

A path to peace: Worcester woman sees global conflict resolution as life's mission

By Nancy Sheehan, *Worcester Living*
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It can be hard for many of us to imagine that peace could ever come to this war-torn world, but Virginia Swain can picture it clearly.

“There can be peace in the world when we find peace within ourselves,” said Swain, 78, who has spent decades as a peace builder through teaching conflict transformation and resolution skills. “I’ll never stop believing in peace and I’ll never stop working to make it possible.”

To that end, Swain founded the Institute for Global Leadership in Worcester in 2001 and served many years as a consultant at the United Nations in New York City promoting nonviolent communication and nonviolent action.

Today, she continues her work as director of the Institute for Global Leadership and offers life and career direction for professionals and leaders through her website, VirginiaSwain.com.

The roots of Swain’s vision of nonviolence run deep.

“I have to admit I’m a pacifist,” she said. “I’m Episcopalian and Quaker and the Quakers don’t believe in war at all. But I think that it’s really important for people to realize that there are alternatives.”

Swain founded the Institute for Global Leadership in Worcester in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy. The institute, according to its mission statement, provides confidential, compassionate and skilled guidance, consultation and training to help leaders and teams through change, challenges and crises.

On its 20th anniversary last October, the institute honored one of its graduates in reconciliation leadership, Sarah Sayeed, chair and executive director of the New York City Civic Engagement Commission.

“A community can only be created when people trust one another,” Sayeed said, of her experience with the Institute. “For trust to be mutual and solid and foundational, people must believe in each other’s reliability ... I was looking around for different approaches to conflict resolution and found the one that Virginia has been teaching with the Institute for Global Leadership.”

The beginning of spiritual journey

Swain grew up in West Hartford, Connecticut. She attended Colby Sawyer College and received bachelor's and master's degrees from Lesley University.

After college, she entered the Peace Corps, serving as a teacher in Liberia, West Africa, from 1964-66. She received the Third Goal award from the Returned Peace Corps Volunteers. The award recognized her for outstanding service in intercultural understanding in Worcester and the United Nations.

While attending her master's degree graduation at Lesley University in Cambridge, Swain was introduced to her future husband, Joseph Baratta, by a mutual friend.

"I knew the minute I met him he was the one," she said.

The couple lived in Cambridge from 1993 to 1999 when they moved to Worcester because Baratta had just been appointed a professor in political science at Worcester State University. (He retired in 2018.)

Swain has a son, Tad, an economics professor at SUNY/Brockport in western New York, and two grandchildren, Alex, 18, and Isabelle, 15. Swain and her husband also have adopted a family from Africa.

"They have enriched our lives," Swain said. "They have two children, ages 7 and 14, that we call our grandchildren."

One of the defining moments of Swain's life was when her brother was killed by a drunk driver in August 1979. Decades later, she came to realize that his tragic death taught her how to live, although that future sense of rebirth was hidden from her at the time. Within a year of her brother's death, she experienced two more devastating events – the death of her father and the end of her first marriage. The cumulative trauma induced a spiritual crisis, she says.

"I cut off all my relationships — nobody could approach me. I was hanging on to life by a thread — obsessed by the thought of death and angered by incredible loss," Swain wrote in an essay about death and new beginnings. "In retrospect, I see now that this was the beginning of my spiritual journey. It was in this darkness, so bleak, this emptiness, so vast, where I began my search for a personal relationship with God."

Wisdom from Hopi elder

Swain gained clarity on her mission in life after meeting the late Thomas Banyacya, one of four Hopi elders who, after the atomic bombing of Japan in World War II, decided it was time to share the Hopis' long-secret wisdom teachings with the public and reveal their prophecies for the planet and mankind. He had come to the UN in 1992 and Swain was assigned to escort him throughout his visit.

“The speech he delivered at the UN changed my life,” she said. “He spoke eloquently on the need to change our consciousness and come into right relationship with the Earth and its resources.”

After meeting him, incorporating reconciliation leadership training became a foundation of her work both at the UN and locally. She also realized reconciliation on an individual and mass scale would be key to avoiding the apocalyptic future the Hopis foresaw if human anger, fear and hostility remained dominant forces.

“I realized the importance of having a sense of what transcends us. Thomas called it the Great Spirit and many other spiritual people call it other things,” she said. “Meeting him was so pivotal for me because he gave the vision of what's going to happen to our Earth if we don't have that sense — and that was a very long time ago, but here we are on the edge of that.”

Swain has developed methods of reconciliation training that help break the cycle of blame and anger and the escalating conflict that results from that.

“Most people think that you can resolve a conflict at the level that it was created. You cannot do that and many famous people have said that,” she said. “You have to use your imagination. So, in meditation, I take people into their imaginations and ask them to imagine the solution to the problem that most bothers them. And then they walk backwards from there and make a timeline and an action plan. So, it becomes a strategic visioning process where they walk out the door with an action step.”

Support for Building Civic Bridges Act

Swain, like so many of us, sees the great need for reconciliation on a wider scale in America, a country so divided politically that progress has become all but impossible on the grave issues that face us. To that end, she strongly supports the Building Civic Bridges Act (HR 6843), a bill introduced by nine Democrats and nine Republicans, led by U.S. Rep. Derek Kilmer, D-Washington.

The bill, Swain says, is a bipartisan effort to build relationships across lines of difference and forge a sense of common civic purpose. It would create a nonpartisan pilot program within AmeriCorps to support community civic bridge building through grants, training, research and public conversations.

An example where it might have been helpful to call in such a reconciliation team is a conflict between Clark University students and Worcester Police during a protest over the killing of George Floyd in June 2020. Four students were arrested and protesters claimed police used riot gear and pepper spray. For their part, police said the crowd had gone beyond the bounds of a peaceful protest and become unruly, even throwing fireworks and Roman candles at officers.

“That would be an example of how AmeriCorps volunteers could go in and talk to them and get them talking and listening,” Swain said. “Listening is so big. How do people really listen without

having to agree with them? It's really a skill. The idea is brokering in a mediation kind of way, listening to both sides and helping them come to conclusion in a nonviolent way.”

Security comes from within

On a personal level, another inspiration for Swain was Dag Hammarskjöld, a highly respected Swedish economist who served as the second Secretary-General of the United Nations from April 1953 until his death in a plane crash in September 1961. Hammarskjöld espoused that a true sense of security comes from within us, not from having a big military or lots of police or other protective outward forces. During her years at the UN, Swain often visited a meditation room that was dedicated in Hammarskjöld’s honor.

“The Dag Hammarskjöld meditation room at the UN was kind of pivotal for me because I often introduced it to people who worked there who would run by the room and didn't even notice it,” Swain said. “They were all so busy and running everywhere, so I got them to stop and reflect. The ability to reflect is key and I had to learn that myself. I'm very extroverted and I think that a lot of American leadership has been very extroverted without reflection skills to the detriment of the world. And I know because I've worked on six continents.”

Swain also had to work to develop that inner sense of security Hammarskjöld believed was such an important precursor to creating peace in the outer world.

“To do that, I've developed what I call my inner voice. When I listen to that inner voice, I'm very reassured at an inner level. And then that's what I help other people do — to trust that. I think if people would trust that more and develop it more and take the time for reflection to listen to the inner voice, then we can, first, deescalate ourselves. We often don't even realize how much a part of this mess we are because of some of the things that we do when we're angry or upset.”

Even as concepts of nonviolence such as those Swain teaches continue to spread, not everyone in the world will necessarily be on the same peaceful page at the same time. The war in Ukraine offers a glaring example.

“There's something called ‘sound pacifism’ where limited military aid is necessary,” Swain said. “In the case of Hitler, it was necessary, and I do think that Putin must be stopped. So, I believe in sound pacifism where you intervene in situations with military force but only as a last resort.”

Swain believes the power of nonviolence is actually stronger and that it will eventually be victorious where armies fail.

“Without understanding of the power of nonviolence, where are we going to end up?” she said. “I mean, look where we are right now. The League of Nations, which is the predecessor of the UN, ended when one country invaded another country. Italy invaded Ethiopia. So, look at where we are right now. One country in the UN has invaded another country in the UN. We're at the same crisis. It's history repeating itself. We have to try other ways.”