The theme for this twelfth installment of the series, “Building a Culture of Peace” is transforming a culture of violence to a culture of peace. In it, Dr. Betty Reardon, Founding Director Emeritus of the International Institute on Peace Education and the Global Campaign for Peace Education discusses ways for overcoming violence and things we can do in our daily lives to create a culture of peace.

The culture of violence seems to be growing stronger in today’s society.

Violence that I define as any conscious action or attitude that damages human relationships is rampant throughout the world. It is due to lack of imagination and awareness of the interrelatedness of a diverse single human family. As in nature, our differences enrich and strengthen us all. Violence reduces human and natural diversity and the vitality of all life. Failing to grasp this truth, fearing others or attempting to subjugate them is foolhardy behavior that damages our interrelatedness. Violence not only harms its victim, but also profoundly damages its perpetrator.

While social media enable us to connect immediately with people everywhere, these cyber connections do not engender a feeling of genuine connectedness to others. Many in today’s society find themselves living in a state of deep alienation. When we are alienated from others, we have difficulty in imagining the effects that our violent actions will have on them. That’s why it is very important to make serious efforts to forge strong, genuine connections and relationships with others as a way to put an end to violence, to build a culture of peace. The very survival of our species depends on it.

Your insights bear a resemblance to some of the points that SGI President Ikeda made in his June 1996 lecture at Columbia University Teacher’s College.

As a peace educator, I appreciated President Ikeda's defining in that lecture three qualities of global citizenship: “the wisdom to perceive the interconnectedness of all life,” “the courage not to fear or deny difference, but to respect and strive to understand people of different cultures,” and “the compassion to maintain an imaginative empathy that reaches beyond one’s immediate surroundings and extends to those suffering in distant places.” These
qualities are all indispensable for building a culture of peace.

I would like to stress in particular the importance of courage, because the root of violence is fear. We need courage to overcome our fear and gain a deeper understanding of others. When we do so, we become aware of value systems that differ from our own and discover that there is much we can learn from others. One focus of peace education has been to foster individuals with the courage to embrace the differences among us and make the best use of the strong points of others, to use our differences to increase our capacities to achieve a culture of peace.

What prompted your interest in peace education?

Like President Ikeda, I experienced World War II in my early teens. In his lecture at Columbia University he said that the “cruelty, stupidity and waste” of war made a deep impression on him. I felt the same way. I wondered why the adults around me seemed to unquestionably accept the war. I asked “Isn’t there some other way?” But no one could give me an answer. So I began to search for the answer on my own, I have continued pursuing that question ever since. That led me to my involvement with peace education, which teaches toward a way of life without war and violence, and elucidates the numerous alternatives to them.

The core of peace education is the principle that all lives have equal value and dignity. Today’s society and educational systems encourage us to compete with one another. We compete to surpass others, creating winners and losers in the process. This only intensifies the tendencies toward schism, inequality and discrimination in society. What we should be teaching instead is the importance of cooperating with and working together harmoniously with others. We need to develop everyone’s capacity to care for others, especially children. Everybody should be provided parenting skills, to be able to care for children and youth. Everybody should care for the young, whether they have their own children or not. If we wish to build a culture of peace, we have to do everything we can to encourage and foster every child and young person with whom we have contact—to nurture their capacity to understand that they are valued, that they have dignity, and to help them realize their fullest potential. I don’t have any children of my own, but I’m very much invested in many young people and I follow their daily lives very closely. Working together with them for peace has been one of the great joys of my life and has given my time on Earth meaning and value.

What kind of practical efforts can we all personally make to expand a culture of peace?

We can help build a culture of peace in many ways in our daily lives. For example, one thing I do is try to refrain from saying things like, “That’s crazy! Where did you get that idea?” as I fear I do with friends and family. When I encounter someone with very different beliefs, I try to say: “Oh, really, that’s quite interesting. Why do you think that?” In that way I try to open the way to dialogue and to discover what the other person is really thinking.

It’s also important to be active in civic life, to work toward the Sustainable Development Goals, contain climate change and abolish nuclear weapons and war. We are facing many problems, but there is hope. Many young people are acting with great courage and thoughtfulness. We all can do something. We can take action for the future of the planet and the human race. We need to look for opportunities to act, be brave, and have fun in doing it.