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A JOURNEY INTO THE FUTURE: IMAGINING A NONVIOLENT WORLD¹

Elise Boulding

The inspiration for this essay came to me after a daylong workshop on Imagining a Nonviolent World which I offered for prisoners at the Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Norfolk on a wintry Saturday morning. This type of imaging workshop first evolved in the late 1970s, as I began to realize that we peace activists, working to bring about a nonviolent world without war, really had no idea how a world in which armies had disappeared would function. How could we work to bring about something we could not even see in our imaginations? Stepping back into the 1950s in my own mind, I remembered translating Fred Polak's *Image of the Future* from the Dutch original, a macrohistorical analysis that showed a war-paralyzed and depressed Europe how past societies in bad situations but with positive images of the future had been empowered by their own imaginations to work to bring the imaged future about. Here was a possible answer!

I worked with Warren Ziegler and other colleagues to develop a workshop format that took people 30 years into the future – to a world at peace. The format allowed time for imaginative exploration of 'how things worked' in that future, followed by a remembering, looking back from this future to the present to imagine how all this peaceableness had come about. The workshops always closed with time for personal commitments to action in the present to help bring about the future participants had pictured. We found that this type of workshop actually empowered people in their peace activism.

But these workshops had involved participants free to be change agents in their world. How could prisoners imagine a more caring world, let alone see themselves as agents to bring those changes about? To make the leap into the future less daunting, I chose ten rather than 30 years as the time span. How would they deal with 2010 in their imaginations? Well, I found out. After explaining about the failed hopes from peace and justice efforts in the past and the new hopes for peace and justice action as we stood on the threshold of the twenty-first century, I asked them what they might hope to find in 2010. Through individual reflection and small group discussion, they constructed a list of hopes. The first major theme in their hopes was:

To be at peace with ourselves and one another and the world in which we live. To recognize, understand, communicate what is going on.

Further themes followed:

There should be a peaceful environment for all mankind: no wars, hunger, homelessness, disease, violence, racism, no TV commercials and no pollution.

People listen to and respect one another. There is equality, just laws and freedom from fear.

Life is local; families are peaceful. There is strong community feeling and conflict resolution. People help each other and have fun together.

Those were the hopes expressed for what might be found in the future. The hopes themselves were more well-defined than I had expected. What their imaginations revealed when they mentally traveled into the future and then drew pictures of what they imagined, was deeply moving. Prison walls had melted away and all the beauties of nature and the life of free humans stood revealed: open countryside, trees, bushes, flowers, distant mountains, lakes and rivers, farmlands, with houses dotting the landscape, often a church in sight. A few drawings pictured villages, malls with shops and people walking about in the malls. One of the most striking features of these pictures was the presence of sunlight and other sources of light: lamps, candles, lighthouses and beacon lights.

Everywhere in these pictures were friendly, often smiling people – walking in couples, bicycling, singing, dancing, playing games, working in small groups, fishing by a lake, growing food, offering helping hands to each other, walking to church, seated in meditation and praying. One picture revealed housing being built for the homeless; another, the opening up and transformation of a prison. Two pictured bombs dropping on a city with the caption, “THIS MUST NOT HAPPEN!” The absence of cars in these pictures was notable.

The themes of open green spaces, the beauty of nature, sunlight, friendly sociability and joyful activity had significant similarities to the themes in the pictured futures of workshop participants that I had been collecting for years. Whether the participants were peace and social change activists, members of women’s, youth or church groups, diplomats, soldiers, scholars or teachers, their pictures suggested a bright, clean, green world and conveyed the ‘feel’ of a joyful local community in which people delight in celebrations, in caring for others. Why should I have been surprised that prisoners could imagine that same world? Whatever impacts prison had on their lives, these men who participated in the weekly Meetings for Worship at Norfolk had vibrant social and spiritual imaginations.

After the participants had worked together in groups of four or five to develop more details about the kind of changes in economic, political and social institutions that would keep this peaceful world functioning, each group was asked to present a short pantomime that would convey what it was like to live in that future. Once again, the liveliness of their imaginations showed through. The pantomimes of

facing differences and resolving them peacefully, of cooperation in difficult tasks, of going from loneliness to joyful community, could have been the pantomimes produced in very different workshops settings.

The *Remembering History* exercise was done with the same zest. The future they had delineated was of course one that would have required at least the 30-year time lapse specified in the usual *Imagining a Nonviolent World* workshop, but since the decision had been taken to set the imagined future only ten years away, there was a tacit acceptance of a strategy of speeding up time!

Standing mentally in the peaceful, prison-free 2010, the participants 'remembered' what had happened over the previous decade. In 2009 (just last year) there had been a great celebration of the emergence of a new personal/global consciousness which was making power struggles obsolete; also a more effective successor to the UN was now functioning – a system of local-global governance. The last nuclear weapons were now destroyed and prisons transformed into rehabilitation centers. The year 2003 saw contact with beings in outer space, a surge in community dancing and music-making, the end of substance abuse and the implosion of the Pentagon. The year 2007 saw reparations to African-Americans, replacement of private cars by public transport, decline in materialism, elimination of the U.S. arms budget and its replacement by equivalent funding of peacebuilding activities including the work of the UN successor organization. This year also saw the achievement of zero population growth for the planet. The year 2006 witnessed the return to Native American peoples by the United States government of the lands previously taken from them; the development of a global food distribution system that drastically reduced hunger and human services that drastically reduced homelessness. Also a *real* Middle East peace treaty was signed by all the countries of the world. In 2005 the successor organization to the UN was able to administer effective pollution controls and people now enjoyed clean air. Human needs budgets and health services greatly increased, along with global immunization against AIDS, as did overall life chances for those who had been poor. In 2004 the process began of dismantling prisons as punitive institutions, and crime rates dropped drastically. The increase in human services, public housing and education began equalizing opportunities for people everywhere. City playgrounds were now safe spaces.

In 2003 the new successor organization to the UN, known as the ESO, or Earth Survival Organization, established an Educational Resources Council to improve learning worldwide and made recycling of all processed goods universally mandatory. Social movements worldwide emphasized the importance of public celebration, dancing and support of all the arts. Hopeful attitudes toward the future began to replace earlier despair, and greed declined. In 2002 the United Nations was officially transformed into the Earth Survival Organization (ESO), accompanied by great celebrations and dancing everywhere. All technological development was now shifted toward saving the planet. A gradual exodus from prisons is under way as new community support systems develop that enable former prisoners to rejoin their families and share their wisdom with their communities.

The year 2001 witnessed a global ban on the production and deployment of nuclear weapons by a changing and evolving UN, and the development of national

gun control programs in every country. The logging industry comes to an end as wood substitutes are developed, and the world's forests are saved. The Internet involves more and more citizens worldwide in communications systems that support cooperation and peace. Power struggles no longer attract adherents. In 2000 the United States elects its first woman president, and moves toward being a softer, gentler nation. The seeds of a new consciousness are being sown. The environmental and peace movements become allies. Are these the kinds of issues and developments prisoners think about during long years behind bars? For the prisoners in this workshop, the answer is yes.

The point of 'remembering history', working back from the future to the present, is to help participants decide what action strategies they personally will commit themselves to in the present, in order to bring the desired future about. What kind of freedom of action do prisoners have? What could they possibly commit to? Each participant contributed his own thoughts on this and six action themes could be identified from their statements. By far the most frequently mentioned action theme was (1) inner peace and personal development. This was expressed in the following phrases: Find inner peace; find out who I am; get more grounded; develop myself physically, spiritually, mentally; continue studies; read sacred literature; become more forgiving, more patient and more nonviolent; stay focused; and deal righteously.

The next two most frequently mentioned themes were, respectively: (2) tell people good things; help others; share with family and friends; network with others, and (3) speak up when necessary; share my truths with the world; write letters; write a book. At least two people proposed the next two themes: (4) work with AVP (Alternatives to Violence Program) and (5) respond directly to bad situations when things go amiss. Lastly, theme (6) was a commitment to more ecological awareness, to consuming less. Challenging commitments, all of them!

That persons with such severe limitations on their daily activities and personal space can not only visualize a positive future for the society which has in so many ways rejected them, but have the inner resources and moral integrity to consider concrete personal actions that could help bring about such a future, suggests how vastly we underestimate the capacities and potentials of our fellow human beings. These human capacities are to be found among the men and women incarcerated in the prisons of our country. Kenneth Boulding always used to say, "what exists, is possible". We have many more potential co-workers in the task of building a more peaceful world than we ever knew.

Endnotes

1. This article is a slightly edited version of the article which originally appeared in the *Friends Journal* in December 1999.