

Preface to I'd Rather Teach Peace

2007 Edition

Colman McCarthy

Coming six years after first being published in hardcover, this paper edition arrives at a moment when peace education appears to be taking hold and, often enough, taken seriously. It comes also when the American invasion of Iraq has proved to be as wrecklessly violent and politically fruitless as I and many others said it would when Congress let itself be duped into supporting the Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld delusions of peace through killing.

Much of my work, aside from classroom teaching, is communicating with other teachers on efforts they might be making to create peace classes in their local schools. Signs of progress appear, as in one in a recent letter.

“Dear Colman,” it began, “I am an English teacher at Niles West High School in Skokie, a suburb just north of Chicago. I’m writing to let you know that our district, somewhat miraculously, approved a peace studies course. Here is the full story.

“I have had a lifelong interest in peace studies and peace education, most likely due to my father who is a World War II veteran and retired English professor. He is a lifelong liberal in the Howard Zinn and Jonathan Kozol mold. To what my father gave me, I added an interest in liberation theology (I am Roman Catholic) and Buddhism. From that, I was driven to learn about human rights violations in Central America and elsewhere, and Buddhism has taught me to focus on inner peace. In Chicago I have had the privilege of knowing Kathy Kelly of Voices for Creative Nonviolence, and have brought her to my school several times. For years I was the faculty moderator of a student peace group, which has become a student chapter of Amnesty International.

“Due to your book, ‘I’d Rather Teach Peace,’ I had the idea of starting a peace course in our district. I ordered your two collections of peace essays several years ago, and you wrote back an encouraging letter.

“It takes a long time to get a course started here, with many institutional hoops to jump through. Two other teachers and I put a proposal together which at first was rejected. It was too ‘social studies’ oriented. We are all, incidentally, English teachers. Our second proposal, titled ‘The Literature of peace,’ accepted by the school board. This was the miraculous part. Because the course is part of the English curriculum, we will be teaching more literature—poetry, short stories, drama—than you would in yours.

“We begin teaching the course this Fall. With two high schools in our district, we will have one course in each. I would love to keep in touch with you as we go through this process. The three of us are new at this and we want to do the best we can to make sure the courses become popular and continue. I would love to see it blossom into a school wide peace studies program involving our entire curriculum. We are at the first step.

In closing, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your work, because your writings inspired me to get this course going.”

The letter-writer was Paul Wack, a teacher who has put into practice the memorable thought of Eleanor Roosevelt: “Some of us are dreamers and some of us are doers. But what the world

really needs are dreamers who do and doers who dream.”

I wrote back to Paul: “Until I check the AAU indoor record book for the fastest time anyone has created a peace studies course, I’m guessing you are close to medaling. It’s usually years and years between a proposal and the day students walk into a class devoted to studying and discussing peace....You’ve done well in Skokie. But watch out. The trouble with a good idea is that it soon degenerates into hard work. Enjoy your degeneracy!”

Creating a foothold for peace education—whether in elementary, middle or high schools, or colleges and universities—almost always is traceable to one singularly resolute person who says, “this will happen and I’ll make it happen.” Despite the media’s continually depicting the peace movement as little more than antiwar rallies or protestors still sticking flower in gun barrels, it is much more. There are the many lovers of long shots—sometimes a student, teacher, principal, school superintendent, or parent—who sees schools as the place to be, where studying nonviolence is valued as the sane, moral and effective alternative to violence in all its forms: military violence, environmental violence, emotional violence, verbal violence, domestic violence, racial violence, gender-based violence, corporate violence, economic violence, institutional violence, religious violence, bullying violence and violence against animals.

What Paul Wack pulled off in Skokie, Jeremy Fischer did in Bethesda, Maryland. I came to know him a decade ago after speaking at a student assembly at his high school, Walter Johnson, and calling on students to act on the ideal of Peter Kropotkin, the Russian anarchist and pacifist: “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.”

After the assembly, Jeremy Fischer, a 9th grader, skipped his next class to talk with me. Did I have a reading list for books on nonviolence? He wanted to know about groups I had praised in my speech: the War Resisters League, Pax Christi, the Catholic Worker, the Fellowship of Reconciliation. I invited him to enroll in one of my summer courses, which he did—consecutive summers--and bringing along his father, a teacher, both times.

Jeremy the 9th grader became a demander in the Kropotkin mold. With gritty persistence, he wrote letters to school officials. He phoned them. He sought out teachers. He endured brushoffs, runarounds, frowns, yawns and countless can’t-you-see-I’m-busy looks from finger-tapping faculty rajahs. But he didn’t go away. He had learned to hang on, hang in, hang out—but never hang it up. A payoff came. In the spring semester of his senior year at Walter Johnson—his 9th inning of high school—Jeremy found Ty Healy, a sympathetic faculty member ready to teach the peace course. It’s been in place for the past 10 years.

When think of the world’s heralded peacemakers—the Gandhi’s, Kings, Yunuses, Perez Esquivels and Corrigan—let’s remember also the Paul Wacks and Jeremy Fischers. They didn’t do great things, but as important they did small things in a great way.

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Washington D.C.

August 2007