

Interview with Rama Vernon on Citizen Diplomacy

Question: What is a Citizen Diplomat?

A Citizen Diplomat is a World Citizen whose fundamental belief is in humanity and human unity. His or her vision transcends national and personal boundaries and focuses on the essential oneness of all people.

A Citizen Diplomat is one who holds two points of views simultaneously and is able to observe and attempt to understand the perspective of another person, nation or government without losing his or her own perspective. Citizen Diplomacy is a non-combative approach to international relations that requires the ability to actively listen, to understand and to love.

The Citizen Diplomat is a peacemaker who understands that peace comes from within the human heart as well as within the world. The Citizen Diplomat appreciates and brings to life the knowledge that the interests of all peoples are the same regardless of national, political or personal boundaries. You might say that Citizen Diplomacy puts the heart back into the dynamics of human relationships.

Q: What is the difference between a citizen diplomat and a traditional diplomat?

Traditional diplomacy works in a different forum dealing with formal relationships between governments and policies.

A Citizen Diplomat is not officially representing his or her own government in policy decisions. They have much more freedom and can "slip through the cracks" in relating to people of another country. Traditional diplomacy requires an intellectual approach to interactions and negotiations. Human relations are based first on a heart connection which then evolves into a more formal structure.

Perhaps it is putting the cart before the horse to base diplomacy first on the formal structure without acknowledging and incorporating the primary and essential level of the heart. In this view, the Citizen Diplomat is beginning the process of restoring the natural order to human affairs and diplomacy.

Q: How would this relate to the relationship between the US and the USSR?

To empathize with the Soviet perspective requires:

- 1) a sense of high self-esteem
- 2) a developed sense of personal identity
- 3) a high degree of individual security

If these traits are developed, then it is possible to relinquish one's own point of view and see the world through the eyes of the Soviets, secure in the knowledge that this perspective (if even briefly) cannot deny or destroy one's own values. Nuclear Age diplomacy requires the ability to carry and balance two points of view simultaneously.

Q: Does this mean you must agree with them?

There will always be points where perspectives DO NOT and CANNOT JOIN. Successful citizen diplomats are careful not to err (as many American liberals do) by overemphasizing cultural similarities and denying the differences, or as many conservatives do, overemphasizing the differences and denying the similarities.

Q: You've mentioned that Citizen Diplomacy is the alignment of polarities. What does that mean?

It is the balance of knowing when to yield and when to be firm. Soviets respect strength as well as our attempts to understand their perspective. They do not respect downgrading of one's own country.

Q: There seem to be so many fears and misconceptions about the Soviet Union. Why is that?

Many of us come back from the Soviet Union with this question rather than an answer. The first time I stood in Red Square and saw the Red Star on the Kremlin spires and on the arm bands of the soldiers posted in Red Square, I came face to face with incredibly fear and a conditioned response

of the "Evil Empire". This response of fear of the Soviets did not come from my background; as it was apolitical, but I saw it as being an inbred conditioning of the "race-mind" of my own country. I was not alone in those fears. Many others have described the same experience.

Q: Did you have anything to fear?

As I came to know the Soviet people as individual human beings this fear dissolved. In looking at my experience, I came to understand that what I had to fear was only the irrational fear itself and not the Soviet people.

Since action follows the line of thought, if I continued to see the Soviets as "the enemy" or a powerful military force that was threatening to take over the world, then perhaps I and thousand like myself would draw to ourselves like a magnet the thing we feared most. The Soviet Union is one of the safest places to travel in. It's one of the few places in the world where you can walk throughout the night safely and ride in the subways at 1:00 a.m. without any fears or danger. Even the fear of Communist takeover has dropped away as I have come to understand the depth of their suffering through the revolutions, purges and losses of 20 million men, women and children during the Great Patriotic War or World War II. Cities were leveled to the ground which have been rebuilt in the last 60 years.

Q: Do you still have a residue of those fears?

Not now after 15 visits. I can even say the word "Communism" out loud. I used to whisper it as if it were an unmentionable word. I did not realize until visiting the USSR that not all Soviets are Communists and that only 6 to 7 percent are members of the Communist party.

Q: Don't we have to be careful of becoming naive dupes of the communist system?

The phrase that several family members, friends and acquaintances used when I first started doing this work was "you're playing right into their hands." (My answer is) "not only are we going to play into their hands but into their arms and into their hearts." If we assume that there is no basis for trust regardless of our experience, we will see it only through the eyes of

our mistrust. If we come from a place of trust, what we see and experience will look quite different. We cannot build peace on the basis of mistrust. The purpose of the Center for Soviet-American Dialogue is to create a fabric of trust woven of the threads of trust connecting the hearts of thousands of citizens of both the US and the Soviet Union.

Q: What do you see as the dynamics of the relationship between the US and the USSR?

The US and the USSR are acting out of mistrust. When one acts out of mistrust, we armor and protect ourselves being afraid to open our hearts to each other. Just as this would make it difficult for two people to work together, it makes it enormously more difficult for two nations to resolve their differences.

Q: What is your stand on nuclear defense?

Nuclear defense is a symptom and not a cause. We arm ourselves as a nation because we do not trust one another as individuals. If we disarm ourselves as a nation before we have developed the trust as individuals we will find other more immediate and perhaps more volatile ways to defend and protect ourselves as individuals. In bringing Americans face to face with Soviets they "face the enemy" only to find, "believe it or not", a friend. Abraham Lincoln, when accused of not being harsh enough on the rebel Southerners after the Civil War said, "Madam, do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?"

Q: Do you really think that grass roots diplomacy can make a difference?

Yes, by creating and multiplying contacts between the people of the USSR and the USA, grass roots diplomacy will progressively change each peoples' perception of the other. As perception changes and appreciation grows, the climate in both countries will change. The result will be increasing warmth in international relations and this is the basis of peace.