What Does Peace Mean To Me?

Francois Clemmons.

Peace is a condition of calmness, stability, and order, which practically everyone seeks in his or her life. Since I never expect to experience a life without some kind of conflict, peace means having conflicts and problems which I can handle and/or solve. Peace implies that I am living in communion with my neighbors and colleagues and that we'd rather sit down to a potluck meal than take out our guns and shoot each other. The Webster dictionary defines peace as 'calm; repose; freedom from disturbance, war, or hostilities.' I would also include in that definition, some kind of 'social contract' and freedom from too much interference from the government into my private life. The social contract with my neighbors, hospitals, police departments, educational institutions, arts organizations, the publishing world, wall street, and the like, would mean that I would not be afraid to be myself, and would not be subject to judgement, discrimination, and ostracization because I choose to live my life in a condition of peace, and differently than my neighbors.

Assuming that our nation is not at war: declared or undeclared, and that for the most part, we are at economic peace with our international neighbors and allies, there are three areas where the condition of peace is most important to me. I want to live in an environment of racial peace, artistic peace, and sexual peace.

I have had the most conflict, over the matter of my race. Ever since my family left the southern state of Alabama when I was but a youngster to avoid 'overtly' segregated schools, I have been aware of race. To my young mind, I never reconciled that people didn't like me just because I was black. After 50 years of living in the 'north,' I still am not reconciled to the institution of 'de facto' racism which I experience time and time again, by people who claim to have no prejudices and don't see my color at all. I see theirs, why can't they see mine. For 50 years, I have listened to well-meaning, northern liberals expound about their proud Irish, Italian, or Scandinavian background, and while not understand why this country needs a holiday to honor the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Every year, the majority of American citizens become honorary Irishmen on St. Patrick's Day, but these same people have not a clue as to why it might be important for them to become honorary Black American Citizens on the national holiday honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
In my experience, most of them simply never thought of it. Never ever, thought of the idea of being Black. Every day, these same people, young and old, through the medium of television, newspapers and magazines, are willing to spend billions of dollars to be like Majic Johnson, or Michael Jordan, or Tiger Woods, or Michael Johnson, or the Williams Sisters of Tennis, without acknowledging that these are black men and women whom they desire to emulate. I want racial peace that acknowledges that Black is beautiful and different...and that the difference is not inferior. It is simply ‘Different.’

The second area where I’d like to experience peace is as a creative artist. Because I couldn’t experience and experiment with the music and musical combinations of my forefathers, I became a producer and entrepreneur, and started my own musical organization: The Harlem Spiritual Ensemble and the not-for-profit organization, The American Negro Spiritual Research Foundation. It is interesting to note that to date, some 20 institutions (and the number is increasing) of higher learning have established a Jazz program and issue one degree or another in Jazz studies, the foundation and source of this great music, the American Negro Spiritual, is still looked upon with shame and denial. Peace to me means that we as a country should acknowledge the uniqueness and creativity of this great body of work, and also, honor those who created it. The legions of black souls who labored on the plantations and rural industries in this country have never been acknowledged and/or repatriated. We, as a nation, have never made peace with the fact that this body of work is overlooked and sometimes despised by the more numerous ‘culture at large’, because it comes out of the experience of rejected, dejected, and oppressed black slaves. I contend that the road to racial and artistic peace in America must encompass some form of national, artistic embrace of the American Negro Spiritual. Our national schizophrenia can only be recognized and healed with the equally painful acknowledgement of our need to be unified and to be at ‘peace’ with one another. It is necessary for us to forgive one another, to embrace one another, and to love one another.

Sexual freedom is the third area in which I would like to experience peace. I’d like to be able to live in peace and harmony with my neighbors, happy in my sexual choices as heterosexual neighbors often do live in peace and comfort with their sexual choices. Even back in the 1950’s when my parents left racist, segregationist, Alabama, for racial peace and harmony, in the north, I knew deep down within, that sexual freedom would be harder to come by. Our nation at the time had open warfare on issues involving racial discrimi-
ination,--- one could follow the lead of people like Malcolm X Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Roy Wilkins, Stokely Carmichael, Angela Davis, and Bobby Seale.........the list goes on and on. But homosexuality was the unforgivable sin that dare not raise its head and had no national voice. One could not be gay and be proud as the Black Liberationists and Nina Simone, and Aretha Franklin and Ray Charles were chanting ‘I’m Black And I’m Proud’. During this time I became acquainted with self-hate.........not for being black, but for acknowledging to myself that the feelings that I had at the core of my being were gay feelings…..a deep desire to be one with the same sex. Living in the black ghetto, I had been carefully taught by my family and by my church to hate the sin and sinner who practiced homosexual love. I would often think to myself, ‘which was worse to be loved and nurtured by my family for being black, but denied their love and acceptance and being cut off from the most important and powerful feelings that were in my heart to express, or to be loved by white liberals for being human, and non-threatening, but who were not at all aware that I was black?’ Again and again, I used to imagine what it would sound like to say ‘I’m gay and I’m proud’ and to hear this chant echoed loud and defiant by my black family and friends who so eagerly touted their racial identity and how proud they were. Little did I know that it would be some 30 years before I would see the beginnings of a Gay Rights movement in New York City. It was also some 30 years before I was strong enough give up my marriage, and face up to the challenge, responsibility, and knowledge that I was a gay man. It was revelatory to me to finally realize that I would always be black, and I would also always be gay. And, once again, I have found peace and salvation in a justice system which forbids racial and sexual discrimination.

I am also painfully aware the I cannot change the heart of someone who does not want to love and accept me, but I can at least live in peace and ‘civil acceptance’ with my neighbors in the state of New York and Vermont. Ultimately, peace in Vermont and in the rest of America means being able to be openly gay and marry the ‘man of my dreams’ as my heterosexual friends have done for a millennia.

In conclusion, I would like to say, that my life would be far more empty and meaningless if I could not find peace in the areas which include my racial identity, my artistic expression, and my sexual nature. As important as the civil rights and civil union legislation is, as important as the attitude of the ‘official’ and ‘fundamentalist’ church is, and as important as the acceptance and love of my family is, I am most affected by the level of inner peace and love that I have been able to establish and maintain for myself. Because it has been a
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painful and often lonely experience, probing into these areas and coming to some kind of reconciliation and peace, has made me a more compassionate and non-judgmental person.

Thank you.

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