

COMFORTABLY NUMB

By Robert Thompson
Peace Summit Co-Ordinator 2022

I had stopped by Tiona Holiday Park as I often do to punctuate my journey whilst travelling north or south and meditated whilst walking the old, old, path through the palm glades towards the Green Cathedral. There are not too many places that evoke such an overwhelming sense of peace and tranquillity for me as looking out across the lake from the Green Cathedral. As I soaked in the experience trying to capture every second of the beauty, my senses were jarred by something that had been cleverly filtered out by my brain. Every now and again I could hear the distant sound of thunder. These muted explosions of sound did not fit the peaceful serenity of this scene. But it was not thunder, it was thunderous surf. The East coast low was having its way up and down the coast causing monstrous waves to smash onto the shoreline over the other side of the dunes quite some distance away. The sound of the waves crashing was familiar yet at the same time it was unsettling as it was now starting to dominate my experience in this otherwise peaceful place. The scientific term for how the brain filters noise is called sensory gating. It is a survival mechanism that has evolved to allow us to pay attention to what is important to us in our environment and relegate all other ever-present stimuli to the background. We are amazing creatures are we not!

I've recently been pondering the issues that were discussed at the Peace Summit. Does this social survival mechanism - sensory gating - help us to filter out the many voices around Peace and Justice issues like the plight of refugees, gun violence, earth stewardship, domestic violence, addiction, human rights, racial prejudice and so on. Science tells us that with any human evolutionary benefit - there is always the potential for it to be over-applied. In the words of Pink Floyd's album "Dark Side of the Moon", we risk becoming "Comfortably Numb".

By all accounts from both online subscribers and face to face attendees our first foray into a large indoor gathering in a post pandemic world was a positive experience. Together we heard from a wonderful cross section of presenters sharing their individual and collective expertise on a wide range of topics, concerns and challenges that affect our communities both here and overseas.

Since the Peace Summit I have had many emails and phone calls asking when the next Peace Event will be... and what we see happening from here.

Perhaps the second question is more pertinent, what does happen from here.

I was inspired many years ago by seeing the movie "Ghandi". I recently revisited the movie and was amazed at what I did not remember from the first time I saw this movie. I am unsure whether my "sensorial gate" had filtered out some of the scenes or not, but perhaps something else is responsible. Perhaps at different life-stages, different things speak to us...

Experience changes us. As a grandparent I am more aware of those things that I have contributed to in the past that have over-taxed the environment. I realise my focus has shifted from a vague distant future for myself to an increasingly worrying environmental future for my grandchildren and other young ones.

In the movie Ghandi, there is a very powerful scene where a man bursts into the room where Ghandi is having a meeting with some Muslim and Hindu leaders. There has been much fighting between the two religious groups leading to Ghandi embarking on a hunger strike. Ghandi is lying in a bed in a weakened state after weeks of refusing to eat. The man who burst into the meeting confronts Ghandi and exclaims that he is in hell, and for him there is no way out as he confesses to killing a young Muslim boy in retaliation for his own son having been killed. Ghandi puts forward to the man that maybe there is a way out of hell. He tells him to "find a young orphaned Muslim boy, take him in and raise him as your own, only make sure you raise him as a Muslim". Yes, this is a powerful example of Restorative Justice. But it is also a perfect example of a 'living out' or embodiment of personal change... Ghandi did not focus on him thinking differently or learning about something... he counselled action. Action that would result in daily ongoing change. This speaks to the premise that we are called to "live out" peace and justice by making our everyday existence more congruent to our beliefs.

Perhaps more important right now than scheduling another Peace Summit or creating another event to complement it, is to find our own opportunity to put something into action - now. All speakers at our recent event shared a common denominator: passion for what they are engaged in and the way it is important in creating a more "peace filled world," a more "just and equitable" world. All of the presenters were "walking the talk". Sometime small actions have large impacts. I would suggest it is not the size of the action but the commitment to the action... the follow-through.

Many are taking the next steps in living out their passion for peace and justice. Some are making choices towards renewable energy, some are changing their eating habits or supporting companies that are leaving a lighter footprint on the earth. Some people are sorting their rubbish more thoroughly and finding where to recycle things they haven't previously. Our everyday choices are making a significant difference as people become more educated and aware that it will take a consistent effort from everyone to bring about a tidal shift. Peace Summits offer the opportunity to potentially re-open some of our sensory gates, to hear, and be moved to action individually and collectively. In doing so perhaps whilst it may sound jarring, we are also 'finding a way out of hell' because "being comfortably numb" is best left where it belongs...on the dark side of the moon!