

## Workshop on the Challenges of Building a Culture of Peace in a Consumer Society

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### Abstract

By comparing the features of a culture of peace to those of a consumer culture, this workshop will help co-learners begin to see the links and challenges between these two cultures. Co-learners will receive a worksheet of the features of a culture of peace designed so there is room to write down ideas about which features of a consumer society provide challenges or opportunities to build a peace culture. Co-learners will begin to think differently about their role as educators, so they can see themselves as socializing people to be global, peaceful citizens first, and consumers second.

### Background

The consumer society has been evolving for almost 100 years. It has become deeply entrenched into our collective psyche. The UN initiative for a culture of peace began only two years ago. The notion of a culture of peace is not entrenched into our collective psyche at all. This entire workshop is designed to provide a forum for dialogue around how difficult it is to build a culture of peace in a consumer culture. 2001-2010 is the UNESCO Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence for the Children of the World. A culture of peace places the universal welfare of all people, without exception, as the highest priority of a society. However, the task of sensitizing a new generation of citizens to value the welfare of everyone above themselves is a severe challenge in a consumer society. Consumer societies and consumer cultures value self-interest, material and wealth accumulation, status, novelty and individualism, and define people by what they can consume. An individual's self-respect and self-esteem are strongly tied to their level of consumption relative to others in the society (Goodwin, Ackerman & Kiron, 1997). By contrast, a culture of peace aims for respect for diversity, tolerance, sustainability, equality, empowerment, democratic participation and transformation of values, attitudes and behaviours which promote peace within each individual, leading to a culture shaped by peace (Canadian Centers for Teaching Peace, 2000). There are five kinds of peace.

#### Inner Peace

There is a deep contrast between a culture of peace and a consumer culture. Peace is the source of all happiness. In a consumer society, people search for peace and happiness in the wrong places. They believe that wealth, money and material goods provide happiness, yet they are unhappy even though they have material wealth. This unhappiness exists because they have yet to realize that peace develops from *inside the person* not from the outside. They do not feel at peace with themselves because they have yet to appreciate that peace is linked to the spiritual aspect of being human, not just the outside, physical sphere. This does not mean that people should not value material goods. But, they should strive not to become attached to them to the extent that they value physical things more than the spiritual, **inner-peace** sphere of life and make immoral decisions that harm others and the environment (McGregor, 2002, 2003b). "Consumerism is the drug that causes people to fall into moral sleep and remain silent on all kinds of public matters. As long as their little world of peace and relative prosperity is not disturbed, they are happy not to get involved. It is against this background of consumer complacency that all kinds of moral relaxation can arise . . . A consumer society is one that is prepared to sacrifice its ethics on the altar of the material 'feel-good' factor" (Benton, 1998, p.2).

#### Positive Peace

Not only is peace conceived as inner peace, it is also conceptualized as **positive peace** or lack of structural violence. Unequal access to resources, to political power, to education, to health care or to legal standing are all forms of structural violence (Winter & Leighton, 1999). Structural violence can also occur in a society if institutions and policies are designed in such a way that barriers are built into society that result in lack of adequate food, housing, health, safe and just working conditions, education, economic security, clothing, and family relationships. People affected by structural violence tend to live a life of oppression, exclusion, exploitation, marginalization, collective humiliation, stigmatization, repression, inequities and lack of opportunities due to no fault of their own, per se. The people most

affected by structural violence are women, children, elders and those from different ethnic, racial and religious groups and sexual orientations (McGregor, 2003). "As we rethink the causes of conflict and violence worldwide, we are challenged to deeply transform excessively consumerist lifestyles that fuel policies and structures of inequity and human rights violations (Toh, 2001, p.1).

### Negative Peace

Peace also can be conceptualized as **negative peace**, or the absence of war and violence. A consumer culture and a culture of violence are inherently linked. Consumerism is yet another value that promotes war. Unlimited wants of a privileged few create conflict in a world with limited resources (Desai, 2001). Northern consumers are the privileged few. Living in a culture dominated by the competitive paradigm sets us up for valuing scarcity and taking appropriate actions to make sure we do not get left behind. That action is consumption. This behaviour is further exacerbated by the actions of the corporate media. It is responsible for perpetrating violence and consumerism under the guise of news and entertainment (deBoer, 2003). This entertainment takes the form of television shows, music, videos, movies, toys, games, cartoons, comic books, and clothing. Because this violence appears in these, seemingly, innocent, regular purchases, people tend to not criticize it, even to see it as violence. It becomes a part of their normal, daily life. This insidiousness creates a real challenge for peace in a violent culture perpetuated by consumerism.

Other features of a consumer society also contribute to violence. Almost three quarters of the goods we buy are made in factories in countries that use child labor, sweatshop labor, prison labor and slave labor (McGregor, 2003a). It is not surprising to see civil disorder resulting from injustices created in free trade zones and factories using exploited workers. Pockets of poverty are created when rural workers go to urban areas in cities looking for work because corporations have taken away their land (McGregor, Fisk & Doull, 2003). Robbins (1999) illustrates that urbanization has led to yellow fever, malaria, cholera and the plague. The poor sanitation and hygiene in these urban areas has led to diarrheal diseases, river blindness, dengue, worm disease, and salmonella. War and civil disorder have led to waterborne diseases and diphtheria. Our consumerism is a major contributing factor to these violent situations.

### Eco-peace

Consumerism is a threat to peace because it has become a process of self-identification, a process that has to be continually fed by buying more things to define who we are. We now use products and services to define ourselves-it is all about images and illusions. Our reality is recreated on a daily basis by buying things. We do this at the expense of those who make our products and at the expense of the natural environment, creating injustice and ecological destruction (McGregor, 2003c). Indeed, peace can also be understood to include **eco-peace**, taken to mean living in a peaceful, respectful relationship with nature and the other 10,000 species who share the earth with humans. Peace defined in these terms refers to all forms of physical violence against the environment. In a period of less than thirty years, a widespread verbal recognition of the need to live in harmony with the environment has occurred (Groff & Smoker, 1995). We are becoming aware that we can pollute the earth until it malfunctions, that humans are not separate from the earth and that we must make peace with the earth (Tilley, 2001). Yet, we continue to consume to the point that the earth is starting to malfunction - global warming, loss of the rainforest (source of oxygen and drugs), radical climate change, loss of biodiversity (plants, animals, seeds, birds, et cetera), loss of land masses and arable land for agriculture, polluted oceans and the list goes on. Building eco-peace in a culture of consumerism is fraught with complications and barriers, not the least of which is our assumption that the earth is ours to conquer rather than share and hold in stewardship for future generations.

### Feminist (Relational) Peace

From the feminist or **relational peace** perspective, the focus is shifted from the structure of society (structural violence) and the culture of war (negative peace) to peace rooted in personal experience and around how peace feels to individuals (Groff & Smoker, 1995). When this type of peace is missing, it is experienced as violence in the street, on the school bus, in the school yard, in the home, with peers (bullying et cetera), in the community (graffiti) and in personal relationships (child and spousal abuse). Consumerism has a key role to play in the absence of this type of peace. Youth violence, manifested in beating kids up for their designer or brand name running shoes or jackets, is a cruel example of how consumerism negates relational peace. Parenting styles, that involve leaving children unattended for hours in front

of computers and TV sets, contributes to a lack of relational peace. Through this practice, children do not learn how to interact in social settings. Plus, violence is flooding into their lives via the media and digital technology in the total absence of parental monitoring and critical dialogue. Gang membership is on the increase because kids are desperate to belong. A consumer society alienates people and creates a huge sense of isolation and disconnectedness. Feeling alone generates fear and anger (the two central emotions triggering violence) which is expressed on the play ground, on the bus, in the halls, through bullying and intimidation. Increased drug use and other addictions manifest because, again, children are afraid, alone, distant and do not feel in control. In a consumer culture, as warped as it sounds, there is a monumental market for drugs to meet this consumer need. Worse still, and even more insidious, is the marked increase in mental illness and depression in this consumer society. Currently, home and world conditions foster social isolation, avoidance of personal attachments, manipulation, internal emptiness, or a sense of meaningfulness and hopelessness. People are getting sick because they were not designed to function in today's society: suicides, manic depression, anxiety disorders, alienation, social isolation and abuse are the result. As a powerful example, our isolated life in suburbia has lead some to live in a sparse social context and to compromise several innate aspects of their social repertoire: bonding, competition, love, innocence, trust, morals, and civility leading to a constant striving for more. They meet these basic human needs through consumption (McGregor, 2000).

### Workshop Process

Work sheets were prepared for this workshop. First, we concept mapped the features of a culture of peace, followed with a one page, numbered hand out of the many features of such a culture (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

#### Features of Culture of Peace.

1. principles of freedom, justice, rights, solidarity, tolerance and democracy leading to social interaction and sharing
2. respect for our environment - challenges consumption behaviour and production patterns and development initiatives
3. respect for the basic democratic unit in society - *the family* in their *community*
4. The promotion of non-violent practices and rejects violence in all its forms especially toward the most deprived and marginalized and vulnerable such as children and adolescents
5. a system of government which is concerned with the best interest of all citizens, without exception; this government follows a code of ethics, is accountable and compassionate
6. an appreciation that peace comes from within each person, inner peace
7. the fostering of: awareness, information sharing, citizenship, dialogue, education, prevention, cooperation, mobilization, participation and mutual understanding
8. the values transformation process over transmission/transaction process
9. knowledge that we have power over our destiny and that we are responsible for our world!
10. being adaptive to local reality while respecting the global situation
11. Respect for all life with dignity, without discrimination or prejudice; concept of community/life expands beyond humans to include the other 100,000 species
12. sharing time and resources with others, in a spirit of generosity, to end oppression, exclusion, injustice
13. Listening to understand (empathy) and defend freedom of expression and cultural diversity, giving preference to dialogue and avoiding fanaticism, defamation and rejection of others
14. rediscovering solidarity and contribute to development of community with full participation of women, elders and children
15. redefining security from national security to include human security
16. New criteria for choosing leaders - their predisposition toward harmony, inclusiveness, integrity and healing

Then, we did the same thing for a consumer culture, also with a one page, numbered handout, see Figure 2.

Figure 2

Features of a Consumer Society.

1. We build identities largely out of things - *things* have meaning- we measure our lives by money and ownership of things
2. to consume is the surest perceived route to personal happiness, social status and national success
3. widespread lack of moral discipline; glorification of greed and material accumulation; increase breakdown in family and community; rise of lawlessness and disorder; the ascendancy of racism and bigotry and priority of national interests over the welfare of humanity; alienation and isolation
4. to keep the economic machine moving, people have to be dissatisfied with what they HAVE; hence, who they ARE
5. social space is reorganized around leisure and consumption as central social pursuits and as bases for social relationships
6. marketplaces are abstract, stripped of culture (except the culture of consumption), of social relations and of any social-historical context
7. the consumer is placed at the center of the good society as an individual who freely and autonomously pursues choices through rational means, creating a society through power exercised in the market
8. the isolated, personal, private moment of consumption (purchase, use and enjoy), work within the home and cultural endeavors are seen by those engaged in them as PRIVATE when they are actually inherently tied to global economic and political processes
9. needs the commercialization of leisure and mechanization of the home to free up time and energy to shop and provide more things to buy
10. social activities and emotions are turned into economic activities (commodification)
11. the meaning of one's life is located in acquisition, ownership and consumption
12. the religion of the market (a system of beliefs) coopts aspects of humanity and spirituality
13. advertising, packaging and marketing create illusory needs that we deem real because the "economic" machine has made us feel inferior and inadequate
14. pollution, hazardous wastes, exhausted resources, irreversible environmental damage, spiritual withdrawal and an increased gap and growing tension between the haves and have nots
15. materialism will co-opt our physical lives, our community and our spirit because it gives us a misleading sense of being in control and security (short term)
16. chronic purchasing of new goods and services with little attention to their true need, durability, country of origin, working conditions or environmental impact
17. people eventually begin to think that things are out of whack, priorities are mixed up, moral center is being lost - so they spend more to cover up the fear
18. loss of biodiversity is paralleled by loss of cultural diversity via cultural homogenization
19. technology has left us isolated with no sense of belonging (it has cocooned us to the extent that we are blinded to our destructive ways)
20. based on round the clock living and we were not biologically designed for this
21. all problems have a material or money solutions
22. people use spending and materialism as a way to build a new ego or become a new person by buying products which support their self image - false, temporary sense of inner peace
23. large sections of the world population are excluded

Following these concept mapping exercises, co-learners received a worksheet that had a table containing the features of a culture of peace in the left column. They were asked to enter the numbers of corresponding items describing a consumer society that best explained how a consumer society provides challenges or opportunities to build a peace culture (see Table 1). This numbering approach was taken to expedite the process, since rewriting all 23 clauses would take too long in one hour.

Table 1  
Comparative Analysis of Culture of Peace and Consumer Culture.



be reflected in the table as entering # 11, from the list of the features of a consumer society, beside item 6 from the culture of peace features.

### The Future

The theme of this conference was taking risks in research and education. Taking a risk means exposing oneself to possible loss or harm. In this case, it meant opening oneself up to the idea that one is so entrenched in our consumer culture that there is little room left for peace, without significant change. In the case of this workshop, it meant moving from being comfortable or complacent about one's role in a consumer society to being responsible and accountable for building a culture of peace. Being responsible meant that one felt one had to do something about it. That meant one to begin to take action instead of staying complacent, indifferent or not engaged. Most significantly, it meant that one's ideologies, world paradigms and entire sets of assumptions, shaping one's place in this consumer culture, were brought under scrutiny.

Those who attended this workshop took that risk - entering, what was for me, only a few years ago, uncharted professional and personal territory. Being at this workshop did not happen by chance. Those who were there, were supposed to be there, at this stage of their personal journey. I would hazard a guess that they will not be able to go back to where they *were*, after engaging in this learning experience. They will not be the same. They will have begun their transformation into a practitioner who becomes engaged with the issue of building a culture of peace in our consumer culture. This engagement will involve new learning, more reflection and exciting collaborations. More risk but also phenomenal opportunities.

**"Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure.  
Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing." Helen Keller**

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Endnote

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