

USING LITERATURE TO TEACH PEACE

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In this essay, we present our experiences teaching the literature of peace and nonviolence at the college level. Our classes are largely framed by the US experience and we demonstrate to our students that there are always alternatives to violence. We focus almost exclusively on non-fiction writing and employ an expanded definition of “literature” that includes essays, speeches, letters, and life writing. We describe the foundational assumptions of our approach in terms of both methodology and ideology, discuss the difficulties and opportunities that this material presents in the classroom, and offer pedagogical strategies and practical tips for teaching peace writing.

Hoping to employ education to awaken our students from apathy and spur them toward social action, we recognize the direct connection between peace education and engaging in active work to promote peace. We therefore centre our courses on the common interfaith principles of working toward peace that brought together Tolstoy and Gandhi; unified figures as seemingly diverse as Philip and Daniel Berrigan, Dorothy Day, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Martin Luther King, Jr., Thomas Merton, and Thich Nhat Hanh in opposing the Vietnam War and in using nonviolence to fight for civil and human rights; sparked an extraordinary exchange of mutually respectful, peace-building communiqués between Muslim, Christian, and Jewish scholars between 2000 and 2008; and serve as the basis for a burgeoning but little-known interfaith peace movement.¹

We welcome all views in our class discussions; we do not silence any perspective. We recognize the essential contribution of atheist and agnostic thinkers who were activists in the cause of peace, and we strive to establish in our courses a safe environment for civil, rational discussion of peace and religion by students of all levels of belief, nonbelief, and unbelief. We aim to make students with deeply-held religious convictions feel comfortable

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