

What Do We Want? Peace! Where Does It Start? It Starts With Me!

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How does that sound? I hear it a lot nowadays. It is being chanted on the streets, proclaimed all over the internet, and even as sign offs on messages to me on various social media sites. Surely, it is meant to sound righteous, angry, and hip. And it kinda does, but what does it really mean?

It is nothing new of course. Its been around since at least the 70s and has been the battle cry of social justice warriors who have taken up a variety of causes. To me, it sounds like a threat of violence; agree to our demands or we gonna burn stuff down. So then, what does it really mean? Let's break it down into its component parts and see if words really mean things.

Let's start with justice. Justice is always something to strive for, but what exactly is it? I guess that justice could be defined as fair; that is fair treatment for everyone. Who can be against that? Problem with that is that my parents often told us, when we complained that something just wasn't fair, that life wasn't fair. When I was appraised of this gem of real life wisdom I always thought that it was just an excuse. Why couldn't life be fair? As I got older, based on real experience, I learned that they were closer to the mark than I; because at nine years old, what the hell did I know?

Justice, or fairness, in the real world seems to be in short supply. For most, if not everyone, life is often a veil of tears. Another way to put it is that life is suffering. The very limitations of being, subject,

one and all, to the difficulties, set-backs, sickness, old age, and finally death that makes up existence on this mortal coil. What the hell is fair about that? No doubt, some people, for some reason or other, seemed to have been born with a silver spoon protruding from the 'ole pie hole. But even the beautiful people among us encounter, on occasion, reversals of fate, bankruptcy, divorce, betrayal, disease, and yup, death. No white, or any other color, privilege is going to shield anyone from life itself.

Now, if we narrow our search for justice down a little, we might be more successful. Justice under the law is a more reasonable goal. For going on three thousand years western civilization has held that at the core of each being was a unique self. This self deals with the outer world on a daily basis. The genius of western civilization is the primacy of this individual embedded in our view of life. From the Greeks through the middle ages and the enlightenment till the rise of representative democracy, the primacy and value of each individual has been at the core of our navigation through the twists and turns of life.

This core principle, although often poorly and inconsistently practiced, is enshrined in such American founding documents as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution with its Bill of Rights. Before the law, all men are created equal with certain inalienable rights. Truly the noblest of ideals and something to strive for.

Problem is the phrases like 'all men.' And it was not even all men. It was all men that were not being held in bondage. From the vantage of our current enlightened understanding, the exclusion of women and slaves is a stain on that noble ideal. Since that time, great strides have been made in rectifying those egregious flaws. We fought a bloody Civil War that resulted in the emancipation of the slaves. When that wasn't enough to bring the decedents of black slaves into their full participation in the largess of the American dream, a movement for civil rights engaged and pressed not only American society but the law itself to reject the sins of the past and pass laws that, when enforced, would guarantee equal treatment under the law regardless of race, color, or creed. The women's and successive movements extended these laws to encompass sex, and nowadays, sexual preference and a variety of other of the human proclivities not yet encoded into the law as needing protection.

Not yet perfect, justice under the current laws has come a long way and as our shared human sensibilities continue to advance, I suspect the law will also advance, surely in fits and starts, towards the ideal. But let's not forget that this is justice under the law. It is still not enough to shield anyone from the onslaughts of the tragedies associated with life itself.

In the west, for a very long time, religious people have been concerned with the reality of being and concepts like salvation, redemption, and justification. Seems that there is something deep inside of most of us that tells us that we are not enough, have fallen short, and are in need of salvation.

The mode of this salvation within the Judeo-Christian tradition, the major shaping force of culture in the west, has been consistent. I have sinned, fallen short, and the way to right this is through repentance, receiving forgiveness, and trying again to be a better embodiment of the logos, the spark of the divine in all of us.

In great contrast, the view of life that arose in Europe after the Death of God, as proclaimed by Nietzsche, has been couched in the vocabulary of Marx. History is a progressive struggle between the classes represented by the capitalists and the proletariat. Workers of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains. In other words, if you are suffering and unhappy then the reason is because you are being oppressed. The solution is to identify the oppressor and use any means available to destroy the oppressor. Although they don't use the same vocabulary; salvation, redemption, and justification, it is justification through blaming an oppressor for the tragedies of life.

After the dramatically failed attempts to play this solution out in the USSR, China, Vietnam, North Korea, and any place that it was tried; the bodies that piled up discredited it as a viable means to address the common human condition. No one in their right mind would advocate having another go at that. Oh really, in the guise of post modernism, identity politics, and other far left ideologies, the same world view has snuck in. Today, justice is not for the individual. It is for whatever group that you identify with that is being oppressed.

Well then what about peace? Like everyone else, all I really want for Christmas is world peace, whatever the hell that is. I was recently asked, when the topic came up, if I had ever experienced peace. After a little thought I replied, "Peace, in my experience, is not the default state of my life. It has to be sought after and contested for every day."

As we strive for peace in the world, the same problem always presents. It's really hard to live in a peaceful world when I myself am not all that peaceful. If you are at all like me, then you may find yourself at cross purposes. On one hand the ideal of peace is undeniable but there is another purpose at work in me. If I am the victim of any perceived injustice I'm going to get pissed off. Once angry the next step is thoughts of revenge. If I play around with scenes of vengeance then if played out it's not far away from murder and if the injustice is egregious enough then genocide is next. So far, I've always been able to short circuit this process before it reached irreversible ends. I am grateful for the religious training I've received that I credit for this.

I once had a professor that insisted that we all have the ability to commit murder inside of us. At the time I couldn't believe him but over time I have learned this about myself. Of course in addition, he said that also we all have the potential for rape and larceny.

So if you want peace, where is the best place to start? Peace starts with me and my own struggle for salvation, redemption, and justification. It is a daily on going struggle and is the real work of peace.

Here is what I'd like to hear chanted on the street;

"WHAT DO WE WANT?"

"PEACE!"

"WHERE DOES IT START?"

"IT STARTS WITH ME!"