

# IS IT POSSIBLE TO TEACH PEACE?

BY SEBASTIAN DE ASSIS, PH.D.

A few years ago I was driving home from work, a teaching job with the State of Hawaii Department of Education, listening to the news on National Public Radio. As the radio station began informing on the devastating consequences of the civil war in the former Yugoslavia, a dark blue Volvo station-wagon stopped at the traffic light in front of me. While absorbing the depressing bloody news (a valuable commodity in modern mass-communication media), I fortuitously noticed the two-word bumper sticker displayed on the vehicle ahead of mine. It read: "Teach Peace." Soon the light turned green, the news was over, but I have been thinking about this possibility ever since.

Being a humanist educator greatly concerned with the deterioration of the human spirit in our high-tech society, I have been mulling over the feasibility of teaching peace as a quasi-academic discipline. I am convinced it is a crucial component currently missing from contemporary curricula.

Right off, I am aware that such an unprecedented educational initiative may be considered subversive by the "authorities." Indeed, it could even prove extremely dangerous to its proponents and practitioners. After all, from Jesus of Nazareth to Mahatma Gandhi to Yitzhak Rabin, history has recorded a long and growing list of pacifist martyrs who dared to carry the white banner of harmony through the red zone of intolerance. Moreover, the world is dominated by powerful economic interests, among which the manufacture of weaponry is

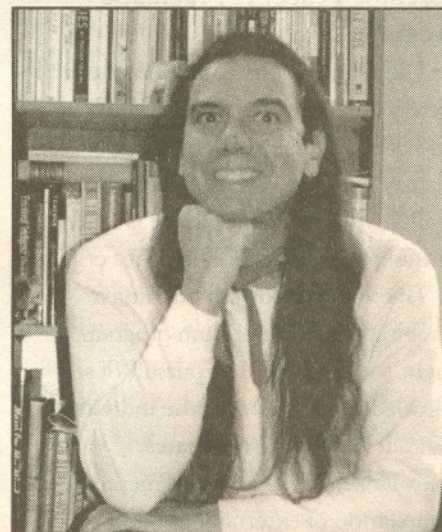
one of the most profitable and dynamic industries. Hence, war and the weapons to wage it are a "vital" and "legitimate" business enterprise. Powerful enemies are made when market potentials are diminished by new initiatives.

## Institutional Education and Reform

Before embarking on the challenging task of envisioning an educational process that promotes peace, it is imperative to understand the objectives of the current educational system and its "reform" movement.

For centuries schools have emphasized development of intellectual knowledge and mastery of technical skills. However, these, as the only elements of the educational process, are fragmentary, alienating, and an incomplete inventory of the human experience on earth. In fact, this emphasis on intellectual knowledge and technical mastery is an utilitarian educational approach geared predominantly toward economic interests, in which accumulation of information, ideas, technology and material prosperity are held to be more relevant than human life itself. In short, in this paradigm, the *economic function* of education is paramount. Until this approach is changed, the dim possibility of teaching peace recedes even more into the fog.

The main objectives of the so-called education reform movement are based upon the development of intellectual knowledge measured by standardized test results. According to modern standards, knowledge is almost exclusively related to the human ability to reason. Even empirical knowledge is supposed to be intellectually processed. Yet clearly,



human complexity is not limited to reason, but is also composed of emotions, instincts, intuition, imagination, and the perennial pursuit of spiritual development. Like religious trinities—e.g., Christianity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit; Hinduism: Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva—education has its own sacred trinity of development: Mind, Heart and Spirit.

Because of its excessive emphasis on technological, scientific and pragmatic knowledge for economic functions, the educational system corrupts the development of the human individual, turning it into the development of the individual worker. Consequently, the abysmal gap between the sophisticated technical worker and the humanized individual continues to widen.

Meanwhile, the human spirit, lacking emotional and spiritual knowledge, wilts. Compassion, cooperation, understanding of the universal human predicament, and, ultimately, brotherly/sisterly love, all are utterly neglected as learning experiences. After all, these are not

considered elements of knowledge, for they are not components of the information which we direct our students to acquire for economic functions.

### Teaching Peace: A Pragmatic Program

The tempestuous condition of our society demonstrates that without this kind of emotional and spiritual knowledge, we may fail to resolve the daunting challenges of our times. Here is when learning to teach peace becomes critical.

The first step toward building a teaching peace curriculum program ought to begin with the pursuit of self-knowledge, for it is with the individual that all knowledge originates. Knowledge, however, is not merely the compilation of external facts and information ("the idolatry of the factual," as Nietzsche called it), but a complex web of thoughts and emotions that transform information into understanding

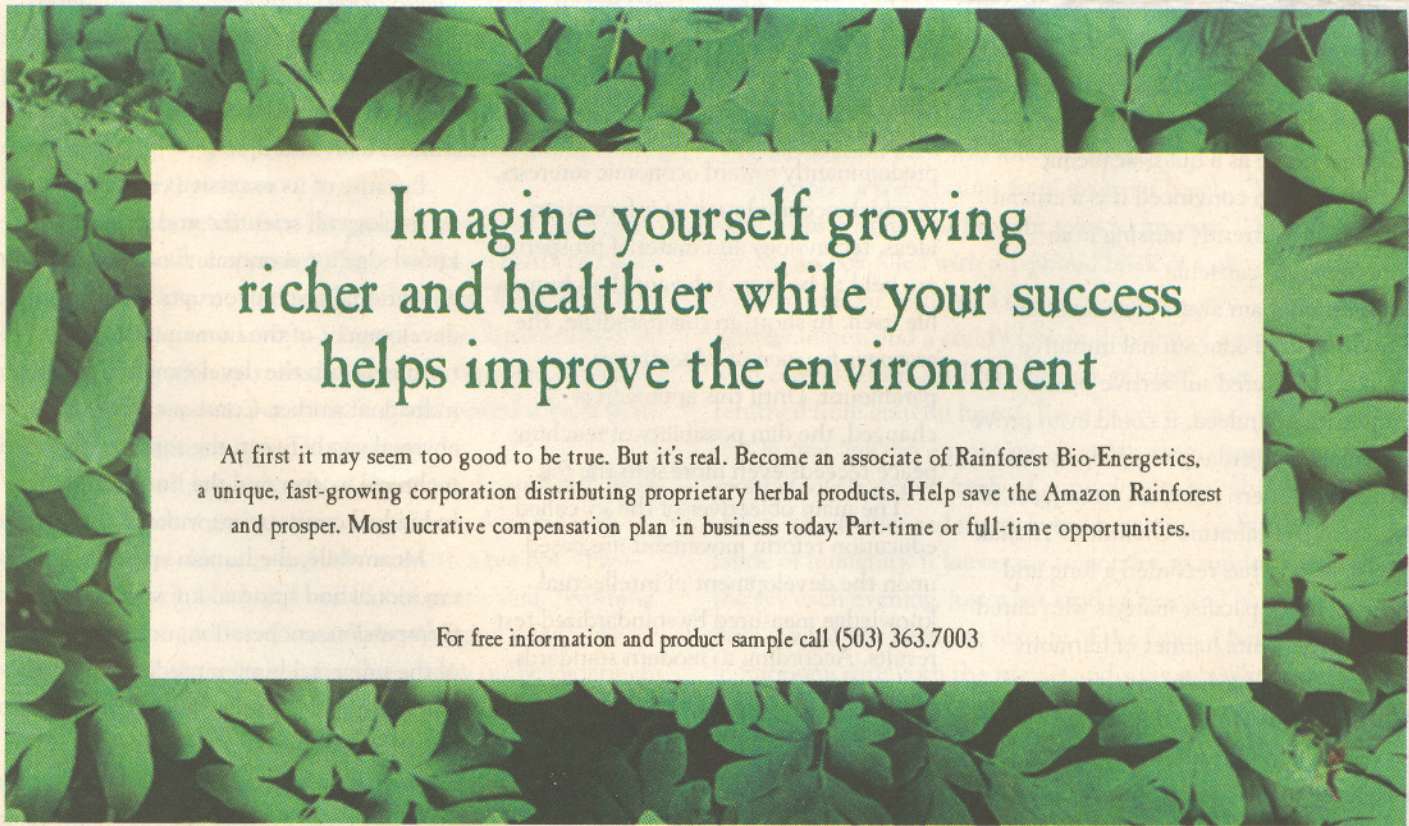
—of the self, society, and life overall. Thus, she who grows up without investigating the fundamental idiosyncracies of her own psychological and social make-up is bound to have a flawed and incomplete education. How can he fathom the reasons sustaining people's actions—and his own—when he does not understand human nature through himself?

The founder of Waldorf Education, the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), offers extraordinary insights on the pursuit of comprehensive self-knowledge through Anthroposophy, or the 'knowledge of human kind.' Steiner contends that human life is essentially the spiritual journey of individual souls. When the soul is nurtured, academic and all other types of learning ensue effortlessly. Whether one agrees with his philosophical views or not, his contributions to child development within the context of right human

relations (peace) are profound and praiseworthy.

Peace has an indissoluble and intrinsic relationship with universal love. And in the same way that a person cannot love another without loving himself, so he can only understand other people to the same degree that he understands himself. Since peace involves the participation of everyone, harmonious existence requires substantial self-knowledge; not only in an individualistic and isolated manner, but in direct connection to the common reality shared by all.

Once diligent self-study (conjoining one's individual human characteristics with sociological factors) has been initiated and securely established by an educational program, the bridge from self-knowledge to social knowledge can be safely crossed. After understanding and accepting the ephemeral, vulnerable, painful, and challenging aspects of the human condition, such prevalent



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motives as individual selfishness and self-preservation have the potential to be transformed into enlightened self-interest, i.e. an awareness for the need of brotherhood/sisterhood and peaceful cooperative effort. In this new stage of exploring social knowledge, it would be possible to assimilate the tremendous suffering humanity has endured hitherto.

Perhaps the best approach for such an educational endeavor would include more emphasis on the humanities (a human-centered investigation of historical events, arts, literature, etc.), and the cosmological ideas of the great Russian master G. I. Gurdjieff (1877-1949) and his most prominent pupil P. D. Ouspensky (1878-1947). They developed what became known as "The New Knowledge," a theory based on the premise that man does not know himself; that she knows neither her own limitations nor her capabilities.

#### Knowledge v. Wisdom

The distinction between knowledge and Wisdom also needs to be emphasized in a feasible Teach Peace program. Knowledge, for the most part, has been perceived and acquired through a Cartesian ("I think, therefore I am") perspective, that is, with the absolute dominance of the mind, while ignoring emotional and spiritual intelligence. Wisdom, however, encompasses all the elements that constitute the human make-up and experience. Therefore, knowledge is an asset only as a pathway to Wisdom; otherwise it inevitably becomes merely the product of an obsessive information accumulation process. By contrast, Wisdom is the zenith; the house where peace dwells; the stage in which mental, emotional, and spiritual intelligence are nurtured and expand. Following is a parallel that characterizes the distinction between the

two in an educational context:

<u>Knowledge</u>	<u>Wisdom</u>
Information	Awareness
Memorization	Assimilation
Learning	Becoming
I Know	I Am
I Need	I Serve
Competition	Cooperation
Traditional	Progressive
Cartesian	Holistic

**"Knowledge without love can be evil."**  
—Philosopher Francis Bacon (1561-1626)

At the core of Wisdom lies brotherly/sisterly love. Without it, knowledge can be a dangerous intellectual weapon of oppression and destruction. Although it is intellectual knowledge that makes it possible to illuminate the cities with electric light, it is love that enlightens the human spirit. Love is the guiding torch out of the dark tunnel of greed and selfishness that distinguishes industrial capitalist societies. And, as it is utterly impossible to gestate a child without the participation of both man and woman (at least by natural means), it is equally impossible to achieve Wisdom without a balanced combination of knowledge and love. Peace being an essential element of Wisdom, teaching peace would only be possible if brotherly/sisterly love became a learning discipline of a radically reformed educational system.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) declares "the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family," and that everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms of the Declaration. Nevertheless, we are far from reaching such lofty ideals, in spite of specific recommendations of this important international document. For instance, regarding the role of education in the promotion of human rights, Article 26, Clause 2 of the Declaration

states: "Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace."

The above statement endorses the arguments presented in this article: the "development of the human personality" (self-knowledge), and "promoting human rights, tolerance and friendship" (brotherly/sisterly love), are fundamental elements for the maintenance of peace. Thus, teaching peace is not only possible but becomes an imperative requisite of any responsible educational system. The course of continuing social evolution must pass through this portal.

Is it possible to teach peace? Absolutely. Pragmatically useful curricula can, should and *are* being developed and tried in schools, irrespective of culture, language and nationality. This is the real education reform that our society, and all societies, so desperately need. As far as the future for humanity is concerned, teaching peace is synonymous with hope.

As Maria Montessori (1870-1952) once averred, humankind will achieve true peace only when the child's developmental needs are fully met, and become society's highest priority in its educational system—instead of focusing on the economic function of education.

Sebastian de Assis, Ph.D. is an educator, writer and the founder of The Educational Center for Human Development. His latest book is *Re-Education Re-Form: Is It Possible to Teach Peace?* Sebastian is an education consultant dedicated to fostering the development of the whole human person (mind, heart and spirit). He designs progressive curricula for independent, alternative, charter and home schools and is available for consultation, workshops and curriculum development.