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Exploring conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Maine schools

Spring 2005

Opening Remarks *By Barbara Blazej*

Spring arrived in Maine this year quite peacefully, with brilliant sunshine and mild temperatures. For folks in Red Lake, Minnesota, spring brought with it the tragedy of a terrible school shooting incident. Despite the distance separating us, I'm certain we all share in this community's pain and confusion, as they grieve for those who died and try to make sense of what happened in the life of one young man that caused him to respond with such violence. As educators who work each day in our own school communities here in Maine, what can we learn from this tragic event?

One year ago this month, on April 26, 2004, the president of Lesley University, Margaret McKenna, wrote an article in the Bangor Daily News entitled, "Columbine Lessons Left Behind." (I'll be happy to mail the article to anyone who would like to read it.) McKenna noted that with increased pressures on schools from No Child Left Behind as well as budget constraints, among other factors, we are ignoring what we learned after that terrible tragedy of 1999, "at painful cost":

— That we must attend to "issues of school safety, school climate, student isolation, bullying and the victimization that depersonalized school environments seem to foster";

— "That teachers and administrators need...to find ways to know kids better and create real communities in our schools"; and

— "That education is not only about teaching content but also about supporting and developing human beings."

The community of Red Lake is paying that painful cost now, but they are not alone. On March 22, 2005, NBC News correspondent Pete Williams reported that "more than two-thirds of all school shooters felt persecuted or bullied," and this includes Jeff Weise of Red Lake, according to his relatives and classmates. While Maine schools may have escaped a school shooting tragedy so far, other forms of violence and harassment continue to occur, sometimes regularly, including bullying, teasing, marginalization, and youth suicide. In our Fall 2004 newsletter, for example, Pam Anderson of Maine Law and Civics Education at USM reported that a 1999 statewide survey of thousands of Maine students found bullying to be a widespread problem in this state.

In response to this newest "wake up call" for educators, then, I'd like to repeat McKenna's suggestion that schools need to incorporate social/emotional education along with academics; and I invite all of us in the field of education to do this *by building and strengthening a sense of community in schools, based on relationships of compassion, empathy and cooperation.*

Compassion means that we take care of each other, we help those who are struggling, we support each other, we listen, we speak up, we learn to forgive, we learn to see and be the best in ourselves and others. Each spring here at UMaine, I co-teach an online course on forgiveness. Forgiveness is based on developing a sense of empathy and compassion for those who hurt us (one of the "paradoxes" of forgiveness), and I've been fortunate over the years to have read some inspiring definitions of compassion. Here are two examples, both from a Buddhist perspective (from *The Sunflower* by Simon Wiesenthal):

The Dalai Lama tells this powerful story: "A few years back, a Tibetan monk who had served about eighteen years in a Chinese prison in Tibet came to see me after his escape to India....During the course of that meeting I had

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asked him what he felt was the biggest threat or danger while he was in prison. I was amazed by his answer. It was extraordinary and inspiring. I was expecting him to say something else; instead he said that what he most feared was losing his compassion for the Chinese”
(page 130).

Matthieu Ricard, a writer and Buddhist monk living in Nepal, says this about compassion: “True compassion must embrace all things and everyone: the worthy and the guilty, the friend and the foe. No matter how bad someone is, we believe that the basic goodness remains. A piece of gold, after all, is still gold, even if buried in the ground. Once the dirt is removed, the true nature of the gold will be revealed” (page 235).

We do not learn compassion in a vacuum; rather, we become compassionate people within a community of others who teach and model compassion. Another one of our forgiveness writers, Desmond Tutu, speaks of the African concept of “ubuntu” (in *No Future Without Forgiveness*, page 31): “My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours. We belong in a bundle of life....I am human because I belong. I participate, I share.” He goes on to say that “social harmony is for us the *summum bonum*—the greatest good.”

We can also learn about the importance of compassion, generosity and cooperation within a strong community from José Martí, the Cuban writer, poet, philosopher, and social justice advocate whose ideas and actions were instrumental in both the Cuban independence movement of the late 19th century as well as the Cuban Revolution of the 1950’s. As you may have read in past issues of this newsletter, I’ve had the opportunity to travel to Cuba each winter for the past few years. I continue to believe that we can learn some important concepts from Cuban society, especially related to the notion of community. As a socialist nation built on the strength and importance of community, Cuba tries (sometimes successfully, sometimes not) to practice José Martí’s ideals of solidarity in community (from *José Martí Thoughts on Liberty, Social Justice, Government, Art and Morality*):

We light the oven so that everyone may bake bread in it. If I survive, I will spend my whole life at the oven door seeing that no one is denied bread and, so as to give a lesson of charity, especially those who did not bring flour (page 27).

It is the duty of every individual to raise people up (page 30).

There is happiness in duty, although it may not seem so. To fulfill one’s duty elevates the soul to a state of constant sweetness. Love is the bond between people, the way to teach and the center of the world (page 34).

One should want and should strive to bring about whatever draws people together and makes their lives more virtuous and bearable (page 34).

School communities based on compassion, empathy and cooperation can model for young people (our future leaders) a good way to live in the world, one that nurtures, empowers, celebrates, respects, and *includes* everyone. This type of educational environment provides opportunities to learn about ourselves and others, to exchange ideas without fear, to develop our whole selves, and to imagine and work to build a better society and world. Communities of compassion and respect encourage learning and teaching in a positive, healthy and enjoyable atmosphere. The other articles in this newsletter, as well as in previous issues, explore various ways to build this type of community in our schools. And I’m certain that future articles will continue to focus on this topic as well. I invite any of you who have ideas on how to create compassionate communities to email them to me for publication in the Fall 2005 newsletter. For now, I’d like to end with one of my favorite stories on what compassion means, which was printed in the Bangor Daily News on May 1, 2004:

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A slightly edited version of an old Hasidic tale tells about a rabbi who one day asked his students, “How can we determine the hour of dawn – when the night ends and the day begins?” One student suggests, “When, from a distance, you can distinguish between a dog and a sheep?” “No,” the rabbi answers. “Is it when you can distinguish between a fig tree and a grapevine?” asks a second student. “No,” says the rabbi. “Please tell us the answer, then,” say the students. “It is,” says the wise teacher, “when you have enough light to view all beings with compassion, recognizing them as your human brothers and sisters. Until then the darkness is still with us.”

Have a wonderful spring and summer! See you again next fall.

Again

By Jason Grundstrom-Whitney

What is it that motivates us? What is it inside of us that resembles the Sistine Chapel depiction of God giving animation or spirit to man? I remember distinctly when the spark was transmitted to me. My mother was involved in the Civil Rights Movement in the 60's. She invited a famous Jewish civil rights leader to our house for dinner. I remember so well his stories of Auschwitz. Perhaps what I remember more was the tattoo on his forearm. Nothing flashy like the biker designs I had seen in downtown Phoenix. These were just plain numbers, not even well done by professional standards. I couldn't understand why this elderly gentleman would have these designs on his arm. He always wore shirts with sleeves rolled up, as he said later, as a reminder to everyone. He talked about the tattoos. I understood. It reminded me of the ranchers in the desert that rounded up the cattle to brand them. What I couldn't wrap my young mind around was why people would act this way to one another.

How is a young child to understand this? This man went into the camps young; he did not enjoy the sweltering Arizona sun and the cooling sensation of jumping into the community pool. He did not have the opportunity to put Mickey Mantle baseball cards in the spokes of his bike and fantasize about knocking a baseball clean out of the house Ruth built. He didn't have the freedom to walk into the desert when you could smell the rain and see the orange clouds moving across the vast tracks of land. Rain, mesquite, and desert sage, too. This day I smell them when I want. When I do, a tear rolls down my cheek, such fond memories.

What were his memories? What were the tears that rolled down his cheeks as he remembered his childhood? Never seeing his mom and dad again. Brothers and sisters wiped out. The smell of sweat, urine, soured food, death. Death. It whispers faintly on our lips. How hideous the sound from the millions of lips he heard. How hideous the sound of the multitude as he heard their last sighs. He talked with us until late that night.

I dreamed tortured dreams. Broken distorted bodies strewn along the ground. Their hands reaching up for my pant legs. I tried to help, but as far as I stretched my young hand, I could not reach them. My soul writhed. How? How? HOW? In these moments, activism was born. I could not allow for this to be created again. I could not allow for this robbing, this stealing, this unnatural ugliness to occur. What could I do?

Well, it hasn't always been easy. It hasn't always been inspired in the face of our enemy—apathy—but I keep trying. Since that time we have seen Cambodia, Rwanda, and many other slaughters and evil towards one another. When I get tired, when I get weary, our Auschwitz friend comes to visit. I see those numbers on his forearm, hear the stories. I see the deep smile of a survivor that knows how precious, how important each and every moment of our lives is. I see the face of activism and I am re-born again into it.

It is important to remember this, as we must understand that our activism is in reaction to something. If we lived in the perfect world (which we do—minus mankind's hatred), we would not need activism. We wouldn't have to talk

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of peace and conflict mediation.

Gandhi was thrown from the train in South Africa. Rosa Parks was too tired to get up that day on the bus. Martin Luther King Jr. lived in the segregated South and saw firsthand, as did the multitudes, the inhumanity this oppressive social outcast system promulgated. I ask each of us to refresh our memories from time to time. Like an alcoholic who always keeps fresh in his mind the last drinking bout to keep him/her sober, we activists must remember and reflect on the spark.

Gandhi, once he felt the spark, took definitive steps that I have outlined below. Steps that I believe we all must take in bringing our vision of peace to the world. Perhaps central to all that Gandhi did and studied on his quest for the truth was the notion of *Ahimsa* or non-violence. To activate this concept is to understand the underlying manifestation of creativity. Non-violence allows for the direct flow of our activities. It allows us to be unimpeded in body, spirit and mind. If we are violent, we stop the creative flow and enter the destructive flow. We impede our minds through hatred and anger. We impede our bodies through the pain and suffering of beatings, stress and, yes, even our apathy. We impede our spirits as we effectively change the flow from creativity to destruction—this act kills a part collectively of who and what we are. We create with the guidance of non-violence and as we do we realize the first of what I call the four E's. (Please understand that this is what I have culled from my study of Gandhi, Dr. King, etc.)

Empathy—We understand when we hear the stories, when we are thrown from the train, when we protest non-violently the struggle of someone beside ourselves. We start to see a perspective that perhaps fundamentally shakes our old thought and belief system. In doing so, we understand. In understanding we feel the love of an undivided self. We see on this intricate web that we are all connected. The pain of one is the pain of all. This realization spawns the vast ocean of unconditional love.

Embody—To make change, we must be change. If we talk and talk and don't follow what we pontificate, our word becomes hypocrisy. I have found it crucial in my 20 years working with teens that this step must be followed for meaningful change. If we have a policy of no alcohol at school functions and yet students see us come out of a bar in town every night, what are we modeling? If we teach tolerance and diversity and teachers tell racist and sexist jokes in the faculty lounge, just what are we modeling? We must be change to make change. I once had the privilege of seeing Thich Nhat Hanh behind stage before he went out to speak. True to form he came into the tent at Rhinebeck, New York, one minute before speaking. He approached the speaking platform from outside, into the tent, onto the speaking platform in walking meditation. His life is the poem of moment-to-moment awareness.

Empowerment—To collect into a whole as the dictionary would suggest, we must begin by fearless examination into the works of past teachers of peace and non-violence. It bothers me that we teach tolerance and diversity as part of the Civil Rights Project in the State of Maine, yet we do not give the entire history of the movement. We stand on the shoulders of giants. These initiatives did not come from a void. Many great teachers sacrificed their own blood and bodies for us to stand here today in relative peace. Gandhi studied intensely. He immersed himself in the reading of Thoreau, Tolstoy, Christ, Buddha, just to name but a few. He empowered himself through knowledge. We must as activists do the same.

Empty—In order to learn, it is imperative that we empty our cup. We have been told a cultural lie our entire lives. This is the lie of indifference and apathy. This lie sneaks into our ears on the cusp of making an internal choice to help. It says, "You can't make a difference. You are but one person. Give it up. Leave it for someone else to deal with." We must empty our consciousness of this lie. It is important to realize that as in Chaos Theory, each action has a consequence that at times might be hard to see. A woman who was in the hospital with my mother during her knee operation three years ago called me recently. She was told at the time that due to her injuries from a car accident that she would be a paraplegic for life. Obviously she was despondent. I talked with her every time I

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visited my mother and gave her some resources. Honestly I had forgotten about it until the other day when she called and told me she was living in another state. It turns out she is a state leader in an organization that works with paraplegics. She is also a motivational speaker. She said she owed it all to me. I knew better, but it reinforced the notion that, yes, we can make a difference, and we never know how fully our kindness extends.

The paradigm I frequently use to teach peace is the medicine wheel, as it is an all-embracing symbol (mankind, plants, minerals, the animal kingdom, this entire web we live). In fact the wheel can have Non-violence in the center, Empty in the east which reflects spirituality, Embody in the south which reflects the physical, Empathy in the west which reflects the emotional, and Empowerment in the north which reflects the mental part of who and what we are. The wheel itself reflects all the relationships that we have with all beings.

This brings me to the last important part of activism that we must all embrace. In order to have seven generations from now, we must think about every action and its effect seven generations from now. If for instance it is our habit to buy coffee in Styrofoam cups each morning, we might not have thought about the filling of landfills with material that takes a very long time to degrade. We can now with the empowerment of education, use a mug instead. Polar ice caps are receding, our brothers and sisters are dying out never to come back in the animal kingdom, slavery still exists, and child prostitution. We must do our part each and every day to bring about change for the world we envision ours to be. Our environment is us. We are the environment. Decisions based on seven generations from now lead to a life of what I call “traceless living.” We must do what we can. It is no longer a choice for our children’s children.

So we enter the door with a spark, a light, a beacon that in a way calls us home to who and what we truly are. For me, there are times of being down, times of being despondent as I look into my grandson’s and granddaughter’s eyes. At those times I remember my old friend with the numbers on his arm again and again and again

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Creating Conditions that Encourage ALL Learners (Part 3 of 3)

By Sharon Wilson-Barker and Carla Ritchie

Over the past year, we have used this forum to talk about the *Social Supports* students need in order to fulfill their potential, and we have given you ideas on how you can use the conditions of Belonging, Heroes and Sense of Accomplishment to establish these supports for your students. We have also discussed the relationship of *Intrinsic Motivation* to student aspirations and suggested ways that the conditions of Fun & Excitement, Curiosity & Creativity and Spirit of Adventure can foster Intrinsic Motivation in your students. With this final installment, we’ll discuss *Self-efficacy* in students and the conditions you can use to help your students become more self-efficacious—**Leadership & Responsibility** and **Confidence to Take Action**.

Research shows that students with high Social Supports, high Intrinsic Motivation and high Self-efficacy also have high aspirations and high achievement. Social Supports are defined as the emotional support, guidance and recognition provided by school personnel aimed at improving student achievement and aspirations. Intrinsic Motivation is defined as a student’s internal desire to attain academic goals as opposed to being externally motivated. And Self-efficacy is a student’s belief and confidence in his or her ability to accomplish tasks, make decisions and achieve goals. The National Center for Student Aspirations (NCSA) has labeled these concepts the 3 Constructs of Aspirations and an understanding of these constructs is essential to guide educators as they strive to positively affect student aspirations.

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Leadership & Responsibility. If we had to explain this condition with just a few words, they would be *opportunities for empowerment*. In fostering Leadership & Responsibility in students, we are empowering them by giving them real, authentic opportunities to make decisions and to accept the consequences of those decisions. For example, we ask students to share their ideas and interests with us, and we decide together how that will affect curricula. We ask students how they learn best, and then work with them to create those learning opportunities in the classroom. We solicit opinions from students about the shortcomings of their educational setting and then give them the power to do something about those issues. A recent experience clearly illustrated this condition to us. In November, we brought student leaders from around the state together for a one-day summit on student leadership. As a follow-up to this experience, we recently conducted workshops at several of the schools that sent students in November. At these schools, the students who had attended November's summit now had the opportunity to facilitate the same workshops they had experienced for their peers. With NCSA staff assisting, they had true opportunities to be leaders at their own schools. At lunchtime, the NCSA staff met with the student leaders to debrief how the workshops were progressing. As we were ending, one student excitedly offered this comment, which was met with many nods of heads: "I feel like I am part of something important!" In a nutshell, the more opportunities we can give our students, the more we are empowering them.

Confidence to Take Action. Providing students with opportunities is important, but there is one more level we must strive to attain. With Confidence to Take Action, we work to foster student understanding of how their actions are affecting outcomes. The two-word summation for this condition would be, *Actions = Results*. With this condition, we build on students' prior successes by helping them to see the results of their actions, thus building confidence that they can positively affect outcomes. Unfortunately, in today's fast-paced world of immediate results and obvious reactions, we must sometimes help students to see the indirect links between their actions and outcomes that may be less obvious. An example may clarify this further. One of our teacher friends shared this experience with us several years ago. Her students wanted to do something to encourage community members to feel that their school was the community's school as well. These students decided to host a Senior Citizen Ball. Much planning went into the event, but when the night finally arrived, the attendance was somewhat disappointing. The students were ready to write off the experience as a failure, but the teacher was not. She encouraged the students to use the opportunity to dialogue with those in attendance. As a result of this dialogue, relationships were established between the students and the community members, and several other volunteering initiatives were begun as a result of that first event—all of which were run out of the school, making the school much more of a community center. In this case, the teacher needed to assist the students to see how they had reached their goal and how their actions had made a difference. In the process, the students came to see themselves as highly efficacious and went on to have several other positive experiences as a result of this initial event.

In summary, Confidence to Take Action goes one step further than Leadership & Responsibility; after providing students with opportunities for empowerment, we must help them focus on the action of making decisions, the action of setting goals, the actions needed to accomplish the tasks, and finally we must help them to see and appreciate the results of these actions.

But wait! Before you rush off to begin fostering Self-efficacy in students through the conditions of Leadership & Responsibility and Confidence to Take Action, we need to offer one word of caution. All students have "Sincerity Radars." If we try to develop self-efficacious students by praising false efforts or negligible results, our plan will surely backfire. As we work to provide real, authentic opportunities for Leadership & Responsibility, we must also recognize real and authentic results when working on Confidence to Take Action in our students.

Congratulations! You now have at your fingertips the *big picture* of student aspirations, including the theory that supports the development of student aspirations and some ideas on how to foster the 3 Constructs of Aspirations:

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Social Supports, Intrinsic Motivation and Self-efficacy. So, go ahead, we dare you! Take a risk yourself and be a social support for your students. Build that mutually respectful relationship. Relinquish some control and allow your students freedom in their choice of activities. Let them make some real decisions and be sure to help them realize all that they have learned. You *can* make a difference in the lives of students!

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Restorative Discipline in Schools: Some Challenges and a Success Story

By Eileen McCue

Over the past two years I have gone into many schools to talk about the idea of restorative discipline. Most of the guidance counselors and administrators that I have spoken with have been enthusiastic about the philosophy, but when it comes to putting that philosophy into practice, not many schools are able to devote the time to create the necessary supports. One exception has been Winthrop High School, where a policy has been put in place. The question then becomes, what was or is different about Winthrop that they were able to do something about their interest in making changes in the discipline system? Let us first look at some of the barriers presented by other schools.

Barrier One: No Time. This is a common problem with schools, especially with the current emphasis on assessment. Most schools are struggling with the resources that they have now just to meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. When more emphasis is being placed on output and assessment, it would follow that relational skill building with young people becomes less of a priority.

Barrier Two: Lack of support. Whether it is the administrators, staff, or community, making such a “radical” change in a school’s discipline system requires support from all constituent groups involved. There are some schools that have a wonderfully supportive administrator, but the staff or the community has not had the training to be able to see the merits of a more relational, cooperative way of dealing with discipline. There are some schools that do not have the critical mass of supporters to be able to move forward with restorative discipline.

Barrier Three: No money. The problem of not having time to dedicate to making a change in discipline can be averted if there is money to hire an extra staff person to get the work done. Unfortunately, most school budgets are already stretched to the limit with impending cuts for the next school year.

So, while many educators, at many levels, are supportive of the idea of restorative discipline and understand that the current way that misbehavior is handled in schools does not work, many things stand in the way of implementation and making change.

Why it worked at Winthrop High School. There were many factors that led to the success of the restorative discipline policy in Winthrop. First of all, the administration was behind the philosophy. In fact, the school already had a peer mediation program and was making many changes toward the democratization of the school. They had also recently been through a process to identify the core values that they would base their policies on. In addition, the community was supportive. When we made the presentation to the school board, there was no opposition to the idea. Finally, and this piece is key, Winthrop had a person that could dedicate a good deal of time to coordinating the effort to bring a restorative justice policy into the high school. Winthrop High School

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was fortunate enough to have an Americorps*VISTA through Communities for Children and Youth. He was able to coordinate some training, had time to work with me on drafting a policy, and acted as the point-person for getting the process done.

From the success at Winthrop and the barriers that I have identified, I have been able to formulate a possible process that would be more successful in creating change in school discipline systems. There are a few things that would be necessary to exist in the school already. There must be support from the administration, as they are the leaders and will be the key players in implementing the new way of dealing with discipline. There must be support from the school board, especially if it is decided that some funding will need to be secured and if policy change is a goal. The staff must be willing to make a change. If the staff is unsupportive of changes in the discipline system, it will not work. Ultimately the goal is that everyone—students, staff, parents and administration—will all be working from the same discipline philosophy. Using the restorative approach requires individuals to examine their own behavior and their own assumptions about discipline; the process will be greatly crippled if the staff is unwilling to do this.

With those requirements met, I would recommend that the school have someone on staff that can dedicate at least ½ time to restorative discipline for at least a three-year period. This position could be secured through grant money, utilizing the Americorps*VISTA program, or using some existing staff time. Once someone is secured for the position, they should begin educating themselves and then the staff about restorative discipline. The key is to give the staff enough support at the classroom level so that they do not revert to the previous, more punitive ways of interacting and dealing with difficult behaviors at the lowest level. This will support the changes being made at the policy level.

The Restorative Justice Center of Maine in Hallowell has an extensive library and can offer help in connecting people with training and other resources. In the future we hope to offer training for many fields, including education. You can reach us at 207.623.0500 or info@rjcmaine.org.