

## SWORDS TO PLOUGHSHARES

*This narrative is about my personal and professional journey in peacemaking. It is about the work of a task force engaged in persuading government officials that "economic conversion" can combine economic, social and human development. My experience in the democratic planning process (sanctioned and at the same time undermined by public officials) in response to the shutdown of a naval base, taught me more than I have ever known about the context of politics and power. Working to build a world beyond war, and engaging in the local planning process of base closure framed my world view of a peaceful society.*

**By Nancy L. Mary**

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### INTRODUCTION

Raised as a Friend, my ancestors were Quakers. I was nurtured as a peacemaker by my Grandmother Flossie, whose legacy to me was her black velvet jacket and two lessons: "Treat others the way you want to be treated," and "fighting never accomplishes anything." I had opposed the Vietnam War, but as a social worker I didn't become active in anti-war activities until I had a child. It was at the height of the nuclear build-up that I read Jonathan Schells' (1982) description of the horrible effects of a nuclear holocaust and made the connection between my hope for our child and the world she inherits, and the potential demise of the planet. I made a commitment to do something. My first activities, primarily educational, in Beyond War, now the Foundation for Global Community, gave me a new identity. I began to see myself as a citizen, not just of my city or nation, but of the planet. I now wanted to do something that was more tangible and local.

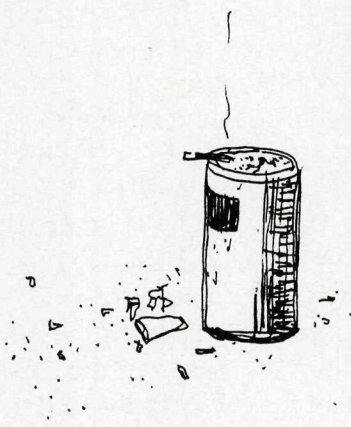
With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 I had hopes for a "peace dividend;" that a shift in the Federal budget from military endeavors to domestic needs might become a reality. So, as a

social worker and a university educator I attended my first meeting of a citywide Peace Network. Thus began my "conversion."

This paper explores my personal journey, and what I learned as a social worker experienced in agency planning, but a neophyte in municipal politics. I have learned lessons in community, power, and economic development in working with local government and making change. I share some of these reflections.

### THE PEACE NETWORK

It was a warm spring night in a room above the First Presbyterian Church that Sam R., a 70-year-old, long time peace activist and local artist convened the meeting of the Peace Network. Representatives of churches, and neighborhood peace organizations were brainstorming the theme of an upcoming August (1991) annual event. Should we do another Hiroshima walk or candlelight vigil? The possibilities of a peace dividend were put forth along with the idea of "economic conversion." Sam asked us if we knew about the local Naval Base and its landing on the Federal Base Closure Commission's hit list. No one appeared to know how to proceed, and Sam said,





"I've got a folder of great stuff I've been collecting from all over, like Jobs with Peace and the National Commission on Economic Conversion... Would someone read it and make a report?" I said "I can do that."



## PEACEMAKING IN THE NINETIES

The material shouted "Peace conversion was alive." Economic conversion, a term introduced by Senator George McGovern in his 1972 campaign speech for the US Presidency (Geiser, 1984), had become common in a public debate. It meant the "orderly redirection of resources now employed in military activities to socially useful economic endeavors" (Melman, 1974, p. 190). It was happening! I immersed myself in newsletters from the Minnesota Jobs for Peace to the National Commission on Economic Conversion. I read studies on what this kind of shift could mean to cities like Austin, Texas or Chicago, Illinois, if a national priority was placed on investing in domestic programs. I found legislation that had been introduced at state and federal levels over the past twenty years, to reward military industries for planning for the production of civilian goods. I learned that this was not just a dream. Many groups across the country, from labor unions and stockholders to peace activists had been pursuing peace in the form of

"economic conversion" for decades. I felt empowered.

When the Peace Network planned a community event I offered to talk about the communities and business struggling to convert from military products to civilian ones. After our panel at the event, I met with about 15 people interested in economic conversion; some of whom were recently laid off aerospace workers, and at-risk shipyard workers (the next facility targeted) and community activists.

## "DOING' OUR HOMEWORK" OR "PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION"

At the end of the hour, with lots of questions and few answers the group decided to meet over the next few months to find out from city and navy officials, and community leaders about what was being done about the forthcoming closure. We came to two conclusions: city decision makers (council members, commissioners and paid planners) did not perceive the closing of the Naval property as a priority, and there was no advanced planning being done. Though the city had done some preliminary plans regarding land re-use, community representatives on appropriate advisory groups were not up to date on the situation. Other things were on their minds, the city had just lost the contract for an amusement park. On the other hand civilian shipbuilders were organizing Save Our Shipping (SOS). Even though only the base itself was targeted, many believed that the adjacent shipyard (to the

Naval Base) was vulnerable to the next round of closings.

We toured the naval base which for some of us was a first. We found that the short-term loss in revenue for the city was a billion dollars. Other places faced with similar situations were organizing constituencies to turn the crisis into an opportunity for broad redevelopment. Our interest was two-fold: The effect of the closing on the city; and the opportunity to shift from swords to ploughshares.

## A TASK FORCE ON ECONOMIC CONVERSION

This was now a critical point for our group. Jane and I were two middle aged female college level educators, Lorrie a 30ish energetic high school teacher, Dan a Methodist minister and Jean, his wife a community activist, Jenny was a young woman in her twenties, soon to be Masters level student in the local social work program. Sam was an experienced peace activist, artist, and active member in the Jewish community. Mary, a female in her seventies with a work history in aerospace manufacturing, was an activist in the ecumenical council, the UN, and the housing/homeless community. Robert was a CPA interested in the expenditure of public moneys in worthwhile "efficient" civilian endeavors. Robert was an oddity. Neither Lorrie nor Jenny had been involved in "piecework" prior to our group; however, they were attuned to progressive causes and the group's articulated agenda. Robert in many ways fit the stereotype of the CPA. In the midst



of a marital separation, he was doing lots of pro bono tax work for low income people at a community center, and had come to understand the need for better jobs with better wages. I was an oddity for Robert. He tried to rile me with labels such as soft headed bleeding heart, and I teased him about the CPA's bottom line, and his doing pro bono work. I learned an important lesson from working together we find out how complex we are, and how our interests often are not far apart. Robert and I found common ground.

Varied in our religious upbringing, our common thread was to determine if a former military facility could be converted to civilian enterprises to meet some of the civilian needs—both economic and human—of the citizens of the city. After meeting over a period of 6 months the group had come to understand that we needed to raise public consciousness. In an effort to exploit the possibilities for change and seek broader common ground, we invited diverse sectors of the city to a "town meeting on economic conversion."

## THE TOWN MEETING

The town meeting on economic conversion was my public debut. A group of 8 task force members, and 2 political science volunteer students had encouraged officials of the city, the navy, and the legislators, and business and community leaders to attend the Saturday Town Meeting. We called ourselves a "task force," although no official body had asked us to do anything. We



thought we would be more likely to get phone calls returned if we said we were members of a task force. We explained that we had simply tasked ourselves as long time residents of the city, to bring this issue to the fore.

After months of letters, phone calls, and appearances at meetings to extend invitations to our event, the day finally arrived. I panicked when at 15 minutes to countdown the Commander of the Naval Base was not there. My heart started beating again when she arrived. I opened with introductions and special welcomes to the politicians and those seeking office (elections were coming up) and we began with the morning's speakers.

The day was a whopping success. From 9:00 AM to 1:00 PM, 70 people from city council members, to shipyard workers, to environmentalists heard: an inspirational speaker from the Northern California Center for Economic conversion describe what other cities faced with military closures had done; an update from the navy and the city on the closure process and the costs; and the key players charged with planning. Then small groups of like-minded people talked about what each sector could do to chart a new direction for the city.

People were energized! Both formal and informal evaluations indicated that they were mobilized and interested in con-

tinuing the dialogue. The priorities they came up with were amazingly similar, despite the various constituencies. Summarized into a report by the Task Force it was presented to the City Council.

The lesson I learned from this Town Meeting validated a power-sharing consensus approach to problem solving. Our group could have taken an adversarial position: such as, present a resolution on economic conversion to the City Council, but this would have precluded linking with important community sectors affected by this military downsizing, many of whom were in the dark about this issue. And, without intention, we could have easily posed ourselves as enemy to the SOS, the navy and city officials. The public dialogue could have quickly polarized into the positions of the shipyard workers vs. peace activists. But by bringing together diverse groups to brainstorm the issue, we were able to provide a report with agreed upon recommendations from a broad community base.

## LESSONS IN POLITICS AND — "THE BOTTOM LINE"

Over the next 10 months, our task force participated in the city's land re-use planning process. Because of the success of the Town Meeting, we were invited to the meetings of the Property Re-use committee of the Economic Advisory commission, and the citizen group advising the City's Economic Development Department. Though not a formal vot-



ing member, we received advance notices of all the committee meetings and public hearings to consider re-use options. Attendees of the Town Meeting were sent notices of each hearing, courtesy of the city. It was during this process that I learned 2 important lessons about municipal planning (an oxymoron, you say?!)

First, about power. I was invited to a meeting of a coalition of homeless advocates and service providers to talk about the Task Force ideas on re-use. The meeting was attended by leaders in the homeless community: former homeless people (as consumers), and about 15 representatives of shelters, transitional housing and emergency services. The majority were women. As representative of one of the invited groups I arrived early and pulled a chair up to the table around where everyone was sitting. I then noticed that several men had chosen to sit in chairs surrounding the perimeter of the table.

As first outside speaker on the agenda, I updated the group on my view of the city's planning process. I shared that a "stand-off" over the land containing former naval housing was developing between the local school district, the university, a job corp site (the latter two supported by the city), and a social service agency for the homeless. I presented our group's position that the site was large enough to accommodate the three facilities, that they were compatible, and would complement each other. I said that from the beginning, we tried to get the city's Re-use Subcommittee to sit down the all three groups to discuss a collaborative

venture, rather than a competitive one.

As I spoke I saw many heads — women's heads — nodding in agreement. Then a fascinating phenomenon occurred. Each time a woman commented in agreement with this collaborative process, it was followed by a man that rejected the idea. "It's really not practical to try and combine these re-use plans" or "Multiple use should not be considered." The men did not all represent homeless groups, but it was the men that rejected collaboration... (perhaps there is something to the idea that this power sharing is easier for women than for men? ...)

Finally the City's Economic Development staff person got up to speak. It would have been easy for this man to pull up to the table and join the rest of us. His voice carried. No need to stand. But he stood above us and from a different level. He was one up, the rest of us one down. He then shared his "expert" world view on development. The most important measure of a successful re-use option, the man said, was "the bottom line in terms of raising the tax base of the city. If the homeless moved on to this property, they would be 'like a vacuum, sucking up the city's resources' in terms of increased need for fire and police protection. They would not be an economic benefit to the city, but rather a constant drain on the taxpayer."

I was shocked at his insensitivity to people without housing, some of whom were sitting next to him. I was also beginning to learn that this narrow vision of community development, as eco-

nomics development, is a common one in our municipalities. The notion that a recovery strategy could combine economic and social development in the form of transitional housing and job training as an investment in human capital was a foreign concept to this official. It did not fit. As others began to argue for the broader view of development, it became clear that a program to invest in homeless people was not the kind of "product venture the City had in mind."

Since this time I have done some studying of community development. This traditional view of development operates on national and international levels. I believe that it perpetuates the myth "that investments in a community's or a nation's social, educational, and/or health and human needs can be separated from the economic development of a society."

What this interchange showed me was that in this society power is synonymous with hierarchy, competition, and oneness. I view this as "blade" thinking (Eisler, 1989), not necessarily male thinking, but more prevalent among males because males more often head the hierarchies this competitive model creates. In her book *The Chalice and the Blade*, Riane Eisler poses an alternative "chalice" approach to decision-making structures. It is not a hierarchy of women over men, it is the "linking" of power relationships in "win-win" strategies presently absent from most of our institutions. Nevertheless, it has the potential for human and societal growth and development.



I share the final "scene" in this conversion play. It illustrates how much we have come to rely on the blade approach in our public domain, despite evidence that a collaborative strategy can be fruitful and efficient.

### DOES POLITICS HAVE TO BE DIRTY? DOES BUSINESS AS USUAL MAKE GOOD BUSINESS?

Nearing the end of the city's planning process, our group had come to support the multiple use option. Both the Re-use committee and the full Commission were going to recommend to the City Council they consider all of the proposals in ranked order; and the homeless proposal was not a valid option despite the fact that Federal legislation gave priority consideration of surplus Federal property to combating homelessness (McKinney, 1987).

It was at this point that democracy went to hell-in-a-handbag. Before the recommendations were ever made to the Council for review, several councilmen, aware of the strong public backing for the homeless project, decided to go to Washington and make their interests known. In a non-public venue they signed a letter opposing the homeless option (for which they were later censured by a court of law for violating the Brown Act). They then flew to Washington to lobby the navy.

Now, some more experienced than I in municipal policy making, saw this as business as usual. "Yes, this is what we elect our officials to do. They can lobby



whomever they want in our best interests." I was new to this process. I was outraged. I felt betrayed by those representatives, who had sanctioned this year long democratic process of public scrutiny, and now were undermining it. So much for "rational planning" ... it was "social action time!" (Thank you Jack Rothman!)

Our Task Force, in the meantime, had merged with a larger like-minded citizen advocacy group, with a 20 year history of involvement in city affairs and an 800+ membership. This non-profit organization had community credibility and resources with which to play hardball. So much for my win-win strategy.... The chair of this organization flew to Washington the day after the Council members, and convinced the Navy officials that there were at least two-sides to the story. (I'm sure it didn't hurt that our regional navy representative, with whom we were negotiating, happened to have been one of her former high school students! One always at least listens to one's teachers!) In the end, the Navy told City officials to go home and try to arrive at a consensus position to accommodate all of the interest groups, "or we will make the decision for you." How's that for power sharing? (Lesson: When pushed to the wall people will do a "win-win" thing.)

The final outcome was a

victory for all. Ground has already been broken for a job corp site, and plans are underway for a program for the homeless, programming, a high school, and a university research park with a business incubator for small business development.

### REFLECTIONS

I look back on that time and am amazed at our ambition and accomplishments! Since then, I have continued to work with the city in my current capacity as Chair of an advisory commission for community services (Federal) block grant money. The Task Force continues to provide input to the city on re-use of other parcels of military land.

My venture into municipal planning (an oxymoron you still say?) and development has influenced my evolution as a peacemaker. I no longer immediately frame community problems within a conflict perspective. I do not deny conflicts among interest groups. But I have seen the costs of citizen disenfranchisement when unnecessary power struggles are accepted as "business as usual." I have seen new rifts develop, and long-standing ones maintained among community groups as a result of one posing the other as the enemy or "drain" on the city. And I have faith in the potential for partnership and power building when various constituencies decide to hear each other out, and discuss each other's points-of-view.

My travels into economic conversion and economic development, and my reading and teaching in community work



have lead me to rethink what it means to build communities. If the primary measure of a healthy economy/community simply gets translated to a short-term rise in the tax base at the local level; or a rise in the GNP at the national level, then they become misleading indicators of the overall health and well-being of a society.

These experiences have helped me to make connections, on a local and global level: between violence toward people and the environment; the lack of attention to strengthening human beings and conserving natural resources, and the increasing gap in wealth and power between 5% at the top and the other 95% of my community or the nation as a whole. My vision of a healthy economy (and society) has come to rest on four elements: a healthy sustained physical environment; meaningful work and leisure for the citizenry; healthy and well-educated children; and the equitable distribution of goods and service between genders and among ethnic and cultural groups. The way to this vision, I am convinced, is one of power-sharing and non-violence. "There is no way to peace; peace is the way."

This journey has been a personal one, resulting in an expansion of my circle of loved ones. Recently, my husband gave me a surprise 50th birthday dinner. As I looked around the table at my closest friends, there sat Sam, his wife Sarah, and Jane, all of whom have become dear friends, in large part, because of our work together. Sam, a member of a new "community of interest" for me in 1991, is now like a father. Com-

munity has become family.

The direction these reflections point me to is a simple one: acting peacefully in my social work practice at every level — in my teaching, community service, and personal life. In some ways I seemed to have traveled a long road, from my Quaker anti-war upbringing to a pro-sustainable development world view. In other ways I feel I've simply come full circle. As my Grandma Flossie said, "Treat others the way you want to be treated... and fighting never accomplishes anything in the long run." □

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