

## Making peace begins at home

By Ruth Ostrow

WHILE recently reflecting on matters of global unrest, it did occur to me that growing up in a large family can feel a bit like a war zone. In my home there were constant battles as siblings would form alliances to raid various personal territories.

The food plate was always a most vulnerable bit of exposed terrain to defend, where your dinner could be stolen right from under you by an invading fork. While the enemy would engage you in some drama under the table, members of the coalition of the willing would perform some superb military manoeuvre to rob you of your chips and replace them with extra bits of spinach or broccoli. The cupboard was another trouble spot. I still lament the time my favourite skivvy was removed in a pre-dawn raid and the neck cut off. Thereafter the enemy pretended that this was not my skivvy at all but a friend's top. And the time my favourite books were captured and other sisters' names written in them, because I had moved out and temporarily left them trustingly behind enemy lines.

The list of grievances on all sides is endless. The enlightened words "Share with your sisters" meant nothing in our house as vital strategic battles, such as who should sit in the middle in the car, continued well into our teens. My mother, the household Kofi Annan, would say meaningful things like "Take it in turns", "Be fair", "Be kind to each other", "Try to see it from your sister's point of view", to no avail, as we continued our aerial bombardments and campaigns of terror. Looking back over this now with humour, I do ask myself, how we -- as human beings -- expect peace and harmony to reign on a global scale when we have such trouble creating it in our own backyards, even with those we adore, let alone with our neighbours?

Consider a friend who went out marching for peace while I was in Sydney recently. Then she got on the phone to find out which of her friends also went out marching. Those who hadn't, for whatever reason, got into a huge amount of trouble.

"How could you not be against war?" was the angry and emotive plea she used against us all. "Of course, I'm not not anti-war. I mean I'm pro-peace," blubbered each person who hadn't marched in that particular rally, on that particular day. "It's just that ..." and thereafter 50 reasons followed, including an engagement party, in our case death in the family, children with the flu, and so forth. But she remained incensed and quite aggressive. Finally I had to have a word with her. "Surely tolerance and peace begin at home," I said bluntly, feeling bad about being judged. "People do the best they can. Why are you so sanctimonious and self-righteous? Remember the creed: 'Live and let live'?"

She couldn't see the correlation between her indignation and the fact that this personal fascism and intolerance on a political scale is exactly what leads to war. After reflecting on this incident, my childhood and my relationships, I decided to do something I'm very proud of. Rather than march in the next rally or write the proverbial anti-war column, I decided to make peace with any friends, colleagues or neighbours I was having an issue with, and to be particularly sensitive and loving to those people I had neglected for a while.

Because it really hit me that it's not enough to stand up with placards and march for global peace if we're not also prepared to resolve the hurt feelings we cause among those closest to us. Peace begins with saying sorry, compromising, and forgoing judgment in our personal relationships. I have known many wonderful people who have supported worthy causes or gone off to international hot spots to give support and aid, while loved ones at home have confided that they feel neglected or invalidated.

Last week I had a fascinating lunch with Alan Clements, one of the first Westerners to train as a Buddhist monk in Burma and author of the book *Instinct for Freedom* (Hodder Headline), who was visiting Australia to promote inner peace as a means to outer peace. He says that compassion should be the new religion of the 21st century, and he agrees with me that peace, tolerance and generosity of spirit must begin at home -- first in our attitudes to ourselves, and then in how we treat our neighbours, families or colleagues.

Many readers have complained to me that they feel powerless in the face of this Iraq war. But if we have little power to stop political forces on a global scale, we do certainly have enormous power on a personal level to stop harbouring bad feelings and promote harmony among our nearest and dearest. And most importantly, we have the opportunity not just to expect our children to respect each other's personal rights and boundaries, but to teach them how to do so.

Call me an idealist, but I see a world where "Don't eat my chips" really means something.

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