

Re-civilizing Society Through Teaching and Doing Peace

Phillip Bosserman, PhD and Todd L. Matthews, MA
Salisbury, Md.

February 2002

Phillip Bosserman

Dr. Bosserman is Emeritus Professor of Sociology and Peace Studies, Salisbury University,
Salisbury, Maryland

E-mail address: pbosserm@tampabay.rr.com

Todd Matthews

Mr. Matthews holds an M.A. in sociology, and is currently a PhD student at Mississippi
State University in Starkville, MS and involved in participatory research work in Mississippi.

E-mail address: Toddmatthews@wri.msstate.edu

What follows is the story of an organization that evolved from a conviction that human beings ought *to do peace*, and not war, whether the context is a troubled neighborhood or a nation rife with ethnic rivalries. The evidence is overwhelming that humans are social beings, and as such, must rely on each other for survival; yet, each is different and that differentness creates tension and conflicts, some very serious, resulting in aggression and violence. But we are not automatons, genetically determined to behave in revengeful, aggressive and destructive ways. As Elise Boulding reminds us, we do have the choice to be peacemakers or war makers.

Drawing on the rich theoretical analysis of Norbert Elias, this essay details some aspects of the *de-civilizing* of United States society, indeed increasingly, the whole of the global society. We argue that this de-civilizing process explains in large part the pass to which contemporary society has come in the living out of daily experiences. We are witness to a decline in the positive transformation of conduct, as the monopolization of physical violence has spread including gun-toting vigilantes who take measures into their own hands, and some of these vigilantes are mere children! Moreover, direct, physical violence is only one level of hurtful behavior. As we shall see structural and cultural violence each have an even more profound effect on the social order.

We go on to describe the approaches employed by the Center for Conflict Resolution, Inc. (CCR) to address some of the underlying conditions driving this de-civilizing process, while affirming the ontologically prior reality that we are social, basically cooperating beings. The Center 's programs seek to provide equal access for every segment of the

population to conflict resolution skill training, peacemaking strategies, mediation, collaborative problem-solving techniques, community organization and development.

Through its emphasis on peace studies the Center ' s work encompasses regional, intra-national and global disputes by linking with other agencies actively involved with trouble spots around the world. In addition, the Center has a special working relationship with the local university, Salisbury University.

The approach underlying the efforts of the Center is one in which the Center works as a bridge between the university, where it is housed, and the larger community and region. This participatory approach is centered in the interplay of theory and praxis by involving persons of the community under study as both objects and doers of the research, as active participants in the research process while being the subjects of that process. As well, these *outside* researchers work in the same way becoming participating *insiders* within the community. The fundamental purpose remains: to level the playing field, to address the destructive injustices that set in motion the cycles of violence.

The defining events of the 20th century were two hot World Wars so barbaric and catastrophic in their destructiveness that they produced lasting legacies of suspicion and bitter animosities. The disastrous Versailles treaty marking the end of the First World War led to World War II some 20 years later. And the uneasy ending to that war spawned the terrifying Cold War in which the two superpowers pitted their nuclear weapons and delivery systems against each other for nearly fifty years. Out of this came a maniacal policy called Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). It was madness all right, creating an arms race that resulted in vast piles of armaments of numerous sizes and shapes, all deadly, terrifying

weapons of mass annihilation. A landmine for example is small enough to fit into a pants pocket, but packs a deadly strike that severs limbs or causes immediate death. The global spread of these weapons now numbers in the billions, worldwide. These immense arsenals that supposedly assures peoples everywhere their security and peace, have very much the opposite effect!

The Cold War armed every nation that chose to have a standing army, many of whom shored up their traditional foot soldiers with armored personnel carriers, devastating air power equipped with so-called smart bombs, plus navy submarines fitted with missile-delivered nuclear warheads. Conventional weapons, smaller yet deadlier, proliferated increasingly thrust into the hands of poor, third and fourth world peoples who are killing each other around the globe. Tragically these third and fourth world countries waste precious resources by spending millions of dollars on armaments to the neglect of food, shelter, education, health, housing and environmental needs. The arms merchants -- the United States leads the pack-- offer their wares guaranteeing their clients that the more sophisticated weapons will assure a more peaceful future, or the successful squelching of a rebel uprising. Heightened mistrust spurred on by the deadly tensions of revenge-driven religious and ethnic conflicts combine to put these weapons into play.

Mixed into this witch 's brew are the toxic inequalities created by the enormous divide between rich and poor nations. This assortment of social and economic forces produces the nearly two-dozen or so limited wars going on at any given time.

In the United States, small arms are ubiquitous, many in the hands of children. Violence against children by children is of particular concern, given the overwhelming media

attention in the past few years to incidents of middle and high school boys killing their classmates.

Why does this happen? What is new in the recent events is that affluent white kids in middle class schools are doing the killing. As long as this form of violence remained in the inner city with blacks and Hispanics killing each other, little concern surfaced. The condition has percolated upwards.

At deeper levels of society reside structural and cultural violence. The way society is organized pigeonholes people, putting them in social conditions that physically maim while destroying their sense of worth. The cultural elements of ideologies, norms, and rules rationalize and justify the position of minorities: Hispanics, African Americans, the disabled, the poor, women, Native Americans and the like. Some examples are ideologies which tout a particular economic system or religious interpretation based on Absolute Truth to exonerate and rationalize the social structural anomalies which lead to the direct violence of killings, maiming, mass murders, and repression like we saw in Afghanistan's treatment of women, or the United States' creation of an urban under-class predominantly Hispanic and African American.

Johan Galtung provides a graphic illustration of the pathology of violence. This is a first step toward calling into question the use of any kind of violence as a way to realize peace. Such reliance on ever increasing destructive violence is a potent indicator of the decivilizing process itself. We can visualize these three types of violence as an iceberg. At its tip is direct violence like the wanton destruction of the environment, murder, war, genocide, and infanticide, repression and detention. Below the surface are the other forms of violence,

structural and cultural. They exploit and victimize by rationalizing and legitimating all types of violence. Peace is the absence of violence. The absence of direct cruelty is only a small part of the condition of peace. As long as we fail to address these deeper sources of violence there can be no peace. Or failing to address all of them together distorts any type of action. Considering only direct violence leads to rigid, inadequate programs of *law and order*. A preoccupation with structural and cultural violence can lead to accepting violent means to attain peaceful ends forgetting that violence begets violence.

Norbert Elias helps us understand that what we have just described is the downside of the civilizing process. He discovered crucial patterns of social life in the processes of moderating spontaneous emotional outbursts, many of them very violent. The processes include a steady realization there is a mental space between the past, present and future that starts connecting events as chains of cause and effect. Thus each society develops over the course of its history ways that are more peaceful, less violent.

For example, Elias noted that 5th century B.C. Greece did not have a level of self-control, based on a conscience, which brought with it restraint, empathy, understanding, and a desire for peace that was apparent in the late 19th century A.D. During the 19th century's closing decades Tolstoy argued that universal peace was possible. History seemed to be moving towards the realization of this goal and purpose. Earlier in that century St. Simon saw the possibility of an international organization that could overcome the problems of the industrial age leading to world peace.

In Elias' essay on *The Germans* he carefully analyzes what went wrong with the German state during the Weimar Republic that led to the rise of Hitler who orchestrated the

persecution and genocide of the Jews and other minorities, and the subsequent expansion of the German Reich resulting in the Second World War. The civilizing process had given way to a de-civilizing era.

Elias observes that after Germany's Second World War defeat came the Cold War that pushed the rapid spread of arms causing increased levels of extra-state-violence throughout the world. Citizen behavior changed drastically. Atrocities multiplied. Many states lost their grip on the monopoly of violence as competing groups, often led by charismatic figures taking measures into their own hands, carved out spheres of control.

Our principal thesis is that the twentieth century saw the general de-civilizing of society. Two world wars were total in their involving the nations' civilian population. No one was exempt. Moreover a widespread crisis in institutional arrangements has ensued: family, education, polity, religion, and the economy as seen in both work and leisure have all been profoundly affected. This institutional morass demanded new arrangements replace old ones, bearing in mind that aspects of the old arrangements will always remain as new forms take shape.

The result is that these broad institutional crises bring with them consequential, unrelenting, often violent conflicts. Elias identifies the key element of power as critical to this decline of civility. He notes how a whole body of authoritative, standardized literature provided the rationalization for this belief in the necessary use of extra-state violence C that is, revolution C to accomplish their ideals. The Marx and Engels corpus fed the outside groups longing for power with a well-organized theory and means for succeeding.

A principal source of the de-civilizing of 20th century society thus hinged on this critical area of the state control of deadly force. Elias' highly innovative analysis goes far in explaining the mechanisms of escalating violence in so many contemporary settings, most of these in nation-states. Each nation makes sure rationalizations are in place to justify the increasing militarization of their national population. Cycles of violent, bloody revenge are set in motion as documented by the deadly conflicts in the Balkans, East and West Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia and the Americas and most recently Afghanistan.

These same conditions have spread internally to the United States. Easy access to small arms on the streets of the inner cities of America, *the savage inequalities* of their populations encourage the use of extra-state violence that has terrifying possibilities for the future if such inequities remain. Especially vulnerable are the young who have nothing to lose in taking force into their own hands. In addition, so many cues come from the military, the United States foreign involvements including an increasingly far-flung war on terrorism, the powerful National Rifle Association gun lobby, and the adversarial, argument culture that permeates every level of this society.

Even more troubling is the spread of this extra-state violence to the suburbs and rural areas of the United States. Gordon Fellman places the de-civilizing impetus on the deeply imbedded compulsion to win and dominate at any cost. He gives us a clear understanding of the personal and social characteristics of this social pattern and process that can only be countered by a new paradigm of mutualism, cooperation and empathy. It is no wonder that kids and youth are killing their parents, teachers, and their own schoolmates while inner city youth killings continue at troubling rates. There has to be a better way to live, an alternative

to using violence in resolving conflicts. This better way is the *raison d'etre* of the Center for Conflict Resolution, Inc.

The Center for Conflict Resolution, Inc. (CCR) is a nonprofit agency that has a working relationship with Salisbury University, Salisbury, Maryland. It serves the populations of the Delaware-Maryland-Virginia peninsula, a predominantly rural area dotted with many farms that raise small grains, vegetables, and chickens. Watermen who fish the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean are a vital economic activity.

The Center's birth is a direct outcome of the de-stabilizing events we have described above. Such events have set in motion necessary counter movements for changing the conditions that have generated the widespread unrest and decline in civility affecting current culture and attendant social frameworks. The CCR is an outcome of these counter movements that gives definition to its purpose. The Center is not alone in its effort. Several hundred programs exist in North America.

A core aspect of the Center's mission is advocacy for partnership among people in conflict, so they can learn to appreciate their mutual involvement and responsibility for being in dispute. To that end, our approach to both conflict resolution and mediation--in both their practice and training--is transformative; i.e., the participants or partners in the disputes must change if resolution and amelioration are to be realized. However we realize that not every dispute can realize this result. Often time and circumstances are of the essence requiring immediate, forthright solutions.

A critical second part of the Center's mission is being in the service of social change: to realize that the causes of violent, hurtful conflicts are the result of an uneven playing field.

Consequential inequalities are imbedded in society itself: the widening divide between rich and poor, the immense sufferings caused by discrimination due to race, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, and any other difference. At another level is the appalling destruction of the environment involving bitter disputes, for example between developers and multiple-interest users. Recalling Johan Galtung's term, all these endemic conditions represent structural and cultural violence. To reiterate cultural violence is those rationalizations we make to justify both direct and structural violence, for example the sale of military hardware to third world nations -- so many of the small arms fall into the hands of children; another is the oppressive presence of United States military bases in a place like Okinawa, Japan; and the belief in the false notion that nuclear weapons make this country or any other more secure.

In short, the Center sees as one of its important missions to confront these structural and cultural sources of violence by finding ways to change their conditions. Conflict resolution and mediation are no more than band-aids if the causes of destructive, violent behavior go unchallenged.

The CCR's beginning was marked by the way the Eastern Shore of Maryland viewed the idea of peace. The *peace word* carried with it a negative impression retaining an association with the hippie movement of the 1960's, conjuring up images of long-haired, sandal toting, bearded types throwing up the peace sign and saying, "Peace brother." As well, talking about *peace* and promoting it will necessarily weaken national security. Peace can only come through strength. Advocating peace in reality smacks of being *communistic* or faintly *un-American*.

These two misconceptions were barriers for the Center from the outset to teaching or presenting alternatives to violence in the schools, churches, service organizations, government and social agencies. However, the failure to teach peace as a way of life, and as a set of practical skills has been an unfortunate lack.

For the most part we are taught that the natural way to resolve conflict is using fists, knives, guns, grenades, land mines, 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. In the words of the 17th century political philosopher, Thomas Hobbes “life is nasty, solitary, 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, and violence. Without these social life would be essentially impossible. We need to stand back and look at the scale of cooperation, the intricacies of inter-weaving relationships and whole systems of mutually interdependent parts that 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 or any society. Yet we persist in thinking that the individual is number one, forgetting that social order relies on cooperation and collaboration. Our compliance is not solely the result of brute force but because we want to obey, we feel this is the right thing to do. It is in the *habits of the heart* as Robert Bellah and his colleagues put it.

Most of us grow up learning the literature of warfare, the history of wars, generals, kings, warlords and presidents who have fought what we think were the crucial battles. Peacemakers like Dorothy Day, A.J. Mustie, Jane Addams, Andre Trocme, Thich Nhat Hahn, Leo Tolstoy, Barbara Lee, the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Society of Friends are unknowns for most young people going through our schools. These persons and groups chose to make peace not war, taking personal and political risks to act on the belief that nonviolence is a better, more permanent way than using any form of force whether it be verbal threats, spears, armed battalions, fists or missiles. In sum, we know very little about those who have led struggles for the nonviolent resolution of conflict, particularly the rich tradition of nonviolence in United States history.

Peace studies have had to overcome in recent decades the stigma of the misperceptions that peace and nonviolence conjure up in people's minds. The Salisbury Center for Conflict Resolution began within the context of peace studies when Phillip Bosserman in 1989 offered a course at Salisbury University entitled "The Sociology of War and Peace." This evolved into "The Sociology of Conflict and Nonviolence." Due to the perception of peace as somehow a *four-letter word*, considerable opposition to the course emerged from right wing elements of the student Young Republicans. They made a *cause célèbre* over its existence, running articles in the campus newspaper charging bias meant to brainwash students. They "infiltrated" the course in order to disrupt class sessions, and garnered local television coverage to air their grievances. The class survived because of a courageous faculty advisor to the Young Republicans resigned that post when he learned of the student leadership's agenda. Also, 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.

A campus-wide project on the environment provided the next chapter in the evolution of the Center. The steering committee for the project invited Colman McCarthy, a distinguished *Washington Post* columnist, to speak on violence and the environment. From his stirring presentation came a spontaneous movement on the part of students to get a peace studies curriculum started at the University. Many were in the sociology class. A committee of students and faculty began putting together a peace studies minor program that was eventually approved in 1991.

At the same time a local peace and justice community group called the Peace Alliance of the Lower Shore (PALS hence), co-chaired by Phillip Bosserman and Joan Maloof, was seeking to get peace studies into the local schools, especially with an emphasis on conflict resolution and peer mediation skill training and practice. This had been a long-term PALS' project. The group first tried to introduce a peace studies curriculum into the public schools by going through the Wicomico county superintendent of schools 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, still unable to appreciate what peace and nonviolence mean.

PALS invited Colman McCarthy for a community visit asking him to address teachers at one of their workshops. The superintendent of schools was again approached, and again she was very open to the idea. This time she recommended a different strategy.

Drop the *peace* word and go with conflict resolution and peer mediation as alternatives to violence. The school board had approved a values emphasis program. She suggested slipping this project in under that rubric.

The end result was Mr. McCarthy came, talked to the teachers and made such an impression that immediately afterwards PALS was besieged with requests for help. We had touched a deeply felt need on the part of teachers and school administrators. Mr. McCarthy announced that he wished to create the Center for Teaching Peace at Salisbury University. This would be the first satellite of McCarthy's parent Center in Washington, D.C. and would use funds that he had recently received from the Schumann Foundation, Bill Moyers, President.

The expressed purpose of the Center would be to work in the schools, K through 12, teaching peacemaking strategies and skills and developing the attendant curricula. The superintendent agreed. The Center would also develop programs and projects with families, churches, service clubs, government and social agencies, and neighborhoods to teach conflict resolution skills. Bosserman was the titular Director and Maloof administered the programs. The Center's key strategy for work in the schools began by training university students coming from the new conflict resolution peace studies minor who wanted to work with children and youth in the schools. These trainings prepared them to teach conflict resolution skills in school classrooms. Beginning in the Fall 1994, the Center added mediation to the services it provided to Lower Shore courts who now were mandating both co-parenting seminars and mediation before litigation for divorcing couples with dependant children. The Center provided mediation for disputes involving labor and management, landlords and

tenants, doctors and hospital staff, university faculty and administration, the Mayor and City Council, and combative factions within church congregations. The Center became a community mediation site for this region addressing local neighborhoods needs especially in high crime and violence areas.

A new, academic major in Conflict Analysis and Dispute Resolution at Salisbury University views the Center as a kind of teaching hospital providing students, faculty and staff direct, hands-on experience in areas of conflict prevention, management and crisis/conflict intervention. This same major provides an international dimension to these activities with internships in South Africa, Northern Ireland, the Balkans, Central America, and the Middle East.

As we stated above, the dynamics of the 20th century resulted in a crisis of civilization which Norbert Elias called the *De-civilizing* of society. The heinous *Attack on America* of September 11, 2001 underlines the depth of this crisis for the global society as well as the United States. The rise of Nazism in post-World War I Germany brought on increased fear of the future, chinking the armor of civilized conduct, and leading to World War II. Elias observes that danger grows and its calculability plus generalized fantastical, often fanatical religious and racial beliefs fuel social volatility. Ironically the civilizing process mediated by modern bureaucracy led to the subordination of the use of violence to a rational, moral calculus.

However, these very conditions set in motion countervailing social forces that seek alternative ways of thinking and behaving, embodying the principles of mutuality, cooperation, and compassion. Outgrowths of these social forces are dialectically opposed

movements of which the Center for Conflict Resolution is an example. De-civilizing forces within the community and region fostered a consciousness that has led to a positive response, manifested in the emergence and development of the Center for Conflict Resolution. We submit that such movements are spreading throughout this society and elsewhere.

The successful creation of a new undergraduate major in Conflict Analysis and Dispute Resolution at Salisbury University represents a vital new method for combating the de-civilizing forces, leading to positive social transformation within and beyond the university community. To wit: several courses in this major allow the more than 6,000 students at Salisbury University to receive General Education credit making it possible for each of them to learn how to think and act differently in the face of conflict, finding nonviolent alternatives to potentially nasty, destructive outcomes. Distance learning methods and technology allow an even greater audience to profit from this curriculum.

The interplay of de-civilizing and re-civilizing processes is ongoing. In this historical moment, the innovative role of a Center for Conflict Resolution, organically linked to university and community, locally and globally, presents a new model for transformative conflict resolution.

Recommended Readings:

- Bok, Sisela. 1998. *Mayhem: Violence as Public Entertainment*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley.
- Boulding, Elise. 2000. *The Culture of Peace*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Felman, Gordon. 1998. *Rambo and the Dalai Lama: The Compulsion to Win and Its Threat to Human Survival*. State University Press of New York.
- Galtung, Johan. 1996. *Peace by Peaceful Means*. London: Sage Publishers.
- Garbarino, James. 1999. *Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them*. New York: The Free Press.
- Hanson, Holly, "Living Purposefully in a Time of Violence," Mount Holyoke College, September 13, 2001. http://bahai-library.org/essays/living_purposefully.html. This is an excellent summary of the issues raised by 9-11.
- McCarthy, Colman. 1999. *One Peace: Essays on Nonviolence*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
- Mennell, Stephen and Johan Goudsblom. 1998. *Norbert Elias On Civilization, Power and Knowledge*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mennell, Stephen 1990. Decivilizing Processes: Theoretical Significance and Some Lines of Research. @ *Journal of the International Sociological Association* Vol. , No. 2: : 205-24.
- Park, Peter, et al. (eds). 1993. *Voices of Change: Participatory Research in the United States and Canada*. Toronto, Ontario: OISE Press.
- Tannen, Deborah. 1998. *The Argument Culture: Moving from Debate to Dialogue*. New York: Random House.