

Pablo Picasso, Noam Chomsky & Their Friends

# Inspirations for Peace

Sydney   
Peace  
Foundation

Stuart Rees



Pablo Picasso,  
Noam Chomsky  
& Their Friends:

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To foster peace in the 21st century, two creative geniuses, Pablo Picasso and Noam Chomsky, are inspiring and visionary. Each is a distinguished artist - scholar, generous with their time for others, committed to the promotion of social justice and the attainment of human rights. Examples of their support for vulnerable and powerless peoples include Picasso in the anti apartheid campaign and Chomsky in his lifelong advocacy of justice for the Palestinians.

Each has been committed to anarchistic ways of thinking – in their terms through an understanding of and commitment to the interdependence of people, possessions and life chances, through encouragement of spontaneity, creativity and cooperation.<sup>1</sup> Picasso joined the communist party. Chomsky could be described as a libertarian socialist.

They never met but their artistry has enhanced an understanding of freedom, the importance of outlawing war and fostering humanness. The life of each man echoes the lines of the American pacifist poet William Stafford who wrote in a poem called, somewhat ironically, *Poetry*,

Sometimes commanders take us over, and they try to impose their whole universe, how to succeed by daily calculation: I can't eat that bread.<sup>2</sup>

The 'bread' referred to by Stafford was the routines of control, the assumption that force is needed to maintain order in societies and in organizations, that human rights can't be afforded until security has been established.

The artistry and politics of Picasso and Chomsky involved friends and associates who influenced them and whose similar humanness can also be savored. For Picasso these other champions of freedom included the American singer and human rights campaigner Paul Robeson, the French resistance poet Paul Eluard and the Chilean poet in exile Pablo Neruda. Chomsky's acknowledged mentors included the American revolutionary pacifist A.J. Muste and the British philosopher mathematician Bertrand Russell.

Noam Chomsky won the 2011 Sydney Peace Prize. In a brief cameo of Picasso and Chomsky I'll outline the work of the Sydney Peace Prize jury and I'll explain why Picasso could also have been a Peace Prize recipient. I'll also clarify why, in 2011, the Sydney Peace Foundation awarded the co-founder of Wikileaks Julian Assange its gold medal for exceptional courage in pursuit of human rights. The gold medal is not the Peace Prize but it's part of the same story.

## **The Sydney Peace Prize**

The jury which chose Chomsky adhered to the three criteria which have guided the choice of each recipient over the last fifteen years: contributions to global peace with justice; evidence of commitment to the attainment of universal human rights; evidence of the language and practice of non violence.

Previous recipients of the Sydney Peace Prize include former Nobel Laureates Professor Mohammad Yunus and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson, Australia's 'father of reconciliation' Patrick Dodson, the former Australian Governor General Sir William Deane, Palestinian author and legislator, Dr. Hanan Ashrawi, the Indian physicist and environmental campaigner Dr. Vandana Shiva and the Australian filmmaker and journalist John Pilger.

All the previous recipients have met those three criteria. It is also important to stress that although the Sydney Peace Foundation values peace, it is far more committed to peace with justice, a distinction which addresses the attainment of human rights as a main objective. In 2010, during several months of deliberations over the merits of over twenty nominees, the Peace Prize jury perceived Noam Chomsky as having exposed the abuses of powerful institutions, and as having paid particular attention to the destructive consequences of US foreign policy, including the blocking of every UN resolution aimed at finding a peaceful and just end to the Palestinian Israel conflict.<sup>3</sup> In numerous books and essays he also told the world how reality was distorted and consent thereby manipulated and manufactured by the mass media.<sup>4</sup>

In her tribute to Chomsky, the Indian novelist and herself a former recipient of that prize, Arundhati Roy wrote . 'He is a man beyond prizes . He is somebody who has helped the world to deepen its understanding of what peace means, of what war means and to expose the subterfuge what lies under the easy deployment of those words.'

In her book *War Talk*, Arundhati comments on the world wide benefits of Chomsky's work. 'He has radically altered our understanding of the society in which we live. He has unmasked the ugly, manipulative ruthless universe that exists behind that beautiful word 'freedom'<sup>5</sup>.

The jury's comprehensive citation for Chomsky reflects a lifetime of achievements. The citation reads, '*For inspiring the conviction of millions about a common humanity and for unfailing moral courage. For critical analysis of democracy and power, for challenging secrecy, censorship and violence and for creating hope through scholarship and activism to promote the attainment of universal human rights.*'

## **The Personal Is the Political**

Long before the feminist movement coined that insightful concept 'the personal is the political', Picasso showed what he stood for and how he would act on his beliefs. He shared with Paul Robeson the ideal that artists must take sides. When Robeson was denied a passport by the US to attend the Warsaw Peace Congress in 1950, he wrote to Picasso, 'We are people of all colours and all conditions . We are united in our ardent desire for peace.'<sup>6</sup>

Throughout his life, Picasso detested the violence that swirled around his own country, Spain, and was outraged and distressed by the German and Italian fascists' alliance with General Franco. His painting *Guernica* shows the savagery inflicted on the Spanish people and conveys the arrival of total war – the obliteration of whole cities and complete populations from the air.<sup>7</sup> *Guernica* may be his most well remembered protest against war but he explored human suffering and death in other famous paintings such as *The Charnel House* depicting the death of the Spanish people in their home, *Monument to the Spaniards who Died for France* and in 1951 *Massacre in Korea*. In his war and peace series, inspired by Tolstoy's great novel of the same name, he represents peace as the joy of life, symbolized partly by a dove, and war as carnage and depravity.

Picasso was invited to create a poster for the peace congress to be held in Paris in the spring of 1949 and during that Congress his partner, Francois Gilot gave birth to a girl whom they named Paloma or dove in

Spanish. At the request of the organizers of such conferences, Picasso's drawings, paintings and posters of the dove became the world wide symbol of peace and in the Cold War a sign of hope.

On the occasion of the cancellation of the Sheffield Peace congress in 1950, when owing to US pressure the UK government forbade entry to prominent artists and intellectuals such as the Curies, Pablo Neruda, Paul Robeson and Dmitri Shostakovich, Picasso announced, 'I stand for life against death. I stand for peace against war.'<sup>8</sup>

Picasso's great friend Neruda was also politically shrewd, strongly opposed to violence and to war. He expressed such sentiments in his poem *Never Again*.

And into that silence of death  
I screamed in a loud voice,  
So loud that war should hear it:  
Never again, war! <sup>9</sup>

Chomsky also lives the ideal that the personal is the political. Although he maintains the highest standards of scholarship and the careful revision of theses once new information comes to light, he does not accept the distinction between academic and activist, between theory and practice. He has championed freedom of speech in his own country, throughout South America and during the Cold War behind the iron curtain

## **Human Rights Issues**

Although analyses of Picasso's commitment to peace and freedom do not refer specifically to the concept 'peace with justice', there is ample evidence that he promoted the ideal of freedom of expression, freedom from persecution and equality. He once explained, 'I am only concerned with putting as much humanity as possible into my paintings'.<sup>10</sup>

In his art, in his personal relationships and in his attitude to politics, this commitment to a common humanity ran hand in hand with his concern to embrace freedom and to share this ideal as widely as possible. He was committed to freedom for the people of Africa and his poster for the Congress of Black Writers and Artists in 1956 showed the head of an African beneath which he wrote,

What I want is for universal hunger,  
for universal thirst  
to be finally set free,  
to produce in its closed intimacy  
the succulence of the fruits.<sup>11</sup>

After the Second World War the leaders of various efforts to achieve peace and universal human rights sought Picasso's support. These appeals ranged from campaigns against lynching and racial persecution, against the death penalty and for prison reform in the USA to the release of prisoners held under apartheid in South Africa and in support of Hungarian refugees. He made a special point of campaigning for Jewish causes and was a leading figure in the French campaigns to save the Jewish American couple Julius and Ethel Rosenberg from execution in the USA for conspiring to pass atomic secrets to the Soviet Union.<sup>12</sup>

In the same year that Noam Chomsky received the Sydney Peace Prize, the Peace Foundation awarded a gold medal to Julian Assange 'for exceptional courage in pursuit of human rights.' Assange via Wikileaks had championed freedom of the press and had challenged centuries of secrecy by governments. We argued that if Wikileaks had only released the video clip 'collateral damage' showing the murders, in 2003, in the streets of Baghdad by US marines from a helicopter gunship, that would have provided a significant public service. But in thousands of leaked diplomatic cables Assange and his colleagues also revealed governments' false claims that they acted in their citizens' interests.

Such revelations have been regarded as a catalyst for Arab revolutions, starting in Tunisia.

Noam Chomsky is a key supporter of Wikileaks and Julian Assange. On my way to London to make the award to Assange, I spent time with Professor Chomsky in Boston. He penned the following message to be delivered to Assange. *'I would like to thank you for fulfilling your responsibilities as a member of free societies whose citizens have every right to know what their government is doing.'*

## **Other Artists and Intellectuals**

The figures whose advocacy of peace Noam Chomsky valued, such as A.J. Muste and Bertrand Russell were similar in attitude to those close friends of Picasso, Pablo Neruda and Paul Eluard. In his poem *Dawn Dissolves the Monsters*, Eluard wrote about the Nazi occupation of France,

They gnawed away the flowers and the smiles,  
They found a heart only at the end of their rifles.<sup>13</sup>

Muste and Russell had made similar protests during and after the Great War. Such philosopher activists' detestation of violence, of militarism, of capital punishment and of repressive governments' addiction to severe punishment of those who challenged them has much in common with Picasso's campaigning allies, Paul Robeson, Paul Eluard and Pablo Neruda. Across a century, such courageous and influential people sang a chorus of hope for humanity and disdain for those who had climbed to power and abused it.

Pacifist thinker and social activist, A.J. Muste is described by Chomsky as 'one of the great figures of 20th century America.' He quotes Muste as arguing that we must 'cease to acquiesce (so) easily in evil conditions' and must deal 'honestly and adequately with this ninety percent of our

problem, the violence on which the present system is based and the evil – material and spiritual – this entails for masses of men throughout the world.’<sup>14</sup> Muste opposed the violence of war but also the violence inherent in the increasing disparity between rich and poor. Muste and Picasso, Neruda and Eluard would surely have followed Chomsky and been leaders in the current global Occupy Movement which is protesting corporate greed and the widespread problems of poverty.

Bertrand Russell, mathematician, logician, philosopher, co-founder of the campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the committee of 100 was as committed to freedom as Muste and Picasso and as his admirer Chomsky. Russell opposed World War I, nationalism, nuclear proliferation and the Vietnam War. He supported the suffrage movement, sexual freedom, reproductive rights, free thought and peace. He valued the insights derived from humour. After the carnage of the Great War he wrote with considerable irony, ‘Wars don’t decide who’s right. They only decide who’s left.’<sup>15</sup> In common with Picasso, Russell was also a well known collector of mistresses. He lived passionately by his motto: ‘the good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge.’

In his office at MIT Noam Chomsky has a life-size cut out figure of Bertrand Russell adorned with that great thinker’s reference to his three passions – the longing for love, the search for knowledge and the unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind.

## **Their Common Ground**

Picasso and Chomsky crossed disciplines and challenged conventions. They created hope for more just, more peaceful societies and to foster that goal they derived inspiration from almost any source. Even the vaguely interested lay person would know that Picasso experimented with different materials and forms and always resisted attempts to control his thoughts and behaviour. When the Russian Communist Party emphasized the value of a certain realism or uniformity in art and

music, Picasso responded, 'I don't try to advise the Russians on economics. Why should they tell me how to paint?'<sup>16</sup>

Picasso was also a sculptor, printmaker, ceramicist and stage designer. Chomsky too is more than a political scientist and linguist. He has conducted pioneering work in mathematics, logic, computer science and theoretical biology. In an acceptance speech

for the Nobel Prize for Medicine, the Danish immunologist Nils Jerne referred to Chomsky's theory of generative grammar to explain the antibody repertoire of the human immune system.

Picasso's prodigious talents became apparent at age ten, at his father's school in La Coruna. Chomsky's first published essay was at age ten in his school newspaper in 1938, about the threat of fascism and the fall of Barcelona. A year earlier Picasso had painted Guernica whose powerful statement about the horrors of war had to be concealed by a curtain before US Secretary of State Colin Powell could bring himself to make the case for the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The values associated with the use of force to solve problems suggests one way of thinking and living. Contrary to the claims made by dictators, or by bullies in public and private institutions, or even by democratically elected leaders such as Bush, Blair, Howard and Obama, freedom is enhanced by the study and promotion of peace and not by policies which make only token appreciation of non violence, prepare nations for war and collude with violence, in particular towards women.

A formidable challenge in the task of fostering peace with justice is to change the way individuals think, starting with a shift from taking violence for granted to championing non violence in all its forms. Most citizens could also replace the fatalism that they have no power with a realization that the freedom to think, to speak and to write without constraint has been not only the inspiration of artists, the

spirit of composers, the lifeblood of poets but is also an opportunity open to them.

Given inspiring humanists such as Picasso, Chomsky and their friends, I find it difficult to believe that the one dimensional use of power to maintain militarism, to foster the use of force, to abuse human rights, can still influence politicians' priorities and their continuing commitment of huge sums of money for so called defence budgets. Do such politicians never learn ? Is the addiction to militarism so strong that they cannot be weaned from it ?

Nevertheless, it looks as though millions of citizens in many countries have heeded the Picasso Chomsky aspirations and one branch of mainstream media has noticed. The 'Protester' against abuses of power became the symbol chosen by *Time* magazine to be the front cover picture which displayed the key trend of 2011 – 'Protest !'

This has been a tribute to well known figures such as Pablo Picasso and Noam Chomsky but there are many less heralded citizens who have also demonstrated wisdom about peace with justice and have spent a life time promoting that goal. A founder of Australia's Conflict Resolution Network and an original member of the Sydney Peace Foundation, the late Dr. Stella Cornelius is one such citizen. There is a plaque in Stella's memory in a Chatswood, Sydney park. On the plaque is an owl carved into a rock alongside the inscription,

**Wise owls dream of peace.**

**Wise people make it happen.**

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## **Acknowledgement**

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# Sydney Peace Foundation

The Sydney Peace Foundation is a not-for-profit organisation which was created fourteen years ago within the University of Sydney.

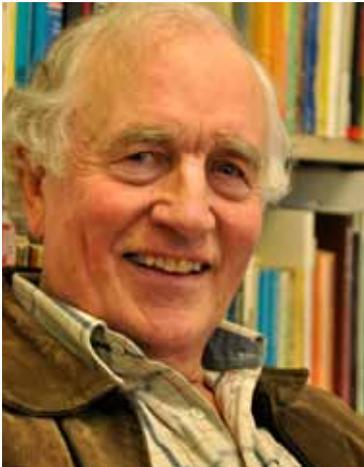
The Foundation aims to raise the agenda of peace with justice in the Australian community. Peace with justice is a way of thinking and acting which promotes non-violent solutions to everyday problems and provides the foundation of a civil society.

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## About the Author

The Director of the Sydney Peace Foundation, Emeritus Professor Stuart Rees AM, has worked in community development and as an academic in many countries and was previously Professor of Social Work at the University of Sydney. He has practised conflict resolution within organisations and has been involved in peace negotiations in Cambodia, Israel/Palestine and in relations between Indonesia and West-Papua. Stuart is the author of over ten books, including *Passion for Peace: Exercising Power Creatively* (2003) and *Tell me the truth about war* (2004).