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**Lowell Speaker Series**  
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***“Peace Witness”***

It was somewhere between snow and sleet that night as I marched with 3000 Christians from across the U.S. the three miles from the National Cathedral to the White House. It was the fourth anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. We were there to witness for peace. We came from a variety of backgrounds, but were united in our belief that non-violent solutions exist and should be used to resolve conflict. As we walked in a slow circular procession around the White House, police arrested over 200 demonstrators for kneeling and praying on the sidewalk.

I grew up in a small urban Mennonite community in south central Kansas. The Mennonite Church, one of the “historic peace churches,” started with the Anabaptist movement during the 16<sup>th</sup> c. Protestant Reformation in Europe. Central to our beliefs 500 years ago as well as today, is that we are to model Jesus’ ministry in our daily lives. This includes his call to counteract injustice by loving our enemies and doing good to those who hurt us. Growing up, I was conscious that, even in the predominantly Christian community of Wichita, KS, most people did not share our commitment to non-violence. This was especially apparent during the first Gulf War. I was deeply disturbed by my fellow classmates chanting “Death to Saddam.” A child at the time, I knew not how to respond.

In graduate school in Oxford, I had one of the rarest pleasures of joining a small group of amazingly thoughtful and articulate friends for a weekly discussion group. We met in the back of the “Eagle and Child,” the pub where C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien had met with their friends 70 years before. During our first Micheltmas term, we debated topics from the death penalty to international conflict. During these debates, I found myself challenged to fully express my pacifist beliefs. Often I was unable to respond adequately to my friends’ counterpoints. I started reading books written by Mennonite theologians to better understand my own position. I also began to concede some points to my friends. Although I still argued for greater success of non-violent resistance to resolving conflict—as seen in the examples of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr, I had to admit that practicing non-violence does not always protect one from experiencing violence. People may still die—as when thousands of peaceful protesters were gunned down in India, or when civil rights advocates were beaten during marches, or—as we have seen—during the current protests in North Africa and the Middle East.

An even greater challenge came discussing my opposition to all violent means in a personal rather than theoretical conversation. Liz, one of my closest friends in Oxford, was a Christian, West Point graduate, and second lieutenant in the U.S. army. We shared so much in common—including an apartment our second year—but we avoided talking about the core beliefs that threatened to divide us. Liz and her family were passionately committed to national service through the American armed forces. My family could not be more different. My mother was a Mennonite minister, my father did alternative

service as conscientious objector during the Vietnam War, and we remained staunchly opposed to any violence, even in self-defense. One night, Liz and I began a delicate and difficult discussion. “As a fellow Christian, how can you not see that Christ’s message is one of love,” I asked her. “Throughout the New Testament is a consistent message that we are to ‘put away [our] swords’ and ‘love our enemies’ even if it results in our death.” To my surprise, she agreed. “However,” she argued, “the New Testament shows us the *ideal* world, while we live in the *real* world; the world Jesus shows us is still in the future.” And so I learned the true nature of our disagreement—not what is Christ’s mission, as I had presumed, but whether it applies to our response to injustice in today’s imperfect world, or to a world yet to come.

I have chosen to share this story with you not to convince you of my own religious views. Rather, I want to show you the profound personal growth I gained from having the courage to discuss deep beliefs on which I disagreed with my friends. If I reserved these conversations only for after sermons, service projects, and political marches with my fellow Mennonites, I would not have examined my own views, refined my own understanding, admitted the flaws in my arguments, or reached the true heart of a disagreement. I now know a new strategy in promoting peace on a local, national, and international level is convincing fellow Christians and non-Christians alike that Christ’s example of non-violent resistance has relevance today—not just in an ideal future. And on a personal level, my difficult discussion did not risk my friendship. Rather, it made it deeper.

It is my hope for each of you, that you will also find the courage to discuss topics that deeply matter to you, whether it is over dinner in the dining hall or in the evenings with friends. With the thoughtful and passionate community here at Lowell House and in the University, there is the wonderful opportunity to grow and strengthen your beliefs, your understanding of yourself, and your closest and most important friendships.