

Why We Must Teach Peace

Colman McCarthy, September 1992, from "All of One Peace"

A question settled in my mind a few years ago and refused to leave until I not only answered it but also acted on the answer. *If peace is what every government says it seeks, and peace is the yearning of every heart, why aren't we studying it and teaching it in schools?*

Governments and citizens proclaim that mathematics, languages, and science are their goals, and students are required to take those and other courses, as if the future of the species depended on them. At commencements, graduates are told to go into the world as peacemakers. Yet in most schools, peace is so unimportant that no place is found for it in the curriculum.

Rather than whine about this, which is what too many in the syndicated column trade are content to do most of the time, I decided to go into the schools myself.

In 1982, I began teaching courses in alternatives to violence. After being with some three thousand students in three universities and two high schools, I can give the preliminary report that, contrary to what some might say, with opened minds and receptive hearts, peace can be taught and learned.

I use the qualification "preliminary" because *peace*, like *love*, is a cheapened word. Nuclear missiles are now called "peace-keepers" and are presumably equipped with multiple "peace-heads." We are told repeatedly that the way to ensure peace is to be ready for war. Nearly all world governments, with an annual global arms budget of \$900 billion, preach peace through strength rather than strength through peace.

The military does what it is paid to do: deal with conflicts through guns, armies, or bombs. Militarists believe whole-heartedly – and deserve credit for the intensity of their beliefs – that violence is the way to stop violence. But it is obvious that history proves that approach wrong – if war were effective, all our problems would have been solved thousands of years ago. More people might embrace that fact, however, if the alternatives to guns, armies, and bombs were taught and learned. If the alternatives aren't made available, how can they be applied?

As a pacifist, I am uneasy with the term "peace studies." It will do for now, but a more exact description will eventually be needed. What I have been teaching is peace through nonviolence. That, too, is somewhat imprecise. The sharpest phrase is peace through soul force or, to rely on Gandhi's favorite word, *satyagraha*. Nonviolence isn't just about ending wars. It's about creating peace in our own hearts, often the last place many people ever find it.

Studying peace through nonviolence is as much about getting the bombs out of our hearts as it is about getting them out of the Pentagon budget. Every problem we have, every conflict, whether among our family or friends, or among governments, will be addressed either through violent force or nonviolent force. No third option exists. I teach my classes because I believe in nonviolent force – the force of justice, the force of love, the force of sharing wealth, the force of ideas, the force of organized resistance to corrupt power. Fighting with those kinds of forces is the essence of nonviolence.

The first class of every semester I ask my students, "Is anyone here armed?" No one has ever raised a hand. "You are all armed," I reply. "You're armed with ideas, and you're in school to become armed with more ideas."

Occasionally a student will come back with the charge that I asked a trick question. Of course I did. Nonviolence is a tricky subject. The beauty and sanity of it doesn't get into our heads easily or automatically. It takes years and years of study. Why is it that we dismiss nonviolence so quickly by saying that it's a wonderful theory but unreal, yet we are willing to go slowly with other complex subjects?

After I ask the question about arms, I pose a second one by listing ten names to be identified: U.S. Grant, Robert E. Lee, Dwight Eisenhower, George Patton, William Westmoreland, Jane Addams, Jeannette Rankin, A. J. Muste, Adin Ballou, and Dorothy Day. Everyone can routinely identify the first five: All are generals. It is rare that anyone knows the second five, all believers or practitioners of nonviolence. A few take a guess that the last person was an actress and singer, as in Doris Day.

The students aren't to blame for knowing only the first five names. In elementary school and high school, and continuing through college, they are taught the history of America's seven declared wars and a fair portion of the 137 undeclared wars. Violence is taught as lore – the Alamo, Custer's Last Stand, the ride of Paul Revere, Lexington and Concord, Gettysburg. If SAT scores were based on high-schoolers' knowledge of bloodshed and militarism, we would have a nation of young geniuses.

To teach peace through nonviolence is to give the young a chance to develop a philosophy of force. It's to expose them to the history, techniques, and practitioners of nonviolence.

To choose to live by a philosophy of nonviolent force is to choose Jesus over Caesar, Vincent de Paul over Napoleon, William Penn over George Washington, Jeannette Rankin over Franklin Roosevelt, Dorothy Day over Lyndon Johnson, Maria Montessori over Margaret Thatcher.

Students, or at least the wary ones, often say they are glad former flower children like me occasionally turn up on college faculties, but in the real world nonviolence won't work and hasn't worked. Look what happened, they say, to Jesus, Gandhi, King, and a lot of other pacifists. I answer with the only honest reply available. Nonviolence *is* a risky philosophy to live by. It is no guarantee of safety. All that can be said of it is that it's a less failure than violence.

Those who prefer violent force, I tell my students, must justify the deaths of this century's seventy-eight million war victims. The number is a 500 percent increase over the last century. Those who choose the handgun as the most effective way to control or persuade the next person need to talk to the ten thousand people who will be killed by gunshot in the next year. Those who prefer violent force must explain the more than forty wars or conflicts raging in the world today, killing an estimated 41,000 people a month – most of them poor boys slaughtered by other poor boys. Those who believe America is a generous nation must account for the 38,000 children who die in the Third World every day from diseases that could be prevented by vaccinations that cost \$10 per child. The Congressional Research Office reports that since 1977, U.S. development and food aid to Third World nations has decreased by 16 percent while military aid has increased 53 percent.

Courses on nonviolence are easily designed. What isn't easy is shifting people's thinking. More than 1,200 U.S. campuses allow the Pentagon into their classrooms with ROTC programs, with some 108,000 students enrolled. At the same time, only 50 colleges offer a degree in peace studies, though others do offer concentrations, like the University of Portland's Certificate Program.

Only rarely though does a school promote itself for its peace program. How often do college presidents tell prospective students, "Come to my school because we have an excellent program in nonviolent studies"? Instead, they recruit students by talking of the new computer center, or the business school, or the new gym.

The militarists aren't to blame. I'm to blame for not doing more to get peace courses into the schools. The peace movement is to blame for the same reason. Liberal arts professors have to answer for their laziness in not fighting for courses in nonviolence.

But in the end, it is students themselves who must supply the moral pressure to get those courses. It's their tuition, their world, and their future. Peter Kropotkin, a Russian pacifist and communitarian, advised the young: "Think about the kind of world you want to live and work in. What do you need to build that world? Demand that your teachers teach you that!" It's advice that students – and their teachers – should take to heart.

This year I am teaching a daily class in nonviolence at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School in Bethesda, Maryland, from 7:40 to 8:30 AM. I have courses also at Georgetown University Law Center and the University of Maryland.

Few students have ever taken a class in nonviolence. Because of that, I often think to myself that I would do better to be teaching a course in linear physics and speaking Swahili. The students would understand it sooner. Yet, here is what students have written in their course evaluations:

"This course dispelled a lot of myths I had about peace and pacifists and introduced me to a completely new way of seeing the world. And I believe I have changed – even my friends want to know what's been 'brainwashing' me!" "I had an argument with my brother. I lost my cool

and hit him. Unlike in the past when this happened, I felt disappointed with myself. If one wants to contribute to making the world a place of nonviolence, one must begin by eliminating the violence in oneself.”

None of my teaching interferes with my full-time work at the *Washington Post*, where I have been privileged to be writing since 1968. If anything, my journalism and teaching are mutually reinforcing. Writing is thinking in solitude; teaching is thinking in public. Both places, an audience is there to challenge whatever is false and endorse whatever is true.

My students are a bracing mix of intellectuals, skeptics, and seekers of peace whose company is unimaginably uplifting. Whether they are in third-year law or third-year high school, I try to create a class atmosphere in which the study and discussion of nonviolence is directed toward giving everyone a chance to embrace a life of both personal and political peacemaking. What other empowerment, save love, is as needed or liberating?

For some students, the embracing comes quickly. They are amazed at the breadth of literature on nonviolence. Others hang back, wanting more evidence that nonviolence isn't just a philosophy for hugging trees at high tide and full moon. It doesn't matter when the assent occurs. In all journeys, someone is first on board the train, someone else is the fiftieth, one hundredth, or ten millionth. That we get on, not when we get on, is what's crucial.

Teaching nonviolence is an act of faith; the belief that students will dig deep into their reserves of inner courage and love to embrace the highest calling we know, peacemaking.