

**Also by Colman McCarthy**

*Disturbers of the Peace*

*Inner Companions*

*Involvements: One Journalist's Place in the World*

*Pleasures of the Game*

*All of One Peace: Essays on Nonviolence*

*Solutions to Violence (Editor)*

*Strength through Peace: The Ideas and People  
of Nonviolence (Editor)*

# I'd Rather Teach Peace

JZ  
5534  
m33  
2007

**Colman McCarthy**

ORBIS  BOOKS  
Maryknoll, New York 10545

JUN 24 2003  
THE LIBRARY — O.U. EASTERN

Foundation, the Florence and John Schumann Foundation, the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation, the Public Welfare Foundation, the Streisand Foundation, the Peace Development Fund, Sargent Shriver, Linda Smith, Polly Steinway, Katherine Hessler, John Stohrm and the large numbers of subscribers to the Center's newsletter, *Peace Times*.

To these, and others, my thanks for holding fast to the idea that the peaceable society is not only possible, it is inevitable—if we press on, starting today. Tomorrow is too late.

## Preface

In early spring 1982 an English teacher at School Without Walls, a District of Columbia public high school where two of my children were students, invited me to speak to her class on the techniques of writing. At the time I had been a columnist for *The Washington Post* for fourteen years and would be for another fourteen. Five blocks from the White House—no school is closer—"Walls," as its three hundred students call it, specializes in experiential as well as theoretical learning. Study zoology by interning at the National Zoo, or politics by working one day a week in a congressional office, or drama by volunteering at the Kennedy Center.

After speaking to the English literature class about writing, I told the teacher how enjoyable her students were during the give-and-take discussion. I mentioned, too, my satisfaction in being with them, a therapeutic break from the solitariness of writing. It wasn't banter. I meant it. The exhilaration was real. The teacher, seasoned and skilled in bluff-calling, said that if I really found the visit to her class so enlivening, why not come back in the fall to offer my own course. Go beyond gushing, was her message.

"You could teach writing," she said. Impulsively I replied, "I'd rather teach peace."

Months later, in the opening week of the fall semester, I was in a Walls classroom as a volunteer teacher with twenty-five students. The course, based on the literature of peace, was titled "Solutions to Violence." We met weekly from 1 P.M. to 3:30 P.M. I made up the time at the *Post* by not taking lunch breaks during the week, not that anyone much noticed. Who

cares where columnists spend their hours as long as the copy comes in on time.

Journalistically, I was creating my own education beat. Classroom teaching was my legwork. Instead of waiting for the Brookings Institution or the Heritage Foundation to issue still another report from the shallow end of the think tank on the state of American education—dismal, predictably—and then writing a column on the findings of the alleged experts, I could ignore their gab and draw on my own experiences in a public school. I could seek an answer to a question that had long gripped me: Can peacemaking be taught—and learned? If peace is what every government claims to be seeking, and if peace is what every human heart yearns for, could it have a place in our school curricula?

Educationally, I learned that my students were hungry to explore the unknown landscape of pacifism, nonviolence, and peaceful conflict resolution. I learned also, and a bit unsettlingly, that I was equally hungry to teach it. I was in my mid-forties, ready to diversify intellectually and see what unused brain cells might be activated.

A balance was created between my writing life and my teaching life: one was thinking in private meant for a large reading audience, the other was thinking in public for a small give-and-take audience—those twenty-five students I spent that year with. They were open-minded, spirited, and appreciative, a bracing mix of dreamers, skeptics, dolts, and doves. Many were from low-income neighborhoods and saw Walls as an escape route from poverty. Some came from moneyed families—second and third generation escapees—that had ample funds for private schools but not a liking for the insularity.

The course went well. I returned for a second and third year. After establishing the course at Walls, I turned the class over to a succession of college students that I trained. They were welcomed by a principal who believed that a person's passion for education meant more than a folder of teaching certificates. I took the course to another D.C. high school—Woodrow Wilson—and stayed two years. I turned the course

over to my son Jim, a recent Notre Dame graduate, and then to another son, John, a baseball coach and former minor league knuckleball pitcher who has taught the course for the past eight years as a volunteer.

In 1987, with Walls and Wilson in place, I was invited to teach at a suburban Washington school. Once again I had been challenged by an educator to stop talking and begin doing. I had given a speech to an annual conference of Maryland high school principals and assistant principals. "Why aren't you offering courses on the history, theory, and practice of nonviolence?" I asked. During the Q&A, a principal said she would like to put a course in place "if you'll come teach it." The next semester I was volunteering for a daily 7:30 A.M. class at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School.

The same year Robert Pitofsky, dean of Georgetown University Law Center, welcomed my proposal to design and teach a course called "Law, Conscience, and Nonviolence." A year earlier I had begun offering a similar course in the General Honors Program at the University of Maryland. In 1995 the Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars, an educational non-profit that brings college students to the capital for a semester, invited me to teach an evening class. The next year I left the *Post* to give full time to my students. I added one more class—a year-round seminar on nonviolence at a juvenile prison, the Oak Hill Youth Center in Laurel, Maryland. During summers I kept the Washington Center course going, as well as a six-week mini-course for college students interning in the city.

By rough estimate I've had more than five thousand students since that first high school class. I've felt blessed. With all of them, from the brainiest third year law students on their way to six figure beginning salaries on K Street to fourteen-year-old illiterates locked up for hustling drugs, I emphasized one theme: alternatives to violence exist and, if individuals and nations can organize themselves properly, nonviolent force is always stronger, more enduring, and assuredly more moral than violent force.

Some students opened their minds to this immediately. They understood Gandhi: "Nonviolence is the weapon of the strong." They believed King: "The choice is not between violence and nonviolence but between nonviolence and nonexistence."

Other students have had doubts, which I encouraged them to express. They did, repeatedly. Nonviolence and pacifism are beautiful theories and ideals, they said, but in the real world, where muggers and international despots lurk, let's keep our fists cocked and our bomb bays open.

All I asked of the realists was that they think about this: Do you depend on violent force or nonviolent force to create peace? Not just peace in some vague "out there," but peace in our homes, where physical beatings are the leading cause of injury among American women, or peace in the developing world, where some thirty-five thousand children die every day from preventable diseases, or peace in those parts of the world where more than 40,000 people die every month in some thirty-five wars or conflicts—mostly the poor killing the poor—or peace where the U.S. Congress gives \$700 million a day to the Pentagon, which is \$8,000 a second and three times the Peace Corps budget for a year.

If violence were effective, peace would have reigned eons ago.

At all schools my course was based on the literature of peace—the writings of past and current peacemakers. I created my own textbook—*Solutions to Violence*—which runs deep with sixteen chapters that include Gandhi, Tolstoy, Dorothy Day, Gene Sharp, Jeannette Rankin, Joan Baez, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Sargent Shriver, Jane Addams, Carol Ascher, Helen Nearing, and Daniel Berrigan, and ranges from nonviolent resistance to the Holocaust to animal rights. The book was published by the Center for Teaching Peace. With generous foundation support, our work is to help schools at all levels offer courses on the methods, practitioners, effectiveness, and history of nonviolent conflict resolution. In my classes, essays are read, discussed, and debated. My goal

has been not to tell students what to think but how to think: gather as much information as possible about nonviolence and then either embrace or reject it. I went with the thought of Peter Kropotkin, the Russian anarchist who advised students in *Mutual Aid*: "Think about the kind of world you want to live and work in. What do you need to build that world? Demand that your teachers teach you that."

The students I've been with these twenty years are looking for a world where it becomes a little easier to love and a lot harder to hate, where learning nonviolence means that we dedicate our hearts, minds, time, and money to a commitment that the force of love, the force of truth, the force of justice, and the force of organized resistance to corrupt power are seen as sane and the force of fists, guns, armies, and bombs insane.

Over the years other teachers have suggested that I offer what they call "balance" in my courses, that I give students "the other side." I'm never sure exactly what that means. After assigning students to read Gandhi, should I have them also read von Clausewitz? After Martin Luther King's essay against the Vietnam War, Colin Powell's memoir favoring the Persian Gulf War? After Justice William Brennan's and Thurgood Marshall's views opposing the death penalty, George W. Bush's and Saddam Hussein's favoring it? After a woman's account of using a nonviolent defense against a rapist, the thwarted rapist's side?

What I have surety about is that students come into my classes already well educated, often overeducated, in the ethic of violence. The educators? The nation's long-tenured cultural faculty: political leaders who fund wars and send the young to fight them, judges and juries who dispatch people to death row, filmmakers who script gunplay movies and cartoons, toy manufacturers marketing "action games," parents in war-zone homes where verbal or physical abuse is common, high-school history texts that tell about Calamity Jane but not Jane Addams, Daniel Boone but not Daniel Berrigan.

I can't in conscience teach the other side. Students have already been saturated with it. No, I say, *my* course is the other side. With me they will have a chance to examine solutions and alternatives to violence. The course is still well short of offering balance. One semester in twelve or sixteen or more years of education is a pittance, not a balance.

Peace education is in its infancy. In 1988 our Center gave fifteen thousand dollars in seed money to a university to create a peace studies program. In the spring of 2001 a major in peace studies was established, thanks to one professor and some students who doggedly kept demanding, as Kropotkin counseled. The effort took thirteen years, a speed record in higher education, I was told. In the 1990s I needed six years to persuade officials in Montgomery County, Maryland—school board members, curriculum committees, principals and assorted desk barons—to approve my text *Solutions to Violence* for use in schools, including the one where I had been volunteering for twelve years. This was a supposedly enlightened, progressive county. Once a school board member, who presented himself as politically astute, said I would do well to come up with another name besides peace studies. *Studies* was all right, but *peace* might alarm some parents. I envisioned a newspaper headline: "Proposed Peace Course Threatens Community Stability."

As a lifelong pacifist, my early hunches are regularly confirmed. Yes, peacemaking can be taught, the literature is large and growing. Yes, the young are passionately seeking alternatives to violence. Yes, our schools should be educating as much about peacemakers as peacebreakers. Yes, whether the killing and harming are done by armies, racists, corporations, polluters, domestic batterers, street thugs or boardroom thugs, terrorists, schoolyard bullies, animal exploiters, or others in this graceless lot, the cycle of violence can be broken—but only if choices are laid out, starting in the nation's seventy-eight thousand elementary schools, thirty-one thousand high schools, and three thousand colleges.

In twenty years I've seen the issue of violence in the schools surface as a major public-policy debate. Solutions range from

metal detectors and police in the hallways to national conferences on youth violence. Suddenly we are awash with experts overflowing with opinions and strategies. As a journalist for thirty-five years, I don't believe half of what they say, and of the other half I have grave doubts. As a classroom teacher, my experienced-based belief is that unless we teach our children peace someone else will teach them violence.

During my two decades of teaching peace, wars and conflicts have been fought in all parts of the world. My classroom discussions regularly focused on them, especially when America was militarily involved. As I write now—two months after September 11, 2001—advocates for pacifism are all but ignored, their arguments for a nonviolent response to terrorist attacks derided as not only unrealistic but unpatriotic. This is a time for a show of force, it is declared by U.S. political and military leaders, with the mainstream clergy dutifully praying that God continue to bless America. As retribution hysteria grows, and at least \$20 billion more is found to lubricate an already over-oiled war machine, it is forgotten that pacifists stoutly believe in the use of force, too. Moral force, the force of organized resistance to violence, the force of sharing wealth, and the force of dialogue, compromise and negotiation.

After September 11, my students came to class with one main question: What does the United States do now? We examined the four possible solutions: military, political, legal, and moral.

The military option, predictably, was chosen by Congress and the Bush administration. The pattern was familiar: theorize, demonize, victimize, rationalize. Theorizing began on September 11. Who attacked America, and why? It was evil-doers, easily demonized. Get them dead or alive. Then the victimizing began: pilots from the world's richest nation bombing people in one of the world's poorest. In Washington, the violence is rationalized.

The political solution was to follow the advice the Bush administration regularly gives to the Israeli government and

the Palestine Liberation Organization: stop the killing, meet with each other, negotiate, compromise, and dialogue. For eight years, the Clinton administration preached that same message to the factions in Northern Ireland. After the Columbine High School massacre in April 1999, President Clinton told a high school peer mediation group: "We must do more to reach out to our children and teach them to express their anger and resolve their conflicts with words, not weapons."

If we tell others to settle their differences this way, why not follow our own advice? In the early 1970s, Richard Nixon began a dialogue with the Chinese Communists. Ronald Reagan did the same with the Soviet Union, which he had once demonized as "the evil empire." In time, both these former enemies—their weapons aimed at us and ours at them—became trading partners. The political force of dialogue was potent.

The legal option was on display in the World Court at The Hague, where Slobodan Milosevic, finally but inevitably tracked down, was on trial and getting due process—of the same stripe as that of a federal court in New York that gave life sentences to terrorists found guilty of the first attack on the World Trade Center.

The moral solution would have been to say to those behind September 11, we forgive you, and then ask them to forgive us for all of our violence, and proceed to do the hard toil of reconciliation. The notion of mutual forgiveness is from the Lord's Prayer, recited by Bush, his generals, and assorted clergy at the National Cathedral three days after the attacks. But it was all for show. After the ceremony, Senator John McCain defined the link between church and state: "Pray first, then fight."

After September 11, a few students asked what they could do as a personal response. Class discussions were among the most heartfelt I have ever witnessed. A range of options were offered, some by me, some by students. Try to simplify your life. Figure out the difference between what you want and what you need. Decrease consumption of goods and

services that rely heavily on oil, either to transport them to the marketplace or to keep them working after purchase. Deny money to companies that profit from violence, from weapons sellers to film studios to the meat industry. Do a favor for someone who cannot thank you. Know that a truly revolutionary act is to raise decent and generous children. Tell others you love them. Join groups that advocate non-violence: the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Pax Christi, the War Resisters League, the Catholic Worker, Feminists for Life, Public Citizen. Subscribe to magazines that deliver the news of social justice, nonviolence and civil resistance. Remember the thought of Jim Douglass: "The first thing to be disrupted by our commitment to nonviolence will not be the system but our own lives." For more sustenance, there is Gandhi's belief: "It is the law of love that rules mankind. Had violence, i.e. hate, ruled us, we should have become extinct long ago. And yet, the tragedy of it is that the so-called civilized men and nations conduct themselves as if the basis of society was violence."

I have been invited to hundreds of schools—at all levels, from pre-K to doctoral programs—to speak on nonviolence and do workshops on the methods of conflict management. At every school I have found students, teachers, and administrators ready to embrace the idea of peace education. But turning an idea into a fact is where dreamers and doers separate. There's an old Irish saying—and it usually is—that goes like this: The trouble with a good idea is that it soon degenerates into hard work. The degeneracy involves rallying support for academic courses on pacifism—the belief—and non-violence—the method—and then pushing to have those courses as valued as math, science, languages, literature, and sports. The hard work gets harder at budget time. When a teacher proposes peace courses to an administrator, the first thought in the administrator's mind is, "What will this cost?" He or she is thinking money, the teacher is thinking reform. Guess which wins? Oddly, money has been found for metal detectors. Money has been found for hallway police.

It's been found for ID badges that students and faculties are now required to wear at many schools. It's been found to pay for administrators to fly off to yet another national conference on youth violence where the inevitable cry will be heard, "Something must be done!"

I had a student at the University of Maryland a while back who wrote a thirteen-word paper that for both brevity and breadth—the rarest of combinations—has stayed with me: "Q. Why are we violent but not illiterate? A. Because we are taught to read." This student—an imaginative lad named David Allan, who went on to serve in Teach for America and is now a writer in San Francisco—didn't know it but he shared the genius of both Albert Einstein and Mohandas Gandhi. Einstein wrote: "We must begin to inoculate our children against militarism by educating them in the spirit of pacifism, . . . I would teach peace rather than war, love rather than hate." Gandhi: "If we are to reach real peace in the world, we shall have to begin with the children. And if they will grow up in their natural innocence, we won't have to struggle, we won't have to pass fruitless resolutions, but we shall go from love to love and peace to peace."

The following pages tell part of the story of my teaching courses on peace at six schools in the fall semester of 2000. Journalled month by month, from September through December, and school by school, it is part reporting, part reflection, and part an exploration of human possibilities. What should be the moral purpose of writing if not to test ideals that can help fulfill the one possibility we all hope for, the peaceable society? For me, any other kind of writing would be menial. Why bother?

For me, teaching any subject other than peace would be tramping through an intellectual desert. The earth is too small a planet and we too brief visitors for anything to matter more than the struggle for peace.

## September

### Don't Ask Questions, Question the Answers

*To find the way to make peace with ourselves and to offer it to others, both spiritually and politically, is the most important kind of learning. To accept our abilities and limitations, and the differences in others—this is the contentment that gives life its highest value. It frees us to grow without restraint and to settle without pressure.*

—WENDY SCHWARTZ

*The job of the peacemaker is to stop war, to purify the world, to get it saved from poverty and riches, to heal the sick, to comfort the sad, to wake up those who have not yet found God, to create joy and beauty wherever you go.*

—MURIEL LESTER

### Georgetown Law

Martin Buber said that "all real living is meeting." Opening classes are for that. Sixteen second- and third-year students have signed on. Some years the number has been twenty. Others twelve. In the catalogue the course title—"Law, Conscience, and Nonviolence"—is something less than a grabber for those hot to make partner in ten years. Their yen is for boardroom law, fixer law, insider law, loophole law. After a decade or so of seventy- and eighty-hour work weeks,