



[Table of Contents](#)
[Feature Articles](#)
[Masthead](#)
[Magazine List](#)
[Shopping](#)
[Contact Us](#)
[Sitemap](#)
[Home](#)



A Pacifist's View of Revenge

with Dot Walsh of the World Peace Abbey

by Julia Griffin

Julia: Can you tell me about your commitment to pacifism and involvement with the Peace Abbey?

Dot: I became a pacifist after meeting Mother Teresa. I was working in the prison system in Massachusetts. Mother Teresa came in answer to an inmate's request that she visit the prison. First she told him that she was coming, and then she notified the authorities of her impending visit.

She was a tiny, frail woman, but she walked through three prisons, and they could not contain her. She touched everyone. She wandered through the inmates with this incredible presence. There was no difference to her between the inmates and the officials. She was beyond it all.

She spoke about kindness and sharing. This was what she spoke about to murderers and rapists. She said you can share a glass of water if you have nothing else to share.

We were all transformed by her. The darkness parted to her

Light.

Between visits to the prison, she made an unscheduled visit to the Life Experience School. The person who accompanied her told me that I must go as well. So I visited the School, and I met Lewis and Meg Randa, the founders of the Peace Abbey. I work there now.

Julia: Tell me a little about the Peace Abbey?

Dot: The Peace Abbey was created in 1988. Lewis Randa was in Assisi, Italy, for the World Prayers. He had taken to this place the ashes of a student who had died. He was touched by the prayers, and didn't want them to be lost. He asked a Native American to take the prayers back to America for the school, and the Native American came to the school and brought the prayers. Now we have an Office of Peace with what are called the "Peace Seeds," prayers representing the twelve traditional religions.

We believe in the One God — in a unity that encompasses all religions, the God that is above all religions. We honor all religions and their prayers. We hope that others can learn what is similar in all religions from this collection of prayers and thoughts.

We also have the Courage of Conscience Prayers or Peace Awards to recognize others' efforts toward peace. These awards highlight the missions of others. Sometimes they are recognized by song, activism, or plays. We nominate these people in order to draw attention to their work. Many people would not be recognized if we didn't focus on their mission. We have no real funds for this. We believe what we need will come, and it does.

We also offer a place that people can find to rest, meditate, or pray. We have a National Register of Conscientious Objectors. Our mission is to work as activists for peace. We also have a Veganpeace Animal Sanctuary and a vegetarian resource. All this is in addition to the Life Experience School that was the beginning of it all.

Julia: Are you familiar with James Twyman's work? I wondered if you could comment on the kind of work he has done with the Peace Abbey?

Dot: I met James here at the Peace Abbey, and I am aware that he recorded the prayers here. Since that time, he has written books, and we have been able to aid his community when they have asked for help.

Julia: I wanted to talk about revenge also. How do you as a pacifist define revenge? What do you see as the root or core of the revenge problem?

Dot: We all know how it feels to want revenge. Many people who were not hurt in 9-11 want revenge.

I think people who suffered in their childhood have not cleared that hurt or learned to understand it. When they feel hurt on any level, they revert back to their childhood state.

But there are many people who lost children or families in 9-11 who do *not* desire revenge. We always have a choice whether to seek revenge — or healing. Choice is the one thing we all have.

Violence is within all of us. The question is what to do with it. That is the choice. Violence is a prison of the soul and the spirit.

I teach a class in walk-in treatment clinics and women's shelters. I ask, "What is violence? What do you know about it?" And everyone relates it to themselves. They say this happened to me, or that happened to me. But they think it's outside of them, that someone else is responsible for it. This is the big denial — thinking that violence is outside. They don't see that violence is within the self.

The United States incarcerates more prisoners than any other country in the world. We think that if we put people who are violent in prison, we will solve the problem. We

think that we will become safe and that there will be less violence in the world. It's not true.

Julia: How can people evolve toward non-violence?

Dot: I know that God can connect with each of us. I have felt this connection, and I cannot be unique. This experience must be available to each of us. Surely, each of us must have the opportunity to be open to that Light, or to try to reach God.

I don't understand the people who don't open to that opportunity to be in connection with God, who don't want it or don't nourish it, or are afraid of it. Sometimes, I think that there are two groups of us, one that is aware, and one that is not. The group that doesn't seek awareness is alien to me, and yet it's the majority.

As human beings, we have not evolved emotionally. We must evolve emotionally and open to the Light in order to create peace.

Julia: I was touched by the Ghandi quote in your literature, where he said, "We must become the change we seek in the world." Can you explain what this means to you?

Dot: It means that the potential for violence and non-violence is a possibility within each of us. The more we feed violence, the more of that quality is within us and the world. The more we feed peacefulness, the more there is of that.

The Hindus say it's like having two animals, a tiger and a rabbit. Which animal will we feed? We can choose the tiger or the rabbit — peace or revenge. We become the "animal" we feed.

Julia: Pain is an element that leads us into the revenge cycle — when we feel hurt we want to hurt others. Many writers say that detachment is the answer. What sort of thinking or feeling do you personally practice or teach to overcome these feelings?

Dot: As you grow older, and I am sixty years old now, you can have an open heart or a closed heart. You can choose between hardening your heart or opening it. When you open your heart, you forgive and let the energy go forward.

It is not always easy to have an open heart, but I want an open heart because I want my spirit to be free.

We are responsible for finding happiness and joy in living. Our journey is to learn how to do that.

Julia: What are the keys in that journey for letting go of pain?

Dot: There are steps in my journey. I pray and meditate. I become quiet.

I ask myself: Could I let go of this pain? Would I let go of this pain? When would I let go of this pain? The only time I have is now. Can I let go of this pain now? How much of this pain can I let go of now?

Julia: Do you usually let go of pain a little at a time? Or do you sometimes experience miracles?

Dot: Most people have to let go of pain in bits and pieces. I see people come to the Peace Abbey and their initial desire is to let go of the pain. I can see that they are suffering, that they are in pain. But it often happens in bits — they can't talk about it, but they can meditate about it. Or perhaps they can write in the prayer book. Eventually, they can talk about it and let go of it.

But I believe in miracles, too. It can all happen at once. I have experienced that.

Julia: What about fear? Sometimes we are afraid of leaving our hurt or anger behind because we are afraid of being hurt again.

Dot: When you are truly focused on the Light, when you become an activist for the Light, you will be focused on your next step. When you are focused on your next step, you will leave the fear behind. You won't have time for it.

I challenge people to move beyond doing nothing. Doing nothing is doing something. It is standing in fear. I challenge people to move beyond their fear.

Julia: In a very real way, pacifists go to war against their feelings of anger and revenge. It's easy to subvert or repress those kinds of feelings. How do you deal with this?

Dot: We have to learn to express anger. It can be as simple as saying, "It makes me angry that you are always late."

This is a positive expression of anger. Anger is not to be kept in. It should be expressed and acted on positively.

Julia: What are the rewards you've found in coming to terms with anger and learning to express it?

Dot: The expression of anger has taught me honesty. It has given me self-respect and the courage to be an activist.

Anger is a powerful tool when correctly used and understood. We are given anger for a reason. When we come to an understanding with anger, it can be freeing.

Julia: How do you teach children to deal with anger and not repress it?

Dot: Usually, children are powerless in our society. We need to give our children power by giving them choices. We can let them choose to litter or not to litter. They can choose what to eat. They can choose to draw, or to write something beautiful.

Children also need to be taught to remember their connection with nature. In remembering this connection, there is strength. When children are connected with nature,

they will naturally connect with their own Divinity.

As parents, we need to learn how to help our children identify their feelings of anger and express their emotions. It is important to acknowledge children's feelings if we want our children to evolve.

Julia: I am also wondering how you present your feelings to others who do not share them. Sometimes that can be difficult.

Dot: Many people do not understand the meaning of pacifism. It does not mean being passive. It means to become an activist and to make changes in the world. This is a position that requires courage and inner strength. It means believing in an ideal and standing behind it. This is the meaning of pacifism. This is the start of understanding.

Julia: There is an undercurrent of revenge in our own country right now. How could we allow our country to be attacked and our people to die without retaliation or revenge as we did in 9-11? What is your view as a pacifist about these events?

Dot: I think that we are a passive-aggressive nation. We love and want to help everyone. We also want to bomb a lot of people. We act in a kind way, but we have trouble expressing our anger.

We have to learn to be more honest with ourselves and others if we want to evolve. I don't think that as beings we've evolved very much emotionally. We don't know how to express our feelings in a positive way.

Julia: What would you define as a useful response to 9-11?

Dot: I think that one of the more useful responses I have seen has come from a group of people called Families for a Peaceful Tomorrow. All of these people lost loved ones in 9-11. They have gathered together and transformed their loss into making an unbelievable movement toward helping

people who lost loved ones in Afghanistan.

If we all move forward through our past suffering and pain, as these people have, then we will create a peaceful world.

Julia: Your literature states that the world's resources are being spent on mass destruction and that "continued reliance on the military solutions betrays a politics devoid of creative ideas." Would you comment on what you mean by creative ideas?

Dot: You begin with honesty. We need to know, for instance, why Iraq and Afghanistan feel the way they do toward us. We need to look at the issues with honesty, not emotionally. We need to act on truth.

There is a lot of deception. Foreign policy is complicated, but we must see through deception. We need to think about what it must feel like to Afghanistan or Iraq to have the most powerful country world coming to bomb them. There is a possibility of finding creative solutions when we are able to say, "Why this problem?" or, "What is the truth behind the problem." In asking these questions, we free ourselves from over-reacting emotionally.

I find it hopeful that the media are beginning to cover some of the issues behind Iraq's and Afghanistan's involvement. This week's *Newsweek* [September 16, 2002] has background information on these issues. There is always hope when there is truth.

Julia: So how do you suggest we create the type of mental and emotional state that would contribute to world peace?

Dot: The peace movement of the sixties was not about inner peace. It was not about being a more peaceful person. Now we know that inner peace is necessary if we wish to seek a larger peace. We see our own pacifist movement as a maturation of the peace movement of the sixties. We believe in a balance of these two movements combined with an activism that seeks social justice.

Julia: Can you tell me a little about your view of peacemakers. Most Eastern philosophy recommends the middle path, yet you say that peacemakers cannot walk the center of the road, that we must tread a wild road, "calling out truths that few of us want to hear." How do you reconcile those two views?

Dot: I believe that peacemakers do walk in the balance of which you speak. We walk in the balance of knowing. Gandhi did walk the middle of the road. He respected all religions.

But we do not walk the *common* road. We walk the road of awareness, of Light. This often seems to be a difficult road or a wild road for those who have not awakened, but we do not abandon our balance.

Julia: You also say that if there is hope for the new world, it is through the peacemakers?

Dot: There is always hope. It is essential to the human soul. The human spirit is about hope and movement toward the Light. There are so many groups. I think that if the grassroots movements joined together, there would be significant progress toward peace.

This seems to be an important time laden with possibility. I believe in hope, so I believe that it is a time that we will join together, and that the possibility is real that peace will prevail.

Julia: I truly admire your efforts toward peace. If others want to become involved, what should they do?

Dot: My dream is that a model and mission that is a reflection of the Peace Abbey will exist in every city in every state and throughout the world. I dream of these places — where everyone is welcome seven days a week, where the door is never locked, and people are joined by their thoughts, prayers, and faith in whatever god they believe in.

Where there is hope for peace.

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The Peace Abbey is located in Sherborn, Massachusetts. They have many programs, and many ways to help you in your own efforts to create peace. To contact them, contact Dot Walsh, or send an email to PeaceAbbey@earthlink.net.

[Top of Page](#)

[Print Version](#)