Frogs, miracles, martyrs, and the fog of peace

Pitching peace to pagans through popular culture can be a whole lot harder than you'd think!

Joel Kauffmann

I revere Michael Sattler because he remained true to radical convictions that included refusing to take up the sword against a "pagan horde" then threatening the very survival of sixteenth-century Europe (or so its leaders claimed). While I don't envy Sattler's fiery demise, I do envy the clarity of his faith.

Unfortunately for generations of Anabaptists who follow in the wake of such sixteenth-century martyrs, even a life of relative faithfulness (hey, I volunteered in post-Katrina New Orleans four times) leaves us feeling inadequate—with a sense that if we were all the Anabaptists we should be, somebody somewhere would be making a serious effort to burn us at the stake.

Perhaps an act of peacemaking should be judged not only by its resonance with our core beliefs, or by the extent to which it jeopardizes life and limb, but by the challenge of its context.

But those long-ago martyrs, with their all-in approach—like those today who advocate radical peacemaking from the safety of tenured positions at peace church schools—offer limited help to those of us seeking to balance the burden of peacemaking with the also-weighty demands of career, family, and the effort to fight off that last ten pounds that just might be the difference between diabetes and mere middle-age spread. So where am I headed with this? Well, ultimately to address (or confess) my several decades of attempts to inject Anabaptist convictions about peace and justice into the marketplace of popular culture.

But first, to establish the bar by which my efforts might be measured, an account of the bravest peace stance I have witnessed. At halftime of a basketball game at my local high school, the audience was asked to stand in support of the Iraq War (the first one). I didn't stand, but I was up in the dimly lit cheap seats. So no big deal. Stand. Sit. Who would notice?

But several high-profile members of my congregation had highly visible courtside seats. Members who wouldn't be caught dead carrying a protest sign—one that protested anything. Furthermore, they were well-known about town and had careers that depended on the continuing goodwill of (non-Menno) community leaders. I assumed they would have to stand and even prepared myself to pre-forgive them. But they didn't stand. In fact, they remained conspicuously seated. I have no idea what that act cost them economically or otherwise. Though it probably did not lead to physical harm, it could have cost a lot.

While that act of courage dwarfs anything I am about to claim, I mention it for one reason beyond humility: perhaps an act of peacemaking should be judged not only by its resonance with our core beliefs, by the extent to which it jeopardizes life and limb, or by its magnitude on some Richter scale of righteousness, but by the challenge of its context.

A death-defying act of conscience may make for a good story, or at least a good myth, but for most of us, a peacemaking stance requires a series of ongoing calculations that must be made while muddling through the fog of peace, much as soldiers have to act in the fog of war.

The Weight

It was the Vietnam War that introduced males in my generation—at least those of us who had low numbers in the draft lottery—to this fog of peace. I wrote a novel, *The Weight*, to describe my inner and outer struggle with this fog. This was also my toe-dipping test of peace proclamation to popular culture (okay, the publisher was my peace church's denominational press, and the intended audience was Mennonite youth, but hey, it was a start).

My postscript to the book expresses both the central struggle of its protagonist and my naive idea that the seriousness of a peace stance can only be judged by the degree of physical jeopardy it brings down on you:

> *Although the response by pacifists to the draft and war was at times courageous, it was just as often confused, comatose, or even cowardly. While some persons did go to jail, to Canada, or into Voluntary (alternate) Service,*

> *many simply went to college—and stayed there. We did join a notable parade of Anabaptist ancestry in protesting war, but we were the first to do so in an era when such protest was not only acceptable, but prestigious. And, ironically, while the struggle of our Anabaptist forbearers placed them in physical peril, our stance as conscientious objectors kept us (out of the Vietnam War and therefore) safe from such peril.*

In the novel, the main character does lose the girl, and in the movie made from that book, he gets beat up by a local thug, so that's something.

One of the actors in the film (made in the 1970s) was Doug Caskey, now the drama director at Goshen College. One of his students recently remarked that he found the film (intended as a serious drama) to be "really really funny." So in the end, I guess I did endure some suffering.

Pontius' Puddle

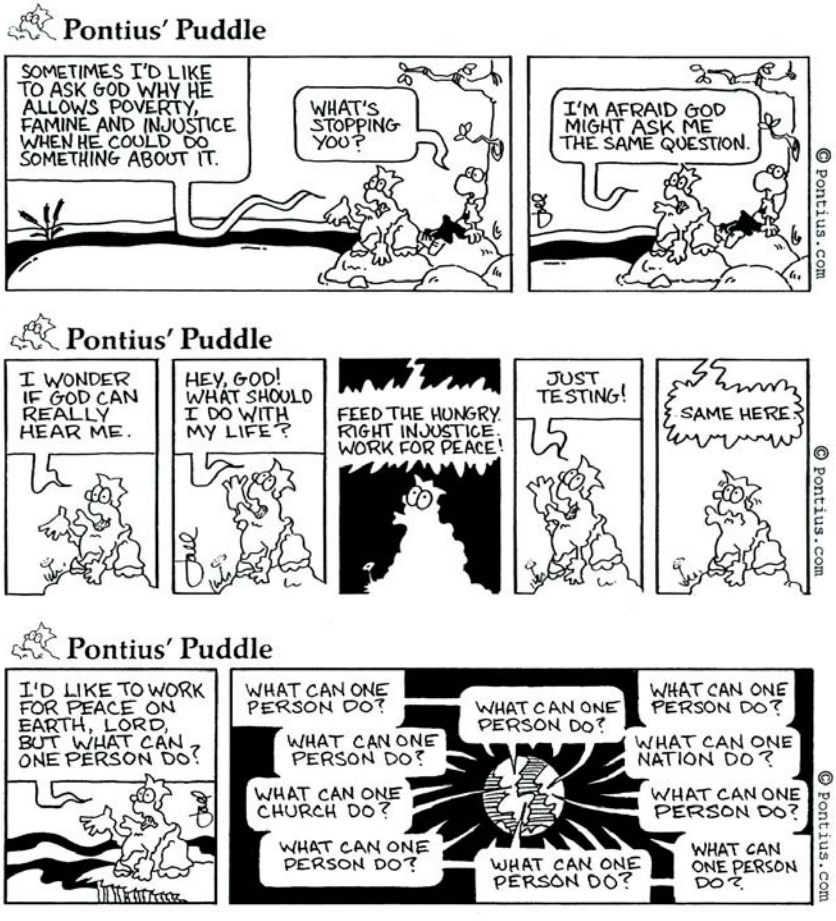
Widening the circle of popular culture slightly. Since 1982 I have produced a cartoon strip for the religious magazine market (and a few secular magazines and papers).

Abingdon Press published a collection of these cartoons, entitled *The Peaceable Kingdom and Other Fallacies of Faith*. I felt Anabaptism had something to say to the rest of the world, including the rest of the global church, and I used this frog prophet perched precariously on his pond's pulpit pad of pontification to address peace whenever possible. In his foreword to the book, David Augsburger expressed the advantages and limitations of this aspiration better than I could have: "The amphibian is, by definition, capable of living in two worlds, Pontius does it well. Alter ego to a cartoonist aptly named for a stubborn prophet, he delivers the wit of Joel Kauffmann with the bite of honest, the nip of revelation, the tug of compassion." Of course, I like the last line, but the relevance here comes from the first.

Growing up in the isolation of a two-kingdom world led, at times, to lapses of judgment about what other traditions might find funny. I lost several Catholic papers by creating a Christmas cartoon (harmless, I thought) that lampooned the Virgin Mary

writing the first whiny Christmas letter. And note to self: check all the Yiddish meanings of "schmuck" before sending a cartoon to a Jewish publication.

But on the positive side, the strip gave me ample opportunity to address issues of peace and justice broadly, if not deeply. Some of my strips embracing these issues proved to be the most popular. At the height of the strip's popularity (before budget concerns and the Web diminished the religious magazine marketplace), it appeared in more than 250 magazines in eleven countries. I estimate that the audience for some of the most popular strips may have exceeded 200 million readers.



The takeaway here, if there is one, is that there is broad receptivity to considering the faith basis for peace. But if you're

going to do it in a cartoon strip, along with conveying some larger truth, it had also better be funny. And maybe that's a lesson for real-life peacemaking. Standing on a street corner with a scowl and sign designed to elicit insults from passing pick-up trucks may feel like a form of witness that resonates with Sattler, but might there be—as we like to say—a third way?

The Disney miracle films

And now to the pinnacle of my popular culture career (by popular culture standards): the two movies I penned along with writing partner and fellow Mennonite Don Yost for Disney Channel.

The first was *Miracle in Lane 2*. The plot was simple (and a true story): a kid born with spina bifida and wheelchair-bound since birth wants to win a sports trophy like his athletic older brother. What elevated this loser-to-winner film was that throughout the story, Justin Yoder (his real and movie name; the part was played by Frankie Muniz at the cusp of his popularity) has a series of conversations with God. Conversations that question the Justness of God: "If the world you create is perfect, what the heck happened to me?"

For Don and me, this film was perfect. We wrote about something we knew. About people we admired. We wrote (and rewrote) it reasonably well. We sold it immediately. Disney pumped nearly seven million dollars into its production—nearly twice their usual budget for a TV flick. And it premiered at the Directors Guild to an audience of industry execs with aisles lined by kids in wheelchairs from the Southern California Spina Bifida Association. We not only felt successful but thought we had done the world a service. The second being far more relevant than the first to the articulated happiness of a Menno.

Just one fly in the ointment. When the project began, Don and I felt strongly that for Justin to earn his final insight (that God's idea of perfect is different than our own, perhaps even contradicts it), it was important that Justin *not* win the final race. And we went into our first script meeting with Disney executives prepared to defend this anti-ending with near-Sattler-like passion.

The Disney execs listened with practiced patience borne of having withstood the onslaughts of many a self-righteous writer, then said: "All right, you come up with a more satisfying ending

than Justin winning the race and we'll use it." And of course, we folded like a cheap Rook table. The film got made, Justin won the big race, and we remain proud of the film.

The second film Don and I did for Disney was *Full Court Miracle*. They brought this idea to us. Their thinking: these guys made one film with a religious theme work; they should be able to pull off another. Our thinking: All right, another paid gig!

Again sports-themed, this second film was about a loser basketball team (Jewish kids) transformed to winners against larger and more skilled foes. It was meant to be an allegorical re-telling of the Maccabean Revolt, in which an overmatched Jewish army (in about 150 BC) repelled a larger and better trained invading army intent on physical and spiritual genocide.

We're not idiots. It did occur to us that taking on this project might create some problems for our peacemaking convictions. But we scrutinized the Hanukkah story till we felt we had found our doctrinal loophole: the true meaning of Hanukkah was not the fighting but the redemptive miracle of the oil burning for eight nights when it should have burned for just one.

Here was a story consistent with other Old Testament battles, such as those fought by Joshua at Jericho, with God reminding his people he was in charge. And hey, the Old Testament is part of our Bible. Long story short: we wrote a draft with this idea in mind, submitted it, then flew back to Burbank to bask in our brilliance.

"We hate it," the execs agreed. "This is the worst thing you have ever written." What followed was the most bizarre Hollywood note session we ever endured. Instead of talking character development or act structure, we argued theology and religious history. For more than an hour, we two Anabaptists stuck to our metaphorical guns against a room full of Jewish executives and one lapsed Catholic who clearly knew where his unleavened bread was buttered.

Don and I drew on every bit of Sunday school–Bible school–Mennonite Youth Fellowship–Goshen College training we could dredge up. The Disney execs wouldn't have needed to argue at all: they could have resorted to filmmaking genocide—fired us and hired new writers. But to their credit, they chose verbal combat. I recall only one of their arguments, the final one: "Had

the Maccabees not fought successfully, the Jewish nation would not have survived long enough for Christianity—and by extension, Anabaptism—to emerge."

We were not convinced. This line of argument was wrong on so many levels (but primarily that God's plan for our salvation was dependent on our fencing skills). But we were sufficiently confused by it to wave the off-white flag of acquiescence. We left the room knowing we had lost. And this time we had lost not just the battle but the war. We had lost our way in the fog of peace.

I cheer any who rise to the challenge of promoting peacemaking through popular culture, but I also offer this warning: it's more likely that popular culture will change you than that you will change it.

The film got made, was modestly successful, and we still cash the occasional royalty checks. Our one small consolation was that the first miracle film won awards, but the second had to settle for mere nominations. Go God!

Two takeaways: (1) Sometimes popular culture will embrace a message that elevates the human condition and acknowledges an intelligent exploration of our relationship with God. (2) However, and more significantly, popular culture is not a blank slate on which any message can be written with equal ease. It is inscribed with big themes, consistent ones, nearly all of them contrary to the tenets of Anabaptism. It prefers winners to losers. It prefers the perseverance of the individual to the preservation of community. And a good fast-paced fight is always preferable to the tediousness of reconciliation.

I cheer any young Anabaptist who rises to the challenge of promoting the idea of peacemaking through popular culture, but I also offer this warning: it's more likely that popular culture will change you than that you will change it.

The Radicals

Having begun with Michael Sattler, I'll end with the 1989 biopic about this Benedictine-monk-turned-radical-reformer that I made with a gang of fellow and once-radical Anabaptist filmmakers (Ron Byler, Jim Bowman, Michael Hostetler).

After years of pre-production and fundraising, we headed to the Alsace to make our epic that would launch Anabaptism, and

more importantly (hey, we were young), our careers into the mainstream stratosphere.

Amid the daily chaos of casting crises and call sheets, we happily allowed ourselves to be enveloped by the fog of filmmaking. That fog cleared for me the last night before filming began in a reconstructed medieval village on the outskirts of Mulhouse. The mayor invited us to join him at the town hall for a toast to our mutual good fortune. Through a translator, he proudly announced that in this very room in the year 1527, a dozen or so Anabaptists were tried for heresy, frog-marched to the edge of town, and burned to a crisp.

Glasses were raised . . . and never has wine seemed more reminiscent of blood. This was no longer a film about a half-remembered patron. This was real. This was the inception of a movement paid for with breath and blood, an origin enhanced with further martyrdoms, career-killing marginalizations, harsh and frequent migrations, and banishments from American Legion baseball leagues (hey, when you're twelve years old, that's real suffering).

For a moment the fog lifted and I could see clearly. How incredible that these ancestors would put life and limb on the line for something that today might falter as a coffee shop discussion. How incredible that we have sustained these commitments and ideals for 500 years, despite our human failings and frailties, our Darwinian desires to conform to those about us. To be liked. To be successful.

So maybe we do have something to say to the world around us. And just maybe we should take up pen and keyboard and camera and attempt to pierce the oft-veiling mists and contrariness of popular culture. We'll often say our piece poorly. We'll settle for half measures that make a paycheck possible. But so long as, in those fog-clearing moments, we believe that we truly do have a worthy story, I hope we find the courage, and the chutzpah, to keep telling it.

About the author

Joel Kauffmann is married to Nancy Kauffmann, denominational minister for Mennonite Church USA. His current project is developing the program for the Museum of the Bible in Washington, DC, which is scheduled to open in 2017.