**Give peace a chance**

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There’s a limit to how much significance songs can carry, of course, but a successful political movement does need a good soundtrack. (As I found out while reporting then, Rage Against the Machine served that purpose for some post-9/11 antiwar soldiers.) Better yet is an anthem crowds can sing when they gather in solidarity to exert political pressure. After all, it feels good to sing as a group at a moment when it doesn’t even matter if you can carry a tune as long as the lyrics hit home. But a protest song, by definition, isn’t a song of peace – and it turns out that most recent peace songs aren’t so peaceful either.

As many of us of a certain age remember, antiwar songs thrived during the Vietnam War years. There was the iconic ‘Give Peace a Chance’, recorded by John Lennon, Yoko Ono, and pals in a Montreal hotel room in 1969; ‘War’, first recorded by the Temptations in 1970 (I can still hear that ‘absolutely nothing!’ response to ‘What Is It Good For?’); Cat Stevens’s ‘Peace Train’, from 1971; and that’s just to begin a list. But in this century? Most of the ones I came across were about inner peace or making peace with yourself; they are self-care mantras du jour. The few about world or international peace were unnervingly angry and bleak, which also seemed to reflect the tenor of the time.

It’s not as if the word ‘peace’ has been cancelled. The porch of a neighbor of mine sports a faded peace flag; Trader Joe’s keeps me well-supplied with Inner Peas; and peace still gets full commercial treatment sometimes, as on designer T-shirts from the Chinese clothing company Uniqlo. But many of the organizations whose goal is indeed world peace have chosen not to include the word in their names and “peacenik,” pejorative even in its heyday, is now purely passé. So, has peace work just changed its tune or has it evolved in more substantial ways?

Peace is a state of being, even perhaps a state of grace. It can be as internal as individual serenity or as broad as comity among nations. But at best, it’s unstable, eternally in danger of being lost. It needs a verb with it – seek the, pursue the, win the, keep the – to have real impact and, although there have been stretches of time without war in certain regions (post-WW II Europe until recently, for example), that certainly doesn’t seem to be the natural state of all too much of this world of ours.

Most peace workers probably disagree or they wouldn’t be doing what they do. In this century, I first experienced pushback to the idea that war is innate or inevitable in a 2008 phone interview with Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist noted for his work with Vietnam War veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome. That was the subject we were talking about when he veered off-topic and asserted his belief that it was indeed possible to end all war.

Most such conflicts, he thought, stemmed from fear and the way not just civilians but the military brass so often “consume” it as entertainment. He urged me to read Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant’s treatise Perpetual Peace. When I did, I was indeed struck by its echoes over two centuries later. On recurring debates about reinstating the draft, to take one example, consider Kant’s suggestion that standing armies only make it easier for countries to go to war. “They incite the various states to outrival one another in the number of their soldiers,” he wrote then, “and to this number no limit can be set.”

The modern academic field of peace and conflict studies – there are now about 400 such programs around the world – began about 60 years ago. Underpinning peace theory are the concepts of negative and positive peacefirst widely introduced by Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung (though Jane Addams and Martin Luther King both used the terms earlier). Negative peace is the absence of immediate violence and armed conflict, the conviction perhaps that you can buy groceries without taking a chance on getting blown to smithereens (as in Ukraine today). Positive peace is a state of sustained harmony within and among nations. That doesn’t mean no one ever disagrees, only that the parties involved deal with any clash of goals nonviolently. And since so many violent clashes arise from underlying social conditions, employing empathy and creativity to heal wounds is essential to the process.

Negative peace aims at avoiding, positive peace at enduring. But negative peace is an immediate necessity because wars are so much easier to start than to stop, which makes Galtung’s position more practical than messianic. “I am not concerned with saving the world,” he wrote. “I am concerned with finding solutions to specific conflicts before they become violent.”

David Cortright, a Vietnam War veteran, professor emeritus at Notre Dame’s Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, and co-creator of Win Without War, offered me this definition of such work in an email: “To me, the question is not ‘world peace,’ which is dreamy and utopian and too often used to ridicule those of us who believe in and work for peace, but rather how to reduce armed conflict and violence.”

Peace movements tend to mobilize around specific wars, swelling and declining as those conflicts do, though sometimes they do remain in our world afterward. Mother’s Day, for instance, grew out of a call for peace after the Civil War. (Women have been at the forefront of peace actions since Lysistrata organized the women of ancient Greece to deny men sex until they ended the Peloponnesian War.) A few still-active antiwar organizations date from before World War I and several arose from the Vietnam War resistance movement and the antinuclear one of the early 1980s. Others are as recent as Dissenters, organized in 2017 by young activists of color.

Today, a long list of nonprofits, religious groups, NGOs, lobbying campaigns, publications, and scholarly programs are intent on abolishing war. They generally focus their efforts on educating citizens in how to rein in militarism and military funding, while promoting better ways for countries to coexist peacefully or stanch internal conflicts.

Count on one thing, though: it’s never an easy task, not even if you limit yourself to the United States, where militarism is regularly portrayed as patriotism and unbridled spending on murderous weapons as deterrence, while war profiteering has long been a national pastime.

Excerpted: ‘Will Peace Ever Get Its Chance?’ Courtesy: Commondreams.org