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### The Violence of Our Knowledge: On Higher Education and Peace Making

By Parker J. Palmer

Non-violence was not a live notion for me until I stumbled across the Quaker tradition. Until then all I knew about Quakers was their wonderful oatmeal—and it turns out they don't even make it. But thirty-three years ago, at age thirty-five, I discovered a Quaker living-learning community near Philadelphia called Pendle Hill where I worked for eleven years as dean of studies and writer in residence.

The core Quaker belief is that there is an inner teacher, an inner light in every human being, a sacred core worthy of respect. When I asked why the community at Pendle Hill made decisions via a laborious, tedious, time-consuming and utterly maddening process called consensual decision-making, I was told, "Because making decisions by majority rule is a form of violence."

Violence is not just about bombing or shooting or hitting people. Violence is any way we have of violating the integrity of the other. Racism and sexism are violence. Derogatory labeling of any sort constitutes violence. Rendering other people invisible or irrelevant is an act of violence. So is manipulating people towards our ends as if they were objects that existed only to serve our purposes.

But it is possible to have lively, rigorous, engaged intellectual debate that is conflictual but utterly non-violent because it does not violate the integrity of those speaking and listening. What I like about the Quaker way of decision-making is how it embraces and affirms the creative potential of conflict, because consensus forces us to hold the tension of opposites. We are forced to hold that tension long enough that it might pull us open to a new way of looking at things—to a third possibility that has yet escaped both parties to this particular debate. Non-violence does not involve the absence of conflict. Anybody who's ever tried to "speak truth to power" knows it's an act that brings conflict. And yet it is an act that, taken with integrity, creates this pole of opposition which can stretch a whole society open to something new.

I also learned from Quakers that one key to non-violence is avoiding the arrogance of believing that I know how others should live their lives. Instead, I need to look within and ask myself the question, "Am I living in that light and power that takes away the need for violence?" Quakers do not have a prescription for running a nation-state. They have an understanding of personal responsibility. We need to engage in an ongoing self-examination of the seeds of violence that we plant with our attitudes and actions, plants that we have the power to uproot.

This brings me to my understanding of violence within the university. When I was a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, I had a friend who felt brutalized by his graduate student experience. When he left with PhD in hand, I felt certain that he would go out into the world as a professor who loved and cared for students. But he did not. He became one of the most brutalizing professors I have ever known. One thing that happens in academic life is the generational passing on of wounds. If violence is done to me in this community, and I come back to this community in a role of authority, it sometimes (not always) happens that I don't know what to do with my wound except to work it out on other people: "This was my initiation rite and it's going to be yours too."

The irony is that the university explicitly promotes authentic inquiry and genuine discourse, both non-violent ways of being in the world. Violence in the university comes not from our explicit mission but from our "hidden curriculum." Imagine a political science professor teaching a course on the values of democracy, but teaching it in a way that essentially says to students, "Listen to what I say, sit down, shut up, make notes on it and feed it back to me at the end of the term." What students are learning is not the values of democracy but the habits that keep you safe in a totalitarian society. The hidden curriculum is inculcating a completely contradictory set of values via pedagogical violence.



Another part of our hidden curriculum is the notion that competition is the best way to induce learning and elicit truth. That's the theory—I call it a myth. I have been in many situations where the intellectual competition was fierce. But what I observed there was not the generation of new ideas, not the pursuit of truth, but people reaching for old ideas that they knew how to wield as weapons, so that they could protect their flank, fend off the opposition, and emerge unbloodied and unbowed. Nothing in my experience says that fierce interpersonal competition will bring us closer to new truth. Rather, it drives us back to ideas with which we are well-acquainted, because with them we're not vulnerable: we know all the possible criticisms that we might hear and we are prepared to defend ourselves on every front.

The pursuit of truth, a genuine life of inquiry, involves constantly making yourself vulnerable to the half-formed thought, the tentative probe, the idea that you can barely bring to articulation. You will not do that in the midst of battlefield conditions. Under the conditions of intense competition, we listen not for what is strong, well-shaped and well-informed in the other's ideas, for that which might amplify our own thinking. Rather, we listen for the weakest link—and we pounce on it.

How often in the thirty years I've been traveling in higher education has someone said to me, "I like ninety-nine percent of what you said, but there was one thing that was dead wrong, and I am going to beat you up about it!" These are not the conditions under which the mission of the university is advanced. Under conditions of fear, students are not induced to learn. They are induced instead to play it very close to the vest. So we have a hidden curriculum in the university called "the cult of competition" that I think plants seeds of violence among us.

The deformations that lead us toward violence of this sort begin in the epistemological root system of our educational enterprise. Every epistemology, I suggest, tends to become an ethic.

Our conventional epistemology includes the habit of objectification, of approaching whatever we are studying—a literary text, a phenomenon from the natural world, or some data about human behavior—and making it into an object. The theory is that if we do not make it an object by holding it at distance, we will commit the grave sin of tainting it with our subjectivity. And the subjective self is thought to be nothing more than a source of bias, ignorance, and error.

But real scientists don't objectify that way. Real scientists engage the things of the world with imagination and intuition as well as intellect, logic, and information. As a young woman, the great biologist Barbara McClintock became fascinated with the phenomenon of genetic transposition. But at the time, her science lacked the instruments that now allow now direct observation of the data, and lacked a theoretical structure to make sense of the questions she was raising. She experienced a lot of marginalization as a scientist until she reached her early eighties, when she received a Nobel Prize. Someone later asked her, "Tell me, how do you do science?" McClintock said, "All I can really tell you about doing real science is you've got to have a feeling for the organism."

I was educated at some of the best institutions in this country about the history of the Third Reich—the murder of six million Jews, persons with mental and physical disability, Gypsies, protesting Christians, anyone who didn't fit the mold. And I was taught that history at such objectified distance that I somehow ended up feeling that all of that had happened on another planet to another species. My professors were not revisionists; they did not say it did not happen. But they gave the facts and figure such an antiseptic presentation that the whole thing seemed unreal, unrelated to me.

There were two things in particular that I should have learned but did not because of this tendency towards objectification. One was that the very community in which I grew up practiced its own form of systemic anti-Semitism during my childhood. I should have known, as part of being a truly educated person, that what animated the Third Reich was not about another planet and another species, but about my own hometown and people I knew.

I also failed to learn that I have within myself a certain "fascism of the heart." When the difference between you and me gets too great, when your version of what is good or true or beautiful becomes too threatening to mine, I will find some way to kill you. I won't do it with a bullet or a gas chamber. But I will do it with a label, a dismissive name, any way of rendering you irrelevant to my life in order to reduce the tension between your view of reality and mine.

Another part of our "objectivist" epistemology that plants the seeds of violence is reductionism. If the objects of our study have no subjective reality, no inner truth, then we can simply reduce them to whatever terms meet our needs, whatever framing fits our logic. But when we do that, we end up with a world of objects to which we are free to do violence.

If the self is nothing more than a social construct, if the self has no ontological reality to it, then why not just reengineer it, manipulate it, or eliminate it if it gets too annoying? If we reduce the world to our own convenient terms, what is to keep us from doing violence when the shape of the world doesn't fit our theory or our needs?

Reductionism diminishes our scholarship as well as our ethical lives. You cannot possibly be a good scholar if you do not know how to receive and perceive the other on its own terms. What physicist or astronomer or chemist ever got anywhere by trying to reduce the amazing phenomena he or she is working with to the convenient frames that work for his or her own mind, at this moment, given the shape of our knowledge? That's not where discovery comes from; that's not where breakthroughs emerge.

So what can we do about the violence of our knowledge? We don't need to import a new culture to the academy. We need to reclaim the best of the culture in which we have always been rooted. For example, scholars at their best always have respect for otherness, whether it comes to subatomic particles or people. If we could reclaim that simple epistemological principle that knowing requires respect, we could get a good start on reducing violence in

the academy.

We can reaffirm that learning to hold ambiguity, contradiction, paradox and tension, without seeking quick, simplistic resolutions, is at the core of being an educated person. The tension we feel as we experience otherness need not lead to violence: it can lead to opening ourselves to a larger view of reality, which is what scholarship, teaching and learning are supposed to be about.

We can also try to overcome the deep divide that runs down the middle of the academy between the “soft” virtues of the heart and the “hard” virtues of the mind. This is an utterly bogus division because the human self does not operate out of airtight compartments: heart and mind work together. If we want genuine rigor that is capable of advancing thought—inviting the tentative probe, the challenging question, the admission of ignorance—we must have deep hospitality in our classroom and other settings of discourse. These are the behaviors that induce rigor, and they will not happen in a hostile, inhospitable space.

So I invite us as educators to confront the question “What are the seeds of violence in our institutional and personal lives?” If we are willing to do so, we can make an immediate and lasting contribution to the world in which we live.

*Parker J. Palmer is a writer, traveling teacher, and activist who focuses on issues in education, community, leadership, spirituality and social change. Author of seven books, including The Courage to Teach, he holds ten honorary doctorates, and in 1998 was named by The Leadership Project (a national survey of 10,000 administrators and faculty) as one of the thirty “most influential senior leaders” in higher education and one of the ten key “agenda-setters” of the past decade. This article is adapted from a public lecture he delivered on November 29, 2001 at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.*

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