

# Muscle Building for PEACE and JUSTICE

A nonviolent workout routine for the 21st century

Pamela Haines

People prepare for war by going to boot camp. They are challenged to do things they have never done before, use muscles they never knew they had. They practice, stretch and exert. It's hard work, and they sometimes wonder if it's worth all the struggle and pain. But they come out better prepared to wage war. What if we put the same kind of intention, practice and hard work into developing the skills to wage peace?

Peace is increasingly hard to come by these days. We are on the cusp of a new era, entering into a chaotic time of transition—where fossil fuels will no longer provide us with cheap energy and the environment is tipping into disequilibrium; where our economic system no longer reliably delivers wealth to anybody but the rich; where wars have become unwinnable, and civilians do the suffering. People who have anything are scared, desperately clutching at a past that is slipping out of their grip. Fears are driving hateful and violent rhetoric, with talk that indicates a willingness to discard whole groups. This is an era of heightened protectionism, of gated communities and soaring prison populations, suspi-

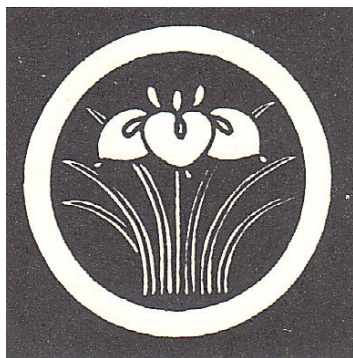


cion and hyper-vigilance—that make nobody safer.

Our society does not prepare us to do the work that needs to be done. The pervasive and corrosive individualism of our culture is a barrier to common work. Affluence and privilege leave many of us feeling entitled to comfort. Advertising and materialism lead us to be passive consumers of goods, services and entertainment rather than active producers of real well-being. Our culture fosters an addiction to ever more extreme pleasure-seeking, and it's become increasingly hard to appreciate small and ordinary things.

These are times that call out for courage, action and deep, deep love. We need an army of non-violent warriors to help shepherd us out of this age and into a new one. There may be no skills more important to learn than those of non-violent living and action. It's hard to learn skills. You have to practice. But this is a practice that could transform ourselves, our community and our world.

I want to talk about some of the very practical skills we need to master, the disciplines we need to develop, the muscles we need to build. There is work here to be done individually, and work to be done in connection with each other, as we share skills, encourage each others' practice, and grow together into a real force for peace and justice. I encourage everyone to join in the workout.



## ■ A Discipline of Hope

First that comes to mind is the discipline of hope. It's easy to be a fan of hope. We enjoy the feeling of hopefulness, prefer it to the alternative, welcome the feeling when it descends upon us, and lament its departure. But a discipline of hope is something quite different. It is a repeated decision to be present to the goodness of reality regardless of all the reasons for despair. There are many such reasons, crowding around on every side. But I am braced by the wise person who pointed out that despair is an insult to the future. And, as I think about the critical shortages in our world today, hope for the future may be the most critical—and the one in shortest supply.

So those of us who are interested in ushering in a new era will need to ground ourselves in hope. This is a workout. It involves getting access to perspectives and information that are not readily available in the media. It means talking about things that give us hope. In my e-mail column/blog, "Living in this World",

I have taken on the discipline of including some things that have made me feel hopeful every month—and I hear of people who skip through the essay or poem to get to those hopeful things. I sometime have to wrack my brains, or do some research, but my goal is to have four things, spanning global, national, local, and just plain human if possible, that genuinely give me hope.

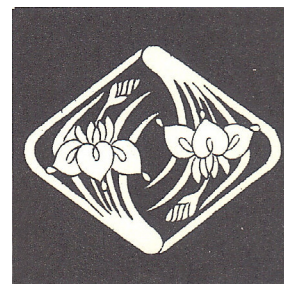
Another aspect of the workout is to cultivate our ability to imagine the impossible. A friend recently pointed out that it's easier to imagine the end of the world than a new economic system, and this is a lethal failure of the imagination. The world needs people who can exercise their imagination muscles, weave new realities from the most insubstantial of threads, be able to say "this is real" even when nobody else around can see it—and to act on that reality. We need to practice stepping confidently into the unknown.

## ■ Reclaiming the Ability to Grieve

The second skill I think of is the ability to grieve. To pierce the numbness that allows us to accede to evil, to maintain our capacity to expect and hope, we must be able to grieve. If we don't have that capacity, then we have to protect ourselves from anything which might cause grief. We can't court joy, feel fully, invest in that which may be unattainable. To ward off any danger of lows, we refrain from setting our sights high; protect ourselves from disappointment by not expecting much.

Yet grief is such a natural part of living. I've learned to see the expression of grief as integral to the healing process. As a parent of small children, I could watch it happen before my eyes. My children wanted something and couldn't get it, or lost something they loved—and they cried. If I held them in my arms and loved them and just let them cry, after a while they would be done, and would go back to life with renewed enthusiasm, ready to want and love again.

Much that is wrong in our world can be traced to an inability to grieve. What are despair and vengeance but indicators of aborted grieving? Incessant, desperate protest may have similar roots. For our love to stay accessible, we need to be present to all that is wrong, to love what could be, and find ways to be overwhelmed with open-hearted grief. I've been helped by a group at our Quaker Meeting that gathers for Lamentation—to grieve together about the state of the world. The actual lament takes many forms—questions born of anger and pain, tears, prayers, calls for



help. I think I can speak for others when I say that being able to open our hearts to the pain, and cry out our despair like a child in a parent's loving arms, leaves us more ready to embrace the world in all its joys and sorrows.

## ■ Attentive, Curious Respectful Listening

A third skill involves listening deeply. The bedrock of human interaction, which makes growth and change possible—is to be able to say what's on our hearts, to show ourselves, and to be heard. Our little children know this, as they call for it endlessly. "Look at me! Listen to me! Pay attention to me!" As we grow up, we internalize the painful message that most people don't seem to want to pay attention to us, and we keep more and more to ourselves.

In our interactions with each other, there may be nothing we can offer of more value and power than our attention. I love to tell the story of a woman in a child care advocacy class I was leading. In a discussion on listening, she admitted candidly that she never really listened to her husband. Others concurred, and I offered the challenge of giving it a try and bringing back stories. At the next meeting she was itching to share. She had tried turning off the television one evening and offering to listen to what was on her husband's mind. Disbelieving at first, he finally took her at her word and talked about his troubled relationship with his father. She listened without interruption, judgment or advice—another surprise. Later that week he spent an evening with his father where whole new worlds opened up. She was awed at the power of this simple decision to listen—and I imagined the ripples spreading beyond where any of us could see.

It's not easy to really listen, avoiding all the pulls to interrupt with our own stories, to give easy advice, to turn the conversation to what catches our own interest, to bring our worries to the center. But if we listen well, we may find ourselves becoming the midwives to stories and resultant insights that would otherwise never have made it out into the world.

Listening with genuine curiosity is a critical habit of mind to develop if we would be of use in situations of conflict or disagreement. When you are curious you can't be judgmental, because there are no right answers. There are only questions, the answers to which will lead both parties closer to truth. When you are curious, the other person is the expert. Your job is to learn what makes them tick. A tone of genuine curiosity inevitably conveys respect—and creates the conditions for change.

We all have stories of grief or loss laying on our hearts. Untold, they not only weigh us down, but cloud our judgment, distort our perceptions and make

us vulnerable to manipulation. I know of more than one situation where a person espousing a virulent and seemingly unmovable position, when invited with warmth and openness to tell his story, ended up revealing a world of hurt, and in that context of deeply respectful listening, was opened to new possibilities.

Some of us come from traditions that value listening together for truth and clarity. I love that part of Quakerism, along with its central tenet of affirming that of God in everyone. To reach for that of God in another calls for deeply loving listening curiosity, and for an intention to imagine what may not be visible in the faith that it is there to be found. I would caution us, however, not to rest on our individual or communal laurels, but to reflect on how good we actually are at this kind of listening in our daily lives. What listening opportunities do I pass up? When do I withhold my attention and why? What would I have to give up in myself to listen respectfully to the person who is hardest for me?

## ■ Challenging the Evil of Separation

While this is a strong word, I have come to the



point of naming separation as a source of great evil. I know of nothing that does more damage to our lives and the world around us—and we certainly can't find our way into a new age alone, or just in the company of our own little group.

Overcoming that separation, and learning the skills of connection, requires discipline and practice. Whenever we feel better than, not as good as, so different from that connection feels out of the question, without access to, unwelcome by, or disinterested in any other group, this has the smell of this evil of separation. Anything with this aroma needs to be challenged in thought, word and deed, gently perhaps, but relentlessly.

There are many forces in society that push us in the direction of separation. Individualism is rampant. Oppression—of race, class, ethnicity, religion—is real, and the divisions it creates are hard to overcome. Voices in the media and politics grow ever more skillful at setting us apart and pitting us against each other.

Luckily we have reality on our side here. We are all connected. We are one species, and as a species we are connected to all life. Every molecule of water in our bodies has been in this universe for billions of years—and we share 35% of our DNA with a daffodil.

The illusion of separation, driven by the scientific and industrial revolutions and the fleeting belief of the last several centuries that we have mastery over an external environment, is embedded deep in our culture, but is total illusion nonetheless.

For some of us, reclaiming our connection with nature will be the challenge, but for most of us, I would guess, it's the people that give us trouble. How can we refuse this separation? I remember struggling to come to terms with a story I read in the newspaper about a woman of my age who lived not far from me. One of her sons was in jail for murder, another had just been killed, and she had to pick up the pieces and raise her grandchildren. How could I, in all my privilege, relate to this woman, my neighbor? Yet the truth is that, if I expand my reality beyond my immediate family, we are not that different. She and I both live in the midst of enormous injustice and hardship, we have both woken up alive this morning, we are both survivors in a tattered world, we both have this day to do our best.

A wise friend once suggested that, if in the course of our daily lives we aren't crossing paths with people from whom we've been separated by race or class, then we need to change the course of our daily lives. It takes intention. It takes decision. It involves awkwardness and making visible mistakes of commission rather than the less obvious and more comfortable mistakes of omission. It involves learning hard things—about the world and about ourselves—that we would rather not face. It takes practice.

## ■ Welcoming Conflict

Many of us—and I count myself in this group—have highly developed skills in conflict avoidance, and, when faced with a call to gain more conflict-related skills, would tend to gravitate toward conflict reduction or conflict management. Yet a preference for keeping things in place can't help but serve the status quo more than it serves the forces of change.

I keep trying to get my mind more fully around the concept of conflict as a positive opportunity for growth. Nonviolent strategist and trainer George Lakey has helped me here. When everything is in motion, he says, there is room for change. Molecules move more freely in a context that is hot than in one that is cold. Things can be rearranged. New patterns can emerge. Conflict warms us up. It makes available things that are otherwise very hard to achieve. The violence is already there, embedded deep in structures of injustice. We're just raising it to the surface so that what was frozen in place can be transformed.

Just committing to believing this is a good first step. There are many other steps I can take in developing a new set of skills: noticing where I have engaged in conflict and survived; earning when and how my fears about conflict come up, and finding ways to

blunt their impact or dilute their strength; celebrating the tiniest successes; making opportunities to be around people who are good at conflict, and learning from them. I need to remember that I have developed skills in other areas that I never thought I could master, and I could develop these skills as well.

## ■ Mending & Repairing

Mending and repairing are homely skills, hardly at first glance the stuff of ushering in a new age. Yet our society is fascinated with and addicted to what is new. We've been deeply conditioned to discard the old and go for the latest in glitz, ease or convenience at the drop of a hat. This ends up encompassing not only products of all kinds, but activities, and relationships as well. We've been trained to abandon things that aren't working well, since something better appears to be right on the horizon.

Not only does this attitude do violence to our earth and our human connections, but it disrespects our abilities to make things right.

A new age will require enormous attention to conservation, to making things last. Any time we can see the possibility that something of value can be repaired, we are affirming an attitude of care and respect for the world around us. In this light, mending relationships, mending chairs, mending socks—and sharing these skills of mending and repairing—can be seen as critical activities of the nonviolent warrior.



## ■ Listening for What Rings True

A skill that feels new to me, but very important, has to do with aligning our selves with the Divine, with right order, in our daily lives. I'm helped by framing it as listening for what rings true. Every now and then I find myself engaged with life in a way that seems just right; I have a human interaction that is clear and connected, and deeply satisfying. I have a moment truly taking in the beauty of my world. I extend the life of something old and functional with a careful mend. I do a piece of work that matters, and clearly has my name on it. I take the hard next step, that's waiting to be taken, in a friendship. I transplant a flower to give away, using my good compost. Something about

what I'm doing rings true.

What if we started to listen for what rings true at other times—in the entertainment we choose, the ways we eat, the gifts we give, the interactions we have, the work we do? To find the answers, we may need to address what keeps us from being able to hear that “clear and certain sound”, as John Woolman says. What clutters our minds? What messages have we taken in (from our childhoods, from advertising, from society at large) that muffle the truth? What has accreted to our habits of life that keep us from listening?

I smile as I imagine myself counting up the minutes that ring true in my life—just two minutes this day, maybe seven the next. It would be easy to get discouraged and give up trying. But we don't have to just wait for a miracle to hear the ring of truth more often in our lives. We can remember those moments, and value them. We can look for where they most reliably happen. We can talk with our friends, and get help working to reproduce the conditions that encourage them. We can dig away at the stuff that muffles them. There may be no work that's harder—or more worth doing than developing this practice of listening for the ring of truth in our lives.

## ■ Reclaiming Truth from the Experts

Modern life is complex. There are so many areas of expertise, so many things to know. When we don't cede our judgment voluntarily to those who claim to be experts, we are lulled, threatened, seduced, belittled into acquiescence. Yet the skills and knowledge of our current shepherds are not adequate to lead us safely into the future. We need to bring our values and our plain old commonsense to the table and claim our right to know what's important.

We can learn here from the long experience of those who have challenged the logic of war. Many of us are just not fooled when generals and politicians claim to be the experts about what will bring peace and security. We're ready to say that their expertise is based in flawed assumptions, and can never get us to peace. Even though we've never known a world without war, we hold to our beliefs, and are confident, outspoken and engaged.

Yet, when it comes to economists claiming to be the experts about what will bring prosperity, and advising us to leave the matter in their capable hands, we have tended to comply. What would it be like to assert that their expertise



is based on flawed assumptions that can never get the world to prosperity? Even though we've never known an economic system that works for everybody, we could hold to our deepest beliefs—that greed is not the source of well-being, and that unbridled growth comes at the expense of the planet's integrity—and be equally confident, outspoken and engaged.

In a culture where science and technology have the authority of God, where we've come to believe that science can explain everything and technology can fix anything, this is hard. We need to practice, and to encourage each other, to wade in among the experts and say, “I know what's right”.

## ■ Risking Internal Disarmament

Another skill involves dismantling our internal defenses. I know that arming ourselves tends to make us less safe. It's true in so many ways. Obviously an international arms race adds to the danger of war. Having guns in the home makes gun deaths there more likely, and not less. Developing football helmets that make indiscriminate tackles acceptable increases the incidence of concussion.

Arming ourselves also ties up resources that could be used for peaceful conflict resolution. Gated communities sidestep the need to address inequity. Those with a militant theology or world view create an “other” against whom constant vigilance is required. Those who are armed with hate have less space for love.

Yet how many of us are good at disarming ourselves? I remember the shock of discovering this irony—that we can blithely and righteously call for nations to lay down their arms, thus making themselves more vulnerable to attack, when we would never consider giving up the defenses that we've built up internally. Is there any one of us without elaborate defense systems—against insult or failure, humiliation or loss? Yet, if I am armed to the teeth internally, how can I demand that others lay down their arms? I need to practice the courage of being vulnerable, of living an ever-more undefended life, of opening myself to all these potentially devastating blows, before I can preach with integrity to the nations.

## ■ Cultivating Courage

When we throw out the model of war as a means of solving conflict, it's easy to throw out the attributes of a warrior. Yet it would be too bad if courage went out with the bathwater. These are times that call for enormous courage—to face down evils of a magni-

tude that has never been seen before, to face loss and privation, to welcome chaos, and to lead the way with loving confidence into the unknown. It takes courage to reach for connection way beyond our comfort level. It takes courage to disarm. It takes courage to speak truth to power. Yet how many of us would-be nonviolent warriors are brave?

Though I can't see the shape of it clearly yet, I think we need a courage project. It would involve each one of us doing a personal inventory of the times and places where we have been courageous, and bringing them to our community for acknowledgment and celebration. Then we would look at where our fears keep us quiet and passive, and each develop personal bravery campaigns. With a buddy or a small group, we would share our intentions to practice being brave—in our families, at work, with our neighbors, in the larger community—and come back to share our successes, or grieve our failures, and get ready for the next courageous step. I imagine us keeping asking ourselves and each other, "If I felt braver, what would I do?" then backing each other to do it.

I'm not an expert on gyms, but I understand that everybody can develop their own workout, depending on the muscles and aerobic capacity they want to build. As I reflect on it, I'm already in pretty good shape around hope, grieving, listening and mending. My connecting and reclaiming truth muscles could always use attention. But my workout really needs to focus on internal disarmament, listening to what rings true, engaging in conflict and cultivating courage. I'm intensely curious about what this workout might look like for others, and about the forms that doing it together might take.



As we take on this great adventure of building the nonviolent skills that are needed to usher in a new world, different levels of activity will be called for. We have to start with ourselves, but we can't end there. It's like getting a hold of one thread of the whole garment, starting to pull, and not letting go, regardless of where you're taken in the process, or being faithful to a friendship with someone who has been impacted by injustice, and following the track of that injustice with them, till it leads you to the cave of the beast.

Ultimately it involves engaging with the powers and principalities. How do you do that non-violently? I don't know, but I'm helped by a couple of images. The first comes from Walter Wink, a great 20th century theologian of nonviolence, who has said that every human institution has a divine vocation, and one of our tasks on earth is to call those institutions home. I've gone back many times to the advice he gives in his

book, *Engaging the Powers*, in the section on prayer. He says that we must let all the pain of the world pass through us. But then we must not attempt to mend it all ourselves, but to do only what God calls us to do. If we are sharply attentive to that call, he says, we can then, very modestly, anticipate the impossible. We can expect a miracle.

The second image, building on the idea of calling the institutions home, comes from my experience as a parent. I have learned what it means to set a limit that really works. You say, "I know that's not good for you, not what's in your heart. Because I love you, I'm not going to let you do it any more. You may fuss. You may be upset, and that's okay. I know it's hard, but I'm right here, holding you, remembering who you are, and I'm not going to let you do it any more." Imagine being that big, that loving, that sure in setting the limits our world needs. We have it in us, and there is much we can do together. But first we have to practice.

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