

The Creation of a Framework for a More Enduring World Peace

Betty Reardon

Transcript of 1985 Interview on Quest for Peace

Betty Reardon is Coordinator of the Peace Education Program at Teacher's College, Columbia University, and Director of the Peacemaking and Education Program of The United Ministries in Education. Today she shares some of her central views on the quest for peace.

Whiteley: You've indicated that peace is a practical possibility. You've singled out two aspects of American society for analysis. First is 'militarism' and the second is 'sexism'. Let's take those one at a time. What's the basis of your critique of militarism?

Reardon: Well I believe that militarism is a value system, and it's a value system which says that human beings basically need to be kept in order by force, and that some people have a natural right to use that force in order to do that. They're better equipped to decide what's best for the rest of us. And so the more militarized a society is, the greater the dependence on force, or the threat of force, to maintain order and to proceed along achieving the goals of the society. Our society supposedly is based on a different assumption, and that is that all people have the capacity to contribute to the order and the decisions about what the society is going to be about, and how we are going to pursue our goals. And what has been happening throughout the world, but I think very notably in this society since the Second World War, is that we have moved more toward the acceptance of militarism which is a profound contradiction with our basic social norms and values.

So that it's not only using military means to solve essentially political or economic problems, which the peace movement decries and many people are worried about, but it's the whole way in which we live our day-to-day lives with that assumption that force is necessary and we will give up other values in order to maintain that force. And that pervades our lives. It's not only in the arms race; it is in all of our human relationships. There's always that element of competition and threat, and I think that's something that has to be addressed if we're talking about making peace a real possibility.

Whiteley: One aspect of the way the United States copes with this problem internally is with a Rule of Law, with a constitutional framework. But we exist internationally in a set of nation states characterized by largely anarchic relationships, and in a very dangerous world where there are threats. How do you make a transition to a world that is free from the kinds of coercion that you talk about when it is dangerous out there?

Reardon: Well I think it goes back to what I said originally. The first thing we have to do is decide that that's what we want to do. I mean we really (I think) haven't yet made a commitment to survival, or to getting on with the business of what the human species is all about. I think there are a lot of signs that that decision is being made by various groups throughout the planet, and they are beginning, as I indicated before, to behave as if it were possible and to do things to make it possible. I don't think that we necessarily have to assume that we have to move from the

anarchy of the war system that we have now as the planetary order into some planetary law system, but I do believe that we have to decide that we will live and value the notion of world community, the fact that the world is a single system, not only ecologically, economically, and in fact, politically. The way we interact even in the competition, it is a single system.

And what we have to do I think, is determine not only the commitment to making that single system the reality for our political and social lives, but to figure out what's the best way to do it. I mean it might be that it's something other than the Rule of Law. We just assume that because this society determined that, or Western societies in general have determined that, law would try to replace force, or should have precedence over force. And it worked for us to reduce levels of violence within the society and so forth. That will work on the larger system, but as you know, it's a very conflictual one, there are many cultural differences, many ideas of what law is and how it should function. But it could be a possibility. But again I think we've got to look at what are the whole range of possibilities, and what would be best for the whole planet because that is now the unit of survival.

Whiteley: But for you the first step is a will to have it differently, a choosing of a different alternative to begin with.

Reardon: Yes. I think of it as choosing the reality; I mean saying yes to what is, you know. We are a single species; it is one planet that we inhabit and what we have to do as a species is assent to that and recognize and behave as if we are one.

Whiteley: The second part of your critique (militarism was the first) was sexism. What's the relationship of sexism to the problem of peace.

Reardon: Well I think that militarism and sexism are in a way part of the same problem, and it goes back to the notion that human differences determine human worth, rather than having decided that the variety of human differences is just a rich kind of thing for us to exploit and enjoy. We've come to use human differences as a way of arranging people in a hierarchy of social and human value. And right now the whole planet is organized so that the most valuable human beings are male, European, urban, and technologically proficient. So if you've got all of those characteristics you're on the top. And one of the other aspects is that human differences arranged hierarchically are so antithetical to what I feel is the natural way for humans to relate to each other that there has to be force to keep that hierarchical system in order.

And one of the major first and foremost distinctions of a higher from lower status, on the basis of human characteristics, was the male/female. And the whole playing out of the idea that men are more socially valuable than women, and that what men are capable of doing is more to the advantage of society than women, has resulted in a whole system of sexism which basically says that the sex that you're born with is going to determine all of your life, and it's much better to be born male than female. And that system of difference in hierarchical rank is maintained either by the existence or the threat of force, which is the same kind of thing that operates in militarism. And my basic feeling is that we have to look at the interrelationships between these two problems, and a whole variety of problems, in order to get a fix on resolving and getting beyond the problem of war. And, of course, I would think anyone would understand that related to this

also are the problems of racism, colonialism, any of those belief systems and structures which are based on using human difference to arrange people in a hierarchical order.

Whiteley: And the problem of the use of force.

Reardon: Yeah, and the basic notion that force, rather than the recognition of common interest and consensus is what we need to keep enough order to keep the society going.

Whiteley: In your thinking, why would a less sexist society be a more peaceful society? What are the connections?

Reardon: Well, first and foremost, the basic one that if we (for example) made up our mind that we really were going to confront sexism, we'd look at it and see where it is in ourselves as well as in the society, and try to engage in processes that would reverse it, which would mean that we would have to take a direct look at this hierarchical order. We'd have to look at the way in which force - threat of force - maintains that system, but we'd also have to look very closely at not what only the undoing of negative things; we can begin to look at some of the opening up of the positive possibilities. And what I see as the positive possibilities is a releasing into the whole human social experience and political experience all of the skills that women have had to develop because of the social responsibilities that women have had; the skills of looking at the whole unit of whatever human group you're concerned with, determining what's best for them, recognizing that it is not good for them to be in destructive competition with each other. Women spend a lot of time intervening between and among children, between fathers and children, and that kind of things. Whole range of skills are there, skills that we need.

Another thing we need to do is to use those kind of criteria that I mentioned about looking at the good of the whole to make decisions about what you do with the resources available for the nation and for the planet in order to (1) recognize that humans do have equal value, although they're very different, and should be nurtured and cared for; and (2) that the more we can nurture and care for them the more in turn that they can contribute. Now those are just two small examples of things that we call 'feminine characteristics' or 'feminine traits.' And these characteristics have been socialized into women; women are brought up to be nurturing, to try to resolve conflict amicably, and those kinds of things. And I think those are skills that we now need in the public order, and we've got to take them out of being relegated only to the domestic, to the intimate, and begin to project them to the public and to the social sphere.

Whiteley: Part of your critique of education has been what the school-age child learns from the first day. What is that?

Reardon: Well, I think the school-age child learns from the first day that to succeed means to submit yourself to the order and authority in the community that you're in. And that's the primary thing, rather than what your conscience (and I think there's some sense of conscience and concern from the youngest age) leads you to believe is right. That right will be what the teacher says is right, that you have a place and your place is at your seat; that there are appropriate times to express yourself and other times that are not, and those are determined by what the authority says; and that the more you please the authority by making higher numbers on

your tests or being very quiet at the appropriate times and so forth, the more you will succeed. That success is acknowledging and behaving according to the rules laid down by the authority.

Whiteley: You're calling for a fundamental reordering of the process of education to a more egalitarian form. That's the process; what about the content? What should the content of education be for peace?

Reardon: The content should be about the major problems that we face as a human species. I think that primary among those problems is the emphasis on what I call 'negative, destructive competition.' The shift from competitive to cooperative modes of learning is very important. I think we know that we learn from each other and we learn together, and yet we don't organize our educational system that way. We organize it as if 'I can learn more than you by doing my thing.' And I think we have to begin to educate in that way. And that the content relates very much to teaching people how to cooperate in a way which enriches them, brings forth their gifts, and then to help them to identify those problems that stand in the way of individual and group human fulfillment. And that we begin to look at education not so much as handing on what we have decided is important, but bringing forth the capacity to deal with the unprecedented problems as well as some of the traditional problems in a new way, and to setting out as the task of education the eliciting of learning for peace, learning to build a global community. Now we've had experience with this kind of thing; I mean education for nation building. Every nation state in the world has decided that there are certain things that have to be learned by the people of that nation if the nation is going to achieve its goals, going to survive and so forth.

Whiteley: And you're calling for that same approach to education on a global scale.

Reardon: Yeah. I think that we have to begin to conceptualize education globally, and we have to be consciously nurturing global peace learning. And by that I mean learning the things that make for peace: conflict resolution, modes of cooperation, cross-cultural understanding, and if needs be, various new modes of maintaining security and defense that are non-lethal, non-violent.

Whiteley: What should the curriculum be in a high school if it's to educate for peace?

Reardon: Well, I think it would be informed by these same sort of general criteria, but I think it's very very important that secondary school curricula give students specific information about the nature of global crises, about the arms race, about the problems that beset the planet, about the infractions of human rights, about the structural impediments to human fulfillment for half of the human race - for women, for the impoverished throughout the world, for the impoverished in our own society. I think that particularly in the United States children at that age where they're beginning to formulate their political world views should understand the role of the United States in the present world order to begin to get a vision of what they - their people - can contribute to making another stage of the human experience on this planet; wherein some of the values that are our traditional values about the equality of persons, about the right to fulfillment, are going to be the norms for the planet, and going to be the norms for the way we behave on the planet. So there's a lot of hard content there but also a continuation of a very strong set of community values.

Whiteley: In the context of quoting President Kennedy to the effect that ‘mankind must put an end to war before war puts an end to mankind’ you’ve focused on the significant role that higher education can play in education for peace. What should that role be?

Reardon: Well I think that higher education should be doing a good deal of the conceptualization of possible solutions. And by that I don’t mean turning out specific answers, but higher education is not asking any of the right questions. I think, for example, if we look at what universities teach about the issue of national security, they’re asking questions about the efficacy of weapons systems, the cost of weapons systems. If they get very far out they talk in terms of the possibility of reduction of weapons systems, of certain forms of arms control and that kind of thing, rather than asking the fundamental question of ‘what will make this nation and the world most secure? In what ways can we defend our values without doing lethal damage to ourselves, to our opponent and to the planet?’

And you know, that’s in a way sort of simplistic and general but it’s the kind of starting point; the universities where, or should be, where we generate new knowledge. They should be about the search for new knowledge which is raising the appropriate questions, and keep raising new and relevant questions according to the way the problems present themselves. And at best, most universities are raising the questions that were asked from 1945 to 1955, and I say that’s at best. But I also have to say that there is a great hope in the university, and there are many more institutions beginning to attend to this, largely as a result of individual academics beginning to reflect upon what their knowledge, what their field can possibly contribute to formulating these questions and pursuing possible alternative responses to the problems.

Whiteley: And you’ve indicated that of peace education efforts, the absolutely most significant new development is disarmament education. What form should that take?

Reardon: Well, I think the forms that it should take are those which are embraced by what the U.N. has undertaken in what’s called the World Disarmament Campaign, which was the only positive thing in my opinion, and the opinion of others, that came out of the second Special Session that the United Nations devoted to disarmament. And what they determined was that if we are going to achieve disarmament we have to have a massive education program that will ultimately reach every citizen of the planet. And what it involves is understanding the nature of the arms race (what causes it, what it is doing); understanding conceptually what is meant by disarmament, how it differs from the present mode of arms control; just keeping the thing from getting out of hand, but changing that process of looking at what are the obstacles to disarmament; what are the possible steps to achieving it; what is the general framework in which we look at the issues, general and complete disarmament, various proposals for piecemeal measures; all of the kinds of possibilities that exist. And that we should be looking at this as a major planetary problem that we have said over and over again that the arms race is going to do us in.

So we have to begin to look at ways of addressing that problem as a common planetary problem and to understand that disarmament, like peace, although it’s only a component of peace, is possible if we think it’s possible and begin to behave as if it were. And there are any number of proposals and possibilities for disarmament with step-by-step proposals for achieving it. But

what the World Disarmament Campaign wants to do is to get people to think about that, to engage in the arguments. There are many differences about how to go about doing it, but the point again is to have people make up their mind that we can do this, and that it's worth arguing about, and it's worth learning about; it's worth doing your homework. And so the World Disarmament Campaign is trying to reach universities, schools, adult non-formal groups, churches, media and so forth, and hoping that appropriate materials and methods for helping people to engage in these issues will emerge, and that we will have a planetary learning experience around this particular problem.

Whiteley: In indicating that there is hope, you believe that human nature is ultimately on the side of hope. That the instinct for survival is more than simply a struggle for life.

Reardon: Yeah. I think we struggle for life because we know we're not finished yet, that there is more that we as a human species can be, just as there is more that all of us can be no matter what stage in life we are. And I think that's one of the things that has kept us pursuing this human experience. And one of the things I think we have to be aware of right now is that it's not just a question of not blowing ourselves up, or not just a question of trying not to smother our planet, but a question of recognizing that we probably have a really great future; we can be a lot more. And the point of surviving is to fulfill that probability and to envision what some of the possibilities are.

Whiteley: A theme that is recurrent throughout your writings is that people are the hope, and there will be coming a new wave of humanity. What will be the values of that wave?

Reardon: I think the values are the valuing of ourselves and understanding that we are one; we are a mix of positive and negative. That we have done some disastrous horrible things to each other and to ourselves in doing it, to our planet. But that we do have capacities to begin to understand what we are; to begin to be more tolerant - I think we need to be more tolerant of our own shortcomings in order to understand and be more tolerant of those that we have to deal with.

I think one of the problems is that we don't face sometimes the things that we don't like about ourselves, so that we project them on to others. So if we could really understand that by and large we're pretty good, and if I'm pretty good then you're probably pretty good too, you know? And if we put the pretty goods together we really have something really great. And I always like to remind myself of what Anne Frank wrote in her diary. And I think that child had a vision really of what was before her, even what she had been through, and she wrote, as I suppose everybody knows, 'In spite of everything I still believe that people are good.'

Whiteley: Ms. Reardon, thank you for sharing with us today your insights into the quest for peace in the nuclear age.