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SPECIAL SECTION: EMPATHY AND ETHICS

"A PEACE THAT LASTS":

NOTES TOWARDS A PEDAGOGY OF PEACE

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Last year's CEA conference theme—"Empathy and Ethics"—suggests intriguing possibilities, especially in light of the 2001 attack on New York's twin towers and 2005's Hurricane Katrina. Among them are the challenges of describing what kind of metaphorical environment we are creating for our students, and whether such an environment fosters peace and justice. In part, my interest in these challenges is due to my adherence to the old slogan, "think globally, act locally." As a teacher, I believe that the local level—the classroom in which I meet my students—is the place where I can be most effective in promoting global peace and justice, even while I teach students how to write essays and read literature. In part, my interest in this approach is a response to a challenge issued by Ihab Hassan, and recalled by Mary Rose O'Reilly in *The Peaceable Classroom*, and paraphrased here: "Is it possible for us to teach so that people stop killing one another?"

My decision to promote global peace and justice through my teaching is also inspired by Michael True's 1994 address to the Hawaii Peace Research Conference, "Learning a Language of Peace: Globalization from Below." In that speech, True refers to two paradigms described by Richard Falk—globalization from above and below. Globalization from above is what we are familiar with through news about the IMF and the WTO. These, "the work of transnational business, political elites, and repressive governments" (59), seek to impose global monetary and trade practices for the "good" of those affected. Globalization from below, on the other hand, is what we see in the work of organizations like Greenpeace and Amnesty International, Oxfam and Doctors Without Borders. These comprise "an array of social forces, a civil society in-the-making, animated by environmental concerns, feminism, and conflict resolution without harm to persons" (59).

True relates this process of “globalization from below” to learning a new language—the language of peace, or the “linguistics of ‘nonviolence’” (59). He goes on to claim that “our capacity to resist violence, and more importantly to construct peace, depends upon empowering ourselves and others” (59). It is at this level, the level of empowerment, that I see a clear connection with what happens in an English classroom. What is the sharing of knowledge if not a form of empowerment? But as we know all too well, the classroom can also be a threatening and intimidating place; indeed, the very relationship of teacher-student is inherently unbalanced with respect to power, especially when students perceive the teacher's role as arbiter of taste and “wielder of the red pen.” Students often enter that space fearful; regrettably, they sometimes leave in the same state. What we want to do, then, is display empathy in an effort to reconstruct the classroom dynamic with the goal of “empowering ourselves and others.” Here I find that Parker Palmer offers helpful observations about undertaking this enterprise.

In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer devotes a chapter to the “The Culture of Fear.” He begins by asserting that “if we withdraw our assent from [institutional structures that reinforce fear], they would collapse,” and claiming that “fear is what distances us from our colleagues, our students, our subjects, and ourselves” (36). This fear takes many forms, but all forms can be reduced—so Palmer argues—to “the fear of having a live encounter with alien ‘otherness’ . . . encounters in which the other is free to be itself, to speak its own truth, to tell us what we may not wish to hear” (37). He then explains that this fear is actually a series of fears that begins in the fear of diversity, and that proceeds through the fear of conflict, and culminates in “the fear that a live encounter with otherness will challenge or even compel us to change our lives” (38). I suspect that each of us can recognize these attributes in our students, but how many of us are willing to acknowledge them in ourselves? Yet that is what we must do—practice the humility that True identifies as crucial to “globalization from below” and acknowledge our own shortcomings. We can begin by distinguishing between the fear that paralyzes and the fear that makes people “porous” to real learning, as Palmer puts it.

One section of his chapter addresses “Our Fearful Way of Knowing.” Here Palmer suggests that “if we regard truth as something handed down from authorities on high, the classroom will look like a dictatorship. If we regard truth as fiction determined by personal whim, the classroom will look like anarchy. If we regard truth as emerging from a complex process of mutual inquiry, the classroom will look like a resourceful and interdependent community” (51). This vision of truth is consistent with True's “grammar of *satragraya* (in Sanscrit, ‘*truth-seeking*’)” (59). If truth is organic and dynamic, a process of discovery rather than an object to be discovered, then perhaps we can cease to compete to be the first to “get” it or to be the one who “gets” the most. That revision of truth requires that we who teach adopt the same posture as our students—that of learners. Yes, we have been journeying longer, and we have accumulated more information on the journey, but we are here to initiate our students into the wonder of the journey as well as its rigors; we are not here to discourage them from undertaking the journey at all.

Palmer considers the Eurocentric orientation toward objectivity and asks why objectivism conspires with totalitarianism and violence. Perhaps one answer, he implies, is control. Objectivism suggests control of the “facts” rather than a shared endeavor. Yet “knowing of any sort is relational, animated by a desire to come into deeper community with what we know . . . at its deepest reaches, knowing is always communal” (54). This communal consciousness is what global justice and peace depend on, and we can begin to foster community in our classrooms. This process requires “humility,” as True observes: “we [must] cultivate both honesty and modesty in approaching our task [of peacemaking]” (60). We must be honest enough to admit when we do not know the answers, and modest enough to listen to the answers provided by others. These answers may not be “correct” in the objective sense, but they will become part of relational knowing—the community devoted to the process of discovering the truth. There may be some constraints on this view; it is hard to imagine grammar as a consensual construct. Nevertheless, we can still explain its reasons rather than simply pronouncing its truth.

Having established, or at least considered, the principles behind this ethical project, we can now address the pragmatic question: How can we begin to dispel the fear that infects the educational enterprise? Put another, more constructive way, how can we begin to build the community of relational knowing? In attempting to answer this, I appeal to two resources. One of them is experiential; the other is traditionally academic. Both are

essentially humanistic in orientation and therefore build on Palmer's values.

The experiential resource is a workshop developed by the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) for use in prison communities to promote personal growth and conflict management skills. The initial workshop, focusing on affirmation and communication, is one I have adapted to the first class meeting of every class I teach. In this workshop, students pair off and try to find as much in common with one another as possible in two minutes. The pair then expands to include another pair, and the four students try to find as much in common among them as possible in two more minutes. Once they have finished seeking common ground, they write a summary of their impressions and share it with the group before submitting it to me. This workshop has been successful in breaking the ice on the first day and beginning the work of building a community. A second workshop, usually later in the semester, focuses on cooperation and creative conflict resolution. In this activity, students in small groups (four or five) face one another in a circle. Each student in turn names an issue of interest; the other students then have one minute each to express their views on that issue—without interruption—while the issue namer jots down their views. In addressing the issue, students must then account for those various perspectives. This workshop has helped students develop better listening skills as well as exposed them to a range of opinions which may challenge their own.

Admittedly, such tactics can be time-consuming. At the outset, students can also be uncomfortable with the responsibility. But with practice comes familiarity, for both the students and the teacher, and with familiarity comes confidence. And if the teacher genuinely listens—and hears—the students, the teacher models the kind of behavior on which peace and justice rely: modesty, empathy, and tolerance for diversity. The results can be gratifying, and worth the investment of time and energy. More concretely, I would rather teach one less literary work or assign one less theme if the exchange is increased tolerance and confidence among my students.

These activities are all helpful in engaging students in the learning process and in modeling the kind of “discursive democracy” that supports peace and justice. But the most valuable tool is the discussion that occurs in class each time it meets. Here I have been influenced by *Discussion as a Way of Teaching* by Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill. As the authors state in their first chapter, “Discussion is a valuable and inspiring means for revealing the diversity of opinion that lies below the surface of almost any complex issue” (3). The revelation, and celebration, of that multiplicity of perspectives exemplifies the democratic process. Their book surveys and explains techniques for promoting healthy, significant discussions, but I want to focus on two specific areas: keeping discussion going through questioning, listening, and responding; and keeping voices in balance.

In their chapter about keeping discussion going, Brookfield and Preskill remind us that “an important focus of democratic discussion should be on getting as many people as possible deeply engaged in the conversation” (87). In other words, as many students as possible should be involved. They propose types of questions that can help sustain momentum—questions that ask for more evidence, questions that ask for clarification, open-ended questions, and synthesis questions. More importantly, perhaps, the authors emphasize listening as a part of discussion. In explaining paired listening, for example, they describe an exercise in which “students work in pairs and practice listening to each other with great intensity” (93), as in the AVP exercise described earlier. I also have students write a summary of the exchange in order to reinforce the importance of hearing the subject as well as listening; this approach can be particularly useful when the subject is a text or picture rather than another person. As the authors explain, “This kind of exercise can teach students to attend sympathetically to even the most confusing or off-putting voices and to derive a certain level of understanding from them instead of dismissing them out of hand” (96). In other words, this activity promotes tolerance as well as humility. Indeed, if we close discussion with affirmation, as the authors recommend, we have gone a long way toward dispelling fear and building confidence.

Once we have the momentum of discussion under way, a further challenge emerges in balancing the voices, both students' and teacher's. As Brookfield and Preskill explain, “Discussions are out of balance when a substantial number of students feel excluded from the discussion for long periods of time . . . in balance when students feel they have an equal right to participate but also feel comfortable with periods of prolonged silence”

(171). To achieve this balance, the teacher must try to discourage monopolization by only a few voices. The teacher can do so by helping students establish ground rules for conversation, assigning roles to group members and rotating those roles, and calling for regular periods of reflective silence. More importantly, perhaps, “teachers model participation in discussion groups . . . trying to control how much they speak and making sure they give way frequently to other group members” (177). And if students don't speak, the authors encourage teachers to examine possible explanations for their silence, such as the fear of looking stupid or a lack of preparation, and then helping resolve those difficulties. When they address the phenomenon of teacher monopolization, Brookfield and Preskill explore several variables. One of the more interesting—unclearness about the purposes of education—recalls Palmer's observations on “objectivism.” If education does nothing more than present “facts,” then a teacher fulfills her purpose by instilling those facts in the students' brains. But if education's purpose is also “to help students see the link between their current experiences and understandings and the ideas they encounter in college” (198-9), perhaps discussion is a more effective vehicle than lecture. The authors cite Deborah Meier's remark that “a good education and a good life can be conceived similarly” in that both entail the desire and ability to participate in increasingly complex and engaging conversation (199). Brookfield and Preskill conclude that if this analogy is true, “then giving students the opportunity to sharpen their conversational and deliberative skills is one of the most important things we can do” (199).

This meditation has covered a lot of ground, encompassing as it does some seven years of reading, thinking, and experimenting. If I were to summarize the highlights, they would sound like this: Mary Rose O'Reilley's *The Peaceable Classroom* got me wondering how to make teaching a more pacific encounter. Michael True's speech then set me to look at teaching—and learning—in a more global context, concentrating as he does on the notion of globalization from below. Parker Palmer next encouraged me to see these principles as a personal as well as professional commitment, focusing as he does on using the fearful nature of education to produce creative tension. Finally, Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill offered me several concrete methods for promoting the ideals I have identified. If we encourage and affirm our students in their efforts to encounter and accommodate diverse opinions, we go a long way toward dispelling fear. If we can transform the remaining anxiety into creative tension, we can foster the discursive democracy that leads to true peace and justice—real globalization from below. And if we can facilitate this process in our classrooms, maybe—just maybe—we can answer Ihab Hassan: “Yes, it is possible for us to teach so that people stop killing one another.”

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