Building a Culture of Peace

An Interview with Muriel Duckworth and Betty Peterson

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Muriel Duckwort, (94) et Betty Peterson (85) réfléchissent sur ce qu'elles ont appris au cours de leur longue vie comme résistantes de guerre, et activistes pour la paix au Canada et aux USA. A la lumière de leurs combats passés, elles demeurent optimistes, déterminées et activement opposées à l'invasion de l'Irak.

We had the opportunity to interview Muriel Duckworth (94) and Betty Peterson (85) in October 2002. In this article they share and reflect on what they've learned in their long lives as war resisters and peace activists in Canada and the U.S. While examining their lifetime of struggle they remain hopeful, determined and active in opposition to the invasion of Iraq.

Muriel Duckworth and Betty Peterson, 1995.

For Peace and Social Justice

Evie: Both of you, Betty and Muriel, have been involved in the peace movement for a very long time. Could you tell us how you became interested in peace issues, what were the personal and larger social events at the time that made you turn your attention to the peace movement?

Betty Peterson: A thousand years ago when I was at university, particularly in 1938-39, there were rumblings of war in Europe. There used to be protests on the campus, saying things like "Hell No, We Won't Go!" I had been a very serious music student and not paying any attention to such things. But I happened to be very enamored of my future husband who was a conscientious objector and I began reading, and war seemed like such a senseless waste, as it does today. He was sent to Maine and built a little log cabin there. I came up with our child another child was born there. We were without newspapers, out in the middle of the woods, but there was a little radio with a lot of static, where we kept hearing about the terrible things that were happening. We felt very much that we were doing the right thing, working for a better world, bringing our children up in that way, believing they surely would go on and bring about a peaceful world. At the end of the war came the news of the Holocaust. We had heard nothing, or very little in the States anyway, about the Holocaust. It came as the most horrendous shock. And then, of course, the bombing of Hiroshima, followed a few days later by Nagasaki—we could not believe that such a thing could happen. My husband and I decided to devote the rest of our lives to working for peace and social justice. We became Quakers shortly after the war and, of course, the peace testimony is a very strong part of what they believe.

Muriel Duckworth: Betty and I are just about nine years apart, so my life began nine years before hers did. I remember WWI and having nightmares about Huns and Bolsheviks coming into my bedroom to cut me up into little pieces when I was visiting my aunt in Boston, when the United States decided to go to war in 1917. I would have been nine. When I was in university from 1925-29 war was something away over there. It was nothing that I really felt involved in although we were raising money for European students who were having a hard time in Germany because of the tremendous inflation after WWI. There were people in Canada who did go to prison because they wouldn't go to war, but my husband was too old (he was 42 when the war began). He was the YMCA

Secretary and he would not support it. After the war, after this terrible use of the nuclear bomb, which it wasn't easy to get news about because it was hushed up for quite a while afterwards, we thought there can't be another war, this is so terrible, nobody will ever have another war. Then, there was the testing of nuclear weapons in the Pacific and the death of a Japanese fisherman.[1] They not only used those bombs on Japan, they then tested them in the Pacific. That was really a wake-up call for everybody. There was a risk that nuclear weapons would be used. The anti-nuclear movement became strong during the 1950s in Canada and we were deeply involved. Voice of Women (VOW) was started in Canada in 1960 because there was a feeling that women's voices should be heard and that there would be a difference in what women had to say about nuclear testing.

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Betty: I think from the beginning some of us always put together peace and social justice, because without justice there is no peace. During the war, Kagawa, the great Japanese pacifist, was a model who played a big part in my life. It was just impossible to believe that so soon after WWII there was the Korean war in 1951. I was brought up in the States, and, living through the McCarthy period,[2] we had to be very careful. Communism had a great appeal to many of us at that time, and so did the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), the largest international peace fellowship in the world.[3] Peace was not separated from everything else. Other organizations that I was involved in were the War Resisters League, another outstanding group that began in the United States but is also international.... As early as the 1940s, I was out at lunch counters with Bayard Rustin and Jim Farmer who were two outstanding peace and civil rights people. That was part of peace work as well, peace between people. We tested lunch counters—white people going into lunch counters or dining rooms, then black people going in, and then all of us going in together to see what would happen. Then I worked closely with the American Friends Service Committee, a very strong Quaker group in the States, similar to the Canadian Friends Service Committee here. They had many regional conferences, all over the U.S., and brought very well-known speakers, some from the Socialist Party. There was a wide range of excellent people so it was marvelous to have that exposure.

Muriel: The association that meant the most to me when I was at McGill was the Student Christian Movement. We had study groups and visiting speakers who introduced me to the Social Gospel, to pacifism, to suffering in the world, and the need for change through non-violent action. Several of the speakers were Quakers although I did not make a connection with the Quakers until 1962.... At McGill I met my husband, Jack Duckworth, eleven years older, who was a passionate and active pacifist. I began to learn about Gandhi and Kagawa. We had Norman Thomas and Harry Ward as speakers. Dr. Ward was considered such a social radical that people were booing him at McGill when he came there to speak. He taught in the Union Theological Seminary where I studied in 1929-30, just after I graduated from McGill, and where my husband was studying theology. There was a radical view of society in the seminary and pacifism was rampant. Then, coming back to Montreal the Depression was very serious until WWII provided jobs for everybody, including women (of course many of them were sent back to their kitchens when the war was over). "They" said "they" had fixed the economic system so that the Depression would never happen again...

During the '30s the major factor in my life was having children. Children ask a lot of questions, and you are not comfortable about the answers you have to give because of the state of the world. We were trying to create a world that would be different than the one creating wars. I became involved with the Home and School Movement for many years trying to get them to take a position on not having nuclear testing. At that time the mood in the Home and School was "what does that have to do with education?" so they weren't ready yet to do anything about it although they did later.

After the war we joined groups like the Fellowship for Reconstruction, the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order, and tried to do peace work in the United Church. Out of this renewal of energy in Canada and the feeling that surely, surely after Hiroshima and Nagasaki nobody ever will make war again, we began to build the new society. Out of this came the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) (precursor of the NDP), the Canadian Association for Adult Education, and many actions for social reforms. In 1947 we moved to Halifax and I joined the Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Coloured People. Their members were disillusioned because the "war for freedom" (WWII) had brought them nothing.

Betty: I had to make a choice about what to do when my children were small, during the late 1950s and '60s when I lived in the suburbs outside of Chicago. It took a long time to get into the center of Chicago where all the big peace rallies were held. When the Vietnam war came along, we spoke out against it and wore buttons and did

everything we could in the suburbs, but civil rights was the big thing. We lived in a very particular part of the south side of Chicago where there were wealthy enclaves of people, then there were middle-class people like us, and then there would be black communities over here, and people that worked in the steel mills over there. They were very close and you had to drive through all of them. There were opportunities all the time to work with black people for equal housing, equal schooling and all the rest. It was a very fearful time. You didn't dare use the words "human rights" and even the words "race relations" were forbidden. They would not print those words in the local paper.... We rarely felt we did enough though we would be called in the middle of the night, "there's going to be a riot, would you go down and try to calm people," or we would get called when there were crosses being burnt on black people's lawns. I was a part of a group called the South Suburban Human Relations Council that was started by a group of Jewish women, families right out of the Holocaust. We became very good friends. They were so courageous during the civil rights movement, those women who had witnessed such terrible things....

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Muriel: The thing that happened after the war in Canada was the Guzenko case.[4] Guzenko was working for the Russian Embassy and defected in 1946. It was really devastating for peace activists and radicals because people they had known were arrested. Then along came the McCarthy era. During that time the Women's Peace Movement in the United States was really frightened and even felt they couldn't function. It just about this time the Canadian Voice of Women was formed in 1960 and, right after that, the Women's Strike for Peace in the United States. They were a very outspoken group. In fact, they did a lot to ridicule the Un-American Activities Committee.[5] They had testify as peace groups under scrutiny. They took children, they took flowers, and they answered their questions very lightly. Somebody asked the spokesperson, "how many members have you got?" She said she had no idea how many members they had. Also, "are there any communists?" She said, "we don't know. We don't ask questions about that." And, "do you have any fascists?" She sighed, "oh, if they would only join us." This was quite wonderful because it began to make fun of the Committee that had been terrorizing the country and all activist liberal people. This group had a part in ending the Un-American Activities Committee. Then along came the Vietnam war, which came not long after the Korean war in 1951, which was a total shock so soon after WWII. This was a critical period.

One of the best things the VOW did during the Vietnam war was to bring Vietnamese women to Canada twice. This was the Voice of Women Centennial Project, in 1967. They went across Canada and spoke in several of the cities to hundreds of people. As the national president of the VOW I accompanied them. Of course, we couldn't go to the United States, because the Vietnamese women were "the enemy." But hundreds of Americans came up to Canada to hear them speak. This action comfirmed our feeling that we had to be related to the women in other parts of the world and that we couldn't allow the government to make enemies of the women of the world. They weren't the enemy. We always tried to make connections with women who were on the other side. For instance, we were also the first women to invite Russian women to Canada, and later on to get Chinese women to come to Canada. We went to international conferences that included women who were, under the McCarthy terms, "the enemy." I still feel that one of the important roles we play as the VOW is to keep in touch with women as much as we can, women who are working for peace, wherever they are working, all over the world. During the Vietnam war, there was a committee in Toronto that had a lot of women, who were not members of VOW, knitting dark-colored garments for children who could not play outdoors in the daytime, because if they were seen in light-colored clothes they would be shot at. VOW would send these women information and try to give them a more accurate picture of what was happening in Vietnam. Too many people count on what the daily newspaper says. A function of VOW has always been to exchange ideas about what's worth reading and getting people to read it so that they can be better informed.

Evie: What are some of the other Canadian or international peace organizations that you were involved in or in contact with?

Betty: I was a very active member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) in the States and after I came to Canada as well. In 1983 I went to Europe with a group who were mostly Americans, but there were also a couple of Canadians, to protest at the NATO headquarters and participate in the big peace march in Brussels with women from all over the world. Then I got on a train and went to West Germany, East Germany, and then coming back I went to the women's camp in England, Greenham Common. It was quite exciting to meet women from all over the world who were working for the same thing. When I came back to Canada there were so many good groups that I thought I couldn't

keep up with everything. There was the International Fellowship of Reconciliation and The International War Resisters League and, many others and, of course, there were Quaker groups all over the world.

Muriel: Besides VOW I belong to the United Nations Association of Canada and the National Anti-Poverty Organization, OXFAM, and the NDP. In addition, I support several other groups. When I was president of VOW, I went in 1967 to the Soviet Union and I couldn't believe I was there, me, this little farm girl from Quebec, expected to speak for VOW. There were women there from all over the world at this international conference of women for peace. In 1975, the first UN conference on women was held in Mexico City; in 1980 the second one was held in Copenhagen. I represented VOW at the first, and both VOW and Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW) at the second. This web of women all over the world is very strong.

"Here I Stand, I Can Do No Other"

Marie: What sustains your involvement in the peace movement?

Betty: There's such need and you just have to keep going and keep involved.... The company of other people working hard, and especially women, is something that keeps me going. My involvement with the Quakers is very sustaining to me. Quakers believe that you owe something to the world for being here. So, you have faith that things are going to get better and I think in the long run they will, but you also have to put your faith into practice and get your hands and your feet moving towards that end and not give up.

Muriel: I've often quoted Martin Luther when he said "Here I stand, I can do no other." It's something inside that cannot be set aside. I couldn't live any other way. Now I haven't got the energy to do what I used to do. I have to live with that. On the other hand, I just could not look at myself in the mirror if I didn't renounce violence, devote myself to peace, love justice, and nurture. There are so many people out there who believe as I do. Many of them are my friends. I have to stand beside them. I am especially grateful to the Quakers and feminist pacifists in my life.

I had a very good experience this summer when 14 women came to my cottage in Quebec for the weekend just so we could sit in a circle and talk. These women were all are very concerned with social justice and peace issues and they came from Toronto, Ottawa, Halifax and Cambridge, Mass. Somebody asked me, "did you solve the world's problems?" We didn't solve the world problems but we were dealing with the problems you have trying to solve the world's problems. I believe, as Betty has said, that small groups are essential for working towards changing the world, groups where you would come together as equals and there is no-one at the top telling you what to think. You're there in a small group working things out among yourselves. The more people we can get doing that, the better chance we have for a decent world where people have the courage to say we will have nothing to do with war because it is the total destruction of life. This is essential to a culture of peace.

Grassroots Organizing for Peace: A Web of Women

Evie: What do you think are the major peace issues today and conflict situations where women around the world are involved and struggling to have a say in peacemaking?

Betty: I am totally absorbed in the crisis in the Middle East for the moment. I am so filled with admiration with what women are doing about peace—mothers of the disappeared in South America and the Women in Black in Israel and now all over the world. U.S. groups are picking up on this. There are many Women in Black groups, all over the world, and women's groups believing that peacemaking starts in the home. Some well-known women like Aung Sung Suu Kyi, for one, and Arundhati Roy for another, are speaking out as has Mary Robinson who has just resigned from the U.N. Human Rights Commission. Strong women like that are role models for us, speaking about issues, reaching out to other women across borders. Women are really leading the way. Also, there were two women, one from Palestine and one from Israel who came over last spring and actually spoke to the UN Security Council—all men— urging that women be included in peace negotiations.

Marie: What further roles could women play in peacebuilding? How could Canadian women in particular promote peace and solidarity in Canada and peace activism in other parts of the world?

Muriel: It is essential that women are represented equally with men at negotiations at the UN. I'm quite sure that very different conclusions would be reached if there were 50 percent of women. Politically, of course, it's very difficult to get in. We are not very good in Canada. We do not have a very good representation of women in politics. It takes a lot of courage for women to get involved. By the way, I should mention that Alexa (McDonough?)[6] signed that wonderful petition that has been circulating in Canada that says that war is no longer acceptable as a means of settling issues. I think we in the peace movement should keep feeding Alexa and the other women in parliament information for their role there.

Every year the VOW takes about 20 women from Canada to the United Nations. They go with questions, they go with ideas, and they stay for almost a week, visiting several of the different branches of the United Nations and having discussions with them.

Rosalie Bertell[7] did an excellent series of lectures in English in Norway about the whole nuclear thing and how dangerous it is. The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW) is arranging to get the

lectures on videotape into Canada because it seems terribly important for everybody to have them available. People are not paying enough attention. A lot of people now have no idea what nuclear war really means.

In addition, we should urge our government to push for action on the UN Council resolution 1325 "Women and Peace and Security" passed in October 2000. This resolution calls for the increased representation of women at all decision-making levels and for "gender mainstreaming throughout peacekeeping missions" as well as "special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence." It is also high time to get out of NATO which has been VOW's position from the beginning, as well as the NDP's position. We should urge our government to get out from under U.S. militarism and empire-building. It will be costly but it is the only way. Children in Afghanistan, Sudan, Rwanda, Iraq, India, and Colombia are as precious as our children and our neighbours' children. Our government must never support sanctions. Economic sanctions are weapons of mass destruction. We should demand that our government take part in creating a culture of peace.

Betty: I belong to the Committee of Canadians, Arabs and Jews for A Just Peace in the Middle East and we are in close touch with people in Israel and also in Palestine. We are trying to give them as much hope as we can but it is a very difficult situation. It has been so painful for me, working in this field now, to be misunderstood by Jewish friends who have the perception that if you are appalled by what Israel is doing in the world today you are anti-Jewish. It just strikes to the heart. In the group End the Sanctions in Iraq we work closely with groups in Canada and the States exchanging ideas and speakers.... Those are the two biggest issues the world is confronting right now. People are interested in these things so we organize and pull people together whenever we can.

The Politics of Governments and the Politics of People After 9/11

Evie: What do you think should be the immediate strategies of the peace movement in Canada and globally to address the current buildup for war? What should we be doing here in Canada to promote the cause of peace?

Betty: These are very tough times. A lot of people, myself included, are quite distressed. Since coming back from Cape Breton, however, I am encouraged by the number of things that I hear are going on both in the States and in Canada. Small groups of people are feeding into larger groups of people. One of the things I was reading said that the numbers of the anti-globalization group had dropped considerably because people are not yet certain that they want to combine their cause with peace. They are strictly anti-World Trade Organization-IMF and the World Bank. I hadn't realized that that many people were still holding back. This marvelous strong group of people who have been protesting, thousands and thousands of people, are concerned about globalization. We need to get them to spread their vision a little wider and realize that if we go to war everything else gets thrown out the window. We all have to protest going to war. It is important to see the connection between globalization and war. They are completely dependent upon each other and the way they subsidize the building of arms and the sales of arms.[8]

Muriel: War is terrorism. The American government thinks it is talking against terrorism but everything they say the other side could be said about them. My daughter is very active in the peace movement in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She belongs to a group that came out of 9/11. A lot of them are relatives of people who died at that time. You probably heard the slogan, "Not in My Name," which is a very powerful response that came out of that group. They meant they were opposed to a retaliatory response by the U.S. government in their name. This last weekend there were great big anti-war rallies all over the place. There was one in Boston. I didn't see it in the paper,but I heard about it from my daughter. There were about 20,000 people there and the papers didn't mention it. Maybe one of the things we should be doing is bugging the newspapers. Canadian people need to know about things like this.

Betty: We haven't talked about non-violence and it's a big subject. One writer that I admire a lot, Jonathan Steele started off by "daring to dream in Jerusalem." He envisioned thousands of Palestinians marching out of Jenin, heading toward Nablus, Jerusalem, and Ramallah. They march toward the first checkpoint and the soldiers are all shouting "stop!" but they don't stop. The soldiers shoot and some people fall dead, but they keep coming and they keep coming, and pretty soon they are joined by thousands of Israelis and international people and then the soldiers don't dare shoot at them. They keep moving, there's no stopping them. This is civil disobedience, this is non-violence. He said, of course this is only a dream, this has not happened, but it could. I thought of this in connection with the last question—the need to be totally non-violent and to support the non-violent efforts.... In this case, to know a lot of people are with you, really helps.

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