



Peace is Possible

OVERCOMING ROADBLOCKS
TO POSITIVE PEACE

Presented by
 unRival.Network

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Introduction

The data doesn't lie: despite two World Wars—the deadliest conflicts in human history—the relative size and death toll of war has reached [a historic low over the last 100 years](#). [New mathematical models can predict escalating violence](#), as well as how trade and democratic processes can intervene to stop it. After a century of international conflict, and the rise in terrorism at the turn of the new millennium, many would consider our globalized world to be entering an unprecedented time of peace.

And yet, violence seems more visible than ever. Polarized politics feel more dangerous, as governments in Myanmar, Burkina Faso and Sudan fall to military coups. We might have felt some relief, living in a time of no major international violence—but then, to everyone's surprise, Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022.

How do we make sense of this violence in a world we claim is growing more peaceful?



Peace by Numbers

While armed conflicts appear to be decreasing across the world overall, studies of violence tell a complex story. Some of the news is very good. Some of it is surprising, even frightening, and shows us that we need to update our understandings of conflict and violence.

[On the positive side](#), more countries decreased their militarization than increased it over the last decade. The economic toll of violence has decreased more than 11% in the same amount of time. Upward trends in homicide and violence against children do not suggest *new* outbreaks of violence, but rather *more awareness* of how much violence actually exists in the world.

It is painful to become aware of this violence. It is easier to accept the narrative that the world has become more peaceful, and there are good reasons to do so. Still, facing violence head-on puts us in a better position to do something about it.

Though it's true that violence now tends to be more localized, [what happens in far away seats of power has implications for us all](#). Governments look askance at one another across a competitive stage, feeling the need to put their own nations and power first. To secure that power, cynical politicians pit identity groups against each other and stoke fear and hatred to win elections. This leads to rising authoritarian trends all over the world and, with it, a greater distrust in information and deeper political polarization. In the Middle East and even North America, women and minorities feel their hard-won rights threatened by armed insurgents—or, less extremely, by reactionary voters and the politicians representing them.

Even if the absolute number of deaths has decreased worldwide, many parts of the world stand poised to pitch into new periods of violence if something does not change. Though there are indications of peace, the threat of violence is growing. What we think of as “peace” is not whole, durable, or just.

This is the reality we miss when we define “peace” as merely “the absence of war”. To respond effectively, we need *positive definitions of peace* that understand the habits, systems, and institutions that defuse violence in our societies. We need a brick-and-mortar definition of peace – and we need to enable those who build it.

The Complexity of Positive Peace

Positive peace is more than the absence of violence. It describes a community's *resilience*.

Current thinking about “resilience” is rooted in *systems theory*—an approach that looks at the overlapping elements in various social structures.. Related to systems theory is *complexity theory*: a discipline that understands change as non-linear, complex, and chaotic.

In these disciplines, resilience is the ability of complex systems to adapt to ongoing change in ways that allow both parts and whole to grow stronger. In issues of peace and conflict, resilience might be defined as, “a society’s capacity to overcome a violent shock and communal stressors in a way that defuses violence.”

While resilience is difficult to measure, many organizations are hard at work trying to find data that helps build positive peace. [The Institute for Economics and Peace offers 8 “Pillars” that it uses to measure the resilience of societies and institutions.](#)



The 8 Pillars of Positive Peace established by The Institute for Economics and Peace.

The 8 Pillars of Positive Peace include:

- **Well-Functioning Government**
- **Equitable Distribution of Resources**
- **Free Flow of Information**
- **Good Relations with Neighbours**
- **High Levels of Human Capital**
- **Acceptance of the Rights of Others**
- **Low Levels of Corruption**
- **Sound Business Environment**

Because peace is systemic, when one Pillar of Positive Peace is suffering, all other parts of the system weaken, too.

So it should give us pause to know the [Positive Peace Index](#) has found—across all regions, but especially in Europe and North America—consistent drops in the Free Flow of Information pillar and the Low Levels of Corruption pillar. Important “peaceful” nations like the US and Canada are losing trust in their governments and their media. Citizens are seeing more and more corruption and inequity in their societies. These trends predict a catastrophic drop in overall Positive Peace if they continue.

Fortunately, all it takes is for one Pillar to receive redoubled support, and all the others will experience that support as well.

Before we ask how we can support positive peace, it's worth asking a few more questions about why systems of positive peace can find themselves in jeopardy. We discovered, [by interviewing](#) dozens of activists, community leaders, and academics, that *rivalry* plays a major role in social breakdowns that lead to violence.

Rivalry: A Misunderstood Threat to Peace

Failures in human systems occur for many reasons. One of the most overlooked is rivalry.

We tend to see rivalry as a good thing. In a market economy, competition drives innovation. Sports teams push the limits of their skills in tournaments. The space race

stands out in our political memory as a time when international competition spurred technological and scientific advancement. These are all known *goods* of rivalry.

But when rivalry infects someone's political platform or social identity, it can turn toxic and destructive. Rivalries can cause individuals to develop biased attitudes, understanding themselves primarily as belonging to a particular group or as being different from someone else.

This leads to us-vs-them views and behaviors that introduce instability into their systems. "Good guys" start to use the same tactics as the "bad guys" to preserve their group identities.

In Michigan, for example, Democrats risked the 2022 midterm election by [giving support to a Far Right senate candidate](#), assuming his extremism would damage his own party. After winning those elections, Michigan Democrats set about aggressively fixing the damage they perceived Republicans had caused to their state. This led some to perceive them as [equally reckless and power-hungry as their political opponents](#).

Such dynamics increase perceptions of corruption and decrease trust, as they did in Michigan. They are consistent with *destructively rivalrous thinking*. While it may not signal a full outbreak into violence, destructively rivalrous thinking only moves in one direction: eventually, it decides that *someone* is the problem and that the system can't have peace again until that someone is removed. Communities choose "heroes" to lead them in beating the undesirable "villains". All sides start to believe that the only path to peace involves obliterating one or more "enemies".

Once a society reaches this point, it is very hard to get them to focus back on the real issues; when the problem becomes the rival, a scapegoat has been found, and with a scapegoat comes a simple, easy answer to complex, systemic problems. The *last* thing they want is to reverse direction and seek a genuine solution – a complex answer for a complex problem.

It might feel natural to look for heroes to swoop in and save such situations. But systems and complexity theories already raise questions about whether top-down change is really effective in addressing violence. This is [especially concerning](#) if that change is proposed by someone brought in from outside a community—like an NGO, high-ranking diplomat, or UN agency.

Understanding the role of rivalry can help us make sense of why top-down peace efforts frequently fail: they are not designed to address the enmity communities experience or the grudges they nurture as "solutions" to their problems. While local communities may

experience rivals jostling for power in the midst of conflict, hierarchical attempts to solve the problem with outside “expertise” tend to make rivalries even worse. Sometimes, the diplomat or well-meaning NGO becomes the very “other” who needs to be expelled.

So if conflicted societies tangle themselves in rivalry, but imposing outside solutions is ineffective, what is to be done? Who is to be supported?

We believe *networks of grassroots peacebuilders* are the answer: those who actively engage their own communities and lay foundations for positive peace. Who refuse “heroic” labels for themselves, and reject the constantly-circulating stories about who is “good” and who is “bad.” Those who dare to imagine peace as a path that *everyone* in their community can travel.

We need systemically-minded peacebuilders who can address these deficits in positive peace before they have a chance to explode into rivalry, scapegoating, and violence. And they, in turn, need the support, collaboration, and shared learning which fortifies their resilience in the face of intense violence and the discouragements of scapegoating.



The Importance of Grassroots Peacebuilding

Grassroots peacebuilding is a process that addresses the root causes of violent conflict—the reasons people fight in the first place. It works to resolve injustice in nonviolent ways, transforming the structures, systems, and conditions that generate deadly conflict.

Peacebuilding at this level doesn't merely resolve conflicts; it builds societies, institutions, policies, and relationships that are better able to sustain peace and justice. This means building resilient systems of human rights, economic prosperity, and environmental sustainability that prevent societies from backsliding into violence when problems arise.

As our friends at [Nurturing Hope](#) remind us, “Peaceful communities are built and sustained by peaceful people.” Transformed relationships are key to peacebuilding. Creative grassroots peacebuilders recognize that such transformation requires imagination to see what is possible within some very limited choices. Under these constraints, they develop less rivalrous strategies for developing personal, group, and political relationships, overcoming stereotypes and helping different groups work together.

Finally, peacebuilding is a long-term, collaborative effort. Since it involves changing attitudes, behaviors, norms, and institutions, it sets relatively narrow goals specific to a context. Narrow goals do not mean small goals; though many peacebuilding activities may seem inconsequential at first, hundreds of these efforts made regularly over time can produce lasting change.

We have hope in grassroots peacebuilders because their strategies work, preventing the escalation of violence through nonviolent means. Around the world, peacebuilders successfully identify potential sources of conflict and take steps to prevent them from escalating into violence. [They may work with local communities](#) to address grievances and build trust, or they may [support economic development programs](#) to reduce poverty and inequality.

Peacebuilders also work to build the capacities of their local communities to prevent and resolve conflicts on their own. They often train community leaders in conflict resolution and mediation, or support the development of local peace committees and other grassroots organizations which are key to a region's durable peace. By empowering local communities to take the lead, peacebuilders help create a culture that is more resilient to violence.



Roadblocks to Creative Peacebuilding

The evidence is clear: nonviolent peacebuilding works. Still, there are roadblocks to overcome.

For one, nonviolent movements frequently confront systems of power and oppression that aren't afraid to use violence. What's more, those powers can frame nonviolent activists as violent revolutionaries, using that pretense to suspend the rule of law and tighten their oppressive hold. They justify the use of force against peaceful protestors. Though this risks damaging an authority's public image in the long run, the immediate threat to peacebuilders is tremendous.

Because they do not meet these threats with force, nonviolent peacebuilders are sometimes called complacent and cowardly. Erstwhile allies may accuse them of being unwilling to get their hands dirty and depose oppressors. Of course, nonviolent action takes many active, creative forms; the deeper issue is that peacebuilders don't buy into the hero/villain narratives around them. They refuse to act in ways that will further divide their communities.

This final point is what really sets peacebuilders apart – and often places them in the most danger. Creative peacebuilders understand how tempting it is to use the tools of oppressors in the name of justice. But they also understand that once the oppressed start to resemble their oppressors, the spirit of ethical resistance falls to pieces. Human dignity and equality are all-or-nothing values; dehumanization cannot be answered with more dehumanization.

This can be a hard lesson for resisters to hear, especially when they have already invested so much in violent responses. [Vera Grabe, a former Colombian guerilla turned peacebuilder](#), recalls the shock she felt when her commander told her and her fellow soldiers to lay down their arms and enter peace talks with the government. Many who shared her feelings walked away, still carrying their guns. Vera could only take this tremendous risk when she admitted to herself that violence had brought her and her country no closer to peace.

For others, however, hearing that one's enemies also deserve dignity tempts them to turn on the messenger. Peacebuilders seek everyone's flourishing, including those we call bad or villainous. When peacebuilders refuse to divide the world into "good" and "bad" people, it's often the "heroes" who lead the charge in scapegoating the peacebuilders for refusing to take sides. [As our friend Andrew DeCort writes, "When you love the enemy, you become the enemy."](#)

Today, we are only just becoming aware of the epidemic of mental health needs across peacebuilding sectors. Amongst those exposed to war or other violent conflicts, 1 in 5 will experience symptoms of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia. Those most affected by conflict are also most likely to lead in transforming conflict, which means that 20+% of peacebuilders are doing their work while holding intense traumas. Add to this the likelihood of violent resistance and scapegoating by those they are trying to help, and you have a recipe for high burnout and turnover among peacebuilders.

This reality has deeper, more disturbing implications. Peacebuilding *requires the long-term involvement of specific people who continue cultivating a web of relationships for years and years*. So much successful conflict transformation depends on trusting relationships allowed to grow over long periods of time. Burnout and scapegoating interrupt that process, sundering relationships and forcing peace processes to start over with new people who don't know yet or trust each other. The loss of senior peacebuilders can undo decades of hard work if they are succeeded by someone with very different priorities,

their networks inherited by those who have not worked through their own biases and rivalries.

We need to better address scapegoating and build resilience amongst peacebuilders. We need to provide them with resources for the long term, for building trust in their communities.

What's the Solution?

The single most important building block for positive peace is peacebuilders in leadership roles working directly in and with their communities. Resilient, nonrivalrous leaders in these positions have a tremendous impact on the way the field raises funds, sets its priorities, and executes highly contextual plans for peace. We call these high-potential, high-impact leaders “artisans of peace.”



Identifying Artisans of Peace

Artisans of peace often serve in the middle of their organizations. They are responsible for communicating the story and value of their work to institutions and philanthropists.

They are also committed to nonviolence. Their diverse experiences show them violence is contagious, and just as likely to infect their cause as further it. But they also believe peace is contagious, and that a path forward for everyone attracts more desire and support in the end.

Artisans of peace are committed to nonrivalrous collaboration and organization with other peacebuilders. Though they may compete for funds at the donor level, artisans of peace see themselves as interconnected with other activists, artists, and academics trying to achieve peace with justice in our time. While world circumstances might not treat them all fairly, they are dedicated to mutually supporting and collaborating with one another.

Finally, artisans of peace are driven by an awareness that peacebuilding is an art and that it requires tremendous creativity. They not only use data to make decisions and set priorities; they also intuit the needs of their communities. They train other peacebuilders to develop their intuitions, following their desires to surprising, creative solutions. They know the importance of *expressing* these desires in beautiful and symbolic ways instead of jostling for supremacy. Because of this, they are fervent supporters of artists in their contexts, and sometimes artists themselves.

Connecting, Accompanying, and Amplifying

Our research reveals that the professional side of peacebuilding—meetings with donors, planning summits, networking events—creates great stress for artisans of peace. They're rarely able to enter these spaces in a relaxed way. Most of the time, the culture of these spaces pushes them to justify themselves professionally or ideologically, often questioning their commitments to nonviolence. Despite the commitments of these peacebuilders, this environment breeds a constant sense of rivalry and a need to perform, which prevents the learning and collaboration essential for discovering solutions to conflict and violence.

Named for those we serve, unRival's Artisans of Peace program (AoP) is designed for such peacebuilders. In these experimental, diverse spaces, we encourage participants to discover their creative edge and their capacity to innovate alongside others who share their commitments. Our goal is that each cohort undergoes four transformative experiences that they can then multiply in their own contexts:

Deconstructing Rivalry

Even the most creative and courageous peacebuilders are not immune to fear, destructive rivalry, and discouragement. They long to engage honestly in spaces where there is hope that bitter conflicts can give way to justice and peace.

Inspiring Collaboration

Forming friendships with other creative peacebuilders sustains them in difficult circumstances and reveals otherwise unimaginable opportunities. Exploring collaborations across diverse cultures, religions, and worldviews energizes peacebuilders for the work ahead.

Releasing Creativity

Building peace is a creative act. Intentionally gathering academics, artists, and activists brings different perspectives to the table and draws out the creative spirit in all. Working together on creative tasks nudges each participant beyond their comfort zone and fosters collaboration.

Renewing the Heart

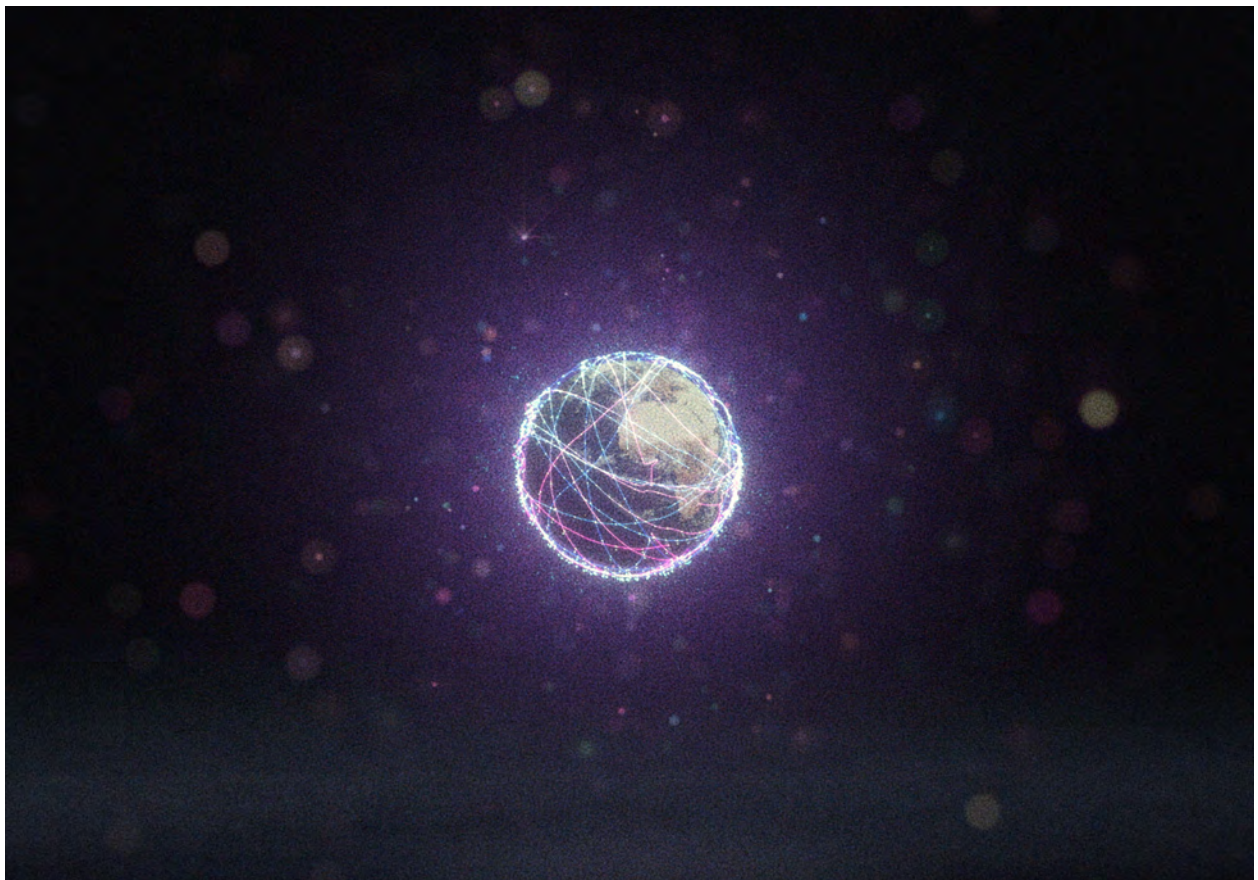
Peacebuilders emerge from Artisans of Peace programs with a renewed sense of the value they bring to their communities. They feel revived, ready to tackle the difficult, challenging path of nonviolent social change, and return to their communities as models of what is possible when rivalry gives way to friendship.

Amplifying Artisans of Peace

None of this is worth much if it stays only with us. We're also working to bring the deep learning of Artisans of Peace to you, and to your community – whether it's activist,

artistic, or academic. We believe artisans of peace to be *powerful models of nonviolent, nonrivalrous living* that can galvanize people and organizations with their influence. We're sharing the stories of how these peacebuilders came to choose nonviolence, how they've learned and adapted in their struggle for justpeace, and how you can put their best insights into practice in your own community.

We believe creative nonviolence is as contagious as rivalry and violence, and that it can heal communities wherever it spreads. Artisans of peace are putting that theory to the test.



5 Ways to Practice Peace

“There is no path to peace. Peace is the path.”

– Mahatma Gandhi

As dedicated artisans of peace, you are already on the path of nonviolent peacebuilding. We invite you to deepen your practice by reflecting on five insights rooted in the wisdom of seasoned peacebuilders in our network. May they serve as an additional help to you as you deconstruct rivalry and cultivate peace with justice in your community:

1. Our identity, self-worth, and desires are received and sustained by others.

Our sense of self is not constructed in isolation, but deeply influenced by our community. This interconnectedness is a strength we can harness in the name of peace and justice. Artisan of peace [Sharon Enright](#) found her identity and her calling for “peace, order, and abundance” amidst a turbulent home life, thanks to her brother’s influence.

Practice: Think about how you first became committed to transforming conflict. Who influenced you? Who modeled this desire for you? How have you kept step with or deviated from their example? What model are you providing for the peacebuilders you work with?

2. Conflict is fueled by rivals who share insecure and fearful identities.

Conflict often arises from fear and insecurity. Individuals or groups mistakenly perceive others as threats to their identity or rivals for things they want. Overcoming such fear with empathy and vulnerable courage is essential. Artisan of peace [Julijana Tesija](#)

demonstrates this insight by recognizing how fear and insecurity continue to shape Eastern Europe after the Yugoslav Wars.

Practice: Identify a current conflict within your community. What fears are motivating that conflict? If someone is being blamed for the conflict, how real is the threat? Look for at least one way that you can relate to someone you disagree with about the nature of the conflict.

3. Rivalries generate victims whose suffering is ignored or minimized by the rivals.

In the heat of rivalry, the suffering of victims is often overlooked. Peace demands advocacy; no rivalry can justify collateral damage. A former freedom fighter in Colombia, artisan of peace [Vera Grabe](#) chose to lay aside her weapons when she learned her battles were harming those she aimed to protect.

Practice: Investigate a local issue where rivalry exists. Identify those who are being marginalized and find ways to bring their stories to the forefront.

4. Rivalries tend to be resolved by fixing blame on a scapegoat.

Sometimes, to resolve a conflict, an individual or group is unfairly blamed. Scapegoating avoids the root causes of conflict and even escalates the conflict by continuing cycles of blame and resentment. Artisan of peace [Joel Aguilar](#) learned this while participating in a protest against corruption in Guatemala that led to the arrest and humiliation of a major political figure. Her incarceration was treated as the solution to everyone's problems—yet longstanding poverty, inequality, and racism remained unaddressed.

Practice: Research instances of scapegoating in your community. What are those stories like? What was the person blamed for? Challenge these narratives by addressing the root causes of the issues at hand.

5. Violence is contagious and self-perpetuating. So is peace.

Deep desires and fears spread and reinforce themselves within a community. Contagious beliefs and emotions are the source of escalating violence—but also the possibility of durable peace. Artisan of peace [Julia Robinson-Moore](#) shows this daily in her classrooms where she cultivates empathy, understanding, and cooperation in conversations about African American history and the problem of White Supremacy.

Practice: Reach out to someone with whom you disagree deeply. Are there ways you're tempted to dehumanize them? How might you recognize and acknowledge what's at stake for them in this conflict? If you take the risk of humanizing this person, are you prepared to receive humanity back in return?



As you practice nonviolent peacebuilding, we invite you to connect with us and share your stories! You can reach us via email at info@unrival.network.

We hope you'll follow along with us as we build this support system for artisans of peace. Help us amplify this invaluable work—both yours and theirs.