Teaching Peace Studies from a Mennonite Perspective: Quiet in the Land Revisited

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In the spring of 2013, the staff of Selkirk College (where I teach Peace Studies) embarked on a process of indigenization or de-colonization of our institution. This process began with a preliminary two-day workshop, facilitated by an indigenous woman with years of experience working within British Columbia's post-secondary education system. As the workshop began, participants were gathered into a circle. By way of introducing ourselves, we were each asked to describe our heritage. The premise of the exercise was for us as educators to better understand ourselves so that we could more fully embrace the values of indigenization: awareness of history, connection to the natural world, and embracing the values of generosity, humility, and beauty. The indigenization process, our facilitator advised, best begins with self-awareness. As a peace studies educator, I had determined that indigenizing our curriculum was both necessary and overdue. And as an educator of Mennonite heritage, I saw this exercise as initiating a process of self-reflection on teaching Peace Studies from a Mennonite perspective in the changing Canadian landscape of the 21st century.

What does it mean to teach peace studies from a Mennonite perspective? My current reality is far removed from the Mennonite prairie town where I was raised. I now live in a small city in British Columbia that has no historical or cultural ties to the Mennonite community, and I married outside the tribe. But somehow, after a decades-long career as a health care professional, I managed in my mid-forties to find my way back to the fold through plying the best trade a Mennonite could—teaching Peace Studies!

The institution I teach at is a government-run community college—also clearly disconnected from any Mennonite identity. Students in my classes usually have no understanding or opinions about Mennonites or about how this peculiar (maybe even exotic) religion might have any bearing on their education. Therefore, disclosing my Mennonite connection is something I have avoided, perhaps attributable to past experiences where

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disclosure elicited only blank polite stares or, worse yet, disdain stemming from incomplete knowledge or cultural stereotypes (like most stereotypes, based partly on reality) of conservative Bible thumpers who don't dance or have fun.

At a deep level, I have questioned whether my Mennonite heritage is relevant in today's peace studies classroom, where themes of decolonization seem more relevant and timely, and possibly even antithetical to reminiscing about the history of a small group of Christian pacifists. In this particular region of British Columbia, the Mennonite presence is notably overshadowed by other traditional peace churches such as the Doukhobors and the Quakers. Doukhobors comprise a sizable proportion of the surrounding community, owing to large scale settlement in this area more than 100 years ago. Additionally, the Quakers' local presence can be seen at Argenta, a nearby community where American Quakers settled decades ago to escape militarism and materialism south of the border. Both of these communities have had a significant positive impact on the local peace scene, including the development of our college's Peace Studies program.

However, paralleling the vibrant presence of these local peace churches is the perceived absence of an Aboriginal voice, especially when it comes to issues of peace, justice, and reconciliation. An understanding of this lack of voice must begin with the historical reality that the Sinixt, an Indigenous group who have occupied this region for thousands of years, were declared extinct by the Canadian government, much to the chagrin of Sinixt members who are very much alive on both sides of the Canada-US border. A declaration of extinction pertaining to voice, identity, and power has significant ramifications, not the least of which is the Sinixt being shut out of current treaty negotiations with the federal government.

Therefore, my personal reflection in *The Conrad Grebel Review*, initiated by the indigenization workshop, begins with wondering how my Mennonite heritage may find a voice within my local context. An old axiom describes Mennonites as "Quiet in the Land." That adage speaks to our history of keeping to ourselves, intentionally separated from a dominant culture where violence and injustice seemed to prevail. Historically, Mennonite peacemaking was manifested through a lifestyle that exemplified simplicity and withdrawal from a perceived violent dominant culture, rather

than through protesting or taking a public stand on peace and justice issues. However, as I embark on the journey of de-colonizing my classes, a new meaning for the adage becomes apparent: "Quiet in the Land" might aptly refer to the idea that Mennonite history and values around peace and justice may no longer relevant in my local landscape.

My reflection on what it means to be a Mennonite peace studies educator utilizes the "Quiet in the Land" axiom as a foil. By juxtaposing current realities and priorities of 21st-century peace education with Mennonite influences (and interspersing my personal journey into this rich tapestry!), I will analyze the notion of being Quiet in the Land using these themes: Mennonites as Peacemakers, Mennonites as Christians, the Mennonite Experience of Suffering, and Mennonites as Settlers. In my concluding remarks, I offer several ways in which this reflection may guide me to better serve my students.

Mennonites as Peacemakers

In many obvious ways, for someone who has grown up in the Mennonite community, becoming a peace studies educator seems like a natural and honorable career path, like becoming a farmer or a choir director. Indeed, I marvel at the high proportion of Mennonites at peace studies conferences! But how does being Mennonite influence my teaching? To begin with, I find it helpful to reflect on how the Mennonite identity is attached to peace and justice activities in Canada. Three examples that I use in my classes come to mind.

A paramount component of any introductory peace studies course is a critical analysis of our criminal justice system, which necessarily flows into a comparison of our current retributive framework to the tenets of restorative justice. According to the dominant mainstream narrative, it was the Mennonite Central Committee of Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario in 1974 that is credited with establishing the first restorative justice program, a victim-offender mediation alternative to the court system.[1]

Another example is the work of Ten Thousand Villages (initiated by the Mennonite Central Committee) to raise awareness of and bring justice

[1] "Restorative Justice: Promising Beginnings." Public Safety Canada, 2002. www.publicsafety.gc.ca/res/cor/sum/cprs200209_1-eng.aspx,accessed June 19, 2013.

to the poor around the world. Moving beyond the charity model of simply feeding the poor, Ten Thousand Villages asks why people are impoverished, and offers alternative choices based on social justice for both affluent consumers and struggling producers, challenging economic policies that favor cheap consumption at the expense of the poor. Ten Thousand Villages started from humble beginnings but is now the largest non-profit fair-trade organization in North America.[2] Most peace studies students are familiar with the concept of fair trade, and may be drawn to a story where traditional faith and values have been applied to a present-day issue.

A third example is Christian Peacemaker Teams, whose informal motto of "Getting in the Way" is perhaps the antithesis of the adage "Quiet in the Land." These specially trained nonviolent activists provide protective accompaniment to human rights workers in many parts of the world, and advocate, through nonviolent resistance strategies, for people who lack power and voice. They heed the call of Christian activists like retired South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who contend that remaining neutral in situations of injustice is akin to choosing the side of the oppressor.[3]

The juxtaposition of the call by Christian Peacemaker Teams to "get in the way" and the historical Mennonite adage of "Quiet in the Land" reflects a greater societal schism in how peacemaking is viewed. This schism often generates lively discussions in Peace Studies classes. How does our society view those who engage in peace work from a faith background? Mohammed Abu-Nimer asserts that religion typically frames peacemaking into two camps: the harmony camp and the liberation camp.[4] Harmony focuses on peacemaking and reconciliation, bringing people together with the premise that God loves all the people of the earth. Biblical concepts like love, brotherhood, and peace resonate. Conversely, the liberation model, perhaps best exemplified by Latin American liberation theology, exposes the injustices that surround us, often breaks the silence, and makes members

[2] Andre Mayer, "How Can You tell if Your Shirt was Made in a Sweat Shop?" Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, April 25, 2013, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2013/04/25/f-bangladesh-clothing-consumer-awareness.html, accessed June 17, 2013.

[3] Desmond Tutu, www.tutufoundation-usa.org (and other sites), accessed June 21, 2013.

[4] Mohammed Abu-Nimer, "Interfaith Dialogue: Limitations and Possibilities in the Middle East," presentation at Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, October 15, 2007.

of the dominant culture uncomfortable with their complicity in structural violence.

Abu-Nimer critically analyzes these two models by examining the dynamics of Middle East peace camps, where Palestinian and Israeli children come together, often for the first time, to build friendships and learn about each other's story. Outwardly, these activities emphasize harmony. However, occasionally and unintentionally, vestiges of the liberation model seep out into the open, as exemplified by a Palestinian student's question following his new awareness of Israeli affluence, access to better schools, and freedom of movement: Why do these inequalities exist? His teacher's attempt to highlight harmony—"Politics are not part of this class"[5]—seemed to do so at the cost of nurturing new ideas of justice or liberation.

The tension between getting in the way and being quiet in the land brings to mind a personal story. Recently I was contacted by the local media to offer an expert opinion on a community action by local peace activist: the interruption of a Remembrance Day ceremony. Before I could respond to the reporter's question, she made her own opinion known by musing how someone in the name of peace could commit such an "unpeaceful" act. "Getting in the way" is often deemed inappropriate by the mainstream. As a Mennonite peace studies educator, in which direction do I find myself leaning? Sometimes the easy way to stress "getting in the way" is to teach about stories from long ago (Gandhi) or from far away (recent protests in Egypt). "Quiet in the land" seems the easier choice when it comes to the local context. The issue always appears less black and white when you actually know the people on the other side. But this begs the question: Should peace education make students uncomfortable? Marc Rich and Aaron Cargill[6] convincingly demonstrate that transformational learning on topics such as race and privilege, tailored to the local context, require students to delve beyond their comfort zone. Less harmony, more liberation.

The historical reality of being quiet in the land is challenged by

[5] Mohammed Abu-Nimer, "Education for Coexistence in Israel: Potential and Challenges" in *Reconciliation, Justice and Coexistence: Theory and Practice*, ed. Mohammed Abu-Nimer (New York: Lexington Books, 2001), 180-96.

[6] Marc Rich and Aaron Cargill, "Beyond the Breach: Transforming White Identities in the Classroom," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 7, no. 4 (2004): 351-65.

the recent Mennonite activities discussed above. It seems to me that the Mennonite legacy rightfully deserves a place in a modern peace studies education stressing nonviolent resistance over passive nonresistance. "Quiet in the land" just got a little noisy.

Mennonites as Christians

The context in which I teach is decidedly secular. Most students only nominally identify with Christianity, and other religions are almost never represented in the classroom. Because secular literature on the role of religion in world affairs often focuses on extremist views, moderate religious perspectives receive little coverage, leaving only the radicals with space on the religious spectrum, and giving too much attention to extremism and fundamentalism. This, I believe, has a negative effect on students' view of religion and reinforces secularism as a rational, balanced bulwark against radical forces.

It is in this context that I relate the following story to my students. In 2007, I joined a peace and human rights educational tour of Israel and Palestine hosted by Christian Peacemaker Teams. In making my initial plans, I hesitated to join a religious organization that was possibly thrusting more religion into an area already overwhelmed with religious tension and intolerance. However, what I experienced in the end was quite different. I discovered that being associated with a Christian organization afforded a ready-made connection to both the Israeli Jews and the Palestinian Muslims, who embraced my assumed Christianity as a source of peace, strength, and even solidarity. It was explained to me countless times by Muslim hosts that our presence, in the name of Christianity, was most welcome and was viewed as a sincere act of building interfaith bridges. These people told me that their own Muslim religion was a source of strength and inner peace in the face of oppression, and a guiding force to work for peace and justice. This was a direct contradiction to the mainstream media portrayal of the role of religion in the Middle East.

I recall riding in the back of a taxi in the West Bank. My identity and anonymity were given away by my red baseball cap with the Christian Peacemaker Team slogan emblazoned on the front. We were required to wear this accessory for recognition and protection. For the taxi driver, the

cap was an invitation to connect. "Do you know what the difference between Christianity and Islam is?" he asked. It was presented as a riddle, as if he was not really interested in my response but was looking for an invitation to share his answer. "No," I replied, "What is the difference?" "Nothing," he burst out. "We worship the same God. We are brothers and sisters!" The message was so different from what I would have expected before, my entire Canadian context having stressed the differences and intolerance between the two faiths. Here, in the supposed hotbed of religious extremism, I found the calming voice of interfaith reconciliation in the back of a Palestinian taxicab.

In my introductory Peace Studies course, I dedicate one three-hour class to the topic of religion and peace. I state at the outset that my goal is not to turn anyone towards or away from religion. My aim is to impress upon students that secularism is the exception, not the norm, in our world. Additionally, by studying how all major religions emphasize the same great truths (such as the Golden Rule), religion has just as much potential to bring people together as to tear them apart. The role of peacemakers, then, at the very least is to understand the pervasive role that religion plays in the lives and conflicts of people around the world. My experience is that students may be secular in orientation but very tolerant in practice, and willing to gain a deeper understanding of religion. Thus they tend to view stories of faith-based peacemaking as inspiring and relevant, and as offsetting typical dominant media stories that showcase extremism.

Mennonite Experience of Suffering

My sense is that young peace studies students are not connected to personal or cultural stories of suffering, but I have no way of knowing this for certain. What would happen if I shared my Mennonite stories—and invited them to share their own stories?

It is certainly not difficult to articulate the link between Mennonites and suffering. Among my own relatives are many testimonies of murder, starvation, imprisonment, and banishment of great aunts and uncles and cousins who lived through the violence in Russia around the time of the Revolution in 1917 and during Stalin's purges in the 1930s. Maria Wall, my father's first cousin, is one example. As a teenager during the purges, Maria

witnessed her father's abduction by the Soviet secret police, and experienced her own deportation and that of her remaining family to the Siberian Gulag, where her sister died of starvation and where, in her own words, the dreams of her youth slowly died. She would later write the story of her life, entitled "Through the Valley of Suffering," a harrowing account of untold and unjust suffering, yet filled with hope and grace nourished by her strong Christian faith. One instance of this hope is demonstrated in a poem she wrote to her (and my father's) aunt who had been captured while trying to escape the Soviet Union during the chaos of World War Two. Maria's poem was an offering to her aunt and her family as the government re-banished them to a northern Siberian labor camp:

> . . . Exiled from your dear home
> Never again to see that beautiful place
> Your weak limbs were long since tired
> And you went on with empty hands
> Instead of your house and garden you have
> A little corner in a dark wood
> In the wide, wide, ever cold North
> Where spring does not come soon
> God never left you here a single day
> He stood with you in every strife and battle
> Why grieve, when you embrace all those
> You love, now spread so far and wide?
> Was it not too good, to bear each cross
> Which he laid upon you in love?
> O poor heart, why now despair?
> This is to move you to believe.[7]

I had the opportunity to meet Maria some ten years ago. She had since moved to Germany after the collapse of the Soviet Union and was now living among many other Russian Mennonites whose tragic life journeys, like her own, culminated in the long-awaited peace and harmony afforded by the generous German government. Maria was clear in her interpretation of her

[7] Maria Wall, "Through the Valley of Suffering," translated by Victor Doerksen (Bergneustadt, Germany: Unpublished autobiography, 1994), 72.

destiny: God provides for those who are patient and obedient. Her stories of suffering injustice were always couched in the language of forgiveness and hope. Remain quiet in the land, she would say, for God is with you. I find Maria's story deeply inspiring. I feel honored to have someone in my family who has shared her story of seeking spiritual peace in the midst of such calamity and despair.

My grandfather (Maria's uncle) came to Canada as a young married man, eager to forget the similar horrors of his final years in Russia. I never knew his stories of suffering, though I did know him as a pastor, a man whose Christian faith played out in his disciplined life and his dedication to family and church. It was only in this past year that I learned the heart-wrenching tale of his narrow escape from being shot to death in Russia—not once, but twice. During the aftermath of the Revolution, many Mennonites were rounded up and shot by firing squads, a crude form of justice for the presumed crime of being enemies of the state. In 1921, my grandfather endured a two-day forced confinement with 114 others, in a cramped cellar with no food, water, or bathroom. The confinement ended when the inmates were removed in groups of ten and summarily executed by a firing squad. My grandfather's fate was transformed when the Russian gunman recognized him as a landless laborer, not a Kulak (wealthy land owner), and spared his life.[8]

Just a few weeks later, the same situation occurred again. This time, my grandfather's would-be assassin recognized him as someone who had helped poor illiterate soldiers write letters to distant family members while my grandfather served in the Russian army as a medic.[9] I imagine my grandfather drafted into the Russian army and served in a non-combatant role because of his pacifist convictions. He used his literacy skills to assist the Russian soldiers around him. His quiet act of love and peacemaking paid off in a very tangible way. It was one of these grateful soldiers who lowered his gun, years later, and refused to shoot because of the kindness he had been shown.

Sharing with students these stories of my own could create vulnerability,

[8] Phil Reimer, "Learning from my Grosspa about the Voice of God," *Canadian Mennonite,* December 17, 2012, www.canadianmennonite.org/articles/learning-my-grosspa-about-voice-god, accessed June 19, 2013.
[9] Ibid.

which, according to Marshal Rosenberg, may facilitate empathy and reduce defensiveness among conflicting parties.[10] According to Eileen Babbitt and Pamela Steiner, during a facilitated process to address conflict between two communities in Israel, one Jewish and one Arab, mediators noticed a breakthrough when each side recognized the other's narrative of suffering.[11] The disparate historical realities of the two groups merged under the theme of suffering, allowing both sides to realize their conflict was a tapestry of common fears and needs. Therefore, sharing my own cultural stories may enable students to begin to understand their own narratives of suffering and vulnerability, in ways that could assist them in connecting with people who are suffering.

Mennonites as Settlers

My life story is far removed from that of my grandfather, in both time and geography. Time has a way of offering new insights to long-held interpretations of experience. My political and geographical milieu is also far different from that of my grandfather. I'm sure my grandparents never heard of the term "Turtle Island," the revered name used by many First Nations groups for the North American Continent. My grandparents' narrative was built on this foundation: be grateful for being allowed into a new peaceful country, work hard, obey the law, and honor God. As I have been afforded the privilege of a modern liberal arts education, my understanding of the immigrants' story cannot be complete without giving voice to the counter-narrative of the indigenous people on whose land my ancestors settled. In addition to the pioneer worldview of a land without people for a people without a land, the "settler" perspective usually viewed the complex issues of poverty and other social ills as just a Native problem that needed to be fixed.

Our gradual awakening to the counter-narrative invokes us to transform the question from "How do we solve the Indian problem?" to what political scientist Roger Epps asks, "How do we solve the settler problem?"[12]

[10] Marshall Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (Encinitas, CA: Puddledancer Press, 2005).

[11] Eileen Babbitt and Pamela Steiner, "Combining Empathy with Problem Solving: The Tamra Model of Facilitation in Israel," in *Building Peace*, ed. Craig Zelizer and Robert A. Rubinstein (Stirling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2010), 157-78.

[12] Quoted in Paulette Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within* (Vancouver, BC: Univ. of British

This simply posed question opens up a complex, often difficult conversation in peace studies education that may mirror the sentiment that violence and injustice are problems which typically occur in other parts of the world and which are our duty to solve. Peace studies literature is still primarily written by men of European background with little inclusion of Indigenous history or role models. [13]

In this situation I find little help from my Mennonite heritage. Growing up in southern Manitoba, I knew virtually nothing about my landscape that predated the arrival of the Europeans. My knowledge really only starts with the arrival of the Mennonite settlers in 1874 and the founding of the town I grew up in, Steinbach, with virtually no mention of who were on that landscape (and still are, for that matter) before they came. However, I recall while growing up that our Christian values required us to help those who were less fortunate. It was in this context that I knew of First Nations; that is, from our evangelizing communities several hours away—well-intentioned efforts to bring peace that called on people to accept Jesus Christ. In this sense, the narrative of Mennonite as peacemaker was reinforced for me at an early age as my church community engaged in these acts of evangelism. But seldom did our charitable acts go to a place that would have led to difficult conversations about Mennonites as settlers and beneficiaries of the colonial hegemony, conversations that might be necessary for authentic reconciliation.

The workshop on indigenization pushed me onto a surprising path of self-reflection and discovery. By the end it was evident that indigenization went far beyond curriculum. It had more to do with creating a culture of peace, a classroom culture in which not only Indigenous people but all people would feel validated, recognized, and safe. It seems straightforward at first glance, but this journey can be unsettling, as it means challenging Eurocentric biases and what it means to be settlers on traditional Indigenous lands that in my case (British Columbia's southern interior) have never been ceded to the Canadian government.

Specific, tangible actions can be important in initiating complex

Columbia Press, 2011), 11.

[13] Marvin Berkowitz, "Eurocentric Contradictions in Peace Studies," *Peace Review* 14, no. 1 (2001): 61-65.

processes like indigenization and creating the desired classroom culture. For this year's Peace Studies classes, it has meant inviting a local Indigenous leader to offer a welcome to the class, showcasing Indigenous peacemaking practices such as a restorative justice program run by local elders, and finding more readings by Indigenous authors on such topics as healing and reconciliation.

Concluding Thoughts

This fall, I began my Peace Studies class with the same indigenization activity that initiated my personal journey of self-reflection. Seated in a circle in Selkirk's new Aboriginal Gathering Place and following a blessing by a local Indigenous leader, students were invited to talk about their identity. Just as a concert violinist must know her instrument, we peacemakers must know ourselves—for we are our own instruments. Since our knowing, being, and doing is our work, we must critically reflect on what we take for granted in our knowledge and actions. The words of our facilitator resonated with my students: *You need to know who you are, as you are your greatest tool for creating peace. Peace and justice start where you are. It is coming to know who you are, and it is coming to know the land on which you live.*

Writing this reflection was itself an exercise in coming to understand who I am. This journey has encouraged me not to be afraid to talk about my Mennonite heritage, as personal stories may encourage students to reflect on their own identity. Also, I will not hesitate to initiate class discussions on religion and faith in order to make space for moderate voices. From "quiet in the land" to "getting in the way," I now realize that my Mennonite heritage can have relevance in the current social and political landscape. I have a lot to learn—and a lot to share.

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