

## WOMEN AS PEACEMAKERS: HOW WOMEN HAVE STOOD IN OPPOSITION TO VIOLENCE

By Hope Benne

Most people think women are natural peacemakers. Through the years, deriving from women's important role as mother and guardian of hearth and home, women have had empathy for other people, a desire to feed and clothe and help and care for people, and an inclusive outlook to make sure to include all members of the family in the group. Women have often find themselves helping to explain and reconcile conflicts.

It's no wonder, then, that UN Secretary General Kofi Annan remarked in October, 2000 to the Security Council "For generations women have served as peace educators, both in their families and in their societies. They have proved instrumental in building bridges rather than walls."

If women have so many qualities which lend themselves to being peacemakers, then why haven't they used their **influence** to abolish war?

Well, to ask this question is to show clearly who is still running things in this world. Men in **patriarchal** systems in all civilizations have cornered **power** and been the ones with the ambition and competitive drive to conquer empires, subjugate populations, and dominate life. Not only have men planned wars, they have also come right from the battlefield to plan the peace. When at the negotiating table, more often than not, they've humiliated their opponents and established harsh peace treaties. What's worse, women and civilians have often been the victims of wars throughout history, and, in modern times, even targeted, deliberately and brutally by military strategists, yet women haven't participated in formal peacemaking.

In the patriarchal framework, women's vulnerability has been emphasized rather than our agency. Women have had relatively no political power and so could do relatively little about these failings and inequities.

But, on the positive side, we have many examples of special women all through the millennia and centuries who, although they didn't have power, did **influence** men and use their **influence** for the good. From the Greek play Lysistrata, a fantasy about how women could influence men, to Buddha's

aunt who influenced him, to Mary, Martha, and Mary Magdelaine who touched Jesus, to Kadija who inspired Mohammad, to saints and nuns in the Middle Ages who swayed priests, we see that even though women didn't have **power**, they did have **influence**.

In more **modern** times, we have many specific examples of powerful women who showed the strength of their principles, their human agency, and their determination to wage peace. I want to talk about some of these wonderful women, about what inspired them and what gave them the courage of their convictions. To contain this talk, I decided to discuss **American** women of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – Emma Goldman, Dorothy Day, Jane Addams and Jeanette Rankin. These women were serious-minded activists, and learning about their strong personalities and strong convictions are a legacy for us to build on today.

Most everyone knows the intellectual and cultural context of the early 1900's - called the progressive era- produced political reforms such as initiative, referendum, and recall and women's right to vote, but the era also went beyond progressive to produce a much more radical politics and more powerful ideologies of feminism, internationalism, and anarchism, especially in some of the large cities like New York and Chicago.

In fact, in these cities, you could say these visionaries were doing their best to create a culture of peace. Men and women worked together. Women were feminists and pacifists and men were conscience objectors, sometime ridiculed as sissies, wussies, and cowards by the press and public. They instigated the Fellowship of Reconciliation in 1915 and, after that, the War Resisters league, Women's Peace Party, and National Civil Liberties Bureau, the forerunner to ACLU. Their hearts and minds were on fire. Inspired by the international socialist movement and socialist pacifism, they sought to transform society along socialist lines to eradicate war. They thought the solidarity that socialism would bring would also bring peace. This was when Emma Goldman, Dorothy Day, Jane Addams and Jeanette Rankin lived.

I'd like to say a few words about each of these women.

## EMMA GOLDMAN

Emma Goldman's family's poverty in Russia forced her to take a factory job at 13 and life was so difficult she fled with her sister to the US at 15 and became a seamstress in Rochester NY. Conditions in Rochester were as bad as in St. Petersburg Russia. She sewed overcoats for 10 hours a day and made \$2.50 a week and worked in a small crowded room with no ventilation. Just at this time in 1866 she heard about the hanging of 4 Chicago anarchists in the famous Haymarket Square trial and wrote "I had a sensation in my soul I would follow a great ideal, and was determined to dedicate myself to the memory of my martyred comrades, to make their cause my own."

She soon moved to New York City and began to associate with anarchists there while still earning a living as a seamstress. In 1889 she organized a cloak-maker's strike. Soon she became a spokesperson for anarchism and spent a year in jail for inciting a riot which never occurred. Anarchists in these days opposed exploitation of workers and stood for worker solidarity and many were internationalists who stood for international solidarity of workers. In 1906 Emma launched Mother Earth a monthly magazine supporting feminism, free speech, and worker solidarity.

When the US entered World War I in 1917, Emma co-founded the No Conscription League with Alexander Berkman maintaining that "the militarization of America is an evil that far outweighs any good that may come from America's participation in the war." In a witty speech to the judge she described what happened when she was arrested for forming this no conscription league.

"A dozen or more heroes dashed up 2 flights of stairs prepared to stake their lives for their country only to discover the two dangerous disturbers and troublemakers, Alex Berkman and Emma Goldman quietly at work at their desks wielding not a sword, nor a gun or bomb, but merely their pens. Verily it required courage to catch such big fish."

She soon had her US citizenship revoked and was deported back to Russia under the Alien Exclusion Act. Later when asked about the details of her life she advised the person to consult any police department or the secret service in America or Europe." In a popular pamphlet, What I Believe which she wrote in 1908 she said "Anarchists are the only ones calling a halt to the

growing tendency of militarism which is fast making of this erstwhile free country an imperialistic and despotic power.” She was finally buried near the graves of her beloved Haymarket anarchists in Chicago.

## **DOROTHY DAY**

Dorothy Day often said she “longed to walk in the shoes of Emma Goldman.” As you know she was a writer, social worker and feminist who stood in opposition to the violence of poverty and co-founded the Catholic Worker movement with a Frenchman, Peter Maurin. They ran a shelter for the homeless, called a hospitality house back then. Dorothy began writing a monthly newspaper called the Catholic Worker “to make known the expressed and implied teachings of Christ”. In one issue in 1946 she said “People come into the house in such numbers, 800 a day for food. Hundreds of men, women and children need clothing. But the main thing we give is our time, our patience, and our love. You must **love** the poor very much so they will forgive you the bread you give them

The mission statement of the Catholic Worker movement reads they exist to “fight violence with the spiritual weapons of prayer, fasting, and non-cooperation with evil.” Catholic workers live by principles such as “Whatever you do for the least of these you do for me” and by the concept of the mystical body of Christ where we are all linked as brother and sister in Christ. Their favorite set of beliefs is expressed in the Sermon on the Mount), and a personalist politics (Peter Maurin brought from France) to aid those in need taking **personal** responsibility and find **personal meaning** in non-violent action for changing conditions. Catholic workers discern the truth through contact with the poor and then show connections to high levels of military spending as a theft from the poor. (hospitality engenders solidarity, a radical consciousness is formed by working with homeless and hungry, live in community there’s strength in numbers and strength in talking over with others a strategy for action, “roundtable discussions for clarification of thought, tradition of nonviolent actions is “part of the air we breathe”) Their personalist politics of action to help poor and combat militarism was a very integrated approach.

## **JANE ADDAMS**

Jane Addams, like Dorothy Day, was a social worker who worked among Chicago’s immigrant poor. She met such people as Leo Tolstoy and

Andrew Carnegie, and Mark Twain and as head of the Women's Peace Party in 1915 traveled to Europe with Henry Ford and Emily Balch to try to stop "the senseless slaughter." In 1918 she founded and was first President of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and gave it the money she earned from a Nobel Peace Prize in 1931. She made a total commitment to non-violence and was a pacifist. She said "In order to make the position of pacifism clear, it is necessary that some people, probably a small number of us, will be forced to take an unequivocal position of being pacifist.

### **JEANETTE RANKIN**

Jeanette Rankin was a social worker and seamstress and became the first woman elected to the US House of Representatives from Montana in 1916. She was the only Congressperson to vote against US entry into World War I (saying we can't settle disputes by killing human beings) (just as Barbara Lee, Black congresswoman from Oakland, CA was the only one to vote against US war in Afghanistan on Sept 15, 2001, 4 days after 9/11). Later she was also the only one to oppose the declaration of war on Japan and US entry into World War II with a vote on Dec. 8, 1941 of 338-1.

### **JESSIE WALLACE HUGHAN**

Now I will mention Jessie Wallace Hughan outstanding pacifist, socialist and feminist. Greatly influenced by her Christian faith, her radical parents and opposition to war by British socialists she participated in founding Emergency Peace Federation, American Union against Militarism, Fellowship of Reconciliation, Women's Peace Party, the Anti-Enlistment League and the National Civil Liberties Bureau. And she founded out of her Brooklyn home the War Resisters League in 1923 when she united FOR, Women's Peace Society and Women's Peace Union. Her strategy was to call for a strike against war where citizens would withhold support for war and mobilize public opinion against it. She collected pledges against war and enlistment. The War Resisters League still espouses a socialist pacifist vision and has advocated the general strike for 8 decades.

## OTHER WOMEN WAGING PEACE

Now I'd like to mention several other women who have worked for peace in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nobel Peace Prize winners Emily Balch 1946 as President of International Women's League for Peace and Freedom, Mother Theresa of Missionaries of Charity, Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan of Northern Ireland Peace Movement, Rigoberta Menchu Tum (1992), Mayan Indian from Guatemala, connected with Chiapas struggle, Jody Williams for banning and clearing landmines, Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma, and Shirin Ebadi lawyer, lawyer and judge in Iran who's spoke out against violence to women and children.

### American Women Peace Activists in the 1960's and 70's

Now I'd like to focus on the women activists in the 60's and 70's. Many local grassroots groups sprang up connected with Women's Strike for Peace. There were groups such as Chicago Women for Peace and WAND here in Mass. Gender shaped their strategy because they used motherhood as a justification for activism, used their roles as mothers to argue against war and violence. They acknowledged a positive concept of motherhood as more concerned with preserving life. And then some of these kindly mothers came to be considered dangerous. (In contrast to SANE, FOR and Am Friends staffed by career activists with other justifications) and WILPF which is educational and legislative.

What is interesting, speaking of justifications for peace activism, is that now one of the Peace Groups opposing the Iraq invasion is called Military Families Speak Out Against Iraq War, concern for sons and daughters in Iraq, Another strong group now is Families for Peaceful Tomorrows, 9/11 families

Other women who made a huge difference for peace have been:

**Eleanor Roosevelt:** Headed the 15 person commission which wrote the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1946-1948.

**Barbara Lee** – social worker and pacifist cast the only vote against War Resolution for Afghan strikes after 9/11 Vote was 420-1 taken on Sept. 15. She said the wording “to use all necessary force” gave them a blank check. She advocated restraint before rushing to action, President already has authority through war powers act, too many people of color on front lines

who are disproportionately represented. Since vote: tons of hate mail. Other vote on Iraq resolution October 11, 2002 authorized Iraq war if Saddam refused to give up WMD. Senate 77-23 House 296-133.

**Maxine Waters** – Assisted Jean Bertrand Aristide (taken from his home by US Marines and sent to Central African Republic). Waters has said he's the legitimate leader who was kidnapped by US and forced into exile. Other issues she's worked on child abuse prevention, divest pension funds from S. Africa, advocate for justice in Haiti and for Haitian refugees.

**Carol Mosley Braun**: known as first Black woman elected to US Senate, lawyer, ran for President, stood for peace, gun control, and funding for international programs

**Wynona LaDuke** – Ojibwe Indian, Green Party Candidate 1996 and 2000 with Ralph Nadar, Honor the Earth, close SOA, opposes military aid to Colombia

**Coretta Scott King** – continued husband's struggle for civil and human rights, leads demonstrations and marches, founded MLK Center

**Medea Benjamin** – founder of Global Exchange

**Helen Caldicott**, Physicians for Social responsibility, pediatrician, critic of nuclear arms race

**Sonia Sanchez** – Af. Am. Poet, combative tone

### **The Final Solution**

There is

No real problem here

We the lead/ers of free

a/mer/ica say

give us your hungry/illiterates/criminals/dropouts

(in other words) your blacks

And we will let them fight

In Viet-nam

Defending america's honor

We will make responsible

Citi-zens out of them

Or kill them trying.

I'd like to mention here a wonderful American historian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, **Barbara Tuchman**. Among her many books she wrote one called The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam. In this book she makes the same point over and over that many kings and leaders have pursued policies contrary to the best interests of their countries. She mentioned Montezuma, Louis XIV, XV, XVI, Napoleon, Wilhelm II of Germany and many others. She says they were ordinary men in water over their heads acting unwisely or foolishly, as people often do. She says "The trappings of power deceive us, endowing the possessor with a quality larger than life. Shorn of his tremendous curled peruke, high heels and ermine, the Sun King was a man subject to misjudgment, error and impulse – like you and me."

But war and men don't have the last word in matter. The last word belongs to a quality women have always been known for – wisdom. I find it amazing that in many disparate cultures, early goddesses have symbolized wisdom. The Gnostics considered Sophia, the goddess of wisdom, the first universal creator. Their gospels say "God made the world in wisdom" and god was a woman. Hokmah was the Hebrew for Sophia and their goddess, as well as the Greek goddess, is associated with wisdom. Buddhists have a primordial goddess Prajnaparamita, a creator goddess whose wisdom "goes beyond all human partialities".

So, insofar as we women have been known for our wisdom, we can fall back on this quality to be our guide in waging peace.

References: To Construct Peace by Michael True  
Solutions to Violence by Colman McCarthy