



## Peace, love and understanding: Start with understanding

by Geoffrey Riley Monday, January 25th 2021

The invitation was simple and straightforward: The Ashland Culture of Peace Commission asked me to guest-write the January edition of its bimonthly column for the Tidings.

Let me think about it and check with my bosses, I said.

Journalists follow paper trails, and I followed my own. I brought this up to my bosses in an email at 10:46 a.m. Jan. 6. That is within minutes of the time all hell broke loose in Washington, D.C. A crowd of Donald Trump supporters marched to the U.S. Capitol building, broke in, and interrupted the official Congressional acceptance of the electoral votes of the 2020 presidential election. Five people died that day or soon after.

Needless to say, you and I have had plenty of opportunity to think about peace, or its absence, since that time. Where do we go from here? We certainly know more about ourselves and our fellow citizens than we did a month ago. I'm fond of the phrase "the truth will make you free, but first it will make you miserable." The misery, and the anger, dissipate with time, like a January fog in the Rogue Valley. We are older and wiser, that's for sure, just knowing how hard some of us will fight for what we believe in, even if we believe it in error.

"Fight" is the correct word for what happened at the Capitol that day. But as time goes on, I find it is overused in our culture. Do we have to "fight city hall," "fight the good fight," "fight the power?" Sure, sometimes.

But there are plenty of times we can substitute the word "work" for "fight," and the context changes. Because working for change implies a more consistent and less violent process, one that has room for other people to join, a chance for people to cooperate in achieving common goals.

And that sense of cooperation and shared purpose needs to be present for us to continue to have a functioning society. If we continue to regard people as enemies, they will have no option but to see us through the same lens. It's about now that someone will think, "Well, they started it!" OK. But didn't our parents teach us to be the bigger people, to walk away from a fight, to try to see the good in everybody?

I interview a minimum of 14 people on "The Jefferson Exchange" every week. Do I agree with all of them? I do not. Do I understand where all of them are coming from? I do not. Do I give them a chance to illuminate their work, their findings, their positions? Yes, I do. It's my job; not just my job as a journalist, but as a human being, too — to figure out what a person is doing and thinking. Agreement is not required, but understanding certainly helps.

Honestly, it took a couple of interviews with the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission before I understood its intent. I can be a little thick, frankly, more inclined to understand math and physics than philosophy and metaphysics. But I do remember asking one of the ACPC people a question like, "So, you're really the 'culture of being nice to people commission?'" Yes, came the answer. Ah, at that moment the stars aligned.

After nearly 40 years of interviews, from the very short to the very long, a few stand out. One was with Victor Davis Hanson, a conservative commentator, military historian and farmer. It's the farmer part I remember, because he described doing the work of tending the fields, and opening irrigation gates, and working the soil. And he reminded me that humans have been doing such things since humans invented agriculture. The tools can change, but water and soil are still water and soil; the ancient Greeks knew it and so do we.

People have also known for a long time that it is vastly easier to get through a day, a year, a life when we cooperate. We won't agree on everything. In fact, we can't. But we can work harder to understand each other. As Albert Einstein said, "peace cannot be kept by force. It can only be achieved by understanding."

*Geoffrey Riley hosts "The Jefferson Exchange," weekdays 8:00 to 10:00 on the News and Information Service of Jefferson Public Radio, 102.3 FM. He has lived and worked in the Rogue Valley since 1985.*