



pSUNDAY CIRCLE: DECEMBER 14, 2025

STORIES OF PEACE

My grandfather, Hugh Hanna McNeill, was an officer in the Ulster British forces during World War I, coming from Northern Ireland. Along with many young men, who went and never returned, including the brothers of my material grandmother, Hugh's wife, Edith, that war to 'end all wars' made a lasting impression on me growing up.

My mother married a German engineer from West Berlin who fought the Russians in World War II, so I grew up hearing the stories of the German experience of that war, Papa's not often spoken of story as a conscripted tank engineer, the time he saved his commander when their car plunged through ice on a lake, and Papa pulled him out, diving into the freezing waters. Or the time he bound up bloodied wounds when they retreated too quickly to treat the wounded in the field. He rarely talked of his war experience, preferred to forget, but I heard the stories.

Today I want to share some Peace-Maker stories with you as we reflect on the Advent Candle theme of Peace, Advent 2.

Let us pray: Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation. Give us grace to heed their warnings and

Benedict XV to beg for an official truce, on 7 December, asking the the 'guns fall silent at least upon the night the angels sing' which was refused by both sides.

Despite the official stance, the close proximity of the trench lines led to itself to cross communication, many Germans spoke English or had visited England, many UK soldiers knew at least some German. In early December, Sir Edward Hulse of the Scots Guard, wrote he was planning to organize a concert party for Christmas Day, which would 'give the enemy every form of song in harmony.'

On Christmas Eve and into Christmas Day, some 100,000 British and German troops were involved in the informal halt of battle, along the Western Front. German soldiers lit candles on their trench walls, and on Christmas trees they chopped down from nearby, and both sides sang Christmas carols. They shouted Christmas greetings to each other. Joint religious services were held with chaplains from both sides presiding together. In many places the truce lasted through the night , and even in some places, until New Year's Day. A Brigadier General , Walter Congreve recalled that after the Germans declared truce, one of his bravest men, lifted his head over the parapet and then others from both sides followed... Many soldiers wrote about that night to their loved ones'

yielding one's will to the divine power of Christ, and 'the Christ within'. (Colossians 1:27). Hicks 'painted humans and animals to represent the Inner Light's idea of breaking physical barriers of difference between individuals and working and living in peace'. His themes also represent the peaceful covenant made with the indigenous Native American tribes negotiated in part by Willaim Penn and the settlers of Pennsylvania. In his 'Peaceable Kingdom' paintings, the quotation from Isaiah 11:6 often formed a border to the painting. In some of his later painting he introduced the dividing embankment which developed into a ravine, with small figures showing the founders of American Quakerism. One writer notes "the Peaceable Kingdom paintings portray a delicate balance of difficult and unresolved issues. The lion-ego poses the greatest threat,' 'while other animals are seemingly domesticated,' behaving themselves' but their expression of 'pop-eyed puzzlement is not lost on any viewer."p

STORIES OF PEACEMAKERS

The Roerich Pact was approved at the League of Nations and signed by 21 states in the Americas affirming that “historic monuments, museums, scientific, artistic, educational and cultural institutions” should be protected both in times of peace and war. And sites would be identified by flying the Banner of Peace (a flag bearing the Pax Cultura emblem). In the aftermath of World War II, the Roerich Pact played a central role in forming international law standards to protect cultural heritage.

Roerich is inspiring to me because of his innovation and drive to create something that would have tangible benefits for peace, yet that at the time did not exist.

“The evolution of the new era rests on the cornerstone of knowledge and beauty.”—Nicholas Roerich

2. Bertha von Suttner

Bertha von Suttner (1843–1914) was a Czech-Austrian pacifist, journalist, novelist, and first woman Nobel peace laureate.

Her 1891 novel, *Lay Down Your Arms*, was one of the most influential anti-war books of all time, and it launched her to the forefront of the peace movement in Europe and abroad. She was also a longtime acquaintance of Alfred Nobel, and believed to be a major influence on his decision to include a peace prize in his will.

She worked tirelessly to support the establishment of peace societies in Austria, Germany, and Hungary, was instrumental in the establishment of the International Peace Bureau in

Switzerland, and she advocated for the establishment of an International Court of Justice. She believed that strong peace institutions were necessary to prevent the outbreak of war, and she feared that a terrible war would break out in Europe in the absence of such institutions. Two months after she died, WWI broke out.

Her book captivated me. Following excerpts from her diary, it reads like a very personal memoir of her life and her experiences with multiple wars, integrating insightful reflections on the intersection of gender, religion, education, raising children, economics, and a range of themes associated with war.

"The girls—who indeed are not to take the field—are educated out of the same books as are prepared for the military training of the boys, and so in the female youth arises the same conception which exhausts itself in envy that they have nothing to do with war and in admiration for the military class."—Bertha von Suttner

3. Smedley Butler

Major General Smedley Darlington Butler (1881–1940), was a senior United States Marine Corps officer and one of the most decorated in U.S. history, turned peace activist.

In 1935, following his retirement from the Marine Corps, Butler wrote a book called *War Is a Racket* that exposed corporate interests underlying U.S. war efforts. He then spent the rest of his life advocating against war and U.S. imperialism. He toured America trying to raise awareness amongst young people, military personnel, and the general public about how the corporate-backed government is driving the U.S. war machine, and putting their lives in danger for personal profit.

Smedley sums up his career best:

"I spent 33 years and four months in active military service and during that period I spent most of my time as a high class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street and the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism. I helped make Mexico and especially Tampico safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenues in. I helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street. I helped purify Nicaragua for the International Banking House of Brown Brothers in 1902-1912. I brought light to the Dominican Republic for the American sugar interests in 1916. I helped make Honduras right for the American fruit companies in 1903. In China in 1927 I helped see to it that Standard Oil went on its way unmolested. Looking back on it, I might have given Al Capone a few hints. The best he could do was to operate his racket in three districts. I operated on three continents."—Major General Smedley D. Butler

I think Smedley is awesome because, long before we were talking about the military-industrial complex, he was exposing big business profiteering in war and corporate interests as a central driving force that brings us to war. As you can see by his writing style above, his book is humorous and enlightening. If you read his book, you'll be shocked as he outlines the extortionate profit margins of companies in the war economy (of 100+ years ago), feeding like a virus on both U.S. tax dollars and on resource extraction in conquered lands. If anything has changed, it has been an increase in profit margins and in the human suffering that war and militarization cause.

4. Thích Nhất Hạnh

Thích Nhất Hạnh (born 1926) is a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, peace activist, and author of over 100 books.

Often referred to as Thầy “teacher” by his followers, he coined the term “Engaged Buddhism,” encouraging others to apply insights gained from Buddhist practice to work for peace and to transform injustice. Thầy was an active and leading member of the nonviolent peace movement in Vietnam.

He later toured the U.S. to raise awareness of the suffering of his people and to advocate for an end to U.S. intervention in Vietnam. While in the U.S., he met with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., convincing King to speak out against the war publicly. Dr. King nominated Thích Nhất Hạnh for the 1967 Nobel Peace Prize. After the war, Thầy was denied permission to return to Vietnam and has since based himself in his Plum Village Monastery in France, often traveling internationally to give retreats and talks.

I first encountered Thích Nhất Hạnh and his community of practitioners at Deer Park Monastery in San Diego, California, while a college student. I learned about mindfulness and have read a number of his books. His teaching/writing is inspiring to me because of the eloquent way he links personal peace with peace activism. He sometimes shares very raw experiences from the Vietnam war and speaks/writes beautifully about how to deal with personal suffering, to have compassion for the suffering of others (even those who may hurt us), and to find nonviolent ways to promote peaceful social change.

“Without deep listening and gentle loving speech it is very difficult to move towards peace. Peace will only become a reality, when world leaders come to negotiations with the ability to hear the suffering at the root of all conflicts.”—Thich Nhat Hanh

5. Garry Davis

Garry Davis (1921–2013) was an American Broadway performer and WWII bomber pilot, turned peace activist, and trailblazer in the One World movement.

Horrified by his experiences in WWII, Garry became convinced that to abolish nationalistic wars, we must eradicate nation-states. In 1948 and renounced his American citizenship and declared himself a citizen of the world. Six months later, Davis stormed onto the balcony during a session of the United Nations General Assembly, and bellowed in front of a stunned assembly and T.V. cameras, "I interrupt! I interrupt! The nations you represent divide us! And lead us to the abyss of total war! What we need is one government for one world, and if you won't do it, step aside and a peoples world assembly will arise from our own ranks, because we can be served by nothing less!" While promptly removed from the assembly, he quickly became a global sensation.

Davis then founded the International Registry of World Citizens that processed over 750,000 applications from over 150 countries within two years. In 1953, he founded the World Government of World Citizens that soon began issuing (and still does issue) World Citizen Passports. The passport issuing World Service Authority claims that over 185 countries have issued visas on it on a case-by-case basis, and a half-dozen countries have formally recognized the passport.

Recognizing the futility of the never-ending immigration debates of today, Garry's cause to protect the inalienable right of anyone to travel anywhere was ahead of its time. I also believe that Garry's lifelong campaign to eradicate the ideology of nationalism should, in some form, be a central pillar of efforts to abolish war. His calls for the oneness of the human community and for the need of global systems to support this oneness is certainly compelling. Additionally, while case-by-case advocacy is needed to get them accepted, documents issued by the World Service Authority can and do have genuine value for refugees and other stateless people.

"The nation-state is a political fiction which perpetuates anarchy and is the breeding ground of war. Allegiance to a nation is a collective suicide pact."—Garry Davis

6. Wangari Maathai

Wangari Maathai (1940–2011) was a Kenyan environmental and political activist, the first African woman and first environmental activist to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

Maathai became involved in a number of civic organizations in the early 1970s, and it was then that she began to see environmental degradation as an issue central to many of Kenya's problems. As an active member of the National Council of Women of Kenya, Maathai introduced the idea of community-based tree planting. This idea developed into the Green Belt Movement (GBM), a broad-based grassroots organization whose primary focus is the planting of trees. Activities of GBM served both to conserve the environment and improve the lives of women and families struggling with poverty. To date, GBM has planted more than 20 million trees across the country.

From her involvement with U.N. agencies, international NGOs, and regional networks, GBM expanded throughout Africa. As GBM spread, back in Kenya, Maathai led peaceful protests to protect the destruction of natural lands. During her twenty years of environmental activism, she was injured in brutal crackdowns and imprisoned on multiple occasions, and the government tried to shut down GBM Kenya. Maathai was elected to Parliament and served as assistant minister for Environment, Natural Resources, and Wildlife during 2003 and 2005.

It is incredible how much of an impact Maathai's efforts have had not only in Kenya, but also across Africa. Maathai is inspiring not only for her ability to mobilize mass action for reforestation and the way she stood up to the former oppressive regime in Kenya but also for the creative way she wove together action for the environment with women's empowerment, economic justice, and peace.

"The way in which we can promote peace, is by promoting sustainable management of our resources, equitable distribution of these resources, and that the only way you can actually do that, is that then you have to have a political, economic system that facilitates that."—Wangari Maathai

7. Peace Pilgrim

Peace Pilgrim (born Mildred Norman; 1908–1981) was a small-town girl who walked across the United States for nearly 30 years, speaking about peace and advocating for peace.

In mid-life, she became uneasy with the comfortable life she was living and began a journey of self-discovery. She radically simplified her life and volunteered for peace organizations. After hiking the entire length of the Appalachian Trail, she decided to make it her life mission to walk for peace. She changed her name to Peace Pilgrim and set out on an 11-month walk across the U.S. collecting signatures on a petition to the U.S. government to broker an immediate peace in Korea and to establish a national Peace Department.

And she walked for the rest of her life carrying few possessions, owning no money, eating only what was given to her (and fasting when she had no food), and sleeping wherever she could when nobody offered her a place to stay. She spoke in churches, synagogues, and mosques, in halls and public squares, at universities and conferences, on radio stations and T.V. She walked across the United States six times, spreading her message of peace until a car accident ended her life.

Publications compiled from her speeches and interviews have been distributed over one million times in over twenty languages. What captivated me while watching her talks on YouTube is her ability to forge a genuine connection with and bring out the goodness in every person she met. She was a force of nature that embodied peace. And she had the kind of