

## The Roots of War

*from Peace is Every Step by Thich Nhat Hanh*

In 1966, when I was in the U.S. calling for a ceasefire to the war in Vietnam, a young American peace activist stood up during a talk I was giving and shouted, “The best thing you can do is go back to your country and defeat the American aggressors! You shouldn’t be here. There is absolutely no use to your being here!” He and many Americans wanted peace, but the kind of peace they wanted was the defeat of one side in order to satisfy their anger. Because they had called for a ceasefire and had not succeeded, they became angry, and finally they were unable to accept any solution short of the defeat of their own country. But we Vietnamese who were suffering under the bombs had to be more realistic. We wanted peace. We did not care about anyone’s victory or defeat. We just wanted the bombs to stop falling on us. But many people in the peace movement opposed our proposal for an immediate ceasefire. No one seemed to understand.

So when I heard that Youngman shouting, “Go home and defeat the American aggressors,” I took several deep breaths to regain myself, and I said, “Sir, it seems to me that many of the roots of the war are here in your country. That is why I have come. One of the roots is your way of seeing the world. Both sides are victims of a wrong policy, a policy that believes in the force of violence to settle problems. I do not want Vietnamese to die, and I do not want American soldiers to die either.”

The roots of war are in the way we live our daily lives—the way we develop our industries, build up our society, and consume goods. We have to look deeply

into the situation, and we will see the roots of war. We cannot just blame one side or the other. We have to transcend the tendency to take sides.

During any conflict, we need people who can understand the suffering of all sides. For example, if a number of people in South Africa could go to each side and understand their suffering, and communicate that to the other sides that would be very helpful. We need links. We need communication.

Practicing nonviolence is first of all to become nonviolence. Then when a difficult situation presents itself, we will react in a way that will help the situation. This applies to problems of the family as well as to problems of society.