

**The Peaceable Kingdom**  
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May 31, 2009

*“...and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” --Isaiah 2:4*

**Meditation**

We begin with simple presence...  
Presence to our breathing, in and out, slowing with each breath.  
Presence to our own weight in the pew.  
Present to our neighbor sitting nearby,  
    just a gentle sense of presence and companionship.  
Present here to this gathered community... in this ancient house...  
    and so, present to the generations who here have worshipped.

And as we become more present to ourselves, to one another, in this moment, this time and place... may we feel a peacefulness growing in our hearts; even if our hearts are troubled may we find some measure of peace...

And from our heart's measure of peace, may our prayers for peace include our neighbors, include our community, include our nation and the world, all beings.

May we each pray that the peace of our hearts becomes the voice of our mouths and the work of our hands, that peace may indeed be nourished in ever widening circles.

**Reading** – Isaiah 11:6-9

And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb,  
And the leopard shall lie down with the kid;  
And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together;  
And a little child shall lead them.  
And the cow and the bear shall feed;  
Their young ones shall lie down together;  
And the lion shall eat straw like the ox.  
And the suckling child shall play on the hole of the asp,  
And the weaned child shall put his hand on the basilisk's den.  
They shall not hurt nor destroy  
In all My holy mountain;  
For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord,  
As the waters cover the sea.

## Sermon

I first saw a copy of Edward Hicks' painting "The Peaceable Kingdom" – based on Isaiah's ancient prophetic vision – well over thirty years ago when I visited my future in-laws' home in Philadelphia. It hung over their fireplace.

It is a striking painting. Not altogether realistic; perhaps what you would call folk art in its style. But it gets your attention. The lion and leopard especially seem to seek your gaze.

And yes, it *is* a peaceable kingdom, given the presence of animals who in the world as we know it would be attacking each other, eating each other, or running away from each other.

This said, it is not altogether a relaxed composition.

What is going on in this painting? Is it just a simple rendering of Isaiah's words – "and the wolf shall dwell with the lamb" and so on? Or is more going on than meets the eye?

A little background.

The artist, Edward Hicks, was born in 1780 to Isaac and Catharine Hicks in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Catharine died a year later. Isaac's family had suffered financial reversals during the Revolution, and little Edward was boarded out to a Quaker couple, David and Elizabeth Twinning.

At the age of 13 Edward was apprenticed to a coach maker, and learned the art of decorative painting and sign making, at which work he earned his living throughout most of his life.

And though Edward's parents were Episcopalian, there were also Quakers in the extended family, and of course the Twinings had their influence; so it was no great leap for Edward to join a Quaker meeting when he was twenty-three. It was, however, a step he took with great deliberation, following serious religious reflection on his life as he had thus far lived it; for as he reports in his later memoir until then he had been "exceedingly fond of singing, dancing, vain amusements, and the company of young people, and too often profanely swearing when angry or excited." (We might say that Edward had set the bar for dissolute behavior low.)

In the ensuing years, even as he continued his work as an ornamental artist, Edward Hicks became a respected minister with the Society of Friends, the Quakers, often speaking not only at his own meeting, but at many others as well.

Now, as I expect you know, seeking and nourishing peace is at the heart of the spiritual lives of Quakers. And one of the guiding biblical images of peace for Quakers, as for many Christians, is that passage from Isaiah which we heard earlier:

And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb,  
And the leopard shall lie down with the kid;  
And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together;  
And a little child shall lead them.

Well, as time went on Edward Hicks became, one might say, somewhat obsessed with the image and metaphor of the peaceable kingdom, eventually producing dozens of artistic renderings over the years. The print over my in-laws' fireplace is only one of the better known. And Hicks painted them not for income, but more often as gifts for family or friends, each one a little different as his understanding of the symbolism in the images evolved and as his skill as an artist evolved.

So then, *is* there more than meets the eye in these paintings?

It is after all a pretty simple image. Arresting perhaps, but at first viewing nothing complicated we might think. What could be more openly and directly symbolic of peace than an image of normally aggressive animals sitting quietly, almost passively with other animals that would ordinarily be their prey – and vice versa.

But there *is* more.

To begin with, each of the central animals in the painting is meant to represent a particular human personality type, according to the ancient system of bodily humours: the wolf represented the melancholy type, prone to withdrawal and sadness; the leopard the sanguine, social and enthusiastic; the bear the phlegmatic, solid and cool; and the lion the choleric – passionate, sometimes prone to anger.

So on one level the painting suggests a subtle understanding of the challenge of finding peace in a world of very different, sometimes conflicting sorts of people; and it also suggests the challenge of finding individual inner peace, since every one of us has something of each personality type within, just in varying proportions.

We understand this. For though these days we don't often speak in terms of this ancient system of "humours," we do have our various modern systems of personality types and know the challenge of getting along one with the other; and we also understand the need to find inner balance – and peace – amidst our sometimes conflicted selves.

But there is yet more to the painting, building on this basic symbolism.

It turns out that Quakers, peaceful as they are, are prone to the same sorts of divisions and arguments as the rest of the human race. And though Quakers make a point of not coming to blows over their differences, in Hicks' time the divisions were pretty serious nevertheless.

The deepest split at the time was between those who became known as the Orthodox and those who became be known as the Hicksites – not named after Edward, but after his second cousin and mentor Elias Hicks, the famous Long Island Quaker minister and leader.

Oversimplifying: The Orthodox tended to rely more on scripture and authority, and were more active in relation to social issues, including slavery; whereas the Hicksites put the emphasis on guidance from the Inner Light, the divine spirit speaking within each person, and were less active in relation to social issues.

The bottom line? The Orthodox and the Hicksites were really not getting along.

So much so that during the mid-1820s the two factions literally divided, some Meetings becoming Orthodox, others Hicksite. The eventual healing – softening anyway – of the split took a long time.

And it was during this turmoil that Edward Hicks began painting his peaceable kingdoms.

In fact, when the two groups actually split, a split appeared in the trunk of a tree in the background of some subsequent peaceable kingdom compositions. And the faces of the animals became noticeably more tense, sometimes seeming almost poised to pounce.

In other words, for Hicks, though the peaceable kingdom canvasses were certainly about inner peace as well as Isaiah's larger vision of universal peace, they were also meant to portray what would have to happen in order for there to be peace among the factions of the Society of Friends.

Well, Hicks believed that what would have to happen was for each individual to overcome self-will. Self-will, he believed, was the cause of all dissension. Self-will: this desire to assert one's own will over others... to the detriment of others, to the detriment of group harmony, to the detriment of peace anywhere and everywhere.

For example, Hicks identified himself as a "choleric" type – which as I've said means among other things prone to anger. And indeed in the midst of the controversies among the Quakers, it was his failing to allow his anger – a manifestation of his self-will – to become

destructive of peace and reconciliation. He had to have his way: Yet he knew he would need to overcome this tendency in order to be among the peacemakers.

Some of “The Peaceable Kingdom” paintings, then, are not surprisingly fraught with a barely restrained tension. Each of the animals, after all (returning to the symbolic realm) has had to overcome natural tendencies in order to be with the others in peace. Even the lambs and kids have had to overcome their natural aversion to the aggressive animals, their fear of the lion and leopard and wolf and bear, in order to be present with them in this peaceful tableau. Indeed, the usually gentle creatures might be the most courageous of all! But all of the creatures have had to overcome their particular manifestation of self-will.

Might it be so for us? Peace not as utter relaxation. But as creative tension and attentiveness amidst differences.

Hicks was onto something it seems to me.

If rightly understood.

Because overcoming self-will is not about *repressing* our feelings or desires or *suppressing* our ideas or ideals or completely *changing* our natural personality type. Overcoming self-will is more subtle than that.

Examples abound.

Do you push your idea in a meeting because you are so certain it is the best idea? Or do you join a process of cooperative brainstorming that in the end might produce a more creative idea than any one person might have come up with?

With someone you love – do you keep insisting you are right... about whatever small thing you are disputing... or do you stop talking, put your self-will to the side? Breathe. So the love that was there, is there, will be there, can re-emerge in the relationship – more important than whatever issue had broken the peace.

Peaceable kingdom wisdom around the conference table or the kitchen table, rooted in overcoming – or we perhaps we would better say transcending – self-will.

Psychologically, we could say that this is about letting go of our egoistic view of a situation. Spiritually we could say it is about letting go into a larger Self, into Love, into God. Quakers call it “minding the light” – pausing to listen for a voice deeper, higher than our individual will.

Contemporary Buddhist nun and writer Pema Chodron talks about “softening what is rigid in our hearts” – and perhaps the hard heart is just another way of naming a kind of self-will. “I know best. I will not listen to other views. I will not give in or compromise. I will not sit at the table with...”

Whereas if we pause and allow our hearts to soften, putting aside self-will (driven by our particular “humour” or personality type) in favor of something larger, sweeter, more loving... a measure of peace, or at least a movement towards peace may happen.

But is any of this relevant to the big question: World peace? Universal peace?

I should think so. After all, the best diplomats know that you have to be willing to sit around a table with your supposed adversaries, have to be willing to at least understand if not agree with their point of view, in other words have to let go of some of your self-will. The wisest national leaders know the same.

And a wise citizenry would continue to press their leaders to behave according to what we might call peaceable kingdom wisdom. It’s not about giving away the store. Remember, the beasts in the painting are alert, paying attention. They aren’t allowing themselves to be eaten by the others. But neither are they attacking the others.

Just so, as a nation we must put away our grand ambition (our collective self-will) to be always the preeminent military power on earth – the lion able to eat anyone who challenges us. I for one am ashamed that our military budget is the equal of the military expenditures of all the rest of the nations of the earth combined. Will we become once again a nation others wish to emulate rather than fear?

Might we be shifting in that direction? I hope so. Our leaders talk in this direction. But I'm not entirely reassured by escalation in Afghanistan and drone attacks in Pakistan, or by increases in the military budget.

So whomever our leaders are, we the people must continue to demand peaceful means to achieve peaceful ends, to demand peaceable kingdom wisdom from our leaders.

I don't know about you, but I would like peace now. Wouldn't you like peace now? Peace everywhere? World peace now? I wanted it when many of us chanted those very words during the Vietnam War. I wanted it during the Nuclear Freeze movement. I still want peace now.

But universal peace – which of course must include justice, and which also must include peace between the human species and the rest of the natural world – seems as far off as ever.

Though... we can't be sure. Peace might be around the corner.

So: How would we live in either case – whether universal peace is far off or close at hand?

How would we live anyway?

Of course would nourish peace in our souls, our sometimes conflicted, many-humoured souls. Sometimes all it takes is to sit still now and then. "Till the mud settles" as the *Tao Te Ching* puts it. Just sit still. And more peace will come.

How else? We would nourish peace in our homes and communities. Just sit down and slow down together. Pause now and then in the rush for more stuff, more experience. Pause more often, live more kindly, seek more justice. That's how we would live.

And more *peace* would come.

How else? We would nourish peace by encouraging cooperative rather than coercive power from our from leaders. Peaceable kingdom wisdom by whatever name.

There is, by the way, one part of most of "The Peaceable Kingdom" paintings I haven't yet mentioned.

Off in the distance is a group of Native Americans and English settlers, among them the Quaker leader William Penn. They are signing the treaty that ensured seventy years of peace in the Pennsylvania colony.

Peace *is* possible. Even between those we once thought were intractable enemies. We've seen this.

Peace *is* possible.

May we help to make it so by living as if we were already in the peaceable kingdom. Every day.

So may it be.