

# 1 What Happened to Peace?

*“An open heart is an open mind.”*

*His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama I*

This book is about change. About possibilities. It is about the one thing the entire world likely wants but doesn't know how to find: peace.

Peace is not just a feeling or condition saved for monks or those with simpler lives. And it is undoubtedly not *just* the absence of war. It's much broader, yet our limited thinking has kept it small. It can be for all of us, whether we live in fast-paced cities, middle-class 'burbs, or down country roads. Or in nations large or small. Whether we're rich or poor, families, individuals, or in communities. And even within ourselves. The problem is that our concepts of peace are outdated and not paired succinctly with the modern world we all live in. There is a cultural lag, an imbalance. For many of us, beliefs about peace are inaccurate, spent, and ineffective. Our understanding of peace needs a reboot—a leveling up!

As a college professor teaching peace studies in the sociology department at my local university, I am continually finding ways to unlock the potential of peace in the most tangible ways. And it didn't happen overnight. After more than a decade of studying peace through a community lens, changing variables to see what did and didn't work as if it was a social experiment, I began to see peace through a newly evolving lens. Like a medical researcher studying cells to find a cure for cancer, I continue groping for ways to open my students' minds to new possibilities, especially ones that, for a time, I didn't even know existed.

I passionately wanted to demonstrate to my students that peace is possible, measurable, and movable (practical), igniting my students' desire to implement this new peace in all areas creatively—an optimization reboot for their personal lives. But something was missing, like a lost puzzle piece. I could not connect the dots to explain why peace is stuck in a cultural trap, incapable of realizing its full potential.

Then one day, I discovered the missing link almost serendipitously. The answer I was looking for was right in front of me. This book is about the journey of that finding and how I see it impacting our world phenomenally. This obscure insight can, over time, literally *change the very nature of how we, as a local and global community, see and understand peace* . . . not to mention how an expanded lens transforms perceptions and awareness.

My students walk into my class believing that peace is about hippies, utopia, the absence of war, and impossibilities; a semester later, they walk out with a fresh, updated outlook—an unexpected paradigm shift, a transformative way of thinking about peace that leads to changing beliefs. Beliefs open possibilities, and new possibilities provide frameworks for better ways to enact and embody peace—an unleashing of sorts with ripple effects—not to mention renewed feelings of hope and increased optimism.

Changing old ways of thinking can be daunting. But this book outlines the principles of what I keep learning and refining as I teach my students. Step-by-step. Day-by-day. Year by year. This book addresses the seven *peaceability factors* (ability to “do peace”), literal tools creating a pathway to peace from the micro world to interpersonal relationships and beyond. Numerous students have said, “This needs to be a required course for all colleges.” One asked, “Why limit it to only college courses?” In other words, they have asked me to spread this larger-than-life message, urging me to take it to a broader audience.

Here, I honor their request.

### **Where Has Peace Been?**

For the most part, the concept of peace has been stuck in the towers of academia, the sacred texts of world religions, and the halls of the United Nations. Often, you’ll hear it in the buzz of an activist campaign or at the local Buddhist center. Or, if fortunate, you or someone you know was immersed in Montessori teachings. And yes, in our history books, we learn about the nuclear disarmament campaigns of the late 1950s and ’60s, protests of the 1970s and ’80s, or the horrors of the Vietnam War (or any war). But for the most part, *peace is not playing a normalized, active role in our everyday lives*, and when it is mentioned, it almost seems out of context, as though it doesn’t belong.

The question that comes to my mind is why? Why haven't the words and techniques of peace been taught on a local or global scale across the spectrum of *all* social institutions? Did your family grow up sitting around the kitchen table, discussing how your home could be the epitome of a peaceful space? Or how can you speak respectfully during a conflict? What about financial advisers offering investment options that build platforms supporting peace and the planet congruently? What about businesses? Does your workplace have training on developing a culture of peace? Consider schools. Most schools don't have a curriculum on doable peace. You are probably thinking, well, if they did, what would that look like, and why would this be of value in a modern world where the three Rs (reading, writing, arithmetic) are holding less and less importance, and social media is flooding our children's minds?

Is peace a suitable solution? Because the normalization of peace doesn't make sense to the average person in our everyday society, it is shelved once again as we sit and wait. Don't get me wrong, individuals and many groups are doing the work, but they are few and far between. Let's say that practical peace is not the norm.

Going against the norm takes a lot of courage and risk-taking and possibly involves heavier consequences. So, for most, things stay the same. Comfortable. Hence, a *latent* peace.

Let's look at this graph: a standard deviation.

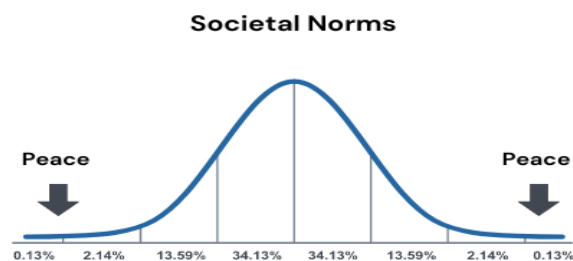


Figure 1.1 2  
Peace Is *Not* the Norm

### 3 The Peace Paradox

*“Instead of sending guns, send books. instead of sending weapons, send teachers.”*

*Malala Yousafzai 1*

“Why in the world would you teach a class on peace? We will not see peace until Jesus comes,” my mom said unapologetically. My mom believes in absolutes, principles set in stone. In her mind, ideas like peace don’t just happen because someone like me is teaching a class on the subject.

“What can I say to help her understand?” I thought. I needed a simple explanation to clarify my new passion—an elevator speech.

So, I developed a pitch and said, “I see peace as being on a spectrum. We can live in cultures of violence or peace or somewhere in between. My class will help students see that societies (or people) can move up or down the continuum by changing perceptions or beliefs and enacting viable actions. And if peace is moving forward, this is progress.”

My mom still wasn’t buying it. But this was not the case for my dad. He sat there and listened, taking it all in.



Figure 3.1 2

Culture of Peace Spectrum

Understandings of peace are paradoxical. Why? Because most people believe peace is impossible. Just ask my students before they take my class.

A paradox is “a seemingly absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition that, when investigated or explained, may prove well-founded or true.” The word derives from two Greek words meaning “contrary to belief.” An example is when someone makes the contrarian statement, “Nobody goes to that restaurant; it’s too crowded.”<sup>3</sup>

The standard view of peace is weakness, a utopian world, a calm state, something soft, radical, farfetched, laughable, politicized, or deviant (hippies). And the most typical answer I receive from students is, “Peace is the absence of war,” which defines peace by *what it is in contradiction to*—not for what it is!

It makes sense that many, if not most, in our society have these same ideas. It’s what our cultures have been feeding us for decades, even centuries. Will you be open to another way? Another perspective? A new narrative? Prepare to stretch yourself. This book makes the case that peace can be the opposite of the above notions. And with this comes the paradox. I want to change the idea that peace is impossible and flip it upside down. In this chapter, you’ll be able to review my students’ most common responses to the word peace and their associated feelings. This may give you, the reader, pause to understand your relationship to the word—peace. It’s time to rattle old stories!

## **Peace as Negative**

I asked thousands of students (over the years) a simple question on the first day of class: “What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word ‘peace’?” For many, peace leans toward the negative more than the positive.

When I ask my students, “What comes to mind when you hear the word peace, and how does it make you feel?” they tend to offer responses like:

- *Stressful* in a way—it is something I want for myself and others, but I firmly believe peace is unattainable.
- A feeling of *anxiousness* since I cannot be entirely sure what peace would include, and I know that it seems so far away.
- *Sadness* that there is a lack of peace in the world currently.

All negative *thoughts*, which lead to negative *emotions*, come with a reaction, a visceral physical *response*.<sup>4</sup> These might be a frown, a sad feeling, or maybe even a memory that evokes shame or guilt. Your thoughts come from many places—your past, present, or future dreams—but mostly from external influences. And you must remember that many of your thoughts aren't true. Even so, your body releases chemicals that make you feel good or bad as if they are.

With positive thoughts, your hands get warmer and dryer, your muscles more relaxed, and your breathing slower and more profound. And with a sad, helpless, or depressed thought, your body immediately produces chemicals that make your hands colder and wetter, your body tenser, and your breathing more difficult. In other words, just by thinking, your body reacts.

So, can the *image* you first see when *thinking* of the word peace change your body chemistry in reactive ways, even without you realizing it? The answer is yes! And, with or without awareness, the images of your thinking produce emotions that *ultimately* determine your outcomes. I know this is a lot, but hang with me.

When hearing the word peace, many of my students have emotions that border on frustration caused by impossibility, disappointment, confusion, hopelessness, discouragement, and even sadness around the word. Why would this simple word conjure up such negative emotions? And where do these feelings come from? Even after asking the same questions of students for more than fifteen years, they still (early in the class) have many ideas that bring the same feelings.

As a teacher, I am eager to dive deep to understand. Therefore, I ask more questions. And I repeat the process over and over.

Of course, some students have responses that harbor more positive thoughts, seeing peace as harmony or a sense of calm, yet later find these feelings disappointing. Why? Because to embody peace or serenity seems hard if not impossible . . . not relevant or practical. And fleeting. One student said, "I've heard about peace, but no one ever taught me how to obtain it. How can we do something if we don't know how?"

It makes sense. No wonder students step into my class, filled with confusion. Their internal responses to the word subconsciously tell them that peace is anything but peaceful, while the curriculum denotes otherwise. And many are unaware that they think and feel this way. Hence, the ultimate attitude is "peace is not possible.

What has been your go-to when minimizing or dismissing peace? Here are common responses.

### **Peace as Frustrating**

Life is loaded with frustration, from the minor irritation of losing keys to more significant moments of not reaching desired goals. Since frustration is a daily part of life, managing these irritations is essential to happiness. Many of my students are frustrated early in class. Why? They try to wrap their heads around a word they've heard most of their lives but know little about. Discouragement comes as they think, "We can't do anything about peace to change it for the better." They don't see a clear path to its obtainment.

Remember, frustration isn't necessarily bad; it can warn us of a problem and help us steer to change. But without awareness or solutions, it may lead to irritability, resentment, depression, or even violence. And seeing peace as often (ironically) linked to war or violence tends to bring up fearful notions of hopelessness or unattainability. In other words, frustrating—and negative.

### **Peace as Impractical**

Peace, for many, is a pie-in-the-sky proposition, a passive daydream producing useless outcomes. It's like my mother saying, "We'll never have peace until Jesus comes," claiming peace as something *you* cannot work toward or get to in your lifetime. A "feel-good" emotion isn't a highly practical notion. It's improbable. Unreliable. And, without substance, the potential for purpose or direction seems unlikely.

Even when we see uplifting stories in the media or hear about better alternatives to problems, our minds do not relate these to peace, as if they are not connected. There is no construct or paradigm to attach it to, so it remains obsolete. Invisible. Without personal and societal evidence that sets peace up for success, notions of its impracticalities will continue.