

## Y.M.C.A. Peace speech

I would like to thank the Y. M. C. A. for this honour. I am very pleased, partly because it is the 2018 award, the centenary of the end of World War I, the war that was supposed to end all wars but instead resulted in perpetuating war up until the present day. I wrote a book on the horrendous emotional, psychological and spiritual devastation of that war, which made me even more determined to tell stories about peace. I'm also pleased to receive this award because writing is such a solitary occupation and also an act of courage. When I write something I never know how it will be received or whether it will even reach an audience, so it is wonderful to have this acknowledgement of my work. This recognition will certainly give me energy to carry on! I would also like to thank Dawne Taylor for nominating me and the others who wrote letters in support of this nomination.

My passion for peace goes back a long time. Peace cannot be achieved without social justice, and I became involved with social justice work from my teenage years, mainly through my involvement in the United Church, which champions tolerance, respect for other faiths, inclusiveness, and compassion.

Over the years while working on social justice issues mainly through Kamloops United Church, I have thought a lot about peace and I want to emphasize a few points about peace today.

1. Peace is not simply a feeling or something you wish for. Peace is something you have to make just like people make war. Peace demands deliberate action. As John Lennon put it so eloquently, "PEACE IS NOT SOMETHING YOU WISH FOR; IT'S SOMETHING YOU MAKE, SOMETHING YOU DO, SOMETHING YOU ARE, AND SOMETHING YOU GIVE AWAY."
2. Action for peace cannot be accomplished by a few but must be collective. We are all in this

together and we all need to be activists. All of us must make choices that will lead to peaceful outcomes, especially when voting. We must vote for the highest principles of tolerance, integrity, and love, and not let fear and distrust taint our decisions. This is especially important now when democracies are being challenged and threatened around the world. Social media can be a very effective tool in advocating for peace, but we also need to build a community of advocates face-to-face. I recently learned that if just 3.5% of a given population advocates for change through nonviolent resistance, the campaign will achieve success. This is based on historical examples. (Erica Chenoweth, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, 2011).

3. Stories about peace, nonviolent resistance, and positive social change need to be told again and again. I would encourage the media to place more emphasis on these stories. Traditionally we have had reporting focused on business, sports, and cars, but why not peace matters? As an English professor, I strongly advocate reading and stress that the imagination is our greatest resource for peace. Reading especially longer works encourage us to develop empathy. We enter into someone else's world and learn of their hopes, desires, challenges. We empathize with them even if we may not agree with their worldview or choices. I am committed to telling stories of justice and peace, with humour, especially since these stories tend to get buried. My play *Mockus* is about a math philosophy professor named Antanas Mockus, who became the Mayor of Bogotá Colombia when it was riddled with crime and he brought about enormous positive change by drawing on creative antics, such as replacing corrupt traffic cops with mimes. My screenplay *Peace Pledge* tells the story of an Anglican priest Dick Sheppard who wrote a letter to the press in Britain in the 1930s asking for people to make a pledge for peace by sending him a postcard. Eventually 136,000 people joined, with advocacy groups throughout the UK, and the Peace Pledge Union still advocates for peace today.
4. Peace is not an isolated issue. Not only can we not achieve peace without social justice, without

bringing about a more equitable society, but we will not surmount the environmental crisis facing us without working on peace. Too many of our resources are devoted to military spending -- \$1.7 trillion dollars worldwide per year and 25 billion in Canada – to say nothing of environmental devastation caused by war. Resources need to be redirected towards environmental restoration, and I would even go so far as to advocate for the military to make environmental work its primary purpose, or for the government to create an environmental corps. There's so much work towards creating a more peaceful world that can and should be done, beginning right here in Kamloops. Currently I am working with a group called Kamloops Blue Dot Network. We will soon be collecting signatures with the aim of encouraging our city to become a Blue Dot community, as 172 communities across the country already have. The aim is to get the rights to clean water, air and healthy food enshrined in the Canadian Bill of Human Rights. Please see the Suzuki Foundation Blue Dot campaign for more details. I will end by quoting a couple of favourite writers who advocated for positive change throughout their lives: First, George Bernard Shaw, who said, “Peace is not only better than war, but infinitely more arduous.” Second, Canon Dick Sheppard, founder of the Peace Pledge Union, who answered critics claiming that peace was too costly to achieve, that it necessitated too many sacrifices: “Not peace at any price but love at all costs.”

George M. Johnson