient of a multitude of interpretations.

For many of us Peace is defined by the absence of its opposites, such as chaos, confusion and conflict. Absent any, or all, of these and we have Peace, and the way to Peace would obviously be the elimination of this unholy trinity. But what sort of Peace would we have? Unfortunately, I think the answer would be, pretty boring and quite dead. Peace under these terms would amount to some static, frozen, idealized state. In the hot moments of living, we might look at such a state with envy, but as a long term reality, we may just have thrown the baby out with the bath water. In the name of preserving life, we have removed precisely the elements that make life possible.

The temptation to desire a life devoid of chaos, confusion and conflict is quite understandable, if only because all three produce circumstances that are decidedly uncomfortable. Given any reasonable choice, who would want such a life? Unfortunately, I suspect all three come with the territory, and are not to be considered under the heading of unnecessary nuisances. For the truth of the matter is that chaos, confusion and conflict are integral to the process of living, and each brings its own special gifts, without which life, in the fullest sense of the word, is scarcely worth living....

### **True Peace**

How shall we understand Peace in ways that allow the inclusion and transcendence of the harsher realities of our lives? Peace without chaos, confusion and conflict is no Peace, not because we would not prefer it that way, but because each member of this unholy trinity makes a positive contribution to the process of living. Equally, Peace without ending and death is productive of an idealized, static life, stuck in its ways – precluding the possibility of any sort of evolution.

Had the Ruler of the Universe taken our council at the start, perhaps we could have suggested a better way. Indeed it seems that He or She almost had it right in those halcyon days of The Garden of Eden (or whatever primal/primitive vision of our initial utopia). But then something happened. Some folks will see the departure from that happy place as the beginning of the end, and the source of all our problems. Personally, I see it as the

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end of the beginning, the starting place of the incredible human journey. In a word, we were kicked out of the nest and forced to fly. Like young eagles, we have been screaming ever since, and for sure our initial wing beats were frantic, verging on comical. But we have learned. Not without a multitude of rough landings, ill advised take-offs – to say nothing of more than a few "crash and burns," but we now know something of the joys of flight. For those who desire a return to that idyllic state, I say lots of luck. And when the going genuinely gets tough in this thing we call life, I can certainly see their point. But at the end of the day, and indeed on most days, I choose to celebrate the rich heritage of *Homo sapiens*, crash landings and all. The flight of the human spirit is, for me, truly awesome. But you do have to leave the nest, and that departure has its consequences.

As for Peace – I like the metaphor of flying – all of flying, including first flights, last flights, and bumps along the way. Peace then is a process, not a thing, a journey and not a destination. It is flow and not a state. *Peace is the dynamic interrelationship of complex forces productive of wholeness, health and harmony. The Practice of Peace is the intentional creation of the requisite conditions under which Peace may occur.* Peace, as far as I am concerned, is infinitely more than the cessation of hostilities, which often takes the form of bombing the offending parties into submission until they can no longer fight back, or each other. And Peacemaking neither starts nor ends at the negotiating table, for the objective is not just a set of treaty terms acceptable to all parties, but rather the renewal of meaningful and productive life for the planet, the nation, businesses, social institutions, the family, and each one of us.

Please do not expect a radical, new approach. In fact, I believe each and every one of us already has both the knowledge and skills necessary, and the fundamental mechanism is essentially "hardwired" into our being. We have only to remember what we know, and practice what we are. I concede that the apparent simplicity of these affirmations verges on the naive. It may also be true that a blinding flash of the obvious may be good for the soul.

The core mechanism referred to above is the phenomenon of self-organization, and the core practice is what we now call Open Space Technology. I will suggest that self-organization drives towards Peace and, when freely operative, is generative of *the dynamic interrelationship of complex forces productive of wholeness, health and harmony*. Open Space Technology (OST) is an extraordinarily simple approach which enables groups of people, large and small, to engage complex, chaotic, confusing and conflicted issues in a Peaceful fashion. For a complete account of this approach, please consult my book, *Open Space Technology*.

First utilized in 1985, Open Space Technology has now been applied thousands of times, all over the world, with virtually every imaginable sort of group. It's effectiveness as a tool for meetings is a matter of record, but many continue to find it strange, if not shocking. The reason is not hard to ascertain, for Open Space apparently violates essentially all theory and practice of group organization. The notion that large groups of conflicted people could virtually instantaneously organize their affairs and pursue their tasks without elaborate pre-planning and a host of facilitators flies in the face of what appears to be the accepted wisdom. And yet the global experience demonstrates that every time a group of people gather of their own free will, around an issue of strong common concern, the experience is repeated – provided they sit in a circle, create a bulletin board on which to identify issues, open a market place to arrange time and place particulars – and they are on their way, typically in something more than an hour. From the point of view of what I might call "standard" theory and practice, what happens not only should not happen, but could not happen. But it does. However, when viewed from what we are now learning about the power and function of self-organizing systems, the unbelievable becomes the predictable.

In truth, I find the Open Space experience much more interesting as an ongoing natural experiment in which we can both experience the reality of self-organization and learn to support and enhance that experience. The phenomenon of self-organization is a relatively recent discovery, and not an altogether comfortable one for those who have understood that order in our lives can only be the product of humongous effort. Recently, we have been learning that, given certain very simple preconditions, order just happens.

From where I sit, Open Space does not contribute anything new, but rather helps us to see what is already quite functional in our midst as a naturally occurring phenomenon. But just because it occurs naturally does not mean that we can't learn to use it, and learn to use it well, even as the natural occurrence of gravity can be used to our advantage. To the extent that self-organization in general, and Open Space Technology in particular, is productive of Peace, this is an experiment we must run. I hope that you will take everything I have to say as a testable hypothesis, which of course is a critical part of any experiment. Don't believe a thing, and certainly not on my say so. Do it – and if the experimental results are replicated, do it again and do it better. It could just be that Peace will break out.

### Capetown

In the early '90s, I happened to be in South Africa a few weeks after Nelson Mandela was released from prison. For the vast majority of the population this release was an occasion for celebration and joy; others were not so sure, and everybody felt the deep anxiety characteristic of the onset of massive social change. With the approaching end of Apartheid, a dark period of the human story was seemingly coming to a close, but how it was going to play out remained a total mystery. Some saw only bloodshed and disaster. Others envisioned the dawning of a new golden age. And somewhere in the middle, reality would set its marker. For all of the uncertainty, one thing was crystalline clear – people needed to talk to each other, quickly and very deeply.

In Capetown, where I happened to be, the situation was nervous, to say the least, made all the more so by virtue of the fact that Mandela's island prison lay just off the coast. My hostess, Valerie Morris, and her associates managed a hotel, and when they had sensed the moment, they immediately volunteered their facility as the site of potential conversation. Who, what and how remained to be determined.

Their decision was made on a Sunday, and by the following Wednesday a hundred or so people had agreed to show up several days later. And it was quite a group, ranging from the mayor of Capetown to young residents from the local township (Black area), with others coming from all over the local society including the ANC and Afrikaners. They all shared a common concern for their country, but most did not know each other, and certainly had had little occasion for intimate conversation up to that present moment.

We met in Open Space. One hundred people sitting in a circle were invited to identify their passions and concerns for the future, announce them on sheets of paper, and take personal responsibility for their discussion. Within 20 minutes from start, multiple issues were posted on the wall, and one hour later discussions were under way. The issues were not the easy ones. Land reform, reparations, education, housing, employment – all made a showing. But the last one posted said it all. A young man from the township said, "I have one issue. Fear. My fear and our fear. And how do we get through it all."

And it started. For eight hours the discussion groups ebbed and flowed. Sometimes in anger, sometimes in silence, and occasionally with laughter. By the end of the day, we stood silently in a circle, and then shared with each other what the experience had meant. There was anger, fear, hope, despair – and at the end silence, broken by a single voice saying, "I think we are the new South Africa, and we have a lot of work to do."

Final Peace did not arrive that day in Capetown. But in a very powerful sense, Peace was already there. Amidst that chaos, confusion and conflict, there was also a sense of connectedness, and people sang the songs of their homeland in the tongues of their birth. It is noteworthy that the whole enterprise was created in four days. There was one facilitator who spoke only briefly at the beginning, and never intervened in any way with any of the groups. The people did it all by themselves.

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## USWEST

"For all of the uncertainty, one thing was crystalline clear - people needed to talk to each other, quickly and very deeply."

From a very different world, and slightly later in time (mid '90s) comes this story of USWEST (now known as Quest), an American local phone company which found itself in some degree of difficulty. The sources of its difficulties were multiple, including the fact that a massive "Process Re-engineering" project had failed to take into account a major shift in their market. After several years of effort, costing many millions and involving massive amounts of executive time, the new organizational design was revealed. Unfortunately, there had been an unforeseen event – major earthquakes in California. This caused many nervous Californians to seek alternative habitation, which they did in such places as Washington State, Oregon, and the American Southwest – all of which constituted the service area of USWEST.

The net effect was that projections for customer growth were off by wide margins, and the demand upon the system was almost more than it could tolerate. Installations of new phone lines, even emergency ones, could take as long as six months. Added into the muddle was the fact that a major part of the "re-design" included a substantial reduction of the work force – downsizing, as it was known. The net effect was a most unhappy situation, made even worse in the State of Arizona by the occurrence of a major flood. As most people know, floods are not supposed to happen in the desert, and when they do, the damage can be severe, particularly if you happen to be a phone company.

For the 5000 employees of USWEST in Arizona, "unhappy" was too mild a term. Angry, frustrated, confused would come a lot closer to their reality – to the point that the union let it be known that unless there were some serious conversation with management prior to the beginning of contract talks, it was their stated intention to "have the company for lunch," as one Union representative explained it to me. The union suggested Open Space as the means.

Barely six weeks after the union suggestion, 160 representative of the company, including the full management team and people from all the skills, trades and geographical areas in the company found themselves sitting in a circle at 9 a.m. There had been no warm-up, no training, no agenda building, no caucuses. There was only a focusing issue, stated as "How do we fix Arizona?" And nobody had any question that it was broke. There were obvious questions, however, as to whether anybody could be civil enough, or even wanted to be civil enough, to work together for a resolution. Looking at the surrounding faces, it was apparent that most people could not figure out whether they were attending a funeral for the company or the opening rounds of civil war. Peaceful it was not.

Following a brief 15-minute introduction, the assembled body answered the invitation to identify the issues and opportunities for fixing Arizona with a curious enthusiasm. Within 45 minutes, 60-70 issues had been posted on a large blank wall, people had signed up to participate in the multiple discussions, and it was off to work.

The first day was intense, to say the least. Discussion raged, people came and went, and as one participant said – there was an incredible amount of anger and bitching. But it all held together, and on the second day the same participant said, "I think we are finding solutions for what we were bitching about yesterday."

By the morning of the third day, it was quite a different world. Issues were prioritized, actions identified, and people accepted responsibility for carrying them out. But that was just the business side of things. Perhaps more significant was the atmosphere of the final gathering. One more time 160 people sat in a circle, but this time they were thanking each other for the opportunity to work together, and for the steps that were being taken. A final participant rose to address the group, a large union guy with tears running down his cheeks. He said something like, "As some of you know, I have had some trouble with my family. But I just want you all to know that I have found my family, and it is you."

When a group traverses the treacherous ground from incipient civil war to addressing each other as members of a family, it is clear that a profound shift has taken place. It was also clear that massive amounts of chaos, confusion, and conflict remained to be dealt with, but the assembled folks had demonstrated, most importantly to themselves, that they were up for the task. Indeed, they had already been doing it. And they did it essentially all by themselves.

### A Starting Point

It might appear from the two stories told above that Open Space Technology represents the magic bullet for Peace. That would be a profound error. It is only a start. The true power lies with the incredible capacity of self-organizing systems to create Peace for themselves and with their environment. Not all the time, not always perfectly, and not without continuing problems, but Peace, none the less. This power is owned by no one, and is available to everyone. We have only to use it.

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Excerpted from *The Practice of Peace* by Harrison Owen (Human Systems Dynamics Institute), which is available from [sales@openspaceworld.org](mailto:sales@openspaceworld.org).

**Harrison Owen** is the originator of Open Space Technology. He is also the author of *Spirit: Transformation and Development in Organizations*, *Leadership Is, Riding the Tiger*, *Open Space Technology: A Users Guide* (Second Edition. Berrett-Koehler), *The Millennium Organization*, *Tales From Open Space* (editor), *Expanding Our Now: The Story of Open Space Technology* (Berrett-Koehler), *The Spirit of Leadership* (Berrett-Koehler) and *The Power of Spirit: How Organizations Transform* (Berrett-Koehler).

Harrison Owen and Judi Richardson will lead a module on "The Practice of Peace" at the 2005 Authentic Leadership Summer Program. See [www.shambhalainstitute.org](http://www.shambhalainstitute.org)

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