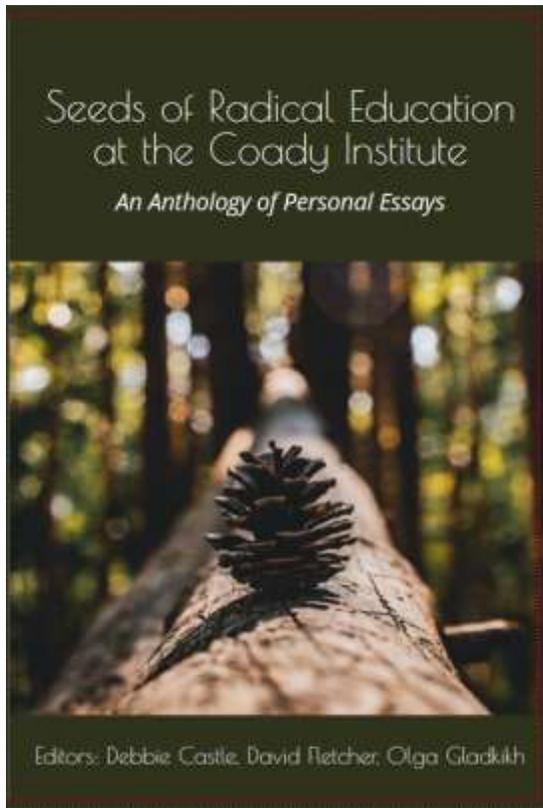


Community Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding: from the inside out

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COMMUNITY CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION AND PEACEBUILDING: FROM THE INSIDE OUT

maureen st. clair

As a peace educator/builder/activist working at a grassroots and institutional level for many years, I believe peacebuilding must begin not at the UN level, not at the level of war, not at the level of textbooks and theories; and not with academics, state mediators and negotiators, but at the level of human relationships — relationships with ourselves, our families, communities, workplaces, governments and countries.

In this essay I reveal the radicalness of the Coady International Institute's *Community Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding* (Community Peacebuilding) certificate in that it begins and ends with people's stories — people exploring, understanding and taking action as a result of stories, which consistently demonstrates peacebuilding from a personal and community level as interdependent, interconnected and inseparable from peacebuilding at national, regional and global levels.

Dr. Peace: Practicing Peace from the Inside Out

I first met Dr. Thomas Turay aka Dr. Peace (and as TMT, Super Sonic DJ) in 2000. He walked into my life with attention and presence — the roots, I believe, of peace and justice in all its forms. He introduced himself as a Peace Educator from Sierra Leone and Canada, his smile as big as the quarter moon pressed against a morning sky. This was his first day at the Coady, and as we sat at a picnic table outside the Tin Room, we began sharing stories. I was working on a Masters degree in Adult Education while living and working in Grenada,

West Indies, where I was collectively engaged in the revival of Grenada's National Literacy Campaign 10 years after the Grenada Revolution. Thomas shared his family's move from Sierra Leone to Toronto, and then to Antigonish, telling the complicated story of the civil war, his family and the powerful work of CD Peace (Community Development and Peace), an organization he and his wife, Mary founded and led in Sierra Leone.

In 2010, I was invited by Thomas, the founder, to co-facilitate Community Peacebuilding. I was deeply honoured to step into a position that was held by another friend and peacebuilder, Sr. Joanne O'Regan. Both were adamant about modelling peace and ensuring two genders were represented in the facilitator team, as well as other aspects of diversity such as race, culture, religion, and experience. This reflected the multicultural diversity of participants in the course.

Thus, began my journey encompassing the teachings, the language and the crucial educational process of being in community, with leaders from around the world and learning from one another. Facilitators and participants alike were inspired by the principles and practices of the Antigonish Movement recognizing through ongoing evaluation, our commitment to transformative adult education, education with and for the people with Dr. Peace leading the way.

On the first day of the course, Dr. Peace usually introduced an activity called the Peace Line. On one occasion he placed himself on the far end of this imaginary line labeled **peaceless** and wept. He shared the conflict he was experiencing with a family member, and wept from the heartache of the conflict's complexities. He shared his woundedness, and at the same time, recognized his own capacity to wound. We, the participants, witnessed his pain. Dr. Peace then took a position closer to the other end of the Peace Line labeled **peaceful**, reflecting his state of peace six months before. He shared a story of a young man who was once a child soldier during the war and now worked as a driver for CD Peace. He had met him while visiting Sierra Leone six months before.

Over the years, hundreds of the Coady participants have stepped on the Peace Line with courage and vulnerability, while holding space for one another to share our wounded and joyous selves. From the beginning, we tore down our walls and witnessed our shared humanity. We also witnessed the shared humanity of communities we worked with and belonged to, such as LGBTQI+ communities, indigenous communities, people with visible and invisible special needs. Through those human stories, we explored and expanded our definition of peace. Peace is not just the absence of war, it is a well-worn tapestry of relative contexts, meanings and perspectives.

According to Dr. Peace understanding peace from a personal level, from the inside out, was not some western romantic notion — this coming from a man who witnessed his family, community and country torn apart by war, yet still believed strongly that we must work deeply and critically on ourselves first, for sustainable change to take place on the outside.

Conflict, Violence and Transformation

A Kenyan participant once shared her story. She was working as a teacher at a secondary school. One of the students was causing many teachers stress and frustration. One day the teachers decided to teach this student a lesson and they beat her, each teacher taking turns adding their slaps and kicks. The girl never returned to school again. In sharing her part in the story, the participant felt deep shame which propelled her to understand, not only her own capacity to commit violence, but also to understand the deeper root causes of violence, the historical and intergenerational violence embedded in structures and systems, and how this had affected her personally and the community of the school.

In the Community Peacebuilding, we did just that. We engaged in critically understanding the many conflicts within our own lives, the lives of our communities, workplaces and our countries. Over the three weeks, we moved through a series of participatory conflict analysis tools. The ABC conflict analysis tool, for example, was used to understand the attitudes, behaviors and context of the various parties involved in the conflict.

Each participant chose a conflict to practice using the tool, placing themselves into the shoes of both conflicting parties imagining the other's perspective, trying to get at the deeper fears and needs of the **other**. For example, the participant mentioned above analyzed the teacher-student conflict she experienced as a teacher. She put herself in the shoes of the teachers and those of the students. She discovered similar fears and needs, such as losing face in front of peers and the need for respect and understanding. She also discovered that both students and teachers shared a colonial educational system that was fear-based, with **power-over** robbing both teachers and students from developing healthy and respectful relationships. This discovery led to a deeper analysis of historical, intergenerational and structural violence at play.

Another participant from Palestine with great vulnerability and courage chose to focus on the killing of her brother by an Israeli soldier. She moved through the analysis, placing herself into the shoes of bereaved families of the Israeli and Palestinian conflict. She stepped into the shoes of both bereaved parties and discovered similar stories, such as stereotypes consisting singularly of hate and violence. She also explored the context of intergenerational trauma on both sides, and recognized the need for social healing at a community level and for more action to be taken to mobilize and advocate for peaceful change.

The ABC tool was one critical conflict analysis tool out of many shared, taught, practiced, then later incorporated into individual peace action plans that participants carried with them to their workplaces, communities, organizations, governments, national and regional policy institutions.

In Community Peacebuilding, we emphasized the importance of discerning between conflict and violence, two words that have often been used interchangeably, making it difficult to understand conflict as neither good or bad, but as inevitable to our lives as relational beings. It became clear we cannot live a life without conflict and that conflict could be a powerful force for change. It also became clear during the course that violence was not conflict and conflict was not violence, but that violence was a response, effect and cause of conflict. Considering violence as a choice, whether conscious or unconscious, helped to deepen our clarity and discernment around these two words.

From there we moved into learning about our own styles of dealing with conflict, further strengthening how we walk the talk as peacebuilders. For example, how do we react to conflict? Do we become what Thomas-Kilmann in his Conflict Inventory¹ calls the **Controller** whose need to be right takes precedence over our relationships? Do we become Kilmann's **Avoider** and run from conflict only to witness conflict resurface with more intensity? Or perhaps we become an **Accommodator** and lose our own sense of self-worth and power? How can we use these conflict styles constructively and creatively to transform conflict into life giving forces that build and honor relationships?

In the course evaluation, one participant from Cameroon wrote that, “empowering ourselves with the knowledge, tools and skills in conflict analyses helps to understand the root causes of conflict as well as the deeply relational aspects of conflict on a national, regional, and global level.” He wrote about his work with

youth within the refugee camps in South Sudan, knowing how vulnerable and susceptible they were to joining gangs. His analyses led him to understand their various fears and needs — the need to belong, to be a hero in one's own uncertain life, to escape the violence and sense of helplessness in young lives. The participant recognized these youth may grow up to become generals, overseers of armed conflict, or holders of unceded and non-negotiable power. He left Community Peacebuilding with renewed energy for his work and with plans to create youth peace clubs and safe inclusive spaces where youth can explore, create, reflect, play and problem-solve in community with one another and with adults, and thus find a sense of their own power through being loved, validated and witnessed.

Building Cultures of Peace: Strengthening Gender Relations, Why Stories Matter

Although gender consciousness is entrenched throughout the course, we still dedicate a day to sharing and critically analyzing stories about gender-based violence. This is necessary given that within our countries, cultures, and religions, violence against women and those who do not conform to gender norms along with violence created by toxic masculinity, are still prevalent world-wide. What follows are some of those stories.

French peacekeepers in Haiti were prosecuted for sexual violence against children in the very countries they were there to protect. A young Nova Scotia woman took her life after being gang raped by a group of male high school students — the violence was shared on social media; the young men were never charged. A Latin American participant broke down in tears recognizing his own story of internalized and normalized violence resulting in his wife leaving him. A transgender man from South Africa was beaten to death and the body mutilated in one of the participant's communities. A man from the Caribbean was sexually assaulted by his uncle and too ashamed to tell anyone.

Sharing, embodying, reflecting on and analyzing these gender-related stories from participants with such diverse backgrounds was a powerful and unique opportunity for all of us. Various participatory methods were used: Story Dialogue methodology, Theatre of the Oppressed, But Why analysis, story swapping/retelling in the first person, and sharing space with a male violence intervention program called New Leaf.² We not only gained a greater understanding of violence at all levels, but also designed action plans according to where our passions, talents and expertise lay. Some of us were working on changing laws and policies, some as educators changing educational systems, some as artists and writers using our various art forms to create change from the ground up.

There were many examples of aha moments when participants first recognized the need to engage men more fully in gender justice work, and to work beside women to tear down violent patriarchal systems and structures. While sitting in a circle with the New Leaf organization, we heard stories of men who had committed atrocities against their intimate partners and children, and who, while still holding themselves accountable, were learning about the sources of their own and other men's violence. This deeply transformative work was shared with the Coady participants. By the end of the afternoon, participants reflected on ways they too could start engaging men.

For example, one participant from Nigeria was going to work with a young men's football team and community football association in creating opportunities for them to take part in participatory awareness sessions. Another became passionate about bringing similar New Leaf programs into prisons in Nepal. A participant from India voiced her passion in addressing the issue with priests in her diocese, while a participant from Pakistan, whose work was in the primary and secondary schools in Islamabad, recommitted to working more fully with male students, introducing more participatory tools and activities to address gender-related issues.

A South Sudanese participant in 2011 passionately shared his personal revelation on the last day of the course: "How can I call myself a peacekeeper when the women in my family and community are suffering daily under the oppressive conditions of a society that treats women inferior to men? How can I call myself a peacekeeper when the women in my own family and community are not kept safe by the very men and leaders who claim to be and are positioned as peacekeepers?" This participant was committed to going home and beginning with himself, his family and community as a means of coming to terms with what it really means to be a peacekeeper.

Learning and unlearning deep-rooted beliefs, attitudes and behaviors related to gender socialization, gender-based violence and gender justice is at the heart of this day dedicated to strengthening gender relations as a means of nurturing cultures of peace.

Social Healing, Reconciliation, Compassionate Listening

As the course deepened and evolved over the years, so did the various themes, issues, activities and sessions. What became clearer was the need to incorporate time and space dedicated to social healing, reconciliation and compassionate listening.

In 2010, Dr. Peace moved back to Sierra Leone and was elected as a parliamentary representative. He soon recognized the challenges of continuing to facilitate Community Peacebuilding, and thus handed the lead role over to me and welcomed my new co-facilitator, Steve Law. Steve brought expertise in inter- and intra-personal and community mediation, facilitation, conflict transformation, dialogue for peaceful change, as well as international peacebuilding experience. We continued to develop the course, integrating more mediation, compassionate listening, social healing and reconciliation.

Both Steve and I share the belief that the work of peacebuilding is the work of relationship building; and compassionate listening the path to building and strengthening nurturing relationships for a more just, humane and peaceful world.

Over the years, Dr. Peace, Steve and I organized meetings between Mi'kmaq Elders and peacebuilding participants at the Tatamagouche Centre³. We sat in a sacred circle under giant oak trees where two rivers meet and shared stories: stories of historical and intergenerational trauma and violence, as well as stories of traditional and social healing practices. We entered into a healing space and sang, chanted, and whispered ceremonial prayers and songs. We cried and celebrated not only the resilience of people, but the flourishing of people and communities despite the atrocities. We celebrated the strength, courage and wisdom of people in creating and revitalizing sacred community spaces to heal and reconcile. Some participants noted during the course, and then while sitting in the circle, how surprised they were to hear about the violent history of Canada's genocide and the present-day oppression of indigenous peoples. Many had an idealistic view of Canada as a peaceful nation. "Peaceful for who?" became a question we asked of our perceptions of peaceful countries throughout the world. This day was a day of renewal of hope for our world, our countries and ourselves.

In Community Peacebuilding we also dedicated a day to learning and practicing mediation skills. On that day, we reinforced compassionate active listening as the root of relationship building and healing. The participants embodied the teachings as they role-played various community conflicts. They learned skills such as

paraphrasing and summarizing; asking open-ended questions; raising awareness around personal bias and judgment; and learning how to transform judgment into curiosity. While role-playing these conflict situations, we recognized our shared human need to be heard, seen and acknowledged.

Over the years co-facilitating this course, I have come to understand with fierce conviction that simply being present to each other is our most basic moral obligation, and that the practice of presence and deep listening is a cornerstone to building cultures of peace.

Saying Goodbye to Dr. Peace, Living the Teachings

Dr. Peace left this world on September 5th, 2015. He left behind a family of peace warriors: his wife Mary, daughters, Theresa, Christina, and Clara and his grandchildren, Malaika, Antonia and Thomas. He also left behind a global family of peace warriors who he touched with his wisdom, love, presence, and dedication.

Community Peacebuilding was a beacon of radical hope in a world longing for safe inclusive circles; critical conversations ignited by stories; creative expression transforming us from heads to bodies to hearts; and a re-alignment with our shared humanity. I give thanks for this blessed opportunity to be part of these teachings for almost 20 years and engaged in transformational learning in community with the world.

Endnotes

¹ <https://www.kilmanndiagnostics.com/overview-thomas-kilman-conflict-mode-instrument-tki>.

² <http://www.newleafpictoucounty.ca>.

³ <https://www.tatacentre.ca>.

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