

GETTING TO YES TO TEACH THE *PEACE* WORD

**By Phillip Bosserman
with Assistance from
Mitchell Rosenwald**

**Department of Sociology and
Center for Teaching Peace
Salisbury State University
Salisbury, Maryland 21801**

**For Presentation at the Peace Studies Association
Meetings, February 28-March 1, 1992, Boulder, Colorado**

GETTING TO YES TO TEACH THE *PEACE* WORD

Introduction

A persistent problem for peace studies is the negative impression the word *peace* carries. Somehow it has been associated with the hippie movement of the 1960s, conjuring up images of long-haired, sandal toting, bearded types throwing up the peace sign and saying, "Peace brother." The other impression *peace* gives is that talking about it and promoting it will necessarily weaken national security. Peace can only come through strength. To suggest otherwise is to weaken America, which smacks of being communistic, or anti-American. These two misconceptions have been barriers to teaching or presenting alternatives to violence in the schools, churches, service organizations, and the like. The failure to teach such subjects and approaches has been an unfortunate lack.¹

What We Learn in School

For the most part we are taught that the natural way to resolve conflict is using fists, knives, guns, grenades, bombs and nukes. We tend to believe that humans are by nature belligerent and aggressive. Competition is the predominant social process in our culture. And we believe it is the way of assuring success. Life is a zero-sum game. There must be winners and losers. Moreover, in the words of the 18th century political philosopher, Hobbes, life is nasty, brutish and short. Such beliefs become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

We fail to learn that cooperation, love, and mutual dependency are infinitely more important than competition, conflict, violence. Without these, social life would be essentially impossible. We need to stand back and look at the scale of cooperation, the intricacies of interweaving relationships and whole systems of mutually interdependent parts which make social

life as we know it possible. Such cooperation and mutuality, what Peter Kropotkin called mutual aid, is not the result of coercion and punishment, but rather the outcome of millions of conscious, freely made decisions on the part of the members of this society. We follow the norms we have created basically because we want to; we are comfortable with them. Take getting to this meeting. Let us say you drove. If so, you followed the streets in your car, driving on the right side of the road, obeying the stop and yield signs, stopping for a red light, allowing a pedestrian in a walk way to cross. We comply with these rules of society because they make sense, they make possible the functioning of our social life. Not to do so would invite certain disruption, even chaos.

Yet we persist in declaring that our social make-up is just the opposite. The governing key to social control, i.e., order, is force and the threat of violence to make us behave. Our compliance to rules is the result of brute force, not because we want to obey, or feel this is "the right thing to do."

Thus, young people know so well the literature of warfare, the history of wars, generals, kings, warlords and presidents who have fought what we think were the crucial battles.

Following the lead of Colman McCarthy, let us try this brief quiz. Figuratively speaking take pencil and paper. Identify these persons:

1. Robert E. Lee
2. Dorothy Day
3. U.S. Grant
4. A.J. Mustie
5. Norman Schwartzkof
6. Jane Addams
7. Caesar
8. Lanza Del Vasto
9. Stonewall Jackson
10. John Woolman

Most of us would be able to recognize the five generals but the others are unknowns, Dorothy Day, A.J. Mustie, Jane Addams, Lanza Del Vasto, and John Woolman. They are recognized "as advocates of nonviolence. Each took personal and political risks by acting on the belief that the force of nonviolence is more effective, moral and lasting than the force of fist guns, armies and nukes."²

In sum, we know very little about those who have led struggles for the nonviolent resolution of conflict. Many have lived lives of love, reconciliation, and compassion. Yet they are persons we seldom study in school or anywhere else as far as that goes.

A little known fact is the American legacy of nonviolence. Mahatma Gandhi, Leo Tolstoy, and many others in the 19th and 20th centuries drew from the American nonviolent tradition, which had its beginnings in the 17th century. When the Society of Friends (Quakers) settled Pennsylvania in the early 17th century, they brought with them the notion that each person flamed with God's inner light. Therefore, each person is sacred and it is wrong to kill for any reason, for one would be killing a part of that Light, a part of God. Other early settlers also came from peace churches like the Mennonites, Old Order Amish, and the Church of the Brethren. They took the teachings of Jesus on the face value that it is against God's will to take another's life. All of these groups opposed the war against the French and Indians, the Revolutionary War, the enslavement of Africans, the Civil War, and all subsequent wars. Figures such as Adin Ballou, Frederick Douglas, William Lloyd Garrison, Henry David Thoreau, Sojourner Truth, joined with the peace churches as 19th century advocates of nonviolence. From these personages and organizations Tolstoy, Gandhi, and King drew their ideas about nonviolence and nonviolent action.

A positive way to view the United States is to see it as a society which gave to the world the nonviolent tradition. The United States has a nonviolent tradition. This history we really do not know. Yet currently the image which many persons in this society and without hold that the United States is a violent nation. Two recent reports detail the extent of this violent streak in United States' social fabric.

First, the Federal Center for Disease Control reports that 20% of high school students said they have carried a weapon in the preceding month. Nearly 50% (43%) said they had been armed 4 or more times during the month.

11,000 Americans were killed in homicides by assailants of high school age. These figures are thought to be very conservative.

The survey was conducted in 1990 among 11,631 students in grades 9-12 in all 50 states, the DC, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.³

Second, according to a recent U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee report, the US is the "most violent and self-destructive nation on earth."

The study depicted US citizens "killing, raping, and robbing one another at a furious rate, surpassing every other country that keeps records." The nation's people committed a record number of killings in 1990 -- at least 23,300 or nearly three an hour -- and a record number of rapes, robberies and assaults.

The report noted that the murder rate in the US is more than twice that of Northern Ireland, four times that of Italy, nine times England's and eleven times Japan's. During the past generation the number of violent crimes has reportedly risen twelve times faster than the population.

"When viewed from the national perspective, these crime rates are sobering. When viewed from the international perspective, they are truly embarrassing," the study observed.⁴

These somber accounts contradict the important truth that nonviolence as a collective way of life had its beginnings in this same America.

The society has not considered this tradition of nonviolence seriously, to show that it is a viable alternative to violent solutions to perplexing problems, great or small. Peace studies have had to overcome in recent decades the stigma of the misperceptions the peace word carries.

The Center for Teaching Peace

We would like to tell you about an approach we are following in Salisbury, Maryland to surmount these barriers. We began teaching a course at Salisbury State University in the sociology department on "The Sociology of War and Peace." This evolved into "The Sociology of Conflict and Nonviolence." We encountered considerable opposition to the course from right wing elements of the student Young Republicans. They made a cause celebre over its existence, running articles in the campus newspaper, attempting to disrupt class, and getting local television coverage to air their grievances. The class went on and the interlopers stopped coming. The editor of the paper wrote a strong editorial supporting the right of students to have a choice among the courses they could take and defending academic freedom. The furor subsided and eventually faded away.

While teaching this class I participated that same semester in a campus-wide project concerning the environment. The steering committee for the project, of which I was a member, decided to invite Colman McCarthy to deal with the theme of violence and the environment. He is one of the distinguished writers for The Washington Post. His column is syndicated in dozens

Education and Peacemaking

of papers throughout the United States. Out of this visit to the campus came a spontaneous movement on the part of students to get a peace studies curriculum started at the University. A committee of students and faculty began putting together a peace studies minor, the first step towards a full-blown peace studies program. This minor has just been approved and will go into effect the academic year 1992-1993.

At the same time a local peace and justice community group called the Peace Alliance of the Lower Shore was seeking to get peace studies into the local schools, especially with an emphasis on conflict management and resolution. This had been a long term project. We first tried to introduce a *peace studies* curriculum into the public schools by going through the superintendent of schools for the county and her curriculum directors. Though the superintendent was very enthusiastic, when she passed the idea along to the curriculum personnel, it met with serious opposition. They had contacted certain parents about the idea. These parents were very vocal in their opposition. Now several years later we have dropped the *peace word* and have taken this current tack. To continue, we thought of inviting Colman McCarthy for a second visit asking him to address teachers at one of their workshops. We approached the superintendent of schools again. for our county. Again, she was very open to the idea. She suggested a different approach. Drop the *peace* word and go with conflict resolution, conflict management and alternatives to violence. The school board had approved a values emphasis program. We could slip this project in under that rubric.

Education and Peacemaking

The end result was that Mr. McCarthy came, talked to the teachers and made such an impression that immediately afterwards we were besieged with requests for help. We had struck a sensitive note.

Why did this occur? In the spring of last year, a number of violent attacks happened in the Wicomico County schools in which racial animosities surfaced, suspicions and hatreds flared. School officials, families and students became alarmed. The Board of Education, the Sheriff's Department, the Salisbury City Police, and the Maryland State and Juvenile Services met to hammer out a policy statement. The overwhelming accent of this policy report was on social control, keeping order. The statement did not make a single mention of preventive measures such as workshops, classes, courses, experiential learning settings where students, families, teachers, administrators, security personnel, social services could learn alternatives to violence, that is, peacemaking and conflict management/resolution. Rather the report considered such measures as communications equipment purchases to assure direct contact with police departments in case of emergency, beefed up police patrols of each school, the issuance of school identification cards so control of who came on the school grounds could be monitored, and the promise of prompt action in case any juvenile breaks a law.

McCarthy's address, as previously mentioned, immediately brought forth requests for visits to schools. Further discussions ensued with Mr. McCarthy in the home of the Superintendent of Schools. The outcome was a proposal from Mr. McCarthy to create a Center for Teaching Peace at Salisbury State University. This would be a satellite of his parent Center

Education and Peacemaking

in Washington, D.C. He offered sufficient funds to begin such an operation. These funds come from the Bill Moyers Foundation.

The expressed purpose of the Center would be to work in the schools, K through 12, teaching peacemaking, conflict management and resolution, developing curricula for peace studies. The superintendent agreed. It would also develop programs and projects with families, churches, service clubs, and other voluntary organizations.

The Approach

Our strategy has been the following:

- Address faculties of schools upon their invitation about the kinds of programs, workshops, trainings we could offer, the resources we have available as to personnel, literature, films, videos, cassettes, film-strips, posters, prints, and the like. We have the possibility of developing, guiding and conducting research as well.
- From this initial step we received immediate invitations to work with two school systems. For instance, we conducted a workshop training session for seventy-five teachers, counselors, and administrators from middle schools, alternative schools, and some elementary schools. These first workshops were conducted by persons who have excellent backgrounds in teaching conflict management and peacemaking.
- Along with this workshop for school personnel we relied upon these same resources to train our university students who have come through our peace

Education and Peacemaking

studies curriculum and want to work with children and youth in the schools.

They participated in intensive training sessions which prepared them for actual hands-on teaching in the classrooms. We pay these students a stipend for their work during a semester.

- We draw upon the rich resources of Colman McCarthy's Center in D.C. plus the Philadelphia Society of Friends Library, the New Society Press, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Peace Studies Association, the Peace Magazine - the organ of the Canadian Peace Movement, the various centers which emphasize conflict management and resolution such as those at George Mason University, Syracuse University, and the University of Colorado.
- We are linked to the electronic bulletin boards, PeaceNet and EcoNet, out of San Francisco. There are important conferences within these boards having to do with all of the subjects that interest us: peace education, conflict management and resolution, peace studies, and peace making.

Conclusions

The stigma associated with the *peace* word has been difficult to overcome. However, thanks to the strategy of our superintendent of schools we were able to get into the classrooms and teach peace. There is a lesson to be learned from that creative approach. Having said that, it would seem that generally speaking the *peace* word is beginning to lose its negative connotations. More and more school systems are beginning programs in conflict management and resolution which, when examined, are relying heavily on materials having to do with peace and

Education and Peacemaking

nonviolence. Two fine examples are the New York City Public schools' project, The Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP)⁵, and the work of the National Association for Mediation in Education which has a program at the George Street Elementary School, Baltimore.⁶ Both emphasize teaching young people "the skills they need to handle conflicts in a nonviolent way."⁷ As the perception of a safer world continues to grow, a world where communism no longer poses the kind of threat people were taught to fear, the real, close-to-home world becomes ever more discernible. In such a setting we are realizing violence is a presence we can no longer ignore but must consider seriously and thoughtfully. Considering alternatives to violence is an idea whose time has come.

1. A recent letter by a local high school student to the editor of The Daily Times of Salisbury, Md. (February 21, 1992) is a case in point. She argued that a potent reason for recent racial incidents in her school was because not a single course dealt with how to reduce, manage, or resolve conflict nonviolently.

2. Colman McCarthy, Why Study Nonviolence. Washington, D.C.: Center for Teaching Peace, 1991, 2.

3. Fellowship, December, 1991, 26.

4. Ibid.

5. Fellowship, January/February 1992, 9.

6. "Making Peace On School Turf," The Baltimore Sun, January 22, 1992, 1G.

7. Ibid.