

Teenagers and Violence, Power and Purpose

by Debra Weistar



Debra Weistar is director of Outdoor Education at EnCompass Learning Center in Nevada City, CA. Since 1994 she and her husband Tom have created and led full length wilderness and leadership courses for youth from around the country, incorporating study, cultural exchange, service learning, and adventure.

The room was filled with that concentrated, low-level hum that occurs when a group is split off two-by-two, each pair intensely focused in dialogue. My role was to introduce each discussion topic and keep time. I wasn't trying to eavesdrop but the voice of the young man sitting closest to me came through like a bell, "When I was 3-years-old, I knew what a "187" was. That's the police code for a murder. That's just not right. 3-years-old and I knew what murder was."

It was Frankie, our 15-year-old "gangster" student from nearby Yuba City. He was responding to the question, "What was one of the first things you remember that made you think that the world was not safe?" It was the second

evening of a ten day Leadership Course for teenagers, an intensive course that is part of EnCompass Learning Center's outdoor education program.¹

As an outdoor educator, I am in a unique position to work with people from all backgrounds and all ages in non-ordinary settings. In this branch of education, the development of persons (as distinct from, but not exclusive of, the development of intellect) is often the primary focus. The understanding of relationships forms the basis of much of my practice. Relationship to self, others, the human/natural world is of primary importance; equally important is how we interact with and learn from one another. As a

teacher I am also a student. Whether we are navigating a difficult stretch of river, solving a challenging initiative problem on the ropes course, or sharing personal journal entries, together we are able to explore who we are as humans, what we are capable of, and what we can aspire to. Part of the responsibility in the exploration of one's humanity paradoxically involves facing one's inhumanity. Consequently, there is hardly an OE course, be it a single day ropes course event or a three week Expedition, when as a group we don't come face to face with the fact of our own violence in one form or another.

Frankie came to the Leadership Course on a recommendation from his school counselor. My husband, Tom (who is also my co-worker), and I had met him twice before on his home turf while we were teaching a short course on leadership to the students from the school he attends. All of the students in this particular school are labeled "at-risk"; many of them are adjudicated and are currently on probation.

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Frankie comes from a world of violence. None of the other students from the Leadership Course are awakened in the middle of the night, on a regular basis, by gunshots. Not one of the others has, as Frankie has, a scar on his upper arm from a bullet wound. None of the others have fathers in prison. Yet, we are all a part of the same world, and the world is a part of us. Martin Luther King wrote, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." The other students were homeschooled or unschooled. One was from a Waldorf high school, another from an alternative private school. Most were from middle and upper middle class families. None of them had previously known someone who had grown up as Frankie had. But when asked who had never felt hate, or bitterness, or jealousy; had never felt like killing someone; had never discriminated against another; had never hurt anyone — not a hand was raised. Frankie's story, not just read in a book or seen on a movie screen, but connected to a real person, a peer, brought the reality of extreme violence close enough that we could not escape it. Nor could we escape to an insulated view of our own violence. The students could no longer hold a picture of themselves as nonviolent, as even the most subtle and inconspicuous manifestations of their own violence were openly discussed and reflected upon. In first seeing and then observing this part of themselves, they became open to knowing themselves as they are, not as they wished they were.

J. Krishnamurti wrote:

Throughout existence, human beings have been violent and are violent. I want to find out, as a human being, how to transcend this violence, how to go beyond it. What am I to do? I see what violence has done in the world, how it has destroyed every form of relationship, how it has brought deep agony in oneself, misery — I see all that. And I say to myself, I want to live a really peaceful life in which there is deep abundance of love — all the violence must go. Now what have I to do? First I must not escape from it; let us be sure of that. I must not escape from the fact that I am violent — escaping being condemning it or justifying it, or the naming of it as violence — the naming is a form of condemnation, a form of justification.

Facing the fact of our own violence, and the part each of us plays in perpetuating outward violence, is the beginning. Recognition and acknowledgement are necessary for change. But what then? How as educators can we provide environments that answer the need in young people to fully express who they are as whole human beings? How can education allow for inherent capacities to come forth — capacities for love, reverence for life, a deep sense of purpose?

To a teenager, expressing personal ideals is a natural and essential part of growth. Issues of personal identity, freedom, and power are at the very core of a teen's development of self. A young person who yearns to actualize her own sense of purpose and aspires to do something truly important in the world has awakened to a new sense of meaning in her life. She is ready to begin to take her place in the world.

Krishnamurti, when asked what one can do when one sees violence outside of oneself, answered:

What one is to do is to teach another. Teaching another is the highest profession in the world. You teach another and by teaching you are learning yourself. It is not that first you have learnt, accumulated, then you inform. You yourself are violent; understanding yourself is to help another to understand himself, therefore the teaching is the learning.

In the core days of the Leadership Course, the students design and lead a two-day, two-night program at EnCompass for middle school students from a Gang Risk Intervention Program based in a nearby city. Using the ropes course, cooperative games, excursions in nature, group council, art, and music, the teens create a program that allows barriers of race and social status and misperceptions, to dissolve. Friendships develop, stigmas are dropped, diversity is appreciated. The chance to give back, to take action and create a meaningful experience for others is not only tremendously empowering but is a beautiful opportunity for reciprocal learning, as the following journal entry written by a student from the 2001 course demonstrates:

3/16/01

Juan, Tania, Pablo, Tanesha, Oscar, Jessica: you take care of yourselves.

Juan, you are an amazing kid, one of the smartest people I know. Speak up, show it more, for gods sake don't get yourself killed, you're only 13.

Tania, you have an ability to make everyone feel better, use it, you are smart and honest. Show it, take care of yourself.

Pablo, trust, trust yourself, trust other people, thank you.

Oh, and flirt with girls your own age, ok?

Tanesha, believe in yourself.

Oscar, I didn't get to know you as well as the others, but speak up, if you speak the world will listen.

Jessica, work on school, graduate from 8th grade. You are stubborn, and determined, use that to your advantage. When you set your mind to something

you can get what you need.

with love,

s

PS and don't get hurt, you are just kids, in some ways you are younger than me, but in others you seem years older. Don't get jumped, don't jump anyone, live to grow up, ok? You are too young to live like you do. You aren't even in high school yet. Take care of yourselves and each other. Thank you for showing me another part of this world I live in.

In the book *The Freedom Writer's Diary*, 150 teens from Wilson High School in Long Beach, California, used the medium of writing, with the solidarity of peer support and a caring, committed teacher, to turn their lives around. They were students from the most violent of living situations, with the least support, the worst grades, the lowest hopes. Racial tension permeated the classroom. Through a curriculum of inspiring literature relevant to the students' lives, rigorous journal writing, activism, and proactive community service, the students took charge of their own lives and contributed enormously to improving their world. As their teacher, Erin Gruwell, put it:

Although I'm not an expert on the subject, I've always felt that all kids yearn to rebel.

Understanding this rebellious nature, I encouraged the Freedom Writers to use a pen as a means of revolution. Through their writing, they discovered they share a common identity, which united them into a community that connected them, not separated them from the world.

The story is told through the students' diary entries over a four-year period, from their freshman year to their senior year. This excerpt by a student was written in the fall of their senior year:

Today at Butler Elementary School, the Freedom Writers mentored the kids. I feel so happy right now because we made a difference that will probably change some lives. These children are like lotus plants. A lotus flower doesn't grow in a swimming pool, but grows in a muddy pond. It

lives in a dirty environment but amid the muddy pond lies a beautiful flower emerging from the water. I hope with guidance, these kids can become as beautiful as the lotus flower.

It is quite simple really. We create an environment in which the students may directly experience the relationship among their taking responsibility for something, putting a plan into action, and then realizing their own capacity for making a difference. Seeing an injustice is one thing. Putting one's energy, intelligence, and power into changing things means that you are no longer accepting the world as it is. You are no longer accepting yourself as you were.

The final portion of the Leadership Course is spent in reflection, discussion, and planning. We ask the question, "What is your gift? What are you going to do when you leave here?" We are sensitive to respect the students' personal expressions. We are not trying to make the students into leaders or outdoor educators. We are not trying to make them into anything. We create a frame for them to discover themselves, using the media available to us, including the ropes course. But the real work happens in the students' home communities where they will use their individual talents in areas such as music, art, theatre or environmental activism. We don't prejudice the outcome in any way; each individual will find his or her own means of expression, and these may change throughout his or her life. We challenge our students to follow their passions, take action, and do what they love. When engaged in an endeavor that is created for the wellbeing of others, love can arise naturally.

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The projects and goals that the students come up with always amaze us. In a conversation that occurred after the course was over, one student told me about the apprenticeship he was pursuing as well as the service he hoped to get involved in. He discovered that he really likes to listen to people and wants to help them. He's applying to an organization that runs a crisis line for teens. What struck me the most about our conversation, though, was his saying to me:

You know, Debra, I'm a good actor. I've always loved my acting class and I think I could even make a living as an actor. But I realize that if that was the main thing I did, I wouldn't be happy somehow. I think acting will always be something I'll do as a hobby, but not as my main focus.

I told him that I used to make my living as a craftsperson, and that I, too, have talents in the theatrical, storytelling, and arts realms. These talents serve me very well in my work with people and, besides enhancing the work, add a little spice to my life. To me, living a life of purpose means living a life of service to others. But that doesn't have to

mean living a life that isn't also rich with beauty and mystery and artistic expression.

Each of the other students took home either an idea for a project or a determination to find one. One student is planning to publish her poetry, another to put up a public exhibition of her paintings, and a third to organize a clean-up of a polluted stream in his neighborhood. A deeply transformative project that touched us all was undertaken by a student named Jess.

Jess arrived at the course in conflict. His mother had wanted him to attend and felt strongly that it was the right place for him. She was concerned that he was depressed at home and at school and was wasting his many talents. Jess agreed to come but was not excited. The first three days were particularly difficult. He told us there was no one there he could relate to. He rarely smiled, and his eyes often had a sad, vacant look. He participated, but with little enthusiasm. On the third day he told me he was having a very hard time

A Teacher's Self-Reflections

Debra Weistar

True learning involves a reciprocal relationship. In the reciprocity, role distinctions between teacher and student can become irrelevant. It is important to note the distinction between being cognizant of one's own learning (or meta-learning — knowing how one learns), and the rather simplistic and naïve notion of "the children teach me." Reciprocal learning means that each individual is involved appropriately according to the knowledge they hold, and at the same time each is open to whatever learning is available. It is an open flow through which offering and receiving, teaching and learning merge and create a synergy that increases as openness to the reciprocity increases.

As I work to improve my own practice, giving and receiving, teaching and learning become one. The students that cause me to confront my own limitations, simply by being who they are, increase my learning a thousand fold. Frankie was one such student for me. Children who grow up in the street often have a heightened awareness of their environment and highly developed observation skills. Frankie reads people very well, and I was no exception. He honed in quickly on the areas to which I have attachment: to not be labeled as authoritarian and to build relationships with all of the students to the best of my ability.

Frankie's horrific stories of violence were not what turned me this time to my own struggle with violence. It was Frankie himself. Although we enjoyed many humorous and close moments, he could be equally rude and disrespectful to me, often without warning. Sensing that it was important to me to build a relationship with him, at times he would deliberately try to hurt my feelings by rejecting me — making a show of hugging everyone or thanking everyone but me; vehemently shrugging off my touch, or verbally dismissing me.

There may be a hundred psychological and social reasons for Frankie's behavior toward me, sev-

eral of which I admit I entertained for a while. But those speculations only served to distance me from Frankie. Psychological speculation allowed me to objectify him and keep the discomfort at bay. I faced some difficult questions: was I really trying to understand Frankie, or was I trying to justify his behavior toward me, and therefore take it out of the realm of the personal, into the impersonal? In so doing, was I participating in and therefore perpetuating violence? Where was the line between not taking his actions personally, and not allowing violence (in the form of disrespect) to be done to me? Did I truly want to connect to him, and if so, what would I be willing to do? I struggled, with these questions and with myself. I found a profound opportunity to self-reflect, to face what Frankie in his inimitable way was showing me over and over again: I held an identity that I had to be good at building relationship with young people. As long as I held that identity, I would unconsciously do violence to defend it. As soon as I saw this, the choice was obvious. So obvious that it wasn't even a choice: the identity had to die. Not that it's necessarily as easy as that, though it can be. It may take discipline and self-observation.

Anytime a teacher (and I include parents in this context) fails to include him or herself in the process of learning, and specifically in the area of self-examination, then the teaching becomes hypocritical. Did I want to hurt Frankie because he was trying to hurt me? No. Did I have the intellectual capacity and experience to understand why he was acting the way he was, and the empathy to respond appropriately? Yes. And I also had the obligation to look at myself more deeply than that, to see what it was that this student was offering me in the way of self-growth. Through this reciprocal exchange, I was able to understand my relationship to violence more deeply, and become a better educator.

and wanted to go home. I told him we would never keep him against his will but asked if he would be willing to give it another day. He did. Little by little Jess revealed the internal difficulty he was in. He simply didn't care anymore. He didn't care about himself, his life, school or anything else. Part of him felt scared that he didn't care, and part of him didn't care about that. He felt a great emptiness inside.

The days and activities of the course continued and Jess stayed. Gradually his engagement with the work and the other students increased. The course curriculum involves different approaches, from exercises that allow the students to examine their biases and the ways in which they stereotype and objectify others, to facilitated in-depth council type discussions, to peer mentoring of younger students, and more. The other students were honest, supportive of, and genuinely interested in Jess — something that was missing in his social group at home. The other students and Jess respectfully challenged each other. Still, the emptiness persisted.

Putting one's energy, intelligence, and power into changing things means that you are no longer accepting the world as it is.

In writing about an unconventional educational approach, there exists a great challenge as well as risk. I hesitate to recount the various ways we approached Jess in his difficult moment, for fear of sounding formulaic, or appearing to have "answers." There is no formula, no set response, no answer. The response resides internally, deeply, in one's state of being. As with all the students, Tom and I observed, listened, inquired, connected. We were conscious of Jess' developmental stage, as well as his background, what he was saying, his interactions with others, his state of being. We entered into his realm, met him there, and responded according to our best approximation of what would support Jess' own intrinsic capacity for wholeness. Gradually, Jess engaged others in discussions he found meaningful. At times he would participate fully, speaking forthrightly or jumping in to help; at others times he would withdraw. There is no way to know for certain what is going on inside another person, but we felt a tremendous struggle taking place in Jess.

Toward the end of the course, Jess confronted his not-caring self. He chose to do this atop the Leap of Faith, a 55-foot high ropes course element, although it could have happened anywhere. His statement was an outward expression of deep personal conviction. Jess announced that he was tired of not caring. Even in that moment, there was a part of him that still didn't care, which he acknowledged, but he made a choice. The choice was to care.

Our last full day together we refer to as integration day. Jess, who speaks with a quiet integrity that others naturally pay attention to, spoke straight to our hearts as he told us what he wanted to do:

I think it's good that some people want to help kids that are affected by poverty or abuse or really crazy situations. But I want to help kids who are like I was when I was younger. Everybody thinks that because you go to a private school or have money that your life is fine, but it's not true. Middle class kids need someone to listen to them and to talk to, someone who understands them and understands what it's like to be depressed, or to not fit in or be popular. Those kids are confused and have problems, too. I want to help the kids at my school.

In the week following the course, Jess made a series of decisions that would result in his taking a stand and expressing himself in a way that the "not caring" Jess could never have done. It started out simple enough. Jess cut school, which was not unusual for him, and in fact was quite common for him. In the past, he grudgingly accepted the punishment or found a way to avoid it. This time, however, was different. Jess knew he broke a school rule and accepted responsibility for it. But he could no longer stay silent about the authoritarian structure of the school itself and the hypocrisy he saw. He took action. He wrote a letter to the administration citing the school's bias toward students that excel in the academic and sports realms. He pointed out that students like him, who follow an unconventional path or struggle with depression or experiment with drugs, are ignored or discriminated against and shunned. He cited school policies for student support and how they are applied only to students who fit the school's image of the model student. He demanded changes and concluded that he was done with not caring, and that, rather than go back to just existing and not standing up for himself and others, he would leave the school.

Education must include our giving students both freedom to acknowledge their violence and genuine opportunities to transcend it.

Jess had silenced a vital, passionate part of himself for too long. In facing his own self-destructive tendencies (violence) with the support of caring peers and mentors, and with the direct experience of helping others, Jess moved from a sense of emptiness to a sense of purpose. He also brought a great gift to the adults who run his school. By taking the risk of telling the truth about the injustice he sees, he is offering those in positions of power the chance to reexamine their values and what they have created based on those values. They now can choose to use their power to re-create a more just and holistic school environment, and by so doing, can help to create a more just and peaceful world.

One of my favorite poems, by the 13th century Persian poet Rumi, contains these lines: "Half of any person is wrong and weak and off the path. *Half!* The other half is dancing and swimming and flying in the Invisible Joy." We

humans are as capable of beauty and creation as we are of brutality and destruction. Education must include our giving students both freedom to acknowledge their violence and genuine opportunities to transcend it.

Note

Names of key people profiled in this article have been changed.

Bibliography

Beyond Violence by J. Krishnamurti

Natural Learning Rhythms: Discovering How and When Your Child Learns by Josette and Ba Luvmour

Holistic Education: An Analysis of its Intellectual Precedents and Nature by Scott H. Forbes (unpublished dissertation)

The Freedom Writer's Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them by The Freedom Writers with Erin Gruwell

Suggested Reading

Essays by Scott Forbes and Josette and Ba Luvmour: posted on the EnCompass website: www.encompass-nlr.org.

Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic by James Gilligan, M.D.

Dead Man Walking by Sister Helen Prejean (also movie of the same title)

It's Our World, Too! Stories of young people who are making a difference, by Phillip Hoose

What Are You Doing With Your Life? Books on living for teens, by J. Krishnamurti

How Can I Help? by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman

Man's Search for Meaning, by Victor E. Frankl

Through the Eyes of the Judged: Autobiographical sketches by incarcerated young men, edited by Stephanie Guilloud

Making a Difference: Stories of how our outdoor industry and individuals are working to preserve America's natural places, by Amy Irvine

Free the Children: A young man fights against child labor and proves that children can change the world, by Craig Kielburger with Kevin Major

Note

1. Outdoor Education (OE) is a broad term used to describe programs and schools that engage experiential learning primarily in the outdoors. Programs can include science and nature camps, environmental education, outdoor leadership, and adventure programs utilizing all types of activities from backpacking to whitewater rafting to ropes courses and more. EnCompass Outdoor Education offers similar activities, and as with all EnCompass Learning Center programs, has a philosophical base in holistic education principles, and in child development practices known as Natural Learning Rhythms. For more information on EnCompass, see its entry in the Directory of Resources at the back of this issue.

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