

## Education for a Culture of Peace

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I am continually astounded and dismayed by the persistence of murderous violence in the world. Humanity seems to be trapped in a deepening spiral of hatred, vengeance, and militarism that will ultimately lead to the horrible destruction of life on this planet. For centuries, our greatest teachers, from Jesus to Gandhi, from St. Francis to the Dalai Lama, from the Buddha to Martin Luther King, Jr., have insisted that peace, not violence, is the path to genuine salvation. They have told us that the “Kingdom of Heaven,” whatever culturally and historically conditioned images are used to depict it, is reached through reconciliation and love, not domination and conquest. Yet millions upon millions of souls, from oppressed inmates of refugee camps to Ivy-league educated power brokers in our capital, resort to killing and desecration and terror to achieve their purposes. As I read each morning’s disheartening headlines, I sadly ask over and over again, *why?*

As a holistic thinker, I know there is no simple explanation. Violence, like all other potentialities, is woven into the fabric of human existence with numerous threads that intersect in complex ways. Certainly there must be some biological impulse, some genetic coding that permits aggression to be satisfying and the slaughter of living beings to be palatable. But this does not mean that we are inherently violent, because significant numbers of people throughout history have refused to indulge in violence, and, with the same genetic “programming” as any other human being, many have led truly saintly lives. Psychology overlays biology: What infants and children experience during their development conditions them to perceive the world as friendly or hostile, safe or ominous, and their maturing personalities will respond accordingly, out of conditioned habit. Cultural patterns—the “webs of meaning” that subconsciously organize perception and understanding—add yet another layer of conditioning. These patterns include religious and patriotic dogmas as well as more mundane and subtle assumptions about life’s meaning, about what people are alive for. And psychology plus culture gives rise to *ideologies*—self-assured convictions about how the world is and how it ought to be

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remade. Psychological problems may cause an individual to assault or kill someone nearby, and cultural prejudices cause a great deal of oppression, but it is usually ideology that spurs clans and factions and nations into terrorism and war.

Holistic thinkers also examine the spiritual dimension of human experience, and this understanding is essential to restraining the spiral of violence. On a personal level, spiritual practice enables us to break free of our conditioning—biological, psychological, cultural, and ideological. It does not much matter what form this practice takes, or, again, what historically colored images are used to describe it. Prayer, meditation, ritual, selfless service, fasting, retreat, physical disciplines—all such practices serve to *disidentify* the person from conditioned, habitual ways of being. They nourish a center of personality, a “Self,” in Jung’s terms, that lies outside, or beyond, or “higher” than the largely unconscious personality that is driven by fears, desires, insecurities, appetites, and fantasies. This realm that lies beyond our limited ego is regarded as sacred; it is, presumably, unpolluted by ideology or our petty desires. Obviously, religious beliefs and practices have often, and very tragically, used the human longing for the sacred to sanction hatred and unspeakable violence, so it becomes vitally necessary to distinguish genuine transcendence or disidentification from spiritual fanaticism. The greatest teachers in all traditions have declared that genuine spirituality results in loving nonviolence, so any ideology that leads to division, hate, and killing, no matter what spiritual language it uses to justify its claims, is still just ideology. It is psychological distortion mixed with cultural prejudice, projected onto the transcendent realm and blinding us to its true radiance.

On a transpersonal level, a spiritual understanding of the Cosmos recognizes that there are vast evolutionary forces at work, far beyond our immediate experience or understanding. Secular modern culture has no place in its worldview for these mysterious formative energies, regarding any spiritual cosmology as superstition. Yet mystics (Rudolf Steiner being a notable modern example) maintain that these energies are real, and in fact shape the course of human destiny. Cultural and intellectual historians refer sometimes to the *zeitgeist* of a certain age, meaning the “spirit of the times” in a

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metaphorical sense, yet Steiner, for one, holds that there literally is a spiritual intelligence or being with a particular temperament or tendencies, that rules each period of history. He further holds that there are dark forces counterbalancing those of goodness and light, situating the human journey, not on the sunny highway of progress and enlightenment that modern technocrats portray, but on a treacherous path requiring spiritual vigilance and conscious moral choice at every step. Many indigenous cultures, from ancient India to the native peoples of North America, similarly believed that human beings must contend with cosmic forces and deliberately work to strengthen the good and overcome the very real power of evil. At the very least, even if it is not absolutely, literally accurate, this cosmology challenges the hubris of any ideology or technology with a sense of humility in the face of mystery, and in the face of the Shadow which (again, in Jung's model) lurks behind every self-assured conscious action. Perhaps one reason for the popularity of the *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings* mythologies is their recognition of a spiritual negative side that requires resolute moral courage, not simply physical power or some clever gadget or weapon, to overcome, because the negative impulses, the Shadow, live within each one of us.

Modernity has banished the negative side to its collective Shadow. "We" (the capitalist West) are good, democratic, and right, while the Other is evil, autocratic, and wrong. It is not hard to find profoundly violent men, such as Saddam Hussein, Yasser Arafat, and Osama bin Laden, to become receptacles for all our projections; we dismiss all negative impulses in ourselves and attribute all evil to our enemies. But spiritual humility, on both a personal and collective level, would compel us to face the negative—the violence, greed, prejudice, and lust for power—that reside in the shadows of our own individual and national souls.

Violence, then, is comprised of layer upon layer of pain, ignorance, self-assurance, and callousness. To overcome violence in the world will require many corresponding layers of understanding and effort. More caring, nourishing ways of education and childrearing are essential elements, but they are not sufficient. Political activism is also essential, but also not enough. Spiritual practice of some sort is crucial—

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but as I have written before in criticism of “new age” or “new paradigm” holistic thought (Miller, 2000), spirituality detached from cultural analysis and political engagement is not going to effect substantial change. A holistic approach to peace, and to peace education more specifically, must be fluid and multidimensional. Its aim is not “peace” as an abstraction, but a *culture of peace*, which means a “web of meanings” that honors compassion, collaboration, negotiation, and service and dishonors conquest and violence. If most present cultures make violence, hatred, and oppression seem manly, exciting, and effective, a culture of peace would treat them as stupid and self-defeating. (I want to add “as in reality they are,” but then this places me outside culture entirely, as some sort of omniscient authority. We must promote peace itself with humility, or we defeat our own purposes.)

Riane Eisler has inspired many readers with her interpretation of cultural patterns as being oriented toward either “dominator” or “partnership” values (Eisler 1987; 2000). The power of her analysis lies in her recognition that a culture is an interconnected set of assumptions, beliefs, and practices, each of which reinforces the others. A society oriented toward “dominator” values, then, will exhibit violence in childrearing (corporal punishment) as well as criminal justice (capital punishment). It will promote intense competition in sports and economics, which will carry over into education. Military leaders, more than peacemakers, will be considered heroes, and military technology will receive a large share of a dominator society’s attention and resources. There will be more crime, as well as demeaning attitudes towards women and minorities. Intellectually, such a culture will tend to favor explanations of human nature that emphasize aggression and biological determinism. These are not isolated “problems” that can be solved one by one, but inherent, interconnected elements of a cultural pattern that needs to be addressed on many levels.

To introduce a culture of peace, a culture oriented toward partnership values of caring, social equality, nonviolence, and cooperation, we will need to rethink common assumptions about education, not only the content of the curriculum, but the way in

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which it is “delivered” (indeed, whether “delivery” is the proper methodology at all), the design of the physical and social environment, the rules of communication and lines of authority within schools, and everyone’s expectations concerning the “outcomes” of the learning process. We will need to decide that education should no longer be a primary agent of cultural conditioning, but a liberating process through which conditioning as such—the inculcation of unconscious habits of perception, thought and action—is challenged by the cultivation of critical inquiry and spiritual awareness. To educate at all is to introduce values into the lives of young people. This cannot be avoided. Whether we design a particular curriculum or try to refrain from direct teaching of any curriculum, our actions represent some set of values. Whether we arrange classrooms like miniature assembly lines or open them up as laboratories for free exploration, we are teaching which human possibilities we value and which we do not.

If we educate holistically, with a sense of wonder and respect for the complex mystery of life, then our commitment to peace education should not harden into an ideology, into a subtle form of conditioning itself, but the fact remains that to educate for peace is to take a moral stand in opposition to many of the primary values guiding modern schooling. As Michael Lerner reminds us,

The alleged neutrality of contemporary education is a sham that covers up the systematic indoctrination of students into the dominant religion of the contemporary world: the slavish subordination of everyone to the idols of the marketplace and its “common sense” that all people should seek to maximize their own advantage without regard to the consequences for others, that all that is real is what can be validated through sense observation, that it’s only human nature for people to compete with each other and seek “individual excellence”....

(2000, 235)

Throughout his writings, and in his visionary magazine *TIKKUN*, Lerner explains how this secular religion, this ideology of the marketplace, is at the core of a dominator-style culture characterized by harsh competition, inequality, violence, and indifference to much of the suffering that results. In *Spirit Matters*, he describes an education oriented instead

to the goal of nurturing individuals who are “loving, capable of showing deep caring for others, alive to the spiritual and ethical dimensions of being, ecologically sensitive, intellectually alive, self-determining, and creative” (Lerner 2000, 234). This fundamental shift of values, from selfish competitiveness to caring sensitivity, lies at the heart of educating for a culture of peace.

Are values formed in society or in the actions of individuals? Does social change come about through personal transformation or collaborative action? Educational reformers and radicals alike have often divided sharply over these questions. Progressive educators have debated “child-centered” versus “social reconstructionist” approaches; the radicals of the 1960s sometimes debated hotly whether Summerhill-style freedom or direct engagement with oppression and injustice (such as establishing free schools in the inner cities) were a more authentic form of educational dissent. A holistic perspective observes that in this case, as in virtually all others, the solution is not either/or; it is both/and. To protect young people from psychological violence, and to help them remain free from ideological conditioning, we have much to learn from libertarian educators as well as spiritual teachers who emphasize that violence begins in the heart of each individual. John Holt was an outstanding representative of this position, arguing consistently throughout his career that adults should not impose their own desires and prejudices on the organic drive toward understanding and health that motivates every normal growing child. He insisted that violence and social problems reflect widely shared personal feelings of inadequacy, alienation, and resentment that are caused when these drives are thwarted; he stated unequivocally that

the root causes of war are not economic conflicts or language barriers or cultural differences but men—the kind of men who must have and will find scapegoats, legitimate targets for the disappointment, envy, fear, rage, and hatred that accumulates in their daily lives. (Holt 1966, 5)

A. S. Neill’s influential writings defended a similar position, and Krishnamurti’s brilliant writing on education also emphasized that our primary task is to free the minds and hearts of individuals.

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Yet while culture and ideology do take root in personal consciousness and can be significantly challenged through personal healing and liberation, they reflect other levels of human reality as well—social and political levels, which we cannot adequately address one individual at a time. Progressive educators in the tradition of social “reconstruction” or social “responsibility” have recognized that culture is a *collective* creation. It is fashioned, not solely by private choices and personal fear and greed, but by the tacit *agreements* shared by large numbers of people and heavily influenced by the power of class, gender, religious, and other shared identities. A culture, or one’s perceived membership in some segment of a culture, *reinforces* personal prejudices, giving them a hypnotic power they would not acquire through personal experience alone. Educating for social responsibility involves *naming* and *facing* the unconscious agreements that blind us to injustice and oppression. As we have seen so many times in history, decent people can allow or even perpetrate great evil when they are under the spell of cultural trance. Spiritual practices help to awaken us from unconsciousness, but often (as we see so tragically in many religious movements) even spiritually awakened individuals are blind to the destructive power of cultural and ideological forces in their society.

Educating for a culture of peace means, in a holistic sense, practicing *both* “child-centered” liberatory pedagogy and a socially responsive approach that awakens our liberated students to the realities of suffering, oppression and violence. Free must not mean carefree. Self-directed learning must not mean self-contained. There is, surely, a tension between these two goals or styles of education, a tension which breaks out into fierce resentment sometimes. Yet holism is not whole without holding this tension (Purpel and Miller 1991). Contradiction and paradox are inherent in the cosmos, and we cut ourselves off from wholeness when we seek to short-circuit this tension by elevating one dimension over the other. This, in fact, is precisely the function of ideology—to resolve the tensions and ambiguities of life through an arbitrary and often ruthless suppression of opposing perspectives. Holism is the remedy for ideology.

Ken Wilber has written extensively and eloquently on this subject. He advocates an “integral” worldview, one which recognizes that there are elements of truth in all theoretical perspectives but absolute Truth in none (Wilber 1997). An integral or holistic

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worldview is essential to peaceful resolution of cultural and ideological conflict, because it acknowledges a domain of transcendence within which opposites and paradoxes surrender their tension and hostility toward one another; in other words, it provides a deeper dimension of Truth that encompasses rather than cancels out diverse perspectives. A culture of peace involves more than grudging compromise or tentative cessation of violence; it is an expanded, generous worldview that tolerates, indeed celebrates, ambiguity and difference, and invites members of a community to seek common ground on higher ground than where they have been standing. Education for a culture of peace extends beyond techniques of negotiation and conflict resolution, beyond multicultural and anti-racist curricula, even beyond spiritual practice: It is an education for a new, expanded worldview, an evolutionary leap in consciousness.

Although Wilber does not directly address educational questions in a systematic way, his integral philosophy suggests the outline of a profound shift in our understanding of education. We would no longer be so concerned about giving lessons or delivering instruction, about standardizing knowledge and measuring it incessantly. Education would be a powerful tool for personal and cultural transformation. This is how my colleagues and I have defined holistic education since the 1980s. A holistic pedagogy is one that challenges ourselves and our students to stretch our understanding and imagination beyond accepted, inherited boundaries—beyond comfortable prejudices and ideologies. We would not tell our students what they should perceive or believe, if we honor the libertarian dimension of holistic education. Yet we would invite our students into an expanded awareness of the world and their moral responsibility toward it—a critical, questioning, self-reflective awareness. This would be the reconstructionist dimension. A culture of peace and compassion honors the cultivation of such awareness; it sees prejudice and ideology and violence as tragic limitations on the magnificent complexity that the cosmos offers to us. Such a culture encourages us to celebrate each other, to learn from each other, to nourish each other's gifts—because our community, and we ourselves individually, can only be enriched by this expansion and transformation of consciousness.

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This way of looking at education is radical, but it is not esoteric. It is exactly what Dewey tried to express, in very nonmystical language, in *Democracy and Education* (Dewey 1966). His vision of a democratic culture explicitly recognizes the expansion and reconstruction of human experience that is possible when people come together to shape their common good: Genuine democracy (not the present kind, where elections are a form of marketing or entertainment) allows us to transcend the limitations of our habitual understandings and beliefs as we engage each other in a shared pursuit of community. Holistic educators still have much to learn from Dewey, even as we seek a more spiritually informed understanding of human existence than his overly rational, social-scientific language permits.

What do I mean by a “spiritually informed understanding”? I do not mean religious belief as such, although it is often expressed in this language. I want to return to an image with which I opened this essay, that of a “Kingdom of Heaven”—a sacred realm that transcends all our beliefs, all our partial perspectives, all the cultural and ideological imperatives that drive so many human beings to commit or condone violence. A spiritual worldview recognizes that the *ultimate* transcendence of violence is a realm of wholeness, absolute inclusiveness, and unconditional love that reveals the limitations of all our temporal strivings. Michael Lerner, for example, suggests that it is the absence of Spirit in modern culture that makes selfishness the “bottom line” in the competitive struggle of contemporary society. When we recognize that our individual selves are not separate from the world and from each other, but are particular expressions of the Unity of All Being and intimately connected to it, we enter a transformational process “that brings about deeper and deeper levels of knowledge, goodness, and radiant beauty” (Lerner 2000, 35). Or, as Martin Luther King, Jr. so passionately taught, we enter the realm of divine love. King insisted that love is the essential fabric of the universe, and that by practicing nonviolence and benevolence rather than hatred and vengeance, humanity could indeed bring about the Kingdom of Heaven on this earth. In his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in 1964, he proclaimed,

I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant....

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I still believe that one day mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemptive goodwill proclaimed the rule of the land (King 2001, 107, 108).

Although the call to “bow before the altars of God” sounds like traditional authoritarian, hierarchical and patriarchal religious practice, I suggest that King is simply expressing the spiritual reality that peace and compassion appear when the individual ego, with all its hates, lusts, and fears, finds the humility to acknowledge what is truly sacred and transcendent, that is, larger than its own limited perspective.

The theme that runs through all these aspects of holistic education—an expanded worldview, genuine democracy, and spiritual awakening—is the process of opening to deeper and more complex understandings than that which one currently possesses. A culture of peace is a dynamic culture that encourages such opening, one that makes it safe to expand the boundaries of awareness. Only this process of opening will enable us, as individuals and as a society, to disidentify with the ideologies and conditioning that constrain our imagination and our compassion.

Peace is not the mere absence of war. If we are to educate for a culture of peace, we will need to address the entire cluster of biological, psychological, social and spiritual patterns that presently favor a dominator-style culture. We will need to acknowledge the insecurity engendered by modern methods of childrearing and schooling (e.g., see Pearce 1980), the latent violence inherent in our competitive economic system, and the colonization of consciousness by mass media and “virtual” imagery, among many other cultural patterns that serve to narrow or rigidify our understanding of ourselves and our place in the cosmos. If we are to teach peace, we need to learn to practice love, not only within intimate circles of family and friends, but in schools and in society and in the world at large. We need to transform society, reorganize our institutions, expand our values, so that our culture favors caring, compassion, justice, and love. No doubt it is a huge task. But it is our truest calling as human beings.

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