

Professor Stuart Rees' observations to students at the 'Mobilising for Peace' Citizenship Convention NSW Parliament House, Monday 3 November 2003.

I would like to speak about ways in which poetry can generate interest and excitement in the cause of peace. I should correct myself. My interest is in peace with justice rather than peace. It is an important distinction. Peace usually refers to the state of affairs when people stop fighting. Peace with justice refers to struggles to recognize people's human rights and to work with them to attain dignity and a certain quality of life. Peace with justice refers to the entitlement to participate in public life as a citizen and to do so by expressing many features of non-violence. Such expressions may be apparent in the way we dress, the way we prepare food and offer hospitality to others or it may be apparent in our choice of music, dance and song. All those features of non-violence display our human-ness and thus contribute to the well-being of others. Some of the best advocates of non violence and of peace with justice have been poets.

Here is an unknown Australian poet, a soldier who fought in the Second World War who is emphasizing the responsibilities to build peace with justice when he returns home, otherwise, he says, the business of fighting a war will have been pointless. The poem is called *Peace*. I'll just quote a few lines:

We seem to be sure about winning this war
It's winning the peace that's the worry..

...peace terms were born in the things that I'd scorn
As being too trivial then.
What things ? Oh, a shake of the hand for the sake
Of straightening quarrels and strikes,
And saying 'I'm wrong' to help things along,
For pride is the source of dislikes.

This thoughtful person was saying that he had previously taken 'peace' for granted. He had thought that the day to day activities which make life possible and enjoyable – like simply acknowledging people's worth – were trivial compared to the serious business of fighting and other forms of violence. Now he realized – and I wish the policy makers in America, Britain and in Australia would learn this lesson in Iraq – that issues like trust, friendship, respect for one another's dignity and different interests were crucial aspects of peace building.

That brings me to questions about the interdependence of all people. The task of building peace with justice requires us to work with people from all walks of life, to forget emphasis on national pride, or on religious or racial identity. This emphasis on interdependence is a way of saying that what you want for yourselves in life – perhaps freedom, health and happiness – should be qualities enjoyed by all people. The wonderful Australian aboriginal poet Kath Walker –

Oodgeroo of the Nunucaal tribe - expressed this ideal in a poem called All One Race. That poem contains the lines:

I'm for humanity not colour gibes.
I'm international, never mind tribes

I'm international, never mind place,
I'm for humanity, all one race.

In another of her poems, written in 1962, five years before indigenous Australians became citizens, Oodgeroo highlighted the meaning of human rights and why these rights were so central to the development of a better future for all Australian Aboriginal people.

The poem is called Charter of Aboriginal Rights.

We need love not overlordship,
Grip of hand not whip hand wardship,
Opportunity that places
White and black on equal basis.

Give us welcome not aversion,
Give us choice not cold coercion
Status, not discrimination
Human rights not segregation.

The goal of attaining human rights as a way to build peace with justice can be addressed by anyone at any time of the day, in any context or country. School children and teachers, parents and friends, shopkeepers and taxi drivers, anyone can make a contribution provided they respect human rights and speak the language of non violence. I want to finish my observations about the significance of our acting responsibly as citizens who contribute to peace with justice, by referring to an experience of mine in the Sri Lankan civil war. I had come to the end of my time in Sri Lanka. I had a few hours to spend at the airport in Colombo before flying home to Australia. During that time I reflected that in spite of the awful violence of the civil war, there were peaceful people who showed love and respect to one another. Such 'love and respect' was best expressed by a particular animal who was always calm, always patient and hard working, who apparently harmed no-one and benefited so many. Almost without thinking I sat in the lounge at Colombo Airport and wrote this poem called *The Water Buffalo*. You might like to perceive a water buffalo as a first class citizen who knew that respect for human rights and expressions of non violence were the way to peace with justice. Here are the first and last verses of that poem.

In times of confrontation,
when humility's a feat,
to kill is seen as freedom,
to serve is labeled weak,
we hear the sounds of protest,
of 'rights and rights' at length,
how strange to call this animal
of stamina and strength.

It must be cheap to run them
on water love and greens,
yoked to the orient's wagons
they need no gasoline,
serene in all their plodding,
predictable if slow,
companions to the poorest
the water buffalo.

At this important convention, only a few minutes away from the break for refreshments, it would best if I let 'The Water Buffalo' have the last word.

Stuart Rees, 3 11 03