

# Two Friends for Peace: A Conversation with Diana Lee Hirschi

Allen D. Roberts

MY "INTERVIEW" WITH DIANA HIRSCHI was not so much an interview as a wonderfully civilized conversation over dinner at the Singing Cricket in Salt Lake City. I had never met Diana before, but Karen Moloney had asked me to interview her. I read "The Quaker Peace Testimony" (this issue) in preparation for that interview. Diana and I met on August 25, 2003, to discuss her essay.

I had been intrigued by the seemingly irreconcilable dilemmas presented by the war and peace problem since well before I assisted *Dialogue* in organizing an earlier thematic issue on the same topic in winter 1984 (Vol. 17, no. 4). That issue had resulted from my attending a conference of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in Denver and bringing back

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several papers, all by believers from other religious traditions than Mormonism, exploring various aspects of the war and peace conundrum.

The purity and simplicity of Diana's "The Quaker Peace Testimony" appealed to me but immediately raised several questions. Diana's answers to these questions (typical, I think, of those most Mormons might ask) would in fact complement her essay by delving more specifically into the practical implications of her beliefs. By the time we met for dinner, Diana had answered my first nine questions by email; she later answered three more, including the two about Hitler, again by email.

During dinner I learned how seriously our author lives as she preaches. In our wide-ranging discussion, she emphasized the difference between being passive and being a pacifist. She is the latter but is very active in her pursuit of peace. Diana organizes rallies, demonstrations, and protests, speaking for peace wherever she can get a hearing. In June 1985 she began witnessing at the Nevada Test Site and, from May 1987 to May 1988, lived at the Peace Camp there for three to four weeks at a time, coming home for about a week to see family and get supplies, and then returning. She ran for Salt Lake County Council at-large on the Green Party ticket in 2002 (winning enough votes to keep the Green Party on the ballot for 2004). She is troubled by paying taxes used to finance the military machine and supports abortion rights and equal rights for women. We spoke of suicides, anti-Nephi-Lehis, and the Mountain Meadows Massacre. Of Iraq, she said, "I'll do what I can [to protest the war], and I'll die before I go along with it." She stands on the political left.

Raised a Mormon in Cedar City, Diana believes there is "no one true church." After attending Quaker meetings for a few years, she was convinced (similar to Mormon conversion) and became a Quaker in 1978. We talked of Jesus and whether his gospel is entirely about love, or whether it contains elements of divisiveness, even violence. "Jesus was just a man," she offered, suggesting to me she is a secular Quaker, and then reached a conclusion I have sometimes reached myself, "I know nothing. It's all a mystery."

*Allen:* Given that religions (Quakers excepted, though not Mormons) have been responsible for much of the world's violence and death, where do religious people find credibility for their supposed moral authority for advocating peace?

*Diana:* About authority in general: I think most Quakers would say

that if a religious “people” advocates peace as a people (or a religious person does so), their moral authority comes from the “inner light” or “that of God within everyone” or the “spirit of Christ.” As for religious people in hierarchical groups, I suppose their authority comes from those who set the rules and give the orders—popes, prophets, councils of bishops—and these leaders get their authority, including their moral authority, by being The Authority. The 1661 Declaration (written to Charles II by George Fox and other Quakers) said the Spirit of Christ is not changeable, and that seems to be true for Quakers, at least with respect to the peace testimony. The papacy, for example, has been quite changeable, and I believe the declarations from Peter’s Chair urging against the attack on Iraq seemed to lack moral authority for that reason.

*Allen:* Conversely, what would you say to those who use religious rationale and authority in support of war?

*Diana:* Well, obviously I can’t believe they are moved by the Spirit of Christ. It seems to me that violence, domination, and coercive control of others contradicts this Spirit as it is found within us and in our inherent relations. I might quote Penn again—“A good end can never sanctify evil means; nor must we ever do evil that good may come of it.”<sup>1</sup>

*Allen:* Quaker peace-seeking seems to be, both in testimony and practice, absolute. Can you (or Quakers) conceive of any circumstances today (such as preservation of life through self-defense) under which you might feel justified in resorting to violence or war?

*Diana:* Of course we are always being challenged with the “what would you do if’s. . .” John Howard Yoder, a Mennonite, put together a nice little book titled *What Would You Do?* He points out that the hypotheticals are framed to evoke an immediate violent image with no way out but violence—“What would you do if an intruder in your house had a knife to your wife’s throat”—when a violent response in real circumstances might be quite inadvisable. But these “what would you do’s?” are usually based on the belief that only violence can contend with violence. And I believe that this assumption permeates our politics and culture.

To oppose institutional violence, as I do, does not mean one cannot

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1. A common Quaker conflation of two sayings, numbers 537 and 545, by William Penn. See William Penn, *The Peace of Europe, The Fruits of Solitude and Other Writings*, edited by Edwin B. Bronner, Everyman Library (London: J. M. Dent, 1933), 61.

defend oneself. I do not know what I might do in the event of a violent attack upon my person. One Quaker I know says that for him the peace testimony means that he will not kill or injure any human at the command of another. This would not preclude self-defense. He could probably assist a war effort more than he would like to if this were all it meant to him; but if everyone adopted this version of the peace testimony, wars would be hard to do.

*Allen:* Mormons, especially in the nineteenth century, have had a violent history, and they have never, as a church, been active advocates of peace. If you could speak with Mormon leaders, what would you say to “convince” them to adopt and practice something equivalent to your “peace testimony”?

*Diana:* Mormon leaders have a good situation, and I doubt they would want to give it up. I certainly could not appeal to them on practical or worldly grounds. The peace testimony is not about worldly power. Simone Weil says somewhere, “God presents himself to man as power or as perfection, and then leaves it for man to choose.” (I think this is quite close to the English translation I read). I think she meant that one of the choices could be wrong—something like free agency even in our vision of God. This might be an opening to “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matt. 5:48), a text I understand is often preached in Mormon ward houses. Jesus is of course talking about the perfection of love, which, if perfected, I believe, would encompass the peace testimony and much more that I am not foolish enough to claim. But if Mlle. Weil is right, it’s one or the other—power or perfection—and I know the former is hard to resist.

*Allen:* Does it not weaken the forcefulness of the Quaker peace testimony to have so many individual Quakers violate it by participating in wars? Do they insist on nonviolent military jobs? If yes, doesn’t any participation in and support of the military contradict and compromise the peace testimony?

*Diana:* I don’t think so, really; no more than Mormons who stray into alcohol, tobacco, feminism, or the Democratic Party necessarily impugn the gospel. I think most who pick up a weapon and go to war are lost to Meeting. Exactly what the peace testimony requires is not spelled out anywhere. During World War II, many Quaker men worked in labor camps, and a large number served in medical corps. Quakers who had been assigned to work in mental asylums during that war were active in

the reform of these institutions after the war. Their service probably did often contradict the peace testimony, just as do my taxes that support this country's wars and weapons. Exactly what is required of us is often hard to discern.

*Allen:* Regarding the Quaker requirement of unity before action is taken, is this not immobilizing in terms of supporting worthy but perhaps extreme peacemaking activities, such as the Plowshares initiative to destroy weapons?

*Diana:* I wouldn't say immobilizing. Quaker action can be forceful because of the force of Quaker unity. Quakers often unite around a member who is witnessing in a way that the entire group cannot—such as my witness at the Nevada Test Site. Quakers are not immune to the blandishments of “respectability”—often to my personal annoyance. However, if a Quaker were to join a Plowshares action on her own initiative, I'm certain she would not be shunned, eluded (i.e., counseled about her behavior), or otherwise disciplined by her Meeting.

*Allen:* Recognizing the value of Quaker activism, what more could Quakers (and similar others) do to move from peace-teaching to active peacemaking, and how can war-makers and the peace-indifferent be persuaded to change and adopt peacemaking policies?

*Diana:* I think Quakers (and others) are doing what they can through AFSC [the American Friends Service Committee], FCNL [Friends Committee on National Legislation], and other efforts. I myself work on a rather limited local level associating with others for purposes of public witness and education. What can and is being done on a larger scale is described in an old interview with Elise Boulding, a Quaker who has been active in various kinds of peace work. I hope you don't mind my referring you to this interview. It's an easy read: [http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/conversations/Boulding/boulding\\_con0.html](http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/conversations/Boulding/boulding_con0.html).

*Allen:* Given the prevalence of violence in American popular culture, how can the virtues of peace be instilled in our youth and general populace?

*Diana:* Well, I don't think it's popular culture, if you mean, for example, the movies and television. I think they reflect something much deeper, and I don't know how to get at it. Maybe the kingdom in which evil is not resisted with evil is not of this world. But I think it could be. I think we can live our lives and speak our words in the service of peace and compassion.

*Allen:* Given human history and nature (such as our proclivity to act in what we perceive to be our own self-interest), is there a realistic prospect of ever attaining world peace? If yes, what paradigm shifts would need to occur?

*Diana:* I am sometimes comforted by the thoughts of that old trouble-making agnostic Bertrand Russell, who points out that many human follies that were defended as bound up in basic human nature have been eliminated or at least thought of as substantially reformed—slavery, dueling, disenfranchisement, and the legal disabling of women. Simone Weil says at the end of her marvelous, long essay, “The Iliad, or The Poem of Force”: “But nothing the peoples of Europe have produced is worth the first known poem that appeared among them. Perhaps they will yet rediscover the epic genius, when they learn that there is no refuge from fate, learn not to admire force, not to hate the enemy, nor to scorn the unfortunate. How soon this will happen is another question.”

*Allen:* How do the Quakers (or you) respond to the idea (most recently practiced by George W. Bush) that peace must sometimes be obtained through war, waged preemptively rather than strictly defensively? The argument goes: Wouldn't it have been much better to have assassinated Hitler several years earlier, perhaps preventing World War II and saving millions of lives, than to have allowed him to live? In the Mormon tradition, we have the Book of Mormon prophet Nephi killing wicked Laban to obtain the metal plates of scripture the latter possessed. The act of murder was justified in the statement, “It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief” (1 Ne. 4:13). The idea here is that Laban's death would prevent the spiritual death of the people. The U.S. rationale for dropping two atomic bombs on Japan near the end of World War II was, in part, that many more Allied forces and Japanese lives would be saved by ending the war than lost in the two bombings. Does the “kill one or a few to save many” theory have any merit, especially given the apparent absence of other mass lifesaving alternatives in these examples?

*Diana:* I guess it makes sense that one might die so that others may live. As I understand the Passion story, Jesus willingly died so that we all could live—spiritually, our sins redeemed, or physically for ever and ever, but in some versions not so happily. There is the story of the man at Auschwitz who threw himself into the gears of a diabolical machine so that others could live a bit longer. We hear that old Eskimos wander into

the freezing night so that others may survive the shortages of winter. All of these seem considerably different than killing one or some so that a greater number might go on.

I've mentioned already John Howard Yoder's thoughts on similar questions. They (the questions) are always formulated so that it's kill or be killed, or, kill some or have many perish. By definition in these "what would you do" problems, only a violent response will rectify the situation, and the nonviolent resister is put in the position of choosing violence or letting a horrible event take its course. (You see it in the movies when the good Amish farmer finally has his epiphany and runs one of the bad guys through with his pitchfork.) Of course, by definition again, the violence proffered as the solution always works.

Would I have assassinated Hitler? In 1940 an assassination could have made a martyr of him and, at the same time, brought to the fore a more strategically adept but as virulently racist a Nazi, who might have avoided the disasters on the Eastern Front but been equally vicious with the Jews, gypsies, and gays. Who knows? I think Mr. Bush and his retinue of neocons might have something to say about the difficulty of predicting and controlling the consequences of violent actions when they write their memoirs. Who knows?

Assuming that Nephi prayed as intensely about the contemplated homicide as we all hope we would do if we were facing such a task, his rationale for it must have been furnished and the consequences ordained by God. I can't argue with that unless he acted without talking to his spiritual friends. I hope, however, if God tells me that a killing will be a very good thing, I remember to take it to my Meeting and perhaps run it by a clearness committee before I act on it.

I can't agree with the premise that the perfection of terror bombing at Hiroshima and Nagasaki saved lives. To assume that it did would require me to believe that less terrible options were not available. And that is hardly ever the case except in "what would you do" hypotheticals.

The peace testimony works in single lives. It's not a strategy for war fighting. It will prevent men and women, one by one, from killing others at the command of the state. If others need killing, don't come to me or (I hope) mine to get the job done. I might wander out into the freezing night, but I won't do that work.

*Allen:* Could the peace testimony have been used to stop Hitler?

*Diana:* First, I try to remember that neither the German army, the

SS, nor the Nazi bureaucracy was composed of Hitler. They were manned and supported by millions of German citizens who seem to have been at least as happy to serve as were our soldiers and citizens, in that war and in wars before and since. But when people challenge the pacifist position with the question, "What about Hitler?" they do not usually ask, "What about the millions who followed Nazi orders?" Hitler could not have done his work without them. Of course, if we make that horrible war into a civics lesson about the duties of citizenship, we're immediately in trouble. Not only are our hands (as citizens) not particularly clean, but we would be asking those German citizens to do what is so vigorously denounced whenever we want our citizens to line up behind a belief that takes them off to bayonet, shoot, bomb, and strafe others, i.e., to ask, "This is evil, isn't it?" Those German citizens were no weaker (nor stronger) than I am, but they did not have a peace testimony. The peace testimony would have stopped Hitler—if enough German citizens had had one.

But of course the question is not meant to inquire into the moral obligations of citizens. I think it could be recast as, "What about absolute evil?" or "What about evil on the march?" I've got to admit that the peace testimony does not present a strategy for intercepting the blitzkrieg as it swept around the Maginot Line or for lifting the siege of Leningrad. (Leningrad reminds me that fighting evil does not establish goodness. Remember that Stalin fought Hitler.) Once the war starts, oughtn't we lay down our pacifist principles and join in? If not in Vietnam or Panama, at least, for goodness' sake, against Hitler? "Resist not evil with evil" can't take us this far, can it? Well, for me it has to. If it doesn't take me this far, it doesn't take me anywhere. It would not have stopped the Golden Horde's sack of Baghdad, or the calvary at Wounded Knee, or our friend Indonesia's rape of East Timor, but I don't think these are reasons to give up on it. As has been said: God doesn't call us to be effective; he calls us to be faithful.

*Allen:* In the context of today's national and worldwide conditions, particularly as linked to 9/11, how would you define "patriotism" and what it means to be a "patriot"?

*Diana:* As the words of a hymn in our Quaker Meeting songbook suggest, patriotism is the love of the land, of hearth and home, and neighborhood, generalized with the realization that one's fellow citizens have or are capable of a similar love. Being aware of the roots of his or her patriotism, the citizen might allow all persons everywhere a similar relationship with their land. Of course, more useful to the war state is the ease with



which it can create or amplify an enemy and persuade us to hate it. It seems the modern nation-state cannot exist without an enemy to oppose; and for it, patriotism is essentially this hatred. The peace testimony cannot coexist with admiration of force and hatred of the enemy. So, to be patriots, we must try love.