

WHY PEACE EDUCATION? AND WHAT IS IT ANYWAY?

A Letter to a Friend¹

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Dear Friend,

Public debate emphasizes the negative, powerless, and passive connotations surrounding the word “peace.” Faced with an often-nonchalant rejection of our human ability to choose nonviolent strategies, I struggle under the pressure of wanting to defend this ambiguous ideal. I often feel confronted with my own incompetence to eloquently explain why I study Peace Education. It is from this struggle that I write this letter. I will share my views with you, without imposing them. I do not claim to be neutral or objective, however, as “neutrality is just being what the system asks us to be.”²

Peace is not something inert. Rather, it is an intensely active and dynamic process.³ It is both negative (the absence of violence) and positive (global justice) peace that peace educators strive for. Peace Education is not easily defined, however. The diverse cultural contexts in which it is practiced, the different understandings of the concept of peace, its various teaching approaches, and the range of sub-fields it consists of make it difficult to delineate the field.⁴ Betty Reardon provides a comprehensive definition:

*Peace education is the transmission of knowledge about requirements of, the obstacles to, and possibilities for achieving and maintaining peace, training in skills for interpreting the knowledge, and the development of reflective and participatory capacities for applying the knowledge to overcoming problems and achieving possibilities.*⁵

Challenging the belief that society and human beings are inherently violent is fundamental within the field of Peace Education. You are right, in history and all around us we see “evidence” of the violent nature of human life. We live in a world of “peacelessness.”⁶ You might say, look at history, look at the media, look at the statistics: we are a violent species. Does this tangible culture of violence imply, however, that violence is innate to our being?

Have you ever heard of the Seville Statement on Violence?⁷ It is a brief and coherent declaration, created by various scientists from all over the world, that challenges commonly held beliefs about violence. In short, the document states that war is not inevitable. Violence, rather, is learned, “essentially based on modeled behavior” of peers, families, communities, and media.⁸ And just as violence can be taught, so can peace.⁹

Reardon defines violence as follows, “intentionally inflicted harm that is avoidable and unnecessary to the achievement

of just and legitimate purposes.”¹⁰

Violence is expressed not only through our actions, but also through our speech and thoughts.¹¹ Eknath Easwaran explains, “most of what we call violence is in the form of action... But as long as our minds harbor violent thoughts, that incipient violence will find its way somehow into our speech and behavior.”¹² As the UNESCO Constitution famously states, “war begins in the minds of men.”¹³

The point is that violence is a choice. We might have aggressive tendencies, but how we act upon these is entirely up to us. Take the Native American Legend of Two Wolves:

An old Cherokee is teaching his grandson about life. “A fight is going on inside me,” he said to the boy. “It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil - he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.” He continued, “The other is good - he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you - and inside every other person, too.” The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, “Which wolf will win?” The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one you feed.”¹⁴

Moreover, although it may seem to achieve some of its immediate goals, violence often has unintended and unwanted consequences – or “hidden costs.”¹⁵ But “violence will be used in conflicts as long as people believe it will help them win,” according to Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall.¹⁶ They assert, “the greatest misconception about conflict is that violence is always the ultimate form of power, that no other method of advancing a just cause or defeating injustice can surpass it.”¹⁷ However, a rhetoric of power¹⁸ can also be used for a different cause, nonviolence.¹⁹ Nonviolent conflict requires far more courage and perseverance than the use of violence. I believe it is much more courageous to turn the other cheek or refuse to give up your seat in the bus for a White man.





Defying learned behavior is not so easy, however. It requires a lot of effort to unlearn the socialization we undergo, which makes us unquestioningly accept the culture of violence. Lanzo Del Vasto exhorts,

*The good news, the only eternally good thing, is that another road is open. We must not discard it as being too easy: the road to peace is not restful!...Neither must we turn away from it because we believe it to be impossible, nor say with disastrous modesty, "we are not saints." It is a question of being men, of not perishing body and soul.*²⁰

To rephrase Del Vasto, it is a question of being human. Knowing, really knowing, the injustices and inequalities in today's world, how can we do anything else but fight for a better society? Peace education, working with youth to empower them, is for me a way to act, to assert agency.²¹

But how can we uproot this idea, that conflict equals violence, that "human being" equals violent? Miles Horton and Paulo Freire explain that today it is not easy to "embolden people to act."²² Ian Harris and Mary Lee Morrison add, "for peace education to be effective, it must transform ways of thinking that have been developed over the millennia of human history."²³ Existing peace education efforts have yet to develop "a pedagogy or an educational scheme of the transformational dimension necessary to a culture of peace."²⁴ Peace calls for nothing less than "a transformation of human society and all its institutions...which in turn necessitate[s] a transformation of human consciousness."²⁵

The primary purpose of peace education should therefore be to build people's capacities to recognize, confront, and transform the culture of violence.²⁶ "Central to such a challenge is providing students with the skills, knowledge, and authority they need to inquire and act upon what it means to live in a substantive democracy...to fight deeply rooted injustices in a society and world founded on systematic economic, racial, and gendered inequalities."²⁷ Horton and Freire remind us that such social change cannot be forced upon people.²⁸ Peace education should therefore be student-centered, a process of mutual learning among students and educator.

Peace educators face many external challenges posed by society, the school environment, and students themselves. The greatest challenge for peace educators, however, is to "be the peace they preach." This cannot be just an intellectual enterprise. Teaching peace must involve a "holy war in the soul";²⁹ a searching within for the things you are trying to teach. Wouldn't it be hypocritical to teach peace without an honest attempt to achieve it yourself? As Del Vasto states, "before you can spread peace on earth, you must have brought it into your own home, and there can be no peace in your home if there is none in your heart."³⁰

This principle forces us to take personal responsibility for what is going on in the world. "Instead of reproducing the

dominant ideology, an educator can denounce it."³¹ I struggle with this ideal and in a way I feel hypocritical writing this letter. Am I the peace I preach? Definitely not, but I am working on it. And this is, I guess, my main point. You have to start making inner changes before you can ever achieve any changes outside of yourself. I believe in this very deeply and to me it is fundamental to the study of peace education. This path demands courage, persistence, and conviction. Daniel Schugurensky writes about Freire, "as a truly revolutionary humanist, he never lost faith in the capacity of human beings to build a better world together."³² I try to cultivate that same faith.

Peace,
Pieternel

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References:

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