

Remarks on the International Day of Peace, September 21, 2017
Kerry F. Crawford

Good morning. Thank you, Terrence, Delta Phi Epsilon, and Amnesty International, for allowing me the honor of speaking with you at this important and highly symbolic event.

When Terrence approached me to ask me to speak on the theme of making peace, my first thought was: “Wow! Where do I even begin?!” As a Political Science professor and generally concerned human being, I keep up with the news...probably too much. When you keep up with the news every day it can start to seem like peace in our world is an unattainable goal and that we human beings have failed time and time again to move beyond the tragedies of miscommunication, greed, and conflict. But then I have the distinct pleasure of coming here every day and working with students who are learning and training to go out and solve the complicated problems and make the world a better place, starting today by planting a tree on the International Day of Peace and participating in the Peace Day Challenge. The small, conscious steps that we take every day to work toward peace- whether within our families, our circles of friends, our classrooms, our campus community, our nation, our foreign policy agencies, or our world writ large- bring us incrementally closer to that ultimate goal of making peace.

My research takes as its starting point the opposite of peace, revolving around acts of unspeakable violence in war. But the focus is not on the horror and desperation of war and atrocities but on how the world responds to some of the worst facets of humanity. Over the course of about seven years I have combed library stacks and online archives, spoken with government and organization interns and high-level foreign service members, and sat in on United Nations Security Council deliberations, all in the pursuit of understanding how the world responds—and too often fails to respond—to sexual violence in conflict zones.

Scholars and practitioners working on this issue long before I entered graduate school have set out to uncover the motives and scope of sexual violence before, during, and after war...and they've succeeded in highlighting a problem that was for too long left in history's shadows. Their goals, like mine, have been to further social scientific inquiry but also to make the world an objectively better place. You see, when we give a problem a name, when we call it what it is, and when we encourage those it has affected to break their silence, we begin to take the first steps toward restoration and peace.

For my part, I have focused on how the international community of states, organizations, and advocates works to try to prevent conflict-related sexual violence and hold perpetrators accountable. The social scientist in me found what most young social scientists are trained to find and pursue: a puzzle, an interesting unanswered question; the regular human in me just wanted to know where we have collectively fallen short in improving lives and how we can do better to right a wrong that history had tacitly accepted as regrettable but inevitable.

Throughout the years I spent researching and writing my doctoral dissertation, and then later my book, people who spoke with me about my work would often ask some variation of a familiar question: “Oh. Which war zones have you visited?” At first I was sheepish in my response, knowing that my answer would always fall short of the daring tales they likely conjured up. The battles I study are the rhetorical ones: parsing the refined and measured speech of diplomats and heads of state to get at the deeper implied meanings and stated intentions; looking for the words that are deliberately left unwritten or unspoken to avoid commitments or difficult definitions of problems. To me, it isn’t that the refugee camps, humanitarian aid stations, and peacekeeping convoys are uninteresting or unimportant—because of course they’re important and worthy of study—but rather that if we are to look for the obstacles to progress toward solving the problem of conflict-related sexual violence (or any global problem), we have to look at the people who make the decisions to take the incremental steps, to fund the aid programs or not fund them, to condemn atrocities or to remain silent, and—key to my research—to identify a problem directly or work around its margins in a politically expedient way. We can’t resolve a problem if we can’t name it or identify it.

I also tend to ground my research (and teaching) in a simple philosophy borrowed from that other kind of doctor: first, do no harm. Could I, a doctoral student and later assistant professor lacking in political clout, money, or psychological or medical training, personally offer anything significant to the people enmeshed in conflict and recovery, aside from the promise to share their story? The answer “no”, led me to focus my work not on the survivors and perpetrators of sexual violence, but on the people who make the decisions that will determine whether or not these survivors and perpetrators find their justice and, ultimately, their peace. So, I did my fieldwork at the United Nations, United States government offices, and foreign embassies in DC in my quest to understand how we define, discuss, and respond to sexual violence in war.

Two things became clear as I was researching and writing about this topic, and these observations are not limited to the question of responding to conflict-related sexual violence. Rather, they shed a little light on this all important subject of making peace in our world.

The first is that there can be no true peace whenever people are suffering, persecuted, targeted for violence, or because of systemic injustices unable to reach their full human potential and realize their rights. Peace is not simply the absence of war, a state of being that is a distant prospect in our world today; peace demands that we cross a much higher threshold and includes realization of the human rights of all people and the safety of every person in their community, however we each define safety. Until we recognize this fundamental and inclusive definition of peace at all levels of our society, from family all the way up to intergovernmental organization, we will struggle to achieve real peace for all people.

The second observation stems from the first: the way we focus on peace in International Relations is often an inefficient way to go about securing peace. When we think about making peace, peacekeeping, or peace negotiations, we often default to notions of global actors coming to a consensus about the way forward for parties in conflict somewhere in the world. We think about peace as that absence of conflict, rather than comprehensive well-being. Rarely

do we think about what peace might look like if we started from the ground up, repairing individual relationships and easing community tensions. Ideally, this would happen before the outbreak of violence, uprising or unrest, or armed conflict, but realistically we ignore tensions and inequality until they have bubbled over into the visible signs and actions signaling a lack of peace.

What I learned from my years of studying conflict-related sexual violence is that a multilateral peacekeeping force may deter some atrocities, but that others will continue in the shadows, within homes, and even within the humanitarian community itself if we only adopt a narrow vision of a problem and therefore limit our potential solutions. When insecurity and violence continue and are overlooked, we are not truly making peace. However, when we combine ambitious international efforts with equally ambitious grassroots work to repair long-term tensions, change the norms and institutions that foster inequality and violence, and empower the forgotten, then we take the steps toward making real, lasting peace. All of this starts with recognizing a problem, calling it by its true name, and identifying all of its aspects, but that is, of course, only the beginning. Once we name a problem, the work of implementing solutions must begin. That work must take into account the perspectives, contributions, and experiences of individuals and communities to build the foundation for true peace.

This brings us back to our own communities closer to home. Today we live in a divided nation, one in which the word “polarized” seems to define so many of our social relations and interactions. We have important work to do to make peace, not just around the world in nations and communities wracked by active armed conflict, famine, and ethnic cleansing, but here at home, as well, where we still must strive to achieve that comprehensive definition of peace so that all of us may know and live it.

So as we plant this tree on the International Day of Peace, I challenge you to think about how we can go about making peace in the world, and also how we can make peace with one another here at home. Consider the Peace Day Challenge. Take the small first steps toward making peace in our community and in the world. What will YOU do? If you are struggling with that first step, unsure of how to begin, I invite you to contemplate that ever so simple philosophy: first, do no harm.

Thank you.

#PeaceDayChallenge

<http://www.peacedaychallenge.org>