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# Beyond War: Empowerment for Senior Citizens in a Nuclear Age

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*An educationally focused non-partisan grass roots peace movement is described, as are the empowering effects of being involved in such a group. Beginning attempts to utilize this approach with senior citizens are explored, and further experimentation is encouraged.*

*Beyond War* is a grass-roots, educationally focused peace movement that is aiming to propagate a new way of thinking that will move us to a world beyond war (*Beyond War*, 1987). It is not an organization that one joins; it is a way of life that one decides to live. This paper briefly describes the tenets of *Beyond War* and the effects of following such a new way of thinking on one's personal life. The central theme addresses possible applications to work with senior citizens, and a description of initial efforts to create such applications. Since the movement as a whole very closely reflects the principles and practices of social work, specifically the reciprocal, interactive, and mutual aid models of group work practice, such exploration will be of special interest to social workers. Hopefully, other practitioners will be encouraged to experiment with ways of involving clients in addressing and resolving the most important issue of our time—the imminence of a nuclear disaster in our world and the need for a new way of thinking that will make it possible to move to a world beyond war.

## History of *Beyond War*

*Beyond War* began in 1982 as a grassroots response to the threat of nuclear war. A group of people from Silicon Valley, including business executives who were successful in all the traditional and material ways, became convinced that their success would be meaningless if the world continued on its present

course (*Beyond War*, 1985a). They were influenced by a film entitled *The Last Epidemic* (1980), which described the effects of a one-megaton bomb dropped on San Francisco, as well as by Jonathan Schell's book, *The Fate of the Earth*, which created national concern about the issue of post-nuclear war survivability, (Schell, 1982).

Their initial endeavors, conducted under the name of *Creative Initiative*, focused on educating people about the crisis. Through the process of community education, and much personal discussion and exploration, the founders came to a gradual realization that nuclear weapons were only a symptom of the underlying problem, which is, as a society, our willingness to use war to resolve inevitable conflicts. The initial efforts of the people involved in *Beyond War* revolved around finding a way to express a new way of thinking which would address this underlying issue.

### The Premise of *Beyond War*

"The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our mode of thinking and we thus drift toward unparalleled catastrophe" (Nathan and Norden, 1981).

This quotation of Albert Einstein's is the essence of the premise of *Beyond War*. We do not live in the world that we used to live in, and because that world is so drastically different, our thinking must change as well. An analogy that is used to describe the way in which this drift has occurred is as follows. When a boat is paddling in calm water, it follows the currents, with no thought on the part of the people who are rowing the boat. As the current gradually picks up, it takes an initial awareness, and then a conscious effort, to have the boat turn in a different direction. There comes a point, however, when the current becomes so strong that no amount of effort is sufficient to change the course of the boat. We, as humans, have done basically the same thing. We have drifted along with the thinking that military strength will keep us safe, and that thinking, as it has gotten stronger and stronger, has brought us to a point that is close to no return. The same military strength that was thought to have kept us safe may be the very thing that leads to our destruction, as we are coming critically close to the point where

the current will be too strong to fight against. It was an idea that may have initially made sense, but the invention of nuclear bombs has changed all of that; in the event that a nuclear war begins, there will be no winners, or survivors. We need, using this analogy, to begin rowing, with every inch of our collective power, while we still have a choice and can change our mode of thinking, to avoid being swept away by the current.

### Knowledge, Decision, and Action

From an understanding of this concept, along with the knowledge that war is obsolete because of our technology and that it is individual people who do make a difference, one of the basic premises that emerges from *Beyond War* is the idea that we are one. That knowledge is translated into action through a decision-making process that affects our lives. The remainder of this paper describes the process by which a group of senior citizens are engaging in the three step process of knowledge, decision, and action (*Beyond War*, 1985c) that is required in order for people to effect change in their own lives, and thus in society.

### An Exploration by Leisure World Residents: An Illustration

I am the coordinator of a groupwork program in *Leisure World*, a private retirement community in southern California. Groups of eight to ten elderly residents meet weekly to discuss any topics of interest to them. Twice a year the entire group of sixty comes together for a workshop on a topic of interest to all residents. A speaker from *Beyond War* was invited to one of the workshops, to give an introductory presentation. Despite concerns that the topic would push people away, because older people had more pressing worries of family, health, and financial issues, the audience was riveted, and expressed interest in beginning an ongoing discussion group related to the workshop topic in larger numbers than had been true of any previous topics in the six year history of the program. Eleven residents asked to be notified of an opportunity to further discuss the concepts of *Beyond War*, and their potential involvement in achieving a world beyond war.

A followup meeting was arranged, and eight residents attended, with three people calling to say that they had conflicting

commitments, but still wanted to be kept informed. The nature of the second meeting was exciting, in its empowering ability. *Beyond War* is, above all, an empowering movement, that allows people to take control of their lives. If one becomes committed to the principles of *Beyond War*, there are implications for both personal and professional living. The first part of the meeting was used to explore the three common implications of believing, and living the principle of "We are one".

I will resolve conflict. I will not use violence.

I will maintain a spirit of good will. I will not preoccupy myself with an enemy.

I will work together with others to build a world beyond war. (*Beyond War*, 1985b).

The discussion of these implications included concerns that are relevant to an elder's stage of development. For example, in speaking of the resolution of the conflict that is part of the major developmental task of old age, "integrity versus despair", Erikson (1950) describes integrity as: "the acceptance of one's one and only life cycle as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions". Many of the group members had had relatives who died in concentration camps in World War II, and were struggling with accepting the notion that preoccupying themselves with an enemy (Hitler) was antithetic to living one's life in a way that recognizes their interdependence and interconnectedness.

Similarly, members of the group struggled with the notion of working with others actively to build a world beyond war, as they do feel overburdened by their private troubles relating to health and financial issues.

The discussion allowed members to voice their concerns and to make a dent in the process of "psychic numbing" (Caldicott, 1985) that forces people to ignore the threat of nuclear war because it is so frightening. Individuals and groups engage in massive denial, because they feel, subconsciously, powerless to make an impact. Joint discussion allows those fears to surface, at the same time that a sense of hope grows, as people share experiences of having made a difference in large societal issues. One woman talked of growing up in Brooklyn, New York when the boardwalk along the Atlantic Ocean was being built. The

initial concept was an architectural, graceful wonder, with entrances and exits as far apart as possible, so as to preserve the design and flow of the boardwalk. She was involved with a group of citizens who protested such a concept, saying that people would be afraid to use the boardwalk because they wouldn't be able to get on and off conveniently. They engaged in letter writing, lobbying, and group rallying, and were successful in changing the plans so that there are exits on almost every block, all along the four mile route. As people listened to that story, they got in touch with instances of their own lives where they had impacted a larger system such as a school system in relation to their children, city zoning regulations, or politicians in relation to the passage of certain bills.

Such exploration enabled participants to appreciate a renewed sense of power and the feeling that they did have energy to expend on a cause that was larger than their own immediate lives.

Another common theme discussed by seniors is the effect that the nuclear threat has on their sense of who their children and grandchildren are. Goroff (1987) eloquently describes his feelings upon the birth of his first grandchild, related to his sense of transience of the life of our planet. Most of the members of this group expressed that feeling in a variety of ways; they were not sure their grandchildren would have a chance to live out their lives, while as grandparents, they have had such a chance; they watched their children and grandchildren's live-in-the-present attitude with bitter understanding; and, they watched their grandchildren decide not to have their own children with sorrow. Again, the talking out of these fears alleviated the paralysis that inhibits people from taking action.

The second part of the meeting allowed, in a small way, for people to take action. The seniors discussed recent newspaper articles related to the growing relationship between the head of the Soviet Union, and the President of the United States, and what is needed for successful disarmament talks. Members of the group wrote letters, to elected officials, expressing concerns and thoughts as to what should happen in our country in the next few months related to those summit talks. The important element of this exercise was not what people wrote, although

it is estimated that politicians count each letter they receive as representing 1,000 voters (Congress-U.S. Capital Switchboard, 1987). What is vital, is the renewed sense for group members that they are the government. They elect the people to serve them, and one of the most potent ways to have politicians serve constituents' needs is to be consistent about expressing those needs. That too, was empowering, in that members left the meeting feeling that they had done something very concrete to make a difference.

The last part of the meeting involved a discussion of the future—in what way did participants want to continue their involvement? The group came up with three major suggestions. The first was that each of them should commit themselves to putting on a workshop at one of the various social and/or educational other groups to which they belong. Putting on a workshop would involve inviting a speaker from *Beyond War*, and initiating a discussion related to nuclear issues. One woman commented that if each of the eight people at the meeting did that, over 100 new people would be exposed to this "new way of thinking", and have the chance to explore their own thought processes.

The second suggestion was to form a monthly discussion group about conflict. If each month, areas of the earth that are experiencing conflict were selected (Central America, Afghanistan, Iran-Iraq), and people obtained information about those conflicts, a discussion of possible causes and solutions would clarify members' thinking, and enable them to have a knowledge base from which to take action. In fact, that is the project that *Beyond War* is engaged in—enabling a dialogue in the community about US-USSR relations. A team of Soviet and American authors will be touring the United States and the Soviet Union early in 1988, sharing their experiences on a joint project to discuss ways in which to end the threat of nuclear war (Gromyko, A. and Hellman, M., 1988). Their presentation will highlight the conflicts between the two superpowers, and possible ways to work together so that both countries' self-interests can flourish.

The third suggestion was for them to become involved in the larger *Beyond War* movement to whatever extent that was

possible, though they recognized that their separate needs and desires made some distinction desirable. Transportation and evening meetings are a problem for many seniors. They welcome the discussion of these issues with their age-peers. In fact, in discussing speakers for other groups, this author (who is in her mid-thirties) was kindly but firmly told that even though she might be an excellent speaker, they wanted a much older speaker to come to their groups, because that person would have much greater credibility. Their commonality of age means that they have a shared sense of experience and perspective on past, present, and future events, which leads them to feel a sense of universality. Many people have the disquieting thought (Yalom, 1985) that they are unique in their despair, which is often heightened by social isolation. The disconfirmation of a person's feelings of uniqueness is a powerful source of relief.

These group experiences, clearly, were only a beginning. Only time will tell whether the speakers materialize, the discussion group continues, and these members involve themselves with each other and the larger community on an ongoing basis. However, the brief experience of living the principle of "we are one" represented growth for the members. Living this principle on an on-going basis represents an unprecedented shift in human behavior, matched only by the unprecedented threat to our survival.

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