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Advocating Peace Where Non-Violence Is Not a Community Value

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- Since the U.S. invaded Iraq, I see my life as usual—wanting
- to be on the "frontlines of non-violence," but not always
- knowing how to get there or what to do. In this narrative,
- I re-draw my local peace advocacy since 2003 to figure out
- the frontlines and my endeavors. Though refreshed by my
- core belief in the mutual dependence of non-violent means
- and ends, I also have identified close conflict with this
- idea. Especially where my county, campus, and classroom
- communities intersect, I live and work where non-violence is
- not everywhere a community value.

Over the past five years since the U.S. invaded Iraq, I have looked back and seen my life much as it has always been: I have always known the "frontlines of non-violence" are where I want to be, but I do not always know how to get there or what to do. I see myself trying to fulfill that life urge as I usually have—blending intuition with education, asking for permission as much as forgiveness, working up guts when confidence runs short, and hoping for truth in the maxim that small acts *do* matter. Hoping has led me to write this narrative, for in my professional and civic work, I am a drop in the sea compared to people with extraordinary brains, energy, and opportunity—people who construct theories, write books, lead organizations, shape policy, and influence others, much like oceans shift sands. Comparatively, my work comes in small, arrhythmic swells, not unlike that done by millions of others who persevere vocationally or a-



vocationally for peace and non-violence. With that hope and humility, then, I add to the larger narrative of peace work a small view of what it is like, to use one of my husband's favorite metaphors, to work "in the trenches" as ordinary people on ordinary frontlines for extraordinary reasons.

As I re-draw my experiences to figure out where the frontlines were and what I did on them, I recognize my core belief in the mutual dependence of non-violent means and ends, and I am refreshed by its strength to carry my peace work. At the same time, however, I am beginning to identify more precisely a conflict between this idea for advocating peace and another held by some people in my communities. It becomes especially clear, even tangible to me, where county, campus, and classroom communities intersect. Here, where I live and work, non-violence is not everywhere a community value.

Communities

I live in a county where many residents expect and respect America for "kicking ass." My county is Southern Appalachian—predominately rural, white, and working class. The 2000 census records the total adult population of 33,121 as 86% white (NC Commerce). The county has lost manufacturing, agriculture, and forestry work in recent years. By the end of 2007, over a quarter of all jobs were governmental; private sector jobs were highest in retail, travel and tourism, and health care and social services. Unemployment was 33%, and, in 2005, 17% of county residents lived in poverty (State Data Center). A chronic tension pits the county's needs for economic development against preservation of land, culture, and family. The university's recent purchase of 344 acres, for instance, promises jobs and money for county residents, but it also forebodes destruction of historical Native American sites and mountain heritage. Folks want things to get better *and* stay the same. The university is the county's largest employer, and many of the hourly wage and lower echelon staff administrative jobs are held by people



who already lived in the county, rather than moved to it for university work.

I work on a campus within this county where the state's higher education system is known for "kicking ass" with too few resources for too many expectations. My campus is a state regional comprehensive university with heavy teaching loads, pressures to publish, and a faculty mix of old-timers and newcomers. Some campus folks have been here since the 1960s. They remember when the state highway turned to dirt road before it reached campus. The longer they have lived here, the more they seem to care for this county and its people. Newcomers are more likely to live out of the county. Some county residents resent the campus for decades of ignoring them—their children, jobs, land. They also resent the increasing number of people moving here for second homes, new business ventures, or retirement—people who usually have more formal education and money than the natives, but often are perceived to have less common sense. Battles among rich land developers and relatively poor land owners make the front pages of the weekly newspaper and dominate its letters to the editor as often as not. Probably the most rapidly growing group in the county are Latinos who have come from Mexico primarily for construction or other manual labor, another source of resentment among some county folks. Commonly, campus folks call people born or raised here "locals"; locals refer to campus people as "at the university" and the influx of non-campus folks as "outsiders" and "Mexicans."

I was born and bred a white, female Southerner in a family that re-located according to her father's military career as an Air Force pilot. As an adult, I lived in several states through a few career choices until I moved here just over a decade ago to take a tenure-track job, glad one had turned up in this state and, even better, in its feels-like-home mountains. I married a near-local. Tom, born in Fort Knox, Kentucky, is a true mountain man who has made this area home most of his life. But, as the joke goes in this county, if he lives here until he's 100, his



local obituary will still read, “Originally from Fort Knox, Kentucky, Mr. Baker lived here for 95 years . . .” A forester by profession and a youth sports coach by avocation, Tom has cruised this region’s timber and visited the homes of its residents for more than three decades. I learn local history through his accumulation of stories about old wounds and recent slights—whose parents were condescended to by “the university”; whose children didn’t get as much as a look from the university’s athletic departments. The concept of town-and-gown again and again turns into a lived reality for me.

For decades, this campus’s undergraduates have been primarily traditionally aged, 90% from within state and most of those in-state students from the immediate eleven-county region. Like this portion of Appalachian America, they are 90% white and about half-and-half male and female. The main difference students notice between home and here is in the number and proximity of places to go and things to do—malls, movies, restaurants, entertainment. A weekend job, family traditions, and active high-school relationships also divide many students’ lives between campus and county. Over the last ten years, I have taught hundreds of first-year students, and I am no longer surprised when as many as a half of the twenty members in any given course indicate they have been raised at home and/or church not to believe in evolution, homosexuality, abortion, and interracial dating or marriage. Likewise, some have been raised and sometimes educated to believe in the unity (not separation) of church and state, and the absolute imperative of war to have created and sustained these United States. Their reasoning, nearly always flawed by *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, combined with an education in history and literature organized by a military chronology, leads them to conclude that without the Revolutionary War, no USA; without World War II, no end to Hitler and totalitarianism and no USA as world power; without war in Iraq, no end to Hussein and terrorism and no USA as rich world power. Back home and at college, American flags, Confederate flags, and yellow



ribbons outnumbered peace symbols displayed after September 11, 2001, and March 19, 2003.

During America’s most recent period of war, I have sought the frontlines of non-violence in these communities where they intersect. To say they “blend” would suggest something too smooth. Nevertheless, we do live, work, and sometimes play together. How do I advocate peace without making war with neighbors and students? How do I construct a frontline for *non-violence*? How can they and I do it together?

Anticipating War

Most of what I know about activism I learned during the few weeks before and after March 19, 2003, the date the United States launched its pre-emptive strike on Iraq. Seventeen months earlier, I was incapable of joining others to view television coverage of the violence of September 11. Instead, I remained in my campus office, off the internet, until I could return home that evening to watch alone and release privately whatever emotions might come forth, in whatever way. I didn’t know what the boundaries were for immediate, public response to massive violence. Whatever they were, I worried I’d transgress them with some out-of-control behavior. How inconsiderate that would be, and how embarrassing to make a scene. That’s what a good girl born and raised in the South thinks. It’s easier in hindsight to imagine I could have walked the few yards from my building to the University Center (the UC) and joined people gathering throughout the day to see the news and start asking questions like “Why?” and “What next?” Of course, I could have kept my act together. Or could I have? Did everybody else? What if I broke down? Much worse, what if I began attacking anyone in the UC or on the TV who was already shouting for revenge? Then, it was easier to imagine whoops and hollers to start “kicking ass!”



A frontline at home sprung up on September 11. My husband and I had joked about being a mixed marriage, he Republican and I Democrat; he a Vietnam vet and I a peace hippie. But it was no laughing matter when we faced utterly opposing views of how our country could best respond to this twenty-first century terrorism. All-out military force for him; all-out dialogue for me. To bridge rather than enlarge a gap of misunderstanding between us, it took nothing more or less than ongoing dialogue involving concentrated listening, slow speaking, and respectful silence. As days turned into months, it also required humor and agreements to not talk when our government left us gasping in a poisonous air of misinformation, or when media left us struggling in quicksand groping for insight. I couldn't leap into every "conspiracy theory"; he couldn't deny them all out-of-hand; and we both had to develop a tolerance for living with the unknown and unthinkable. Over time, we came to deeper, clearer understandings of each other's position and a re-positioning of our individual original views.

And then, in the winter of 2003, it became chillingly apparent that our country was about to invade another. I could sense community anxiety, but could anticipate no action. Unexpectedly, a director in Student Affairs called me with a question she'd been receiving: "Are you planning anything about the war?" My answer was the same as hers: "No, but I'd be glad to help get something going." I was relieved to find out I wasn't the only person in the immediate vicinity about to burst with silent despair. Looking back, it seems no coincidence the call came from a woman involved in non-violent projects for women.

It was Monday, February 17. What to do about "the war?" This is not a simple questions given my awareness of working and living with some people who consider violence a logical, natural, necessary, and respected means of defense. Given the county's predominately emotional, patriotic charge for invading Afghanistan, I figured it a foregone conclusion they would rally behind this next military action. Given my students' similarities with them, I expected similar response.



The point was too fine that the attack on Iraq would be preemptive rather than defensive. Likewise, the fact that Saudi Arabians, not Iraqis, were most obviously linked to the 2001 terrorist attacks could not replace what the nation's administration had locked into their brains. Then, thoughts shifted to campus colleagues. Who among us would publicly protest this war? We had been a quiet campus in Fall 2001 after the crying subsided. I couldn't conjure an image of a sizeable group (say, ten percent of faculty, about forty or so) who would favor—much less participate in—public activism . . . even against this next round of global violence. Were we too busy or business-like to merit activism, or too sage from radical days of the '60s to engage in behavior that, however nostalgic, was not going to change anything? Were we still in a "culture of silence," as a faculty member had proclaimed in the late 1990s, or perhaps a "culture of apathy," as one of my undergraduates had more recently situated all of us? Then, I began to worry about town-and-gown. If my campus did protest pending violence, would it increase the mistrust held by some county folks? Would it divide students against one other? Who might kick whose ass in the process? For that matter, what would be the university administration's stance on antiwar activism on a campus of quietly held opinions in a state that historically votes for Republican presidents? The hardest questions, ones I didn't ask at the time, are these: Was I rationalizing my own tepid behavior? Was I seeking safety as one among many mealy-mouthed worker bees a little too concerned about their own little hives or hides?

The next day, Tuesday, I met my first real-live activist: Lou, a student in her late twenties finishing her second baccalaureate. She had an easy smile and a strong handshake. She came from a big family, was used to living on limited means, and had been involved for years in gay rights' advocacy. The director who had called me introduced us, reserved meeting space, and we started contacting as many people as we could think of who might meet on short notice to talk over ideas for what to do. I sent out a blanket email to faculty and staff inviting anyone who



wanted “to plan local peace initiatives in the face of increasing global conflicts” to a 5:30 meeting the next afternoon. To send the same invite to students, I had to get approval from one of two employees recently charged with screening and distributing all student-wide messages. I crossed my fingers that approval of the cause wouldn’t be an unwritten criterion, too. Evidently, students got the message.

A Tapestry and Forum

It’s Wednesday, February 19. A group of about forty people show up: Students and faculty mostly from the humanities; staff from the library and student services; students in political and performance campus organizations; a range of class ranks and majors. Lou runs the meeting with amazing efficiency, ease, and trust in people and process. She starts with questions, making quick notes on a white board as she goes:

“Why are we here; what’s our mission?”

Lots of ideas from around the room: stop the war; no blood for oil; impeach Bush

“To advocate for peace.” It comes from an ex-Navy man. A “wow” kind of silence.

“Okay, which one’s the best? Got it: ‘to advocate for peace.’”

“All right, so what do each of you bring with you? What abilities, resources, anything to help meet this goal? Go around the room.”

Everybody briefs the room; everybody listens.

“Great. Now, do we want a name; what’s our name?”

Ideas fly again.

“All right: ‘Western Carolina Peace Initiative.’ Everybody okay with that? Great.”



All discussed and decided within an hour.

“Now, let’s get to what we’re going to do. First, though, when?”

Immediate responses: “Soon.” “Now.” “No time to waste.”

“Where?”

Chatter about location on- or off-campus turns to who will be involved, which turns out to be “anybody” who wants to come.

“Okay, then what’s the most available and accessible location we can get quickly?”

Consensus: On-campus outside the UC.

“Okay, now—what do we want to do? Something that gets people’s attention, gets them involved . . . ?”

People start talking about invited speakers; free time for people to say what’s on their minds; handouts; music. Lou describes the idea of creating a “tapestry.”

Consensus: Let’s do it all. Somebody says whatever we do, we have to get the word out. In an instant, Lou begins breaking out teams she sees it’s time for.

“If you can do construction for the tapestry, go to that corner; PR, over here; speakers’ program, there”

Occasionally, I raise my head from the team I had joined to look around the room. The direct, focused collaborative action I witness humbles and thrills me—draw a frontline and trust the process—indeed, I smile. I’m most struck by who is working side by side—members of all the communities we want to experience this event. Granted, we want the campus to provide all the resources we can get, but we don’t want this to be seen as a campus-only event. It’s as if blinders have disappeared



and we can simply see “our community.” I sense a collective recognition that we might be creating the only local opportunity for concerned citizens to speak out or stand with others who do not want this invasion. We had dismissed hierarchy out of hand and immersed ourselves in collaboration; we had dropped geographical boundaries and simply become one. If we were doing it today, I might say we were civically engaged.

Three days later, a press release goes to the local weekly newspaper and the daily regional one:

The Western Carolina Peace Initiative will open a 24-hour window of opportunity for the exchange of views about war from noon Thursday (Feb. 27) to noon Friday (Feb. 28) on the lawn outside [the] University Center. . . . People attending the event will create a Tapestry of Peace, writing out their own messages and wishes on strips of fabric and paper and weaving them into the tapestry. The event will include speeches, live music, artwork, and the distribution of yellow armbands. Speakers will include. . . . Local musicians . . . will perform. . . . Signup times will be available throughout the 24-hour display for visitors to take the podium and make their own statements about the impending war. . . . The Tapestry of Peace is intended to serve as a focal point for bringing together all kinds of people who are concerned about the possibility of war. Organizers hope the event will open a dialogue for the expression of all points of view on the subject of Iraq.

It was not a typical antiwar protest event, nor did we want it to be. I’d been one of the most outspoken about shaping a mission and its rhetoric *for peace* rather than *against war*. That goal included not causing a war among my communities. I was, of course, against this war and the whole concept of war, but I could not—and I didn’t think WCPI should—expect others suddenly to turn against something that was part of their grain. Anyway, what were the chances I or we would be able to convince them to change their minds? Slim to none. Moreover,



what I sensed went beyond the immediate practicality of not beating my head against a wall or angering someone I wanted to enjoin. It was something I tried to express in an (unpublished) editorial letter inviting readers to the Tapestry and Forum:

Peace demonstrations do as much harm as good if they divide American citizens against each other. For example . . . two demonstrations coming up this weekend already have divided participants and anticipate conflict. Yet, from gentlest peace dove to staunchest war hawk, we need to gather together in public venues to discuss hard questions with differing answers. If we cannot talk at home, surely we will always fight abroad. In that spirit . . . [e]veryone is invited to bring his or her questions, answers, ideas, and beliefs to add . . . to share. . . .

I’m pretty sure my insistent pro-peace stance alienated a few anti-war members of WCPI, who were well prepared to present chapter and verse on the geopolitical, socioeconomic, and cultural-historical problems involved in going to war against Iraq. I honestly couldn’t match them on that score, nor could I present chapter and verse on non-violent solutions for peaceable international relations. I knew just enough, intuited the rest, and wore them out talking. I didn’t intentionally alienate them; I just didn’t know how not to while simultaneously aiming to keep peace, or at least avoid hostility, in the county, on the campus, and abroad. In other words, I envisioned an event that both my husband and I would attend without feeling ostracized or silenced. I wanted it to be safe for a WCPI member who was keeping very quiet about her involvement with this peace activity, who shook her head and cringed as she muttered, “You just don’t know how mad my boss would get.” And then there was Lou’s frequent use of the word *propaganda* to refer to materials WCPI would use. She understood it as casual, savvy activist slang, but I pleaded with her not to use a word that could ignite intellectual criticism and stereotypical backlash. *Propaganda* misrepresented our mission; she didn’t believe me, but she conceded.



Onward team work: flyers, e-mails, word-of-mouth, campus radio, letters to editors, a logo, a WCPI banner, a program, armbands, handouts. As-needed heads up for questions that needed everybody's input. The most memorable for me—a member of one team shouts a question to the room, "What if we have bad weather?" (highly likely for February in the mountains). In a split second from across the room, another team's member declares: "War doesn't stop for rain or snow. Neither should peace." Room-wide cheers for adding the slogan to all promo. It had come from a woman who had taped antiwar messages on her baby's diaper to flash during a presidential speech in the Vietnam years. Now the widow of her career-military husband, she was at once as gracious and as angry as any Southern woman I've ever had the luck to know.

Ten days after our first meeting, it happened. The tapestry—hundreds of strips of construction paper—blue, yellow, orange, pink, green—magic-markered with quotes, wishes, prayers, slogans, maxims, names—woven into both sides of a stretch of chicken wire about twenty feet long and five feet tall, freestanding outdoors on the University Center lawn between noon and noon, February 27 and 28, 2003. The music—hours of hand drums, rock bands, and a *cappella* solos—framed by a single Scottish bagpipe at the first noon playing "Lochaber No More" and the lone trumpet of "Taps" closing the second. Four slates of speakers scheduled at high-traffic times—students, faculty, and staff from campus as well as county residents who were writers, business proprietors, ministers, and Vietnam veterans. In the forum's open spirit, WCPI didn't coach or coordinate what they said. They spoke from their academic disciplines, from the emotion and reason of lived experience, and through other peacemakers' words. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "A Time to Break Silence" brought me to tears. The Forum's open mic invited anyone to speak, sing, or recite while others listened, sampled table info, added to the tapestry, or were simply there. Words advocating the invasion of Iraq, wars past and future, or a militant government had their air. A student organization



leader, for instance, was compelled, he explained, to speak in favor of this pending war act out of honor for his family's military heritage. ABC television network's local affiliate covered the story with snips of student interviews, even though the spot required a two-hour round trip to a campus and community usually slighted with too little regional media coverage. The largest crowd might have been fifty or so, but more often a moved in and out during the cold, foggy, drizzling rain that persisted most of the twenty-four hours.

I was a scheduled speaker. I don't know why, but I still have just the last few sentences of my comments in a computer file:

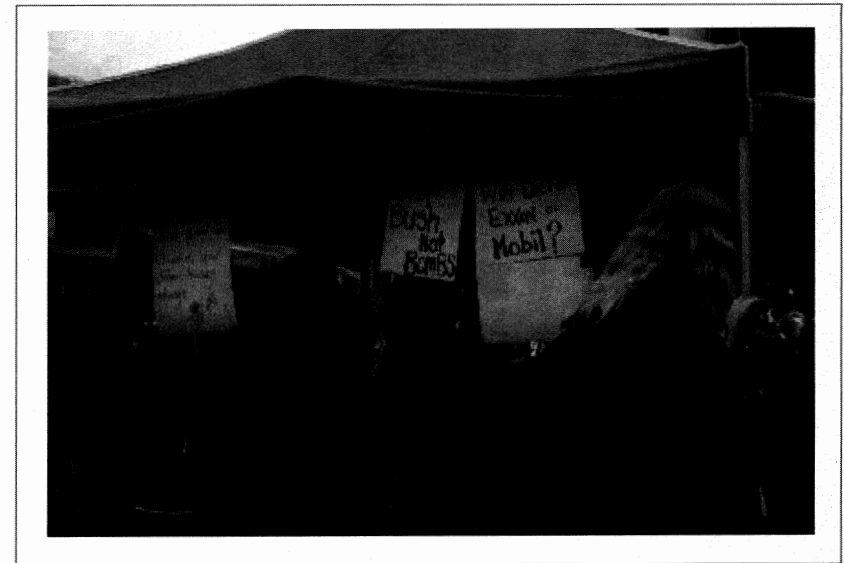
I've always *said* that 'war is not the answer; peace is the way to peace.' And I've always *stumbled* when someone would then ask me, 'How will peace work? Give me some examples of what we should do; show me some evidence that it will work.' I know precious little about the theory and practice of peacemaking. Today, I promise to learn more. I make this promise because today's current events compel me to realize that I no longer have the luxury of being a wanta-be peacemaker. Here will be my primary method: Dialogue. Genuine listening and sharing. With people who know more than me and who believe differently from me. My conversations with Tom (my husband) will be my guide, my model. My other primary means will be through your courage. I am *en-couraged* by your presence of mind, body, and spirit—the newly-born Western Carolina Peace Initiative. And everyone who has and will visit this Tapestry. Together, we will carry on.

Tom also was a scheduled speaker. As a Vietnam veteran, he spoke against politicians again sending well-intentioned yet ill-informed citizens into battles that could not be won militarily; as an American, he spoke of dishonor at the very idea his country would engage in preemptive strike; and as a man loving enough to have conversation with a hippie chick, he advocated giving peace a chance.



I offered our house's basement to store the tapestry until we found out if at least a portion of it could be displayed in the UC or maybe one of the dorms, archiving contemporary student activism. I don't remember what requests were made or why nothing came of them. Uncharacteristically for me, I insisted on keeping that rolled-up chicken wire in the basement until we moved into a smaller house in the spring of 2007. Even then, I kept a wad of tapestry strips in a plastic bag at least to represent what people had written, and that people had written. I'd originally thought I'd make time to type them all to preserve those words that day. I wanted some tangible evidence of the range of thoughts and emotions shared. I wanted to reread and reassure myself that we had been inclusive in advocating for peace. I threw away that bag and a stack of handouts this spring, when I came across them cleaning out the garage. I didn't know what to do with them. I don't even have any photos, yet I am missing those artifacts now.

Three weeks after the Peace Tapestry and Forum, the United States invaded Iraq. The day before, a faculty member emailed campus-wide an "urgent request" to sign a UN Petition for Peace. The invasion was about to start and could tip off World War III, it declared. The post incited a brief, intense bout of replies not about the war but, ostensibly, about campus email procedures. The "urgent request" hardly seemed an "appropriate use" of the campus list, came replies, especially since it turned this virtual space into a "political forum." Others labeled it "junk mail." Creating a university-wide chat-group was dismissed as a bad idea, too; employees with time to "chat" needed to reassess their work load, especially about such "junk." The only retort to the petition's content suggested everyone give "support to our country" rather than "aid to our enemies." Yet someone did note "these circumstances [were] different" because not speaking out for peace actually could lead into another world war. A couple of voices rallied for freedom of speech and patriotism in dissent. Most of the criticism came from "locals" who were more county than campus, regardless of where they worked.



A Peace Tapestry and Forum

Over the next couple of days, the information technology powers-that-were created a list-serv to "support engaged discussion and debate consistent with the university's mission," understanding some "members of our community do not want this discussion *forced* upon them" in their email accounts (my emphasis). This announcement about the "War and Peace – Electronic Dialogue" came a few hours after I had sent a message campus-wide on behalf of WCPI. As Lou had led WCPI to acknowledge, if and when we go to war, we needed a plan for bringing people together—make it at the UC clock tower at the first noon hour after the war begins. That was my announcement. Again a short, fierce spate of replies, this time directing me to read the recent electronic dialogue memo that I had violated. I replied: "Please let me clarify. I sent an announcement, not a letter or note of discussion. Similarly, everyone . . . receives announcements about [campus] athletics, music performances, and scholarly lectures." This time, they were openly angry at my mention of peace, to which I tried to reply peaceably:



- To some who wrote, “I support our President’s decision,” I replied, “I respect your considered decision on this crucial global matter.”

- To one who wrote, “My son is over in Kuwait, in harm’s way. REMOVE ME FROM YOUR MAILING LIST!” and accompanied it with a photo captioned “Kurds killed in Iraq by Saddam’s chemical weapons” and the sender’s postscript, “I dare you to post this at your peace rally!” I replied, “Thank you for sending the photo to remind me of the horrors of oppression and violence. I will keep your son and his safety in my thoughts and prayers, and I’ll share your note with others in the WCPI. . . . My apologies for increasing your troubles.”

- To another’s “I am not interested in your peace movement. I back the President and our troops 100% and the best thing you could do is pray for our troops and our country,” I wrote, “I join you in praying for our troops and country.”

- To the many “Please forward all your peace movement comments accordingly,” I suggested, “Please feel free to delete any announcement you do not wish to read, as do I. . . . I’m sure we are united in our prayers for our country and soldiers.”

I mentioned these notes and my responses with several others involved in WCPI. They were surprised I had responded with kindness rather than a counterattack; gee, wasn’t that hard? No, not really. It was my immediate thought to take each one as a small opportunity to make peace. It just took listening and words of care. Should that be so hard? When I recall my fear about my own potentially angry outbursts on September 11, however, it seems I’ve become more sure-footed as a peaceable community member. I remember thinking, I live and work with these people; so do you. We may be working globally, but we darn sure better act locally.

Until I found that file scrap of my “speech,” I had forgotten its promise to learn more about peacemaking. But I must have owned it that day



because that is what I have persisted in doing. Slowly and unevenly, without always recognizing how the pieces fit together, thankful now to write in a way that lifts the fog a bit. It even makes me smile over what we accomplished, and think about doing something else like it again. Surely that would be easier and more useful than trying to keep my mouth shut and despair buried when the next attack or invasion occurs. I am writing while a lame duck administration intensifies pressures to invade Iran, and for Americans to cheer it.

A Literature Seminar

Seventeen months into the “war on terrorism” in Iraq, two students in a Fall 2004 first-year seminar in literature captured my imagination as embodiments of my communities, and thus a cautionary tale about the limits and possibilities for advocating peace in classrooms that are mixes of “locals” and “outsiders.” Ben, as I saw him, was a pickup drivin’, cowboy boot-wearin’, squirrel-huntin’ kinda guy who spoke in a slow, punchy mountain drawl. He was from the next county over, planning to study forest resources—a “local.” Ginger, with her multi-colored, multi-layered get-ups and long, wild blond curls who spoke with an airy-um-sorta-like loose voice of a girl, entered school as a psychology major and came from across the state near its capital and cluster of research universities—an “outsider.”

Ben and Ginger emerged as intellectual and social leaders early in this semester. They also quickly became the two people most likely to disagree during class discussions, and to pursue those discussions to points where some class members could not resist joining the conversation, while others could hardly bear to be present and listen. Ben was “for” war, Ginger “for” peace, and both of them initially were stunned that everybody else didn’t think the way they did. I hoped the semester’s discussions, writing, and end-of-semester class project would allow us to experience a glimpse of what it takes for people to live peaceably. I realized pretty quickly that I was more hopeful than some of my students who saw peace as “impossible.” The interactions



A Literature Seminar

between Ben and Ginger foreshadowed to what extent we would be able to vouch for peace as a possibility even among ourselves.

In their first literary interpretations, I hear pronounced differences. They were to select a few texts we'd studied and write about what could be learned from them about war and peace. I encouraged moving out of the traditional English essay. Ben wrote an argument about the impossibility of peace, while Ginger created a utopia for peace.

Ben bucked the very idea that anything could be learned:

I don't think we can learn a lot about war and peace by reading poems and stories about the subject. I think the only way we can learn about war and peace is to go through both, sort of hands-on learning. From the age of about 4 or 5 little boys always play cops and robbers or cowboys and Indians; they learn from that age on that killing is bad and that killings in war are ok if they are done under a certain code. We teach them that killing a man is wrong, but if you are in war it is ok.



We teach them that fighting in a war for our country is honorable and a great thing to do. . . . All of the readings that we have read so far have been a waste of paper with the exception of "The Man He Killed" [a poem by Thomas Hardy] . . . this poem is a great example of how war can sometimes be harsh . . . the person you are shooting at may be just an ordinary guy . . . but that is the way war is and there is no getting around it or trying to make it pretty. . . . All these poems have . . . said that [war] doesn't lead to peace. Well, my question is: If some people don't think war leads to peace, do they think peace can be gained by letting people do whatever they want? . . . Do I think we can gain peace in today's world? NO. There are way too many different people and their different ideas of peace. We have too many chiefs and not enough Indians (his emphasis).

I was getting nowhere with Ben and, no doubt, other seminar members about questioning the principle that war is necessary for peace, not to mention that current events between the U.S. and Middle East assured them that human nature and relationships make peace impossible. Ben probably felt frustrated, too, as the semester progressed that he couldn't convince everyone with his earnest, diligent explanation of what seemed so commonsensical to him.

Ginger's literary interpretation took a multi-genre approach as she took readers to the year 2050 and the United Nations creating "Peace Island" to be populated with "different children from around the world at no older than a year":

These children are coming from the depths of our race; they are the most at-risk lives we can find . . . to raise a group of elite, sophisticated, healthy (in mind, body and spirit) people with no concept of war Bringing this [group of children on Peace Island] to the world in its best conditions may help them become future leaders of peace.

Authors we had read wrote letters in support of Peace Island:



From Wilfred Owen, "We have said that to live happily is worth the cost of war No child should ever be told that it would be a positive thing to go killing, when it will never create a solution."

From Tim O'Brien who accompanied his letter with things for the children to carry: "An electronic journal so that all your peacemakers can record what they need to do at any given moment. A super strong mirror . . . so that at anytime your peacemakers can look themselves in the eyes and see the truth behind them. A tie-dyed bag with a giant peace sign . . . to fill with all the other things you find appropriate for the children and peace members to carry around."

From Margaret Mead's reply to O'Brien: "I have to be honest . . . I was worried the Vets like you would sneer at the idea. We in no way mean to take away from the fact that so many men were brought into a damaging institution. It is true that our soldiers are a new kind . . . they are peacemakers."

In Ginger's correspondence between O'Brien and Mead, I hear conversations between my husband and me as we sought ways to advocate nonviolent means without alienating each other and, by extension, community members we like and fellow citizens we will never know. I hear Ginger constructing safe ground on which seminar members could extend conversation among people with differing values of nonviolence. I also could see the seminar becoming a place where Tom could join the conversation later in the semester, illustrating our way of allowing some tension for the sake of some understanding, taking the chance to listen and be listened to.

In the class collaborative project ending the semester, Ben and Ginger continue to stand out in my memory as leaders and, moreover, as rhetors who sought to speak their minds while learning to respect the minds of others. The group chose to bury a time capsule in one of my home's flower gardens. Each class member created his or her own text,



reading it to everyone before placing it in the capsule. Their goal was for a future first-year seminar group to open it and build on the work they did so people are not always starting from scratch, as they felt they had to do, in figuring out how to make a more peaceable world. Ben and Ginger provided the final two literary texts of the semester. He gave a prayer, removing his ever-present ball cap, placing it over his heart, and inviting others to pray with him. Ginger read a poem, which she said also was a prayer, one she had written as an echo to a poem we had studied, Ellen Bass's "Pray for Peace." The most lasting lesson this group of first-year students gave me was their advice to focus future seminars exclusively on literature about peace. We already know a lot about war, they told me, seeing difference and disagreement everywhere. We need to know more about peace. On this point, as I recall (or hope), Ben and Ginger agreed.

At War

Meanwhile, the WCPI tried to keep going, though younger participants seemed especially deflated with what, I think, felt like failure. I recall my attitude as earnestly determined—something like, now is not the time to slow down; we need peace activism more than ever. I must have been pretty dazed or disillusioned, though, because I'm surprised as I rummage through more pieces of files by evidence of work I'd forgotten, and still can't fully re-sequence. About a month after the violence began, WCPI had a booth at an annual downtown event celebrating spring. We received more signatures and fewer sneers than anticipated for letters to regional Congressional representatives urging immediate action to end this war. I don't know whether we received any response to the letters. Lou nearly single-handedly plotted "The Road to Peace" on the UC lawn by staking posters displaying costs in lives and dollars of U.S. military conflicts that led to the UC clock tower where we held several "prayer vigil[s] in support of our troops." We tagged on to the Women's Center as co-host of "Conscience to Action: An Activism Workshop." Early autumn, we set up an information table for International Peace Day and displayed a white



board for people to respond to the question, “What would you do to advocate for peace?” Of course, the notes on the white board vanished. Our sights were narrowing to work just on campus with just those few people who paused to ask each other, “What’s next?” Time and energy for peacemaking was shrinking.

Lou graduated and moved, so I sought fresh student leadership. “Student” because I wanted students to own this peace initiative—actually, any peace initiative—and also because I held on to some vague notion that student involvement legitimized my peace work as a valid, safe part of my university job. Even though the campus was abuzz with talk about service learning, civic engagement, and applied scholarship, I couldn’t get these concepts to “click” in my brain as a location for my frontlines of nonviolence. But I did know WCPI needed somebody to shore up my lack of experience and education as an activist. I had the will, but I sure did not know the ways. Being an effective teacher did not an effective activist make, in me anyway, and the longer Lou was gone, the more I idolized her. Eventually, a kindhearted, peace-loving student stepped up, but she needed leadership as much as I did. At the war’s one-year anniversary, we aimed to stage an event on this so-called Global Day of Action, but only managed to ask people (via emails, again) to “Pause for Peace” wherever they were or whatever they were doing at noon that Friday, March 19, 2004, to “give thought to peace.” We also encouraged travel to counties to the east to the closest city holding a peace rally. Sure . . . not likely. I don’t think anybody even bothered to snap at me for misusing the internet at work.

A Peace Pole

I got to know a colleague through mutual interest in peace work. Tess told me about a Peace Pole, which I’d never heard of. It’s a pole stuck in the ground with a message about peace on it, she said. It encourages passersby to contemplate peace. What about one for our university campus?



I immediately went to the internet site she gave me for more information:

A Peace Pole is a hand-crafted monument that displays the message and prayer *May Peace Prevail on Earth* on each of its four or six sides, usually in different languages. There are more than 200,000 Peace Poles in 180 countries all over the world dedicated as monuments to peace. They serve as constant reminders for us to visualize and pray for world peace. . . . Usually a Peace Pole is eight feet tall (2m 50cm) with the bottom ‘planted’ in the ground, although many indoor Peace Poles are supported by stands. It may be constructed from any material that is environmentally sound. (Peace Pole 1)

I was reenergized. I loved the pole and using it to recharge WCPI’s collective energy for its mission, which had not been accomplished in the last two years any more than the presidential mission in Iraq had. We ran the idea by a few interested parties, and then wrote to the WCPI list-serv, announcing we had a “new project for fulfilling our mission to advocate for peace: installing a Peace Pole.” We invited involvement in fund-raising, designing, and locating the pole. We forecast an installation ceremony during the third week in January 2005 to mesh with campus and county acknowledgements of Martin Luther King, Jr. . . . and with the nation’s witness to the second-term inauguration of the President. “What an appropriate time to provide our campus-community with a tangible symbol for peacemaking,” I concluded my enthusiastic email. I tried to be evenhanded, but the irony was unavoidable.

In a heartbeat, two faculty members who held key administrative responsibilities with much respect and authority were involved. One was sure fund-raising and locating the pole would be a breeze. As it turned out, his building and grounds soon were being renovated, putting his idea for location literally in the mud for months. Then he got a promotion, cutting his availability to involve a group of campus



and county folks in fund-raising. The other faculty-administrator was confident a large organization of top-notch students would want to take part; they might even want to build a pole themselves. Their student board, however, could not reach a unanimous decision due to some members' concern that a Peace Pole might be taken as "offensive" by some people. Offensive?! In a well-intentioned effort not to let the idea die, the first fellow punted the idea up the administrative ladder when he discovered location required more approval than he first thought. I knew we were sunk with somebody not associated with our mission pitching our plan—and how did we get in the position of asking permission anyway, I grumbled to myself. Indeed, word came down that "they" didn't want a permanent installation because it would set a precedent, making it difficult to deny future requests to put up other symbols for other "things." He tagged the bad news with a question about whether to try for a portable pole. I replied: "Disappointing, in a word" and yes, "Let's pursue the portable pole." I thought about writing the higher-ups, but figured it wouldn't change the outcome and might create ill will for future efforts, as I wasn't feeling especially dialogic. More than disappointed, I was disgusted and sad as I remembered a cynical-sounding email I'd received right after announcing WCPI would install a Peace Pole. "Really?" an old-timer queried. "Do you think this administration is actually going to let you do that? Keep me posted." Damn—I didn't want to be cynical, but I sure was struggling to shrug it off. Where was courage? Where was collaboration? Engagement?

The summer of 2005, I took a few days of silent retreat at a fellowship center high in my region's serene mountains. They had a Peace Pole. Maybe as cynicism's antidote, I tried again. That fall, holding my security blanket of student involvement, I contacted a new student organization that had cropped up after an experiential learning course in twentieth-century American racial justice. They were interested in sponsoring a Peace Pole, but they got mired up in framing their organization and never made it to the project level. I began the



next academic year making the same pitch at the request of the organization's new leadership. Again, nothing happened. They had the opposite problem of WCPI, which had intentionally resisted formal structure. Yet the eventual outcome was the same—no action. No more literally hammering out peace and justice on chicken wire or keyboards or poles. It was two and-a-half years into the U.S. invasion of Iraq, fighting in Afghanistan was nearing its fifth anniversary, and I couldn't get a stick of wood asking "May Peace Prevail on Earth" stuck in the ground at a place of higher learning in the mountains I call home. I had a time capsule in my backyard and advice to redesign the seminar that prompted it, and I wasn't sure how to do that, either.

Sustaining Peace

What sustains a peace initiative? Or is the question, what is a sustainable peace initiative? Or how am I sustained? I just didn't know, even though my emotions kept running high and my conscience hounding me with questions like, what could be a more immediate, crucial priority than advocating for peace during a time when "we" are at war? I hated seeing my time, energy, and spirit scooped up by other priorities. I was frustrated and anxious when shifting away from activism. Why can't I simultaneously handle my job, my home, *and* learn how to be a more effective peace advocate in my community and classrooms all at the same time? How is it that everyday living closes the gaps that temporarily expand—when push comes to shove—between what I think I can do and what I really can do? I thought more than once about acting on an impulse to drop everything and go back to school in peace studies.

Instead, I turned toward my research in search of my next front line. The shift made sense if for no other reasons than I had completed the tenure and promotion process and my term as a writing program administrator. To reach those goals, I had put aside my research's larger projects at the intersections of rhetoric, composition, pedagogy, and peacemaking. I also re-upped my determination to revise the first-



year seminar in literature and to design an upper-level course to follow it. Meanwhile, two wars in the Middle East ground on; two presidential campaigns persisted; and I wondered when I would move into peace activism again. About my campus, county, and country, I wondered what could unbind their values from violence.

Three Years Later

Fall: During this autumn, Sister Joan Chittister was interviewed by Krista Tippet, host of the public radio program *Speaking of Faith*. Chittister is a Benedictine nun who, I learn, is one of those extraordinary people whose advocacy shifts the world's sands. Tippet introduces her guest by noting, "If women were ordained in the Catholic Church in our lifetime, some say, Joan Chittister would be the first woman bishop" (Chittister). Then Chittister's first comment, which I absorb as a message about sustainability:

The church is a human institution, and it is slow. It's also a universal institution. It takes a long time for ideas to seep to the top, let alone to move the bottom. So you just realize that what is going on right now is simply the seeding of the question. It comes down to how many snowflakes does it take to break a branch? I don't know, but I want to be there to do my part if I'm a snowflake.

The image helps me admit the presence of strength in my individual tasks and of even more strength when compiled with others' endeavors.

Spring: Kaitlin enrolls in my first-year composition course. I realize immediately she reminds me of me when I was her age. It takes me awhile to tell her, though, not wanting to risk insulting her with the comparison. She is passionate about world peace and committed to doing everything one woman can do to advance it. She is despondent, though, about information she is learning in her courses that indicate she may be in the wrong major to achieve her goals, or that the dream may be more difficult than she imagined, maybe impossible. I am teaching an upper-level liberal studies course, Journey in Literature,



and we're reading selections surveyed in Michael True's book *An Energy Field More Intense: American Literature and a Nonviolent Tradition*. I apply for an internal scholar award to support research in this area. I get it—two course releases and a research assistant for the coming academic year.

Summer: Sometimes I listen to National Public Radio as background noise while I move around the house. Even if I can't hear the exact words, I'll know from the tone of voices if breaking news happens. I don't want to be caught unaware or unable to function next time one country attacks another. Maybe I'll hear it first when I'm alone and can collect my thoughts and emotions. Maybe I'll choose to unleash them in the streets. One afternoon, a report catches me and won't let go ("War Vets"). U.S. soldiers returned from Iraq talk about how foreign "normal life" is now that they're home. The report emphasizes the need for local police officers to understand what these soldiers have experienced being immersed in violence, and what they are experiencing now as they disrupt home, work, bars, and become more disruptive under police intervention. Later in the evening, I plop down on the couch next to my husband as he's watching television, as background noise at the end of a day as much as anything. It's the ending of *Braveheart*, for the hundredth time, with irresistible Mel Gibson as irresistible Wallace. As he is executed, he bellows "Freedom!" In the final scene, his Scottish warriors chant their hero's name at the tops of their lungs as they charge British troops. Then it's *Die Hard 2* with that crazy-but-cute Bruce Willis who jumps in and out of gunfire like kids playing in a summertime lawn sprinkler. I hang on long enough to get the story's setup (I can't remember who the bad guys are this time, just like I can't remember what parts I've seen of this or that shoot-'em-up cop flick). As the bullets exponentially begin to outnumber the movie's words, I slip out to the deck with a second drink and violence on my mind. I hear an airplane or two pass over. I remember reading within the past year that the mountainous terrain of my home is similar to that of Afghanistan, so my state's military



bases have been practicing flying maneuvers here. I don't know if it's "them" again. I try not to think about it at all, instead breathing in cool night air and gazing for stars. I am caught off guard—I sweat, I vomit. A question swirls around in my head, and I wish somebody in my community would pick it up and carry on a conversation: What is the relationship between peace and nonviolence?

Fall: Kaitlin is back for her second year. She's figured out a double major that will prepare her for public discourse in international relations. I'm underway with my research, teaching Journey in Literature again, both endeavors following the path of American writers in a nonviolent tradition. I'm reading primary and secondary discourse of and about American peace activists through the lens of my rhetoric and composition training. I am again in the company of peacemakers like Penn, Thoreau, King, Levertov, and Berry. I am meeting others such as Woolman, Garrison, Day, Jordan, and Berrigan. I am a student of peace through the extraordinariness of Kenneth Boulding, Staughton Lynd, and Howard Zinn. I have the bold work of Nancy Welch at my side, helping locate space and voice for teaching "public writing in a privatized world" (Welch). I have the brave work of Greg Mortenson as he follows his mission "to promote peace . . . one school at a time" (Mortenson). Scores of people and hundreds of texts to guide my journey; I hope I don't get lost, unable to see the forest for the trees. I'm not thinking as often these days about what divides my county and campus as I am about who I am and how I am moved to traverse these boundaries and linger in their intersections. My core belief in inextricable nonviolent means and ends sustains me so I can listen to others who value violence. It helps me be listened to as I choose how to speak about nonviolence. For now, each conversation is a frontline of nonviolence, a way to advocate for peace. Maybe I am a frontline, and everywhere I turn, I try to engage nonviolently.



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