

## ABSTRACT

WAGAR, SCOTT EDWARD. *Working Toward Nonviolence in Composition*. (Under the direction of Chris M. Anson.)

This thesis suggests that composition studies is in need of further efforts to bring the concept and practice of nonviolence into the discipline's theoretical and pedagogical framework. I survey and synthesize existing literature on nonviolence in composition as well as related writing on spirituality in education, feminism, the environment, and moral education. The implications of critical pedagogy and social construction theory for the subject are also considered. Ultimately, I argue for the importance of an approach incorporating the personal and the spiritual on the part of both teachers and students. Such an approach retains a strong social perspective because it works toward an understanding that the self cannot be seen as separate from its others. Guided by these ideas, I present and discuss a proposal for a one-semester university-level composition course entitled "Writing Nonviolence." I conclude the thesis by briefly considering alternate pedagogical models and by calling for further exploration, testimony, and commitment by teachers and scholars of composition and rhetoric.

# **WORKING TOWARD NONVIOLENCE IN COMPOSITION**

by  
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Chair of Advisory Committee

**DEDICATION**

For my parents, with gratitude and love

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Scott Wagar was raised in Rotterdam, New York. He received his bachelor's degree in English and Media Study from the State University of New York at Buffalo and lived in London, England and California before pursuing graduate study in English at SUNY-Albany and North Carolina State University. While at NCSU, he served as an officer in the Self Knowledge Symposium, a student organization dedicated to exploration of spiritual issues. He plans to pursue further writing, teaching and study after receiving his master's degree.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Thanks to my family, especially my grandmothers and late grandfathers, for their support throughout my life; and to my friends, especially North Carolina 303 representatives Tom Greenwood and Leah Cole (as well as the entire Cole family). Thank you and love to Ashley for all her support during the writing of this project, and for everything else.

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## Introduction

Can we say that our pedagogies are not about expressivist writing or about entrance to the academy but about learning how to live?

– Michael Blitz and C. Mark Hurlbert

If the story of the universe had commenced with wars, not a man would have been found alive today.

– Mohandas K. Gandhi

### I.

The composition literature is full of discussions and debates about power, ideology, society and the negotiation of all of these in the classroom. Much of this literature explores violence in, or as perpetuated by, student writing and our teaching. Some – but, I think, not enough – of this work appears to directly address what seems like a simple idea: how to explore *nonviolence* in the classroom and perhaps, accordingly, to foster it in society? Mary Rose O’Reilly has asked: “Is it possible to teach English so that people stop killing each other?” (9). While it may be easy to scoff at the idealism contained within that question, how many teachers who have ever wished to “change things” have not secretly harbored such a dream? The composition classroom has been seen – by many, for a variety of reasons – as an ideal site for planting the seeds of change in students and teachers. Millions of students enroll in required first-year writing classes and upper-level composition courses, so the potential for influence is enormous. Writing is well-known as a practice able to profoundly affect the lives of both writer and reader; most composition and English teachers

entered the field because they were people who deeply felt the impact of words. So perhaps we can make the question a bit more specific: is it possible to teach writing so that people stop killing each other?

But, some respond, we're not in the business of inculcating our political views in freshmen. Who are we to say that things in our students' lives need to be changed? Even if we think that's the case, can we honestly imagine that we understand the worlds many of our students live in? "Turning the other cheek" would merely get some of these kids killed. We teach academic discourse, not pacifism. Few of us, however, would argue that our human world is not full of violence: physical, mental and emotional harm inflicted on ourselves and others. We willingly degrade our quality of life by tolerating images, deeds and words that glorify or at least passively condone actions that injure and kill our bodies, minds and spirits. We certainly do not act as if we believe "Thou shalt not kill."

My original proposal for this thesis suggested that a project exploring nonviolence in composition "seems to be based on an ideology few would openly argue with: a belief that humans should not take each other's lives." While I'd stick with my claim about the likelihood of open argument, I'm no longer so willing to make assumptions about what anyone else believes. So I feel compelled to side with O'Reilly, who points out that "the principles of nonviolence . . . reflect a [particular] tradition of values. [. . .T]his is not an apology, but an attempt to fairly disclose the premises of the argument" (76). So be it. I'm arguing that we might want to think twice about the violence we enact toward each other, and that this project is a necessary or at least desirable one. I am not arguing that composition should become synonymous with nonviolence (not that this would be a bad thing), but I do think that the convergence of the two topics has been insufficiently explored.



I find it difficult to believe that this “pipe dream” isn’t worth some effort. We’re all headed for the grave or the crematorium, but it would be nice if a few of us had some more time to gain wisdom before we get there – and if all of us were able to make the journey in a world in which wisdom was valued more than the ability to hurt.

## II.

So then: how to approach this issue? What, as we might say in the academy, are the present study’s methods and aims?

First, it seems crucial to gain some understanding of what we mean by nonviolence. While this project is certainly concerned with nonviolence in a physical sense – resistance of the compulsions, urges or habits that lead us to inflict physical harm on other humans – the term as used here should also, and perhaps primarily, be understood as a description of an attitude toward the world, a way of “being peace” (as contemporary Buddhist teacher and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh, who was nominated by Martin Luther King Jr. for the Nobel Peace Prize during the Vietnam era, puts it) that involves an experiential dimension extending even beyond situations involving direct threats of violence. The influence of figures like Gandhi and King will be important here, but perhaps, as O’Reilly puts it, more in terms of their “*spirit*” than their specific methods of nonviolent protest (98, italics in original). G. Lynn Nelson, exploring her own vision of nonviolence in English, says that, “When I talk about teaching ‘peace,’ I am talking about something far deeper than just the absence of violence. I am talking about a gentler and more harmonious way of seeing the world and being in the world that arises from our “care-full” use of words” (42). In short, I

mean to define nonviolence here as a means of changing ourselves as much as a means of changing the world.

From this conception of nonviolence, then, where to? My ultimate aim is to suggest what a nonviolent college composition class might look like in light of what we know about teaching, writing, the university, our students and ourselves. This course is a hypothetical proposal; it is not a course I have taught – at least, not yet – but it is informed by, in addition to the thinking and contemplation of many others, my own (admittedly limited at this point) experience in teaching writing. While my proposal imagines a course centered on a *theme* of nonviolence, it is also, I hope, a proposal that takes seriously the idea that our teaching itself may be implicated in the perpetuation of violence. Further, while this project sketches out a semester-long course, it also includes elements that might apply to other courses and to those without the full desire or ability to teach a thematic course.

First I look to the wisdom of those who have attempted similar experiments in their own classrooms. O'Reilly's work certainly provides one of the strong foundations here, but it is important to note that her approach grows somewhat more from the standpoint of a literature teacher than from that of a composition teacher as we commonly imagine it. So I also invoke the voices of others who have defined their approaches in similar terms but from more of a "composition" perspective. A difference between explorations of violence and of *non*violence has already been suggested here, and while I do think there is importance in the addition of the prefix (after all, we're in the business of assuming that a few letters here or there can make a difference), I hardly mean to imply that those who look at "violence" in writing don't frequently share the same goals. So a source doesn't have to have the phrase "nonviolence" in it to be useful here, but I *am* especially interested in the work of those who

explicitly characterize their approaches in terms of nonviolence or peace. However, while one of my central assumptions – if not *the* central assumption – is, with Gandhi, that peace, not conflict, is the inherent basis for our existence, nonviolence as discussed here is without a doubt inextricably tied up with violence. Accordingly, it doesn't seem necessary to comb the prose of this project with the intent of removing anything that might be construed as a violent metaphor or unkind word. However, since it has been claimed that the very act of argument may carry violent implications, I feel compelled to examine this idea and some related ones. Could we as English teachers ourselves be perpetrators of violence?

Another part of our own self-examination is consideration of our politics and favored ideologies. If we want to raise the possibility of bringing nonviolence into the composition classroom, we have to take into account the fact that such a move would be viewed as – and indeed would *be* – a political act. Therefore, I look at the idea of critical pedagogy and at arguments for and against a “politicized” classroom. As I've noted, I'm coming from a particular standpoint here (not that I could *avoid* writing from some perspective), and looking at a relatively unexplored topic. There is no doubt that objections to the proposed course would be made, and it is vital that these objections not be merely countered but seriously considered. Our students deserve at least this much.

The ideological content of our course will not be the only issue. An integration of nonviolence into our lives through writing seems unlikely if we confine ourselves to writing that is thoroughly “academic,” and yet a move into personal writing will bring a new set of objections. And there is more here to consider as well, because, within the realm of the personal, the subject of nonviolence is likely to compel an involved writer into an area perhaps even more verboten in the academy: the spiritual. Jesus, Gandhi, King and many of

the most well-known proponents of nonviolence have spoken and acted from undeniably spiritual perspectives, and an increasing number of educators are likewise arguing that we cannot leave spirituality out of the picture if we hope for our teaching to have real effects. As we will see, this discussion involves a look not just at what our students do, but at what *we* do. And as the personal and spiritual reveal themselves to be the heart of an ideal nonviolent composition class, the usefulness of other perspectives becomes clearer: feminist and ecological writers also have valuable ideas to contribute to this endeavor, in both theoretical and practical terms. So, too, do some of those interested in the age-old question “Can virtue be taught?” – a question whose relation to O’Reilly’s query about teaching English seems clear even if “nonviolence” is, rather sadly, rarely identified as a virtue in itself.

With a strong base of ideas established for thinking about nonviolence in composition, I move into a set of suggestions for what a college writing course concerned with nonviolence might look like. In addition to what may be the most pressing question – what kind of writing will students do? – we need to ask, “What kind of – and how much – writing will students *read*?” I propose some answers to these questions in an annotated sketch for a course entitled “Writing Nonviolence.”

In the end – though, in this effort, we really only seem to be at the beginning – I briefly assess the possible contributions of some alternative and complementary approaches to the ones I’ve favored and consider what will need to be done for nonviolent composition to become more than just a fringe approach. I suggest that interested teachers, who appear to be relatively plentiful, need to continue writing and talking about their own pedagogies, experiences and theories and working to bring ideas about topics like spirituality and

nonviolent rhetoric more into the mainstream of academic discussion. Ultimately, while I cannot claim to have discovered the perfect approach to such a project, my analysis points up clear pedagogical trends in the directions I'm advocating, probably because of a shared sense that our students, and even we, are, in this violent world, often lacking in knowledge not only about others but also about self. Undoubtedly, there are inherent limitations for our powers of change as teachers, but, as we will see, many of us feel something needs to be done – and many of us think we can be a part of that something.

## 1: Composition, Rhetoric, and Nonviolence

That's why I love writing: in writing we can go straight for how things ought to be.

-Peter Elbow

### Nonviolence in Composition

It would be inaccurate to say that compositionists have written little on the subject of nonviolence. But few have couched their work in such explicit terms. Given the scope of the current project, I have chosen to concentrate largely on works that specifically announce their perspectives as nonviolent. However, since, as we will see, discussions about “peaceable” teaching raise questions not only about course content but about pedagogical methods and even the nature of writing and academic discourse themselves, we must expand our examination beyond these “nonviolent” works. Beginning with them, however, is appropriate.

O'Reilley's 1993 The Peaceable Classroom is probably the best-known work on nonviolent English teaching, and not only because of its very quotable articulation (borrowed from Ihab Hassan, one of O'Reilley's own college teachers) of the aforementioned question, “Is it possible to teach English so that people stop killing each other?” Peter Elbow, in his foreword to O'Reilley's book, declares it a work that gives him “courage and hope” (xi) and says that “O'Reilley's words do more than most words from the profession that I've read in a long time” (xiv). So what makes the book special? Much of its impact stems from the fact that O'Reilley is up-front about her life, her standpoint on the issue – a standpoint she realizes may not be for everyone – and her failures. She has no

thesis as such; she notes that her book “is not a how-to manual” (xvii) and that it is “more poetic than discursive” (xviii). While this may be true, I want to argue for the book’s usefulness as part of my attempt at a somewhat more academic articulation of the potential place of nonviolence in composition. For one thing, The Peaceable Classroom is extremely readable: organized in a very loosely chronological but primarily thematic manner, it is, perhaps most importantly, engaging and honest. Some may find its style too personal to function as any sort of persuasive academic text – but O’Reilley argues that the personal must be at the heart of any nonviolent teaching philosophy (a point to be examined at greater length later). Among its many virtues, then, the book *models* the kind of writing students might ideally strive for in a “nonviolent” writing classroom.

For a teacher whose primary focus seems to be literature rather than composition per se, O’Reilley does not at all neglect writing or a composition perspective. Indeed, her second chapter focuses on the teaching of writing as an instrumental part of her own approach. She asserts that “[b]y incorporating such strategies as group process and freewriting, by defining the concept of voice – what we now think of as a process model for teaching writing – [pioneering composition theorists and writing teachers] Macrorie, Elbow and their colleagues were laying out, I believe, a pedagogy of nonviolence” (39). Further emphasizing her belief in the importance of method in teaching writing, O’Reilley relates the story of her encounter with a young colleague at a professional conference who asserts that pedagogical theory is just “a game” which “gives [academics] something to talk about”; O’Reilley’s silent response is “Excuse me . . . but I think this game is a matter of life or death” (39). She is not, however, exactly effusive in her praise of the “hideous in-group jargon” (55) of typical scholarly writing:

The other day as I was reading the first chapter of Mark's gospel, I came upon the familiar passage where Jesus begins his career of teaching and driving out demons. 'He has authority,' the people say. 'He doesn't talk like the Scribes.'

The next question I had to ask was, 'How did the Scribes talk?'

Well, I suppose nowadays we would call it 'academic discourse.' (58)

O'Reilley advocates helping students find a personal voice instead of teaching them to mimic an academic dialect; as I will discuss later, she ties this "discovery of voice" directly into the higher goals of her project. Her overall emphases, then, are on the importance of the individual, the spiritual and the poetic in writing "peaceably," and on the special importance of writing pedagogy in her attempt to focus on nonviolence in her teaching. However, for those interested in joining this quest, from within composition or without, O'Reilley is quick to note that "we may be dismayed by the magnitude of the task" (36).

It is with full knowledge of the enormous scope of this undertaking – and an acknowledgement of debt to O'Reilley for framing their guiding question – that Michael Blitz and C. Mark Hurlbert begin their 1998 Letters for the Living: Teaching Writing in a Violent Age, perhaps the most notable "pure" composition work to address the issue of nonviolence and writing pedagogy. Made up largely of a series of e-mail messages between Blitz and Hurlbert, the book is, like O'Reilley's, unabashedly personal rather than theoretical. Unlike The Peaceable Classroom, however, samples of student texts make up a sizable percentage of the book; it is this focus on student writing that perhaps most distinguishes Letters for the Living as a "composition" work. The three main textual threads running through the book – the authors' messages to each other, their students' class work (mostly embedded in the e-mail message texts), and the jointly-authored commentary in



between – add up to a more intense version of the familiar back-and-forth between student writing and researcher commentary often seen in the composition literature. In some sections, the effect is soothing, as the author/friends trade late-night messages; but in any given chapter, we are not far from a jarring account of a personal revelation from a student. In that sense, Letters for the Living embodies its twin subjects: the violence of students' worlds and the world at large, and the places – sometimes only moments – of peace that Blitz and Hurlbert maintain are possible to find in our lives as well as in our students' writing and our own. Their insistence on the possibility of this peace in the face of so much strife squares well with my own central assumption, via Gandhi, that peace, not violence, is our essential “base” condition. Encouragement of students' acknowledgement of both of these areas of their lives – but perhaps with a more guided focus toward the peaceful aspect – is something that, as we will see, I borrow from Blitz and Hurlbert as an integral part of my proposal for a nonviolent composition course.

O'Reilly and Blitz and Hurlbert certainly seem to have provided what might be considered the foundational texts on this topic, but they are not alone in writing about their interest. Contributors to the May 2000 issue of English Journal, titled “A Curriculum of Peace,” take their own looks at the possibilities for incorporating nonviolence into the teaching of English and writing – though the influence of The Peaceable Classroom's “Is it possible...” question is seen here in many of the articles. Editor Virginia R. Monseau notes that she intended for the issue to “focus not on the violence, but on the hoped-for result of ‘peaceable’ teaching” (15). She expresses gratification at the quantity of submissions received for the issue, saying that she is “pleased . . . to know that so many teachers have been working so hard” (16) at attempting to integrate nonviolence in their classrooms. (This

evidence of substantial interest in the topic calls to mind for me the responses I received while working on this project; those to whom I mentioned its subject often expressed enthusiasm noticeably beyond the polite, “Oh, that’s interesting” I’d expect, and several asked to read or be told more about the project upon its completion.) English Journal is ostensibly aimed at teachers of middle- and senior-high-school English – indeed, an unsurprisingly recurring theme in the “Curriculum of Peace” issue is the 1999 Columbine High School tragedy, and in-school violence (seemingly less of a constant worry in the university environment) is an explicit concern for the volume’s writers. However, a number of the articles in the issue are written by college teachers and are applicable to the university composition class (though many of us might wonder anyway if our first-year college students are so very different from their high-school-senior selves). Characteristic of the approaches at work in the issue are G. Lynn Nelson’s focus, with O’Reilly, on the importance of the personal story and of ““deep listening”” (qtd. in Nelson 44) for a nonviolent composition pedagogy; Sara Dalmas Jonsberg’s argument for the importance of “HOW we teach” and “WHO we are” over “WHAT we teach” (28); and Marsha Lee Holmes’ concentration on treating examples of violence in popular culture as “opportunities for peacemaking” (101). Each of these essays adds something important to the discussion and to this project, for, as I will suggest, both how *and* what we teach would be important in an ideal nonviolent composition class.

Although it does not appear in a mainstream composition publication or under a well-known composition imprint, Michael Eckert’s “Writing for Peace in the Composition Classroom” from the 1999-2000 issue of Journal for the Study of Peace and Conflict is also worth examining. Eckert’s short essay eschews “meditation on how we go where we are”

(par. 2) in favor of a description of specific assignments from his second-semester composition course, some of which are based on the work of peace researcher Michael True. Interestingly, some of these assignments are rather similar to ones I devised as part of a sample class proposal a year before reading Eckert's article. While my model naturally differs from Eckert's and his brief piece leaves much unsaid, the article is notable among the works discussed so far for being the only one that lays out a semester-long assignment sequence explicitly intended to foster thinking and writing about nonviolence.

My focus on these particular works, as I suggest above, is intended to highlight the work of those who give special attention to promoting peace through writing pedagogy, not to discount the efforts of the apparently great number of composition teachers who, like Candace Spigelman, "hope to promote human understanding and a more peaceful society" (321) in their own ways but do not couch their discussions in explicit terms of nonviolence. "Mere" intention like Spigelman's, though, may be very important, for, as most of the above authors – O'Reilly and Jonsberg in particular – assert in one way or another, the means we use as teachers, the quality and "peaceableness" of our presence in the classroom, may be just as, or perhaps even more, important than the particular assignments we give. Could it be, though, that the *how* of our pedagogy is already inextricable from the *what*, in ways *not* conducive to teaching peace?

### **The Violence of Argument, Literacy, and Education?**

A number of authors have asked us to consider the possibility that, as Sally Miller Gearhart puts it, "any intent to persuade is an act of violence" (195). Argument, the positing and defense of a thesis, is the common thread running through what many of us teach. So, by instructing students in skills for arguing, are we immediately complicit in making them

agents of violence? Lakoff and Johnson, in their often-cited study of the pervasiveness of metaphor in thought and action, The Metaphors We Live By, begin with the example “Argument is war” (4) and return frequently to it, claiming that it is a primary guiding concept not only for how we talk and write but for how we think and live. According to Lakoff and Johnson, “we talk about arguments that way [in terms of war] because we conceive of them that way – and we act according to the way we conceive of things” (5). They later suggest that “whether in national politics or in everyday interaction, people in power get to impose their metaphors” (157).

So, as teachers of writing and “people in power,” which metaphors are we imposing? While Lakoff and Johnson’s claim about the centrality of the “argument as war” metaphor is convincing, I do not think that we are “stuck” with this model. Lakoff and Johnson ask us to

imagine a culture where arguments are not viewed in terms of war, where no one wins or loses, where there is no sense of attacking or defending, gaining or losing ground. Imagine a culture where argument is viewed as dance, the participants are seen as performers, and the goal is to perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way. In such a culture, people would view arguments differently, experience them differently, carry them out differently, and talk about them differently. (4-5)

While Lakoff and Johnson seem to propose this example for the sake of explaining their idea of metaphor rather than for seriously positing an alternative, and while I am not suggesting we subscribe to this particular model, I do mean to point out that alternative ways of thinking about argument have been promoted. A number of feminist compositionists and rhetoricians – generally working either from the notion of “argument as violence” or from a

model that believes females are inherently different communicators from men, or from some combination of the two (Fulkerson, n. pag.) – have suggested shifting our focus away from argument altogether in favor of a more “sharing”-oriented model. Others, like Richard Fulkerson, have even suggested that argument itself be re-conceptualized as a “partnership” (n. pag.) rather than as a battle. Maryann Ayim, whom Fulkerson cites as a researcher with concerns similar to his own, notes the prominence of violent metaphors in academic discourse, particularly in science and philosophy (a matter that may especially concern those of us involved in writing-across-the-curriculum and writing-in-the-disciplines approaches), and suggests that “[r]eason itself will be better served if we abandon the metaphor of the battlefield for the more humane and human metaphor of the cooperative community” (192). Peter Elbow’s appendix to the seminal<sup>1</sup> Writing Without Teachers claims that the “believing game” – making a genuine effort to understand another person’s point of view – is as important to intellectual work as the “doubting game,” an attempt to find fault with every proposition or viewpoint; this argument furthers his suggestions from earlier in the book that members of a writing group should (among other things) listen attentively and respect each others’ readings. (I recently saw this approach to interaction, if not writing, during a visit to a Buddhist monastery, in a group activity known as “dharma discussion”. Participants were asked to listen attentively while one member at a time spoke about personal concerns, but they were also asked to simply notice, rather than mentally run with, any inclinations toward judgement or desire to formulate a response. My own experience with the challenge of this practice suggests that it would be a worthwhile sort of activity with which to engage students.)

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<sup>1</sup> Ayim makes the interesting suggestion of “ovarian” and “mammarian” as feminist alternatives to the word “seminal.”

It seems, then, that academic writing need not be imagined – or taught, or lived – in an agonistic way. Lakoff and Johnson may be right about the prevalence of such a view, but, particularly in an enterprise in which we imagine a different world, I think that we can also imagine a different discourse. And while Gearhart’s claim about argument is thought-provoking, it remains, as Fulkerson notes, an argument – an attempt to change our attitudes about argument, but an attempt to change nonetheless (Fulkerson, n. pag.). A popular composition textbook by Lunsford and Ruskiewicz is titled Everything’s an Argument, and the title’s claim, as Fulkerson also notes, can reasonably be applied to almost all written discourse. Ellen W. Gorsevski’s recent attempt to establish a “foundation for developing a theory of nonviolent rhetoric” (xxii) is called Peaceful Persuasion, and in it Gorsevski argues that “persuasion is not necessarily violent (or even coercive) when it is performed in the context of true nonviolent action” (186). (In Gorsevski’s paradigm, nonviolent rhetoric is rhetoric that aims to promote social justice and has an educational effect inviting – rather than compelling – its audience “to initiate self-imposed, self-driven change” [188].) Part of our job as educators of nonviolence, therefore, will be to help students see that, if much of what they write for others can be viewed as argument, this writing need not be “loud, raucous, vituperative, and occasionally violent,” as Eckert’s students, according to him, often perceive argument (n. pag.).

We should also, however, address another well-known work that equates the teaching of English with violence: J. Elspeth Stuckey’s The Violence of Literacy. Rather than focusing on any inherent violence of language use, Stuckey argues that literacy is highly valued in our society for reasons that are essentially economic and political: literacy standards serve to help those in power remain in power by favoring members of the dominant class and race.

According to Stuckey, this means that as teachers, our attempts to foist a “correct” language on our diverse population of students are acts of violence as sure as the more obvious ones perpetrated by society at large. However, a clear answer on Stuckey’s part as to what we should do is not forthcoming; Patricia Bizzell notes that Stuckey continues to teach English herself and opines that “[p]erhaps Stuckey, in the fashion of many good critical pedagogues, does not want to presume to suggest solutions; they will have to be worked out by each of her readers” (n. pag.).

While I also do not find The Violence of Literacy to be a call for us to give up teaching, its argument may be especially valuable in keeping us humble because of its suggestion that we may hardly be “above” the violence we hope to reduce. Humility, in fact, will be an essential part of a project such as this. We may feel that our motives are pure, but as members of an institution – the university – we cannot claim freedom from complicity in institutional violence, which is almost certainly present in some respects. As Russel Lawrence Barsh and Chantelle Marlor point out,

Like any other large human organization, the university and its classrooms are theaters of power, domination, and aggression . . . We teach within an environment which is itself part of the topic of violence, and students are not blind to this fact. Many feel stressed, depressed, abused, and marginalized. Some have been sexually manipulated, others subjected to capricious grading or unreasonable rules and regulations. Teaching about violence as if its location is somewhere else does little to enhance an instructor's credibility as a scholar. (3)

Indeed, Gearhart's claim about the violence of persuasion could be viewed as an indictment of education as a whole.<sup>2</sup> But Paulo Freire suggests otherwise, that indeed "any situation in which people are *prevented* from learning is one of violence" (Watkinson 3; italics mine). Bizzell offers another version of this view, which begins to take us into more political and ideological territory. In "The Politics of Teaching Virtue," she cites an instance in which rhetorician Stephen Mailloux, discussing with students a militaristic Defense Department reinterpretation of the ostensibly peace-promoting U.S. Space Act of 1958, found himself unable to convince a student of the incorrectness of the reinterpretation. According to Bizzell, Mailloux's attempt at persuasion failed because he was "embarrassed" to couch his argument in anything more than theoretical terms: "Mailloux [could not] allow himself to talk directly about the moral commitments that inform[ed] his work" ("Politics" 5). Bizzell goes on to say, "I feel strongly that American academics are abandoning their responsibility to the community when they allow a theoretical perspective to silence them on questions of grave importance to common security" (6). Although Bizzell's concerns are broadly defined as ones of "social justice" rather than nonviolence, violence of all sorts is most certainly a threat to common security – and, according to Bizzell's view, ignoring that threat may actually mean that we are *adding* to the existing layers of violence.

So we can give up, despondent at the possibility that we will never be able to step outside of the web of violence, or we can resolve to be mindful of our probable place in that web and to do what we can to reduce the ways in which we perpetrate violence. I argue for the latter. We do need, though, to examine more fully the issues raised here by Bizzell's claims. Again, we may believe our motives to be pure, but even nonviolence can be seen as

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<sup>2</sup> Gearhart, however, taught at San Francisco State University from before "The Womanization of Rhetoric" was published in 1979 until the early 1990s, suggesting she may not have shared this view ("Small Town").



ideological. Thich Nhat Hanh's Order of Interbeing organization offers this guideline as the very first of its "Mindfulness Trainings": "Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, I am determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology" ("Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings"). This seems like reasonable advice, but are we following it? Could promotion of the ideologies that motivate our teaching also implicate us in violence even as we think we are helping? To find out, we need to look more closely at the issues of critical pedagogy and politics in the classroom vis-à-vis our project. We will then begin to see how the political intertwines with the personal approach we have already seen advocated.

## **2: The Political and the Personal**

I have come to distrust any pedagogy that does not begin in the personal . . . [and] any pedagogy that does not conclude in the communal.

-Mary Rose O'Reilley

### **Politics and Ideology**

At the time of this writing, fighting rages in Iraq (in the wake of the Second Gulf War) and in innumerable other places, and the accompanying debates are frequently presented as politically polarized ones. In this atmosphere (one that seems unlikely to disappear very soon), a course based on a writing pedagogy of nonviolence, defined explicitly as such, would surely raise questions about the appropriateness of “politicizing” the composition classroom, and the course’s very existence might be endangered from the start. Thus, we need to look at where our course might fit into the broader debate over politics in the composition classroom.

Critical pedagogy, of which Freire is popularly credited as the founder and which constitutes an attempt to engage instructors and students in an examination of the conditions in which they teach and learn, is a much discussed and contested practice, partly because it frequently involves an explicit statement of political leanings on the part of the teacher. Debates about the wisdom and ethics of creating a “politicized” classroom became especially prominent in the 1990s in the wake of a proposed course at the University of Texas-Austin called “Writing about Difference,” which would have focused student writing on analyses of arguments in a series of discrimination cases from federal courts. The

course's perceived political content created a furor not only at UT-Austin but also in the popular press and then in the composition field at large. In the wake of this uproar – fueled according to Linda Brodkey, one of the creators of the syllabus, largely by the efforts of those who had never even seen the course plan – the proposed class was never taught. (The syllabus for “Writing About Difference,” which has since been published, does indeed seem more focused on rhetorical analysis of arguments than on the promotion of specific political positions.)

The episode at Texas marked the beginning of a wider discussion among compositionists. One of the principal arguments against the Texas course, and against writing courses with political content in general, was typified by Maxine Hairston, former CCCC chairperson and a professor at UT-Austin at the time of the “Writing about Difference” controversy (it is not clear whether Hairston was among those who had seen the syllabus):

Now, however, I see a new model emerging for freshman writing programs, a model that disturbs me greatly. It's a model that puts dogma before diversity, politics before craft, ideology before critical thinking, and the social goals of the teacher before the educational needs of the student . . . The new model envisions required writing courses as vehicles for social reform rather than as student-centered workshops designed to build students' confidence and competence as writers.

(“Diversity,” 660)

Hairston's view was echoed in print by a number of other compositionists but countered by, seemingly, at least as many. William H. Thelin called Hairston “naïve” for her “belief that classrooms can be depoliticized” (“Response” 252). According to Thelin's line of

reasoning, teachers bring their political baggage with them to the classroom whether they admit it or not (even to themselves), so explicit statements of political belief are mere statements of honesty. Thelin feels that in Hairston's version of the ideal classroom, "the politics are [merely] kept covert," and calls on Hairston to give up her naivete and focus "on ethical ways to negotiate race, class, and gender in a politically overt classroom" (253).

Hairston and Thelin thus represent, more or less, the two "poles" of thought on the issue. Both raise issues relevant to a writing course centered on nonviolence. We need to worry about whether such a course might place "the social goals of the teacher before the educational needs of the student," and we also need to worry about the role of the teacher's personal beliefs and about "ethical ways to negotiate race, class, and gender," all of which will undeniably come into play in any examination of the violence in our world and our own roles in that world. One of the biggest problems such a class needs to address, though, is demonstrated in the very move I've just ostensibly made: setting up two positions as *opposed* to each other. I'm very concerned about the tendency of politically-minded individuals of all sorts to take positions, to draw lines in the sand, and often to invoke the very agonism that instructors interested in nonviolence would ideally be working to reduce. We might keep in mind a point that has been made about peace efforts in general: "nonviolent" activists who aren't peaceful in their dealings with themselves or others may not be of much help to anyone. (The *how*, again, being as important as the *what*.) I imagine that many teachers interested in teaching a nonviolent writing course would have – as, I think, do I – a set of beliefs that would tend to identify them with the "left." But an absolutely crucial aspect of this course's success would be a willingness for teacher and students to play Elbow's "believing game," to make an earnest attempt to *listen* to each

other's points of view. I would, however, certainly be explicit about my belief that nonviolence doesn't get as fair a hearing as I think it ought to in the world at large, even if I believe that students would "figure this out" for themselves from context. Establishing an honest atmosphere from the beginning of the class would seem essential. Indeed, any teacher willing to lead a class of this sort would need to be able, to some degree at least, to push past the "embarrassment" about moral commitments cited by Bizzell.

But how, then, to deal with a concern that Hairston ("Required Writing Courses") and others raise: that students learning under a teacher with a professed viewpoint will simply learn to "parrot" that position in hope of greater success in the class? James Berlin, among others, has argued that in his experience with "political" writing pedagogy this doesn't happen: students still assume viewpoints other than that of the teacher. Candace Spigelman, however, confesses to a suspicion that her attempts to "promote human understanding and a more peaceful society" (321) sometimes result in students who change their positions on paper but remain unconvinced in actuality; she notes that "[a]lthough they [students] may ape our pieties, they may not internalize our hopes for a better world" (338). Spigelman's statement is not only an honest appraisal of the possible "real-world" effects of ethically-minded instruction but also one that brings us back to Hairston's worry about teachers' "social goals" taking precedence over the teaching of writing. In our case, both of these issues lead back to an important point: what are the "social goals" of a writing course on nonviolence?

The aims of such a course are, as I have suggested, not to get students to question this or that war in particular but to help them become stronger writers while querying themselves and others about what causes violence in the first place. Nonviolence, in the way I mean it

here, is a unique focus for composition. This is in part because such a focus, as we shall see, will almost certainly *demand* change for us as teachers, while we can only *hope* for change on the part of our students who are, first and foremost, in a writing course. I think there is much truth to the notion that changing ourselves is an essential part of changing the world, especially the world's tendency toward violent action. In The Universal Schoolhouse, a call for a sweeping revision of our conception of education as well as our educational practices via a change in focus to "personal growth" (xi), James Moffett argues, "personal development [in education] must be central, because all solutions to public problems, no matter how collective the action, depend on mature, enlightened individuals to call for and indeed insist on these solutions" (xv-xvi). As O'Reilley puts it in her critique of "formal peace curricula": "[p]erhaps what I am encouraging instead is Inner Peace Studies, which asks Who am I? Am I at peace with who I am? Who are these other people? What is the nature of community? What do they believe, and why? Is it possible for us to work together?" (Peaceable 37). A composition class examining such questions can still be a course where writing is central, and posing such questions as our central ones need not result in either sloppy thinking, lack of intellectual rigor, or a class that has a set-in-stone "social goal" beyond asking students to examine, via writing, issues that are undoubtedly important to them.

Indeed, O'Reilley's questions seem to me to be entirely consistent with, if not indeed to form the essence of, the questions that motivate the humanities and social sciences, and give us reason to desire exploring the physical world through the sciences at all. Since, in the context of a writing course, such questions will likely lead to very personal answers, it is appropriate here to look at the conversation about the role of "personal" writing in

composition, a conversation that also involves questions of politics and student welfare and one that brings us closer to the heart of what a nonviolent composition course should be.

### **The Personal**

As we have seen, many of those who have experimented with or considered the question of nonviolence in composition have written from a personal perspective and advocated that their students do the same. In the original version of this project, produced for my first graduate course in composition theory and informed by a single reading of O'Reilly, a semester's worth of composition studies readings and my own instincts and experience as a student, personal writing predominated as well. Why? Blitz and Hurlbert say that the very personal Letters for the Living "is one attempt to peel away some theoretical abstractions so that we might better understand the personal and culture implications of what each student is telling us, the uniqueness of each student, of each life. No one encounters violence or peace in general. The experience of each is always unique" (21). Not only do Blitz and Hurlbert believe in the value of their students' personal writing for themselves, their students and their students' classmates, they believe in its value for others in composition studies: "[T]he fact is that sometimes when we are in the classroom, the only map of rhetoric and pedagogy that we can make is an anecdotal map in which we collect the various stories told to us by our students, a collection we share with our friends and colleagues with the idea of creating a deep history of shared experiences" (21). Indeed, it seems to me that personal writing is valuable because it is memorable, because it has the potential to make others' experiences our own. If we mean to work toward nonviolence, we need to learn from the "unique" instances of peace and violence that give those abstract concepts their meaning. Nelson too argues for the importance of student stories, claiming, "In an increasingly impersonal

society, personal story affords self-affirmation, a modicum of esteem” (43). She goes on to make the connection with violence:

Deny me my stories, as the modern dominant culture does, and I will eventually turn to the language of violence. . . . In such a society . . . we are literally dying to tell our stories. The tragedy at Columbine High School, like all such violence, was a publishing of untold stories, unheard needs, unhealed hurts. (43-44)

Nelson may appear to be arguing from an underlying assumption about “writing as therapy,” and while the assumption may not be without some merit (I give some attention to this topic in Chapter 5), we need not be convinced to appreciate the idea that stories can help us learn about the experiences of others, relate those experiences to our own, and therefore see others as more like ourselves, more human. It has been well established that rhetorical dehumanization is often connected to neglect and violence (see, for example, Solomon, 1985; Katz, 1992). If, however, we are able – perhaps through telling and listening to personal stories – to view an ever-growing number of others as human, we may be less likely to commit acts of violence against those others.

One need not, however, be a compositionist of nonviolence to share in the belief that students and their writing can be well-served by an emphasis on the personal. Indeed, Hairston cites the power of student experience as part of her objection to politicized courses (in this case, explicitly “multicultural” courses) and notes that

[a]s writing teachers, we can help students articulate and understand that experience, but we also have the important job of helping every writer to understand that each of us sees the world through our own particular lens, one shaped by unique experiences.



In order to communicate with others, we must learn to see through their lenses as well to try to explain to them what we see through ours. (“Diversity” 672)

It seems that Hairston’s professed goals for her own writing pedagogy share much in common with the ones that have been articulated here. Indeed, in keeping with the idea of finding common ground, I think it is wise to note at this point that a seemingly genuine concern for student welfare is a near-constant in the readings I’ve seen debating or promoting this or that pedagogy, though I can appreciate the arguments of both those who say that “political” teaching treats students as means to an end and those who claim that teachers who ignore politics do students a disservice. Hairston seems to be troubled by what she considers a lack of concern for students, but not by what most of us seem to agree should form the center of a nonviolent writing course – that is, personal writing. While the fact that one of the most widely-quoted opponents of politicized writing classes has voiced support for the methods we want to use is potentially a boost for the prospects of our course, it would certainly not be enough to protect the course from all objections. (Not that anything could – basic administrative wrangling provides enough trouble for new courses that come without a whiff of overt politics, so we should not in any case imagine that this class would not invite scrutiny.) But it is a good sign, I think, that this is an area on which we seem to be able to find some kind of agreement.

This agreement, however, is not universal. David Bartholomae and James Berlin, among others, have argued against a primarily “expressivist” approach to composition, claiming that such an approach ignores what we have learned about the socially-constructed nature of knowledge. Bartholomae, writing about a student’s paper on her parents’ divorce, claims that “[w]e’ve all read this essay. We’ve read it because the student cannot invent a

way of talking about family, sex roles, separation” (“Writing” 484). He notes that, in his pedagogy

I begin by *not* granting the writer her “own” presence in that paper . . . I begin instead by asking her to read her paper as a text already written by the culture, representing a certain predictable version of the family, the daughter and the writer . . . I ask her to revise in such a way that the order of the essay is broken – to write against the grain of the discourse that has determined her account of her family. (“Response” 502)

In this pedagogic paradigm, not only the student’s writing but her very conception of “self” is called into question: is this conception “hers,” or is it necessarily determined by cultural and societal forces? Bartholomae, it seems, would argue for the latter. Berlin, in his discussion of major approaches to the teaching of writing, takes the discussion into more overtly political territory when he says that

[i]n the name of empowering the individual . . . [a personal-writing-based pedagogy’s] naivety [sic] about economic, social, and political arrangements can lead to the marginalizing of the individuals who would resist a dehumanizing society, rendering them ineffective through their isolation. This rhetoric is also easily co-opted by the agencies of corporate capitalism, appropriated and distorted in the service of the mystifications of bourgeois individualism. (“Rhetoric” 697)

As noted earlier, and as seems apparent here, Berlin is a proponent of the “politicized” writing classroom, and his politics are explicitly of the left. This presents an interesting kind of tension for our project, since, as we have seen, an interest in nonviolent pedagogy will likely position us on the left side of the political spectrum (whether or not we wish to be

associated with such acts of positioning in the first place). Thus Berlin, who would probably agree with many of our wishes for the betterment of our students, criticizes the means by which we hope to help them work toward a less violent world.

But the “expressivist”/social constructionist “divide” is hardly an absolute one. Thomas Newkirk agrees with constructionist notions such as the idea that “[t]he student who writes personally is not revealing a unique self”, noting, “if that were the case it would be pointless to generalize about it” (95); however, he claims that Berlin’s argument about personal writing’s potential for serving dominant interests is a weak one, drawing on similarity rather than causation, and is just as easily turned against the more critical “cultural studies” approach that Berlin advocates, since a hyper-critical approach might be seen as, for example, a useful business tool (89). Other theorists such as Candace Spigelman – who, as we’ve seen, is an explicit proponent of a “more peaceful society” – and Jane E. Hindman have argued that the use of the personal need not preclude attention either to the social aspects of writing and knowledge, nor, because the personal “too offers claims, reasons and evidence for serious analysis and critique” (Spigelman “Argument” 83), to academic rigor – the charge that a pedagogy based on personal writing may be anti- or at least extra-intellectual being another one that often needs to be countered. While Spigelman and Hindman both consider the question largely in terms of the role of the personal in professional academic writing, each writer also suggests that her arguments can apply to considerations of student writing. But the fact that the case has been made for the legitimacy of the personal in our own writing is important too, for it helps create an atmosphere where we can more confidently (in a professional sense) draw from works like Letters for the Living – with its focus on the ways in which Blitz and Hurlbert’s “private”

lives parallel and connect with those of their students – and The Peaceable Classroom, which is explicitly situated within the framework of O'Reilly's own life not only as a teacher but as a single parent, a peace activist, and a spiritual seeker. (Not to mention that it helps a project such as ours seem more viable.)

If student writing is ultimately our primary concern here, however, I think it is wise to note that, in addition to writers such as Spigelman and Hindman, even more prominent figures such as Peter Elbow have weighed in on the social constructionists' concerns. In a response to Bartholomae (part of a multi-part written "conversation" from which the earlier Bartholomae excerpts here are taken), Elbow addresses the other scholar's approach to students such as the one who wrote the "divorce" essay and explains his own, more "hands-off" style:

What the culture does – as you point out so powerfully – is to do their thinking for them. Therefore it seems to me that the most precious thing I can do is provide spaces where I don't also do their thinking for them (despite the attendant risks of giving more room for the culture). In contrast, your response to her paper seems to do her thinking for her – that is, you are telling her that she thought she meant X, but really she didn't; she thought she told what she saw and experienced, but really her perceptions and experience were a script written out for her by the culture. It feels important to me *not* to do that. ("Interchanges" 508)

Elbow points out that this approach hardly encourages solipsism, with students receiving "plenty of feedback from peers and from [Elbow himself]," including comments from him that ask them to consider the various factors influencing their experiences and writing (509). But he notes, "If my end or goal is to get students to think for themselves and not be dupes

of others thinking for them, I don't want to try to seek that end by thinking for them" (508). He claims that his goal, ultimately, is for his students to come to view themselves as writers and "keep writing by choice after the course is over," having discovered writing's power to "lead to the kind of questing and self-contradiction we [Elbow and Bartholomae] both seek" (509). This seems a laudable aim. We might also want to consider the idea that Elbow's response to Bartholomae contains an implicit warning about the sort of violence we may be engaging in by insisting that students see things *our* way, and in fact whether Elbow may be pointing out an inherent danger of pedagogy that has some sort of overt political motivation. And yet it also seems easy to understand the argument of someone like Berlin, for whom "abandonment" such as Elbow's would be tantamount to sending students to the lions of a soul-sucking culture.

So what I really want to emphasize here (again), is that we have a situation where two "sides" seem to exist in opposition to each other but may in fact be working toward similar goals. I agree that we must acknowledge the socially-created aspects of language and writing in our students' work, but I think that the testimony of those who have tried a nonviolent approach suggests that such an enterprise must deeply value what students bring as individuals to their writing. Often implicit in this testimony, it seems, is the idea that students, as well as teachers, must in fact go beyond – paradoxically, at once deeper and yet further outward than – "the personal" if they are to find the causes of violence and the sources of peace in the world and themselves. In short, they – and we – must acknowledge the presence of the spiritual.

### 3: The Spiritual

One day we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek but a means by which we arrive at that goal.

-Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Spiritual” may be a frightening word for some of us, for a variety of reasons, but a growing number of educators insist that we cannot hope to progress as teachers or indeed as a society without attending to the spiritual dimension of our experience. O’Reilley feels that a view of teaching as a spiritual practice is a necessity. In addition to The Peaceable Classroom, she has dedicated a small volume, Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice, to an even more explicit discussion of this aspect of her work. Parker J. Palmer’s foreword to Radical Presence offers up, in its attempt to describe O’Reilley’s efforts, what seems a good working definition of spirituality in the way I mean it here: “seeing one’s self without blinking, offering hospitality to the alien other, having compassion for suffering, speaking truth to power, being present and being real” (ix). Palmer notes that these are “secrets hidden in plain sight” for “good living” (ix), and as with my initial conception of this project, it is, at first glance, difficult for me to see how these qualities would not be almost universally agreed upon as positives. If it is also plain to see how these values connect with our project, it is equally easy to comprehend how difficult they are to realize.

Palmer, who has himself written on the connection between spirituality and education, and O’Reilley both agree that if we want to live according to these “secrets,” we will need to be, not anti-intellectual, but (let us say) *extra-intellectual*. O’Reilley notes that “we have to

work with our analytical minds, that is our nature, but we must not trust in mind alone to do the work. There is a ground of knowing below the rattle of cognitive thought” (Radical 37-8). Ultimately, it is attention to this “ground of knowing,” to something beyond the self and beyond the rational, that may be said to distinguish a spiritual perspective. Palmer’s preface to his To Know as We are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey (a book not about composition in particular but regarded as a groundbreaking work in arguing for greater attention to spirituality in education) addresses this viewpoint and offers what seem to me some fairly obvious ties with the current project:

[W]e have an opportunity to revision education as a communal enterprise . . . Such an education would root ethics in its true and only ground, in the spiritual insight that beyond the broken surface of our lives there is a “hidden wholeness” on which all life depends. In such an education, intellect and spirit would be one, teachers and learners and subjects would be in vital community with one another, and a world in need of healing would be well served. That, finally, is the reason why the spirituality of education deserves and demands our attention. (xix)

Is there room for more examination of such a perspective in composition in particular? We may notice that, of the fair number of writers who cite O’Reilley’s “Is it possible to teach English so that people stop killing each other?” question as inspiration, few mention the fact that O’Reilley’s approach is unabashedly spiritual. Blitz and Hurlbert, who have, in their own way, based a book on O’Reilley’s question, don’t really discuss this aspect of The Peaceable Classroom. Nelson alludes to it when she calls for “a gentler and more harmonious way of seeing the world and being in the world” (42) and cites O’Reilley’s call (from Radical Presence) for “deep listening,” but does not take the discussion further in an

explicitly spiritual direction. Most others seem to quote O'Reilley without any mention of the spiritual background of her enterprise. Why? There are probably a number of reasons. There is, no doubt, some well-founded apprehension about raising the topic, for fear of appearing, as I have suggested, anti-intellectual or (at least for those of us who teach at public institutions) to be breaking the church-state "wall." But we should also note that O'Reilley, for instance, comes out of a particular tradition, or rather, a combination of them; Palmer points out her "Catholic-Quaker-Buddhist" background ("Foreword" x). Not all who have written on nonviolence in composition can be expected to similarly situate themselves within the framework of a religious or spiritual tradition (or they may simply not wish to do so publicly) even if all share a concern for student welfare.

Moreover, a number of compositionists *have* written about the connections between writing and spirituality or the non-cognitive. Moffett, in a chapter from his 1981 Coming on Center: English Education in Evolution, traces at length a rationale for using various forms of meditation in writing pedagogy; this and some of Moffett's other writings are often cited as influential by like-minded scholars. Indeed, a 1994 CCC "Interchanges" feature on "Spiritual Sites of Composing" that brings together short essays by Ann E. Berthoff and other composition scholars repeatedly cites Moffett, and Moffett himself is accorded the privilege of writing a closing response to the other authors' work in the feature. Further, at least two edited volumes dedicated to spirituality or non-cognitive thought have appeared in the last decade. Chapters in The Spiritual Side of Writing and Presence of Mind look at, for instance, "spiritual empowerment" as it relates to writing and its teaching, the role of silence in composition pedagogy, the rhetoric of popular meditation books, and the use of secularized versions of Zen Buddhist "koans" or intellectually-unsolvable riddles to help



students write. The editors of The Spiritual Side of Writing note that they received an “overwhelming response from professors across the nation” (Foehr and Schiller x) when they issued a call for contributions, and the contributors themselves repeatedly cite the need for a greater attention to these issues in the academy.

So there is ample evidence of interest in the subject, and it does not seem unreasonable to think that some of those who have written on nonviolence in composition have spiritual interests of their own, whether or not these interests are discussed in their work. And indeed, I think that much of what these apparently “non-spiritual” writers discuss has a spiritual dimension whether or not it is explicitly mentioned. Letters for the Living is a good example. Blitz and Hurlbert may not write about the spiritual nature of what they do, but surely their candid revelations of their struggles to teach in a violent world and of their own lives are attempts to “see themselves without blinking”; their efforts to understand and empower their students, who often come from very different backgrounds than themselves, represent an “offer of hospitality to the alien other”; their obvious care for those students shows a “compassion for suffering”; the very nature of their enterprise – to help students find some peace in a culture which seems to provide little of it – is a means of “speaking truth to power”; and their honest grounding in the details of their own and students’ lives is a step toward “being present and being real.” Even if they do not discuss their meditation or prayer practices (if they have any), they seem to be working toward Thich Nhat Hanh’s way of “being peace.” Similarly, the claim that they and others make for the value of personal writing can be seen as a call for helping students pay closer attention to their own lives and the lives of those around them, to be “present and real.”

O'Reilley makes this call explicit and takes it a step further, arguing that the "voice" emerging from students' personal writing is evidence of something deeper: "finding voice," she says, "is a spiritual event" (Peaceable 61). She asks us to recall the prophets of old who were "[g]iven words" and notes that "spiritual events change the face of a community. A prophet, or prophetic writer, calls us to a higher standard of what we could be. That's simply a prophet's job description" (62, italics in original). Something I find particularly interesting in O'Reilley (but not surprising, given the nature of her approach) is this connection she makes between the spiritual and the political and between the spiritual and the community. "Finding voice," for her, is also a "socially-responsible political act. We don't just do it for ourselves" (62); instead, while "it defines a moment of presence, of being awake," it also "involves not only self-understanding, but the ability to transmit that self-understanding to others. Learning to write so that you will be read, therefore, vitalizes both the self and the community" (58).

Further connections between the areas we've been discussing now become more apparent. It should be obvious by this point that we cannot really view even the most apparently "expressivist" of the writers we've examined as in denial of the role of the social in the making of our knowledge; these writers simply give individual agency a more privileged place. Constructionists, for their part, rarely seem to deny that the individual is a factor in the epistemological equation. The fact that scholars like Spigelman and Hindman have argued for the legitimacy of the personal even when working from an explicitly constructionist viewpoint shows that the two "sides" can and do coexist, and also reminds us of the way in which spiritual traditions – paradoxically, it seems – advocate a practice of looking inward in order to make greater connections with what originally seemed to be

“outside.” And there is another connection to be made explicit here: if the ultimate goal of spiritual experience is, as most traditions seem to tell us, self-transcendence, the realization that we are without rigid individual selves but rather are connected to an infinitely larger whole, then social construction theory contains an interesting parallel in its assertion that our selves are not “our own” but “constructed” from the web of knowledge. Thich Nhat Hanh says that “[i]f we examine things carefully we will see that all phenomena, including ourselves, are composites. We are made up of other parts” (No Death 12). Though, in this particular discussion, Nhat Hanh goes on to complicate the issue, at least from an intellectual point of view, by insisting on the importance of experiential and presumably extra-rational knowledge (“We may be intelligent enough to understand this, but to understand it intellectually is not enough”), he also introduces what seems to me an extremely useful concept to describe this connectedness: “inter-being” (13). Perhaps if we could think of social constructionism as a theory of “inter-knowing,” part of our “inter-being,” we could more easily accept this possible (and possibly useful) connection between the spiritual and the social. Elizabeth A. Rand (2001) draws a similar parallel between spirituality and constructionism in her examination of the academy’s view of Christian beliefs, and Moffett offers further support for the notion when he points out that Hinduism has long “assumed the ‘constructionist’ view of knowledge that . . . humans make knowledge or meaning, collectively and individually” (Universal 28). An effective (if violent in its choice of metaphor) summation of these connections is given by Berthoff in her introduction to the 1994 CCC “Interchanges” feature: “It should not come as a surprise that language is . . . a social product, but that does not mean that the language animal has no

soul. The chief benefit of attending to spirit is that we can more efficiently slay the killer dichotomy of the individual and society” (237).

In this view, even more of us may be working in a spiritual vein than realize it. But how, we may ask at this point, to make the connection with classroom practices? What concrete suggestions for our nonviolent writing course does a spiritual perspective offer? Certainly, several in particular are appealing. I’ve already mentioned the importance of freewriting, but here it seems worth noting that O’Reilly discusses the practice as drawing on “contemplative resources we seldom use” (Peaceable 44). Spiritual writer Georg Buehler has also pointed out that the freewriting process, by quickly getting a lot of words and ideas down on paper, may help us attach less strongly to those words and concepts and thus give a new perspective on the jumble that tends to run through our heads. While freewriting is commonly envisioned (and justified) in the composition classroom as a means to an end, the beginning stage of some larger work, it might be crucial for a course such as ours to allow for regular, private instances of this activity without any explicit connection to course projects. Students would essentially be able to use freewriting as it suited them. Because the practice is undeniably useful as a brainstorming activity and would consume a relatively small amount of class time, consistent freewriting would most likely be an unobjectionable activity.

Incorporating the suggestions of Moffett and others on meditation as pre-writing is a bit more problematic. Inviting students to meditate in the classroom seems to present us with the issue of unacceptable imposition of religion. Meditation, despite the fact that it can be linked with specific religious practices, is ultimately a nonsectarian activity, but we need not spend time arguing this point to students or administrators: we can simply invite students to

concentrate their minds in specific ways. Moffett recommends one method which might be quite useful as a pre-writing strategy; this involves encouraging students to “visualize, imagine, feel, and think everything they can about [a particular] subject without at first concerning themselves about writing something down” (Coming on Center 176).

Among the specific projects with spiritual inclinations I am drawn to is one I originally encountered in the work of ecocompositionist Derek Owens (I discuss the ties between an ecocomposition/environmental perspective and a spiritual one a bit later), that of asking students to write in great detail about their homes and neighborhoods. Blitz and Hurlbert give similar assignments, even leading “local field trips” where applicable (145). While none of these ideas are offered from an explicitly spiritual standpoint, they make me think of the Quaker writer John Woolman’s notion, described by O’Reilley, of “making peace within our small spheres of influence” (Peaceable 21) (Indeed, this approach can be seen as the hallmark of Letters for the Living, and such a view would further connect an apparently non-spiritual source with the work of determinedly spiritual writers.) Another potentially useful classroom writing practice along these lines, called *naikan*, involves making lists of things the writer has given and received and troubles the writer has caused to others; the lists can apply to all the writer’s interactions for a given time period or can focus on a particular person. The practice was developed by a Japanese Buddhist to emphasize gratitude and connectedness but lacks any overt religious leanings and could thus, like Moffett’s “meditation,” be fully appropriate for a required writing class.

These and a number of other activities seem to me to reflect or grow from a spiritual viewpoint, and are, I think, very useful for our proposed nonviolent writing class, especially as they help encourage attention to one’s self and a greater awareness of that self’s

connection with others. Writing seems to have some special power to help us deal with the seemingly great difficulty of finding out who we are and how we relate to the world. As we have seen, the spiritual viewpoint does not simply suggest that “we’re all one,” but rather that “we’re all inextricably connected *and yet* obviously different at the same time.” The rational mind cannot really make sense of this idea, hence the spiritual call for a way of seeing that goes beyond what the ordinary thinking mind can accomplish. But we cannot “push” such a viewpoint on students. We must allow them to discover connections for themselves, though some of the activities we assign as teachers can help this process.

However, the spiritually-oriented writing in composition shows a noticeable trend, and it may be the most important way in which spirituality and teaching writing – or teaching anything – come together: a focus on the need for teachers to have spiritual lives themselves. In The Peaceable Classroom and Radical Presence, in Blitz and Hurlbert, in The Spiritual Side of Writing and Presence of Mind, we see this again and again: teachers ruminate on their own lives, “spiritual” and otherwise, their interior and exterior struggles, their desire for connection with students. Often, pedagogical practices are not the focus of the writing. Jonsberg says that “WHAT we teach doesn’t matter half so much as HOW we teach it. WHO we are, what values we model, has far more effect on our students than the words they may read or hear” (28). O’Reilly says that to be able to listen deeply to students and thus to be effective teachers, we “need many things we probably don’t pay enough attention to: an inner life, a high degree of consciousness and intentionality, good discernment, the love of friends, and grounding in some tradition of values” (Peaceable 51).

In this light, it makes perfect sense that O’Reilly and Palmer have dedicated entire books to talking about teachers’ inner lives. Blitz and Hurlbert ask: “How can we . . . stop

pretending that our real lives are secondary or irrelevant to the work of teaching? How can we make these stories, these ‘private matters,’ integral to creative, collaborative pedagogy?”

(2). Questions such as these make me think that the teachers’-spirituality “movement” also reflects a need to publicly acknowledge the deeper aspects of our lives. As we have seen, many teachers and scholars seem to need to “tell their stories,” even if that need is “disguised” via explanations of how personal writing is justified in a scholarly sense (which of course may be very true). If, then, as many of us seem to agree, that transforming ourselves is a (if not *the*) critical part of changing the world at large, deep attention to those selves may be an absolutely crucial component of this, or any, nonviolent teaching project. A spiritual perspective may or may not show up explicitly on the syllabus, but that syllabus will reflect what is in us, and so will our teaching, our comments, and even our presence – spoken or not – in the classroom.

As a final point (for now) on this topic, I feel compelled to note that I don’t mean to water down the idea of spirituality: just as I have made some distinction between those who have written explicitly on nonviolence in composition and those who seem to be working for similar goals from an “undeclared” standpoint, I don’t want to claim that every writer on nonviolent composition pedagogy is necessarily “spiritual,” or that an inclination toward the topic of nonviolence automatically makes one a spiritual practitioner. O’Reilley points out that *her* definition of spirituality is “of, or having to do with the central religious traditions of humankind” (73); she makes this clear, she says, because “‘spirituality,’ these days, can mean anything you want it to mean” (72-3). O’Reilley’s urge to offer a stricter definition is understandable, but for the purposes of this project I prefer Palmer’s “secrets” as a working definition of spirituality, particularly because, in addition to “seeing one’s self without

blinking . . . being present and being real,” his formulation includes “offering hospitality to the alien other, having compassion for suffering, [and] speaking truth to power.” Thus spirituality requires attention not only to the self but to the other as well, and compassion is explicitly part of this attention. And the realities of the social world are just as important: the “truth” about the connection between one’s self and all others must be spoken “to power.” Moffett also offers an elegant definition that might be said to embody the exact same ideas with even fewer words: “To be spiritual is to perceive our oneness with everybody and everything and to act on this perception” (Universal xix). In these formulations, spirituality and nonviolence are all but inextricable: we cannot have the first without the second, and if we seem to, we are not dealing with authentic spirituality. The same relationship does not hold for *religion* and nonviolence or vice versa, which makes O’Reilley’s definition a bit problematic here.

But O’Reilley’s insistence on “religious traditions” does reflect a certain reality: since humans do not ordinarily perceive Moffett’s “oneness” on their own, seekers almost always at the very least flirt with some tradition for guidance or inspiration even if they eventually embrace instead a combination of traditions (as in O’Reilley’s case) or no particular tradition at all. And I do think that the absence or presence of a declared spiritual practice (“declared” to ourselves, not necessarily to others) is likely to make a difference in our pedagogy and our view of it. O’Reilley claims that the reason for this difference is not “dogma” but “discipline” (73), and she immediately offers a passage from Tad Dunne to show why she think this discipline is important. The excerpt is worth quoting at length:

The self-loss which mystics praise and all great world religions preach must now be understood as a strategy for revolution. It is the loss of concern and fear for one’s



reputation while one is engaged in dialog, disagreement, and debate. Indeed, all the old spiritual doctrines about mortification, self-effacement and abandonment to the will of God can now be understood empirically. We no longer have to accept them as mysterious practices that will make us better persons. We can now understand how they make us better – because we put being attentive above being smug, being intelligent above being narrow-minded, being reasonable above being a dreamer, being responsible above being hedonistic, and being in love above being stiff-necked and hard of heart. The authenticity that results from obedience to the transcendental precepts . . . changes ourselves and our world for the better in intelligible and verifiable ways. (qtd. in Peaceable 73)

Regarding the seemingly growing interest in educational spirituality and her own project, O'Reilley adds that

[t]here was a time when it seemed important to understand social-epistemic discourse and what the heck the word *heuristic* meant. Now it seems important to understand abandonment and self-effacement. When I began thinking about the peaceable classroom, I conceived it as a *goal*; now I see it as, in the Zen sense, a *practice* . . . [O]ne doesn't worry about whether it goes well or badly, one simply tries to 'practice'. (73-4)

As I have tried to show, O'Reilley does not seem to be the only one of us bringing a sense of practice, of regular and committed personal involvement, to the nonviolent composition classroom; but it may indeed make a difference whether or not we bring an explicit sense of spiritual discipline to that practice.

#### **4: Further Connections: Feminism, the Environment and Moral Education**

I shall accept the label “feminine” but only if we understand that all of humanity can participate in the feminine as I am describing it.

– Nel Noddings

Our examination of politics, the personal and the spiritual has brought to light what seem to be the most important theoretical considerations for those of us interested in a nonviolent perspective in composition. But a number of other areas also appear to have ties to our project; indeed, it’s often difficult to separate one realm of thought or theoretical consideration from another. In many ways, the compartmentalization of topics here is a matter of organizational convenience rather than a declaration of fundamental differences. As we have seen and will continue to see, taking the discussion into “different” areas tends to reveal even more connections.

##### **Feminism, the Feminine and Ecology**

We have looked at the questions raised by feminist thinkers about the nature and appropriateness of argument, but there also exists much analysis of the connections between feminist or feminine approaches and nonviolence. While a full examination of such work is beyond the scope of this project, we should recognize that the ties might be crucial ones. Many writers on the topic see an important link between nonviolence and “feminine” values such as nurturing and inclusivity, but anger is given its place too: many discuss the ways in which rage at the violent system can be channeled into nonviolent action. Pam McAllister,

editor of Reweaving the Web of Life: Feminism and Nonviolence, notes in her introduction to the collection that

[p]ut into the feminist perspective, nonviolence is the merging of our uncompromising rage at the patriarchy's brutal destructiveness with a refusal to adopt it's [sic] ways – a refusal to give in to despair or hate or to let men off the hook by making them the “Other” as they have made those they fear “Others.” (iii)

Writers on feminism and nonviolence vary in their approaches. While Sally Miller Gearhart, for example, presents a plan (argues?) for radical feminization of the planet by means including reducing the percentage of males on Earth to 10% of the total population (“The Future – If There Is One – Is Female”), O'Reilley claims, in a chapter from The Peaceable Classroom examining feminist perspectives, that (based on her own experience in such environments) “a few weeks in feminist utopia will convince most anyone that the problem is not *men* but the self, or the self among others” (135). Though this might suggest that Gearhart and O'Reilley represent diametrically opposed viewpoints, it may be more useful to conceive of their positions as points on a continuum: Gearhart asserts that her rather extreme ideas are based not on a notion of “biological determinism” (273) but on a belief that men “have botched so badly the job of human and environmental health” (274) that they need to be relieved of power, while O'Reilley, for her part, admits that “[men] have a bad record in the violence department” (133) but says our ultimate goal should be “not to replace the male system with the female but to increase the range of humane problem solving strategies available to us all” (136).

Here and elsewhere, the dominant theme in a feminized approach to nonviolence is an insistence that, to a greater or lesser degree, feminine values that address the way we treat

each other and ourselves need to assume more prominence. As we have seen, O'Reilley emphasizes the personal and the spiritual on the grounds that the world inside shapes our actions in the world outside. O'Reilley also makes clear connections between the spiritual and the political; given feminism's political leanings, it is no surprise that Leela Fernandes, in the recent Transforming Feminist Practice, makes a similar connection, subtitling her work Non-Violence, Social Justice and the Possibilities of a Spiritualized Feminism.

Feminism, in Fernandes' definition, is synonymous with social justice because of feminism's history of looking at "multiple forms of structural inequality such as race, nation, class and sexuality, in addition to gender issues" (12). She argues that the work of nonviolent social justice will not really advance until it includes a "lived spirituality," a "transcendent sense of interconnection that moves beyond the knowable, visible material world" (10). An explicit part of Fernandes' claim is that this spirituality must be intimately linked with a sense of "social responsibility" (109) and not become "yet another consumption practice for one's own well-being and comfort, another commodity that is meant to alleviate the stresses of living without the discomfort of challenging any of the structures of power that shape the world" (110). In other words, this practice must include an explicit commitment to changing ourselves *and* the world as we see it unfolding around us – both close by and far away.

Given the centrality of spirituality in Fernandes' book and in my own analysis of the probable components of a viable nonviolent writing course, Fernandes' arguments about the connections between nonviolence, spirituality and social justice lead me to think again about some of what I have written. Can a nonviolent course really *not* focus on particular "political" situations if we sincerely want to help our students transform both themselves

and the world? Will encouraging students to look primarily at the personal, with a corresponding hope that this will connect them more deeply with the spiritual, really just lead to more solipsism and promotion of “bourgeois individualism”? I can’t pretend to answer these questions fully, but, upon reflection, I still think that a writing course exploring the possibility of real progress in the world must begin with the personal in order to engage students and to help them understand their part in facilitating change. Indeed, I think that Fernandes would probably agree with this. She notes that, in her Women’s Studies classes, even “passionate” students insist that their discussion of possibilities for sweeping societal change is “simply a matter of theory, inapplicable in reality” (8), and later offers an explanation:

Students’ resistance to things they deem too abstract and theoretical is not merely a reaction to theories that seem too elitist or overly complex. Rather, I have found that such resistances often represent a fear of having to engage in the arduous and often painful process of self-transformation. Utopias are inconvenient because they necessitate deep-seated changes in ourselves and the ways in which we live our lives. (19)

Fernandes’ arguments, finally, seem to parallel some of what I have been suggesting: postmodern theory about the social construction of our identities and knowledge is valid up to a point, but, as Fernandes puts it, “If such work continually points to the often violent limits of the knowledge that is produced [by systems which render power to some at the expense of others], it has stopped short of giving us an alternative form of knowledge that can transcend these limits” (20). What Fernandes suggests is missing is a spiritual aspect, “the essence of the unrepresentable, which Western postmodern intellectuals have been

paralyzed by only because they have mistaken the unrepresentable for the unrealizable” (118).

Fernandes’ claim that proponents of a feminized nonviolence may need to effect “deep-seated changes” in themselves raises some interesting ideas for us and our students vis-à-vis our proposed class, and also suggests some further connections with “other” areas of thought. The idea that we must not only *reflect* but *act* as well, sometimes in ways that are not easy, is a core notion in many types of spiritual practice. Such an idea might be manifested in, for example, writing assignments that ask students to make commitments to and document the progress of real, verifiable changes in their lives – changes in action. Students could take on small, relatively brief self-chosen “personal challenges” (such as establishing a desired new habit or temporarily suspending an unwanted but persistent one) and then write about their experiences with this attempt at self-transformation. This exercise would provide a clear, concrete opportunity to move beyond the theoretical into the experiential. In such a case, it would probably be advisable for instructors to take on a challenge along with their students, but, as teachers seeking to build good habits and unlearn ones that stunt our inner growth, we may also want to consider what longer-term, quantifiable changes might be made in our own lives as part of our commitment to nonviolent teaching. What might we do to improve ourselves in ways that, directly or indirectly, may help our students?

One suggestion of a very possible general change, made by Thom Hartmann in *The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight*, involves turning off the television, which Hartmann calls a ““drug”” whose “user . . . would publicly proclaim the ability to do without it . . . but in reality would not even *consider* having it be completely absent from his home or life for days,

weeks, or years” (108). Hartmann notes that television may offer some beneficial programming, but that it is rare and in any case presents information better accessed through books (104). (Thich Nhat Hanh says, “We do not even have the courage to turn off our TV, because we are afraid to go back to ourselves” [Love in Action 81].) I use this example because some changes in our habits (“usage”?) could in many cases easily benefit us and our students and because Hartmann’s book, a discussion of the state of the planet and a call for “a different set of stories” (134) to guide our behavior, adds environmentalism to the list of areas we see connected to feminism and spirituality. Hartmann describes what is happening to Earth and its societies as we near the end of the oil reserves that now support the existence of so many of those societies, including our own, and points out that

[t]he reason most solutions offered to the world’s crises are impractical is because they arise from the same worldview that caused the problem . . . [R]ecycling won’t save the world, birth control won’t save the world, and saving what little is left of the rainforests won’t save the world . . . Nothing but changing our way of seeing and understanding the world can produce real, meaningful, and lasting change . . . and that change in perspective will then naturally lead us to begin to control our populations, save our forests, re-create community, and reduce our wasteful consumption. (2-3)

The titles of several of Hartmann’s chapters give a good idea of his prescription for this sweeping change and how this prescription is relevant to our discussion and project:

“Renounce War Against Any Living Thing”; “Learn to Create Awareness”; “Re-empower Women.” (“Turn off the TV” is a chapter unto itself as well.) He begins one chapter, “Lessons from a Monk,” with the sentence, “The best way to remake the world is by starting with yourself and your own internal world” (234).

Hartmann writes from an overarching perspective that is not specifically academic, but his work's ties to areas of thought such as the ecomposition movement, in which we see a writing-focused but nevertheless extremely broad outlook, are readily apparent. I have previously cited Derek Owens' "place portrait" assignment (Owens 30) in my discussion of how a spiritual perspective might inform our proposed class. The essay from which the idea is taken, however, focuses on promoting sustainability rather than explicitly examining spiritual questions. So in some ways it might seem to make more sense to introduce Owens here instead, "separating" his work out because his essay appears in a collection called Ecocomposition. And yet Owens notes in his conclusion that concern for students' "intellectual, spiritual, economic, and physical survival" is a prime motivation for his own pedagogy (35). Thus, while it is useful to discuss Owens' work here as well, it is again difficult to assign a solid boundary between areas of thought.

In the same collection in which Owens' essay appears, Christian R. Weisser addresses the social construction question that we have repeatedly touched upon in his call for a revised conception of identity – what he calls an "ecological self" – in our theory and pedagogy: "Ecological selves perceive their interconnection with others and comprehend the degree to which their own identities are inseparable from the nonhuman world – a recognition that the material world 'out there' is a part of our identity 'in here'" (86). Thus, [i]dentity can now be seen as socially constructed and sustained in community with an enormous number of interconnected others along with their ecologies and habitats. Compositionists would do well to recognize that identity emerges not only from our human relationships, but from the connections we have with other life-forms in an array of habitats. (87)



Again, while Weisser's is not, on the surface, a spiritually-oriented discussion, his description of the "ecological self" has an almost Zen ring to it; additionally, his call for a broader notion of inclusivity is easy to connect with a feminist viewpoint. (Yet another essay in Ecocomposition, by Greta Gaard, explores the connections between ecofeminism and ecocomposition.)

These ties may well be useful for our project from a pedagogical perspective. Weisser gives a simple but interesting example of an assignment that asks students to "describe how their identities, and those of their family members, are often shaped by relationships with non-human others" (92). Responses, he says, have ranged from discussions of the impact of pets (hardly a small matter, incidentally, for many of us who were raised with companion animals) to ties with the ocean and fishing. While many have pointed out that "nature writing" is hardly ecocomposition's sole focus (the Owens assignment is just one example of the truth of this), it may indeed also be valuable to send students outside, as O'Reilley – not an ecocompositionist per se, but does it matter? – suggests, with the instruction to stay still for a few minutes and simply pay attention, then to report back, "taking any direction in the writing that occurs" to the student (Radical 10). Students would thus be encouraged to experience a shared local space – one, however, without walls – and to discover what kind of thoughts and writing emerge from that experience.

We have now further widened the range of perspectives available to us to help students use writing as a means of connection with themselves, others, and their surroundings – and possibly participate in crafting a better world while they're at it. One connection we have not yet made, though, is the one between our current project and the idea of virtue. In hoping that our teaching of writing may help shape, as O'Reilley puts it, "a certain kind of

human being: compassionate, balanced, and inwardly mobile” (Peaceable 39), are we also hoping to teach virtue?

## **Virtue**

The age-old discussions about how we develop a sense of morality and of whether virtue *can* be taught have not gone away, and although a full examination of the conversation would take much more room than is available here, some attention to the topic is warranted.

For our purposes, one of the most relevant voices on moral education is that of Nel Noddings, whose Caring attempts to philosophically define an “ethic of caring” (5) in which the “one-caring” and the “cared-for” (4) are both important. Noddings’ approach is unabashedly feminist and feminine, in many of the same ways that we’ve been looking at (as the epigraph for this chapter suggests), and while nonviolence is not one of her explicit concerns, she notes that one of the ideal results of a caring approach to education would be “that young people devoted to each other will refuse to bayonet, shoot and bomb each other” (185). Similarly, without framing her discussion in terms of spirituality, Noddings reminds us of O’Reilley’s “deep listening” and the spiritual ideal of full presence when she asserts that, as a teacher, “I do not need to establish a deep, lasting, time-consuming personal relationship with every student. What I must do is to be totally and nonselectively present to the student – to each student – as he addresses me. The time interval may be brief but the encounter is total” (180).

In Educating Moral People, Noddings continues the discussion of caring in education and looks particularly at the issue of virtue as she makes distinctions – and acknowledges some similarities – between character education, which seeks the inculcation of particular virtues, and care ethics, which is focused primarily on the development of “caring

relations” (8). Her examples of the “virtues” listed by various character education programs include “respect,” “responsibility,” “honesty” and “compassion” (3), but, unsurprisingly, not “nonviolence” (which leads to the question of whether we might someday see it included there). Noddings notes the various difficulties of defining and teaching particular virtues and says that for care theorists, “virtues are defined situationally and relationally” (2) rather than being monolithic. Instead of attempting to teach a list of abstract qualities, then, care theorists suggest that the best way to educate young people in morality is to instruct them how to care – including how to care for themselves – and to be cared for.

Particularly applicable for us are Noddings’ assertions that “continuing relationships with adults who obviously care for them” are among the most important factors in helping students resist the impulses of a violent culture (26) and that “[f]or students immersed in a violent society, the search for meaning is especially important. Just to engage in such a search is a sign of caring for one’s self” (34). Indeed, Noddings advocates exploring religious ideas explicitly in the classroom, educating students “not only about other religions but, perhaps more important, about the political agendas that have accompanied the development of their own religious systems” (112); we must, she says, “gently and persistently press the case” for exploring the positives and negatives of religion even in the face of protests on the grounds of what Noddings calls the “mythical ‘separation’” (113) of church and state. While Noddings is primarily concerned in this instance with secondary school education, the idea that we need not leave explicitly religious material out of our classrooms is an interesting one for us, especially given the potentially helpful exercise of asking students to write about, for instance, the apparent divide between proclamations

against violence in the Judeo-Christian scriptures – such as the Ten Commandments and Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount – and the decidedly violent behavior of many who claim to subscribe to Judeo-Christian beliefs. (A widely-circulated article from the satirical weekly The Onion, “God Angrily Clarifies ‘Don’t Kill’ Rule,” which appeared in the weeks following Sept. 11, might be an excellent way to introduce this topic.)

While I have been working from the assumption that we can cultivate our own spiritual lives and help to enhance those of our students without explicitly bringing religion into the picture, Noddings’ idea of openly engaging religious ideas with a receptive yet critical attitude is an important one for us to consider. We may also want to remember O’Reilly’s claim that “grounding in some tradition of values” may help us become better teachers, and consider Hairston’s point that “religion plays an important role in the lives of many of our students – and many of us, I’m sure – but it’s a dimension almost never mentioned by those who talk about cultural diversity and difference” (“Diversity” 672).

Noddings ultimately seems to be claiming that the question “Can virtue be taught?” is somewhat off-base, and that the real question may be: how is virtue learned? Leroy S. Rouser, making a distinction between ethics and virtue in “Can Virtue Be Taught in a School?” says that “[e]thics *per se* is only the tuneless prescription of social oughts” but that “[v]irtue is a mystery, a song, a transforming vision. . . Can anyone really teach that?” (142). By way of an examination of the philosophies of Ivan Illich, Gandhi and Socrates, Rouser comes to the conclusion that “you can’t ‘teach’ virtue, but you can help people get to a place where they can learn it for themselves” (149); for him, this requires a “personalization” (150) of education that focuses on rigorous intellectual work *and* “pay[s] increased attention

to the ‘inwardness’ of both teachers and learners” (151). He notes that, while taking such an approach too far could be dangerous,

[w]e already have a built-in model for this kind of education in conservatories and schools for the arts, where “finding one’s own voice” is what education is all about. Students there are saved from sentimentality and overpersonalization by the rigors of the discipline. But the focus remains on what the student is becoming . . . the critical question is still [as it was in Socrates’ time] “What will they make of you?” (152)

It seems likely that, for Rouner, a focus in a composition classroom on students’ stories, on their inner lives and their interactions with others – combined with clear work on understanding how those stories grow from and fit into society and how they can best be shaped in writing in order that others can also benefit from them – would be the most effective way to help “make something” of our students. This idea fits quite well into the model of the nonviolence-oriented composition classroom that we’ve been working toward. For Noddings, too, the intellect *and* heart must be nurtured, but “our main educational aim should be to encourage the growth of competent, caring, loving and lovable people” (94).

### **Moving On**

It seems, then, that a nonviolent writing pedagogy can and should be informed by a number of areas of thought – diverse areas that, as it turns out, share numerous similarities. Approaching the project in this way, we not only bring in a wide range of perspectives but also reflect the far-reaching goals of the endeavor: to dissolve the divisions which lead us to violence against “others” of all kinds. Clearly, there are differences and divisions among these areas of discussion; it would be difficult to classify intellectual knowledge without them. I am not suggesting that a simple “we’re all one” works any better as a credo for

different areas of thought than it does for different individuals. But I am suggesting that we be mindful of how many things are shared in common.

## 5: Writing Nonviolence: A Course Proposal

We cannot educate for peace, we *cannot*, if we lose our abilities to appreciate, to be moved, by those moments in which we are well.

-Michael Blitz and C. Mark Hurlbert

We have explored a good deal of theoretical background and come to some tentative conclusions about the sorts of writing that might be helpful in enabling students to move toward a nonviolent perspective, and it now seems appropriate to sketch out a more-developed picture of a nonviolence-oriented first-year composition course.

One question we have not fully considered, however, is that of the potential role of course readings. This question should be examined here, because it forces us to re-confront another question that might be even more central: should this be a course *about* nonviolence, a course *in* nonviolence, or a course that's *taught* nonviolently? While I believe that the answer is all three, the focus, it seems, should remain on writing. The shorter project from which this longer one grew included in its model syllabus the claim that "student writing will be at the center of the course" but called for students to read Writing Without Teachers, The Peaceable Classroom, and a course packet including selections from Gandhi, King, the Bible, the Koran and the Buddhist sutras as well as a selection of more "up-to-date" material to be finalized close to the beginning of the semester. Looking at it now, that appears to commit students to a lot of reading. And yet there are so many other worthy texts in addition to the aforementioned: possibilities for readings in a course such as this also include selections from feminist writers on nonviolence; bits of Natalie Goldberg's Writing Down

the Bones; Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning; the diaries of Etty Hillesum; Thich Nhat Hanh; Vonnegut; O'Reilly's Radical Presence. And the list goes on<sup>1</sup>. I have examined, in an unpublished paper, the question of whether ancient rhetoricians as exemplified by Quintilian – the most well-known classical advocate of the “good man speaking well” – might be appropriate source material for a nonviolent project; my answer was a qualified “yes” – and so the list of potential source material is expanded further. And what I've mentioned here barely scratches the surface.

So finding readings is not the problem. But what would be done with these texts? Should a nonviolent writing class seek in large part to teach students what other writers have said about nonviolence, or is that a task for another course? Perhaps, instead of (or in addition to) the “nonviolent sources” approach, students should look at violent writings critically? O'Reilly notes that she began her nonviolent teaching experiment in a class on war literature, and Jonsberg similarly asserts that “[w]e could teach peace with any text, even one that seemed to celebrate violence – for we could read . . . questioningly, testing and debunking the premises on which it was built, and come ultimately to a conclusion that favored peace” (27-8). Barry Kroll, meanwhile, has discussed what he describes as a successful course based around Vietnam literature and extensive student writing. The course was designed to “engage students’ emotional and intellectual resources” (3) and included writing assignments that asked students to consider their own reactions in hypothetical wartime situations, although Kroll’s approach was not explicitly a nonviolent one. But these pieces by O'Reilly, Jonsberg and Kroll seem to be primarily focused on

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<sup>1</sup> Often during the writing of this project, I've come across a chapter, passage or quotation and thought, “Everyone has to read this! Then they can't help but get it!” though I confess I can't quite explain what “get it” means.



literature (though Kroll is ordinarily a compositionist); of necessity, they have devised ways to “peaceably” or at least critically examine an often-violent canon.

Among those who have written especially from a composition perspective, we see fewer assigned sources. Eckert’s assigned reading seems to be limited to a few short stories and poems, out of which students compare two and make a claim for one as a “more powerful expression of nonviolent sentiment” (par. 7). Students in his course do, however, conduct some outside research. Both Blitz and Hurlbert’s class readings, such as they are, appear to consist mainly of outside research sources rather than works that the entire class reads. Hurlbert actually notes that he “never assign[s] readings in my research writing classes – or topics for that matter” (138). Nelson says that her curriculum essentially consists of a series of invitations to “tell me a [personal] story” (45) – source materials for her classes aren’t mentioned.

We do not necessarily have a consensus, but theorists such as Nelson, Blitz and Hurlbert, and Elbow may have the right idea. My limited teaching experience suggests that we have the opportunity to engage students much more by making writing – primarily personal writing – the center of a course, and that such a course may encourage at least some of them to “keep writing by choice after the course is over” (Elbow, “Response” 509). Newkirk notes that in composition courses based around “thematic readings . . . [i]t becomes harder for the student writing to be the ‘content’ of the course; instead this writing explicates the reading” (105). “[I]f,” he says, “one of the aims of a composition course is to make room for the representation and discussion of diversity, it follows that the invitation to write should be an open one. The more space the apparatus of the course takes up, the harder it is going to be to elicit this representation” (105). I agree. But I also think that there is

substantial value in “gently” centering our course on the theme of nonviolence: explicitly stating that theme, presenting a few readings for discussion and written reflection, offering “springboard” quotations on nonviolence to help spur freewriting, presenting assignments and tasks that are in keeping with the spirit of the enterprise as we have been discussing it. Although it may indeed be that, as Jonsberg suggests, “the visible curriculum” is less important than the quality of the teacher’s presence (27), students are likely to benefit from explicit exposure to perspectives so different from the violent ones they most often encounter. And we need not be “experts” on nonviolence to introduce some key ideas and literature about the subject in our course, even while the focus of the course remains on student writing.

Thus, I offer the following as a brief sketch of how a nonviolent composition class syllabus could be structured and presented to students. It is probably apparent that I am advocating what might be termed a “post-expressivist” model – one that encourages students to primarily use their own lives as source material but that nevertheless emphasizes the crucial role of the “web” of social knowledge. Such a model will of course not be a possible or desirable one for all of us – but there is widespread agreement that such a model is likely to be the most useful one for our aims. (My conclusion takes a brief look at how nonviolence might fit into different composition models, including ones that examine nonviolence as more of a “subject”.) Further, the course is imagined as the second semester of a two-course writing sequence (such a sequence being a fairly common one in first-year composition programs) in which the first semester would concentrate on more “academic” writing tasks. Annotations are in bracketed italics throughout to distinguish them from the parts of the syllabus that students will read.

## ENGLISH 102: WRITING NONVIOLENCE

“Is it possible to write so that people stop killing each other?”

(paraphrased from Mary Rose O’Reilley)

### Course Goals and Description:

Welcome to English 102. The course goals call for you to:

- Look critically at your own writing and the writing of others
- Think critically about your experience and become more effective at sharing, via the written word, your thoughts on that experience, for yourself and for a community of fellow readers/writers
- Write with a rhetorical view of language, always keeping in mind the context of writer/audience/message
- Improve your ability to develop points, foreground key ideas and create effective structures and transitions, as well as strengthening your abilities to compose effectively at the sentence level
- Utilize “pre-writing” strategies for drawing together your knowledge on topics before formally beginning projects
- Learn to discuss and critique your own writing, the writing of peers, and related issues in ways that are honest but respectful, and to decide which feedback is most useful
- Build your ability to revise early drafts into more effective later ones

This is a class in which we will work on becoming stronger writers – more comfortable with and effective at using the written word to communicate with ourselves and with others. Although there will be a few related readings, your writing will be at the center of this course.

The question at the top of this syllabus is intended as a focal point for our writing in the course. It is a challenging and, at first glance, possibly strange question. But it involves issues that affect each and every one of us. We may not have a clear answer for this question, but many people have suggested that a less violent *world* can’t be a reality unless each of *us* is less violent. Since writing is a unique means of learning about ourselves and others, it has the potential to lead us to places where we can question the violence we’re all part of. We probably won’t all agree on where and when nonviolence should be practiced, and that’s fine. But we probably *can* all agree, at the very least, that we would like to live with a greater amount of peace – of body and mind – and would like that for others too. If we find that we are already in touch with peace much of the time, there is the possibility that we can learn to share it.

We see frequent evidence of violence. But do we see evidence of nonviolence? It might not seem so at first, but if we look closely, we see that our lives are *based* on nonviolence:

violence is the exception. Can this everyday nonviolence be expanded through our writing so that violence becomes even more of an exception?

We'll try to use writing to help us understand what's going on in our own worlds and in the worlds of others. This is not so much a course about nonviolence as a *subject* as it is a place where we'll build writing skills, read each other's work, and think and feel as we conduct a hands-on inquiry into a possible means of reducing violence: writing.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote:

**Nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit. You not only refuse to shoot a man, but you refuse to hate him.**

*[Blitz and Hurlbert note that one of Blitz's former students told him, a while after their class together, how the students in the course appreciated the fact that Blitz would always begin class by telling them, "I'm glad you're here" (65). This reminds us of how important it may be to simply make students feel welcome – something that, in large part, won't show up in a syllabus. Nevertheless, this introduction offers a short welcome before listing the course goals and attempting to convey a sense of the guiding notion of the class. The goals and language of the text that follow emphasize that this is a writing course first and foremost, though an unusual one. In a project like this it is helpful to keep in mind the concerns of scholars like Joseph Harris, who is appreciative of loftier overall goals for writing courses but who worries that the "social turn" composition has taken moves us away from the "practice" of writing (577). It is not insignificant, since we have been examining connections between spirituality and writing, that Harris calls our attention to "practice." Although he gives no special evidence of a spiritual inclination, Harris' call for "a renewed attentiveness" (578) to the specifics of writing as a practice in conjunction with a notion of the larger possibilities of that writing makes an interesting parallel to the spiritual aspect of our project, in which close attention to one's own experience may highlight connections with others.]*

*The course goals do not include the word "argument," substituting instead terminology such as "developing points" and "foregrounding key ideas." But students will nevertheless be making arguments in their writing, and the class itself will include some meta-level attention to ideas about argument and violence, along the lines of those discussed in Chapter 1 here.*

*I begin with a paraphrased version of O'Reilley's question because I remember how the original question affected me when Prof. Robert Yagelski wrote it on the board before a meeting of my first graduate composition class; perhaps it will stick, too, with some of our students.*

*I end the introduction with a quotation from King because, as a twentieth-century American, he may seem like one of the "closest" voices of nonviolence for many students.]*

## Coursework

Writers work on a variety of types of material, through a variety of techniques, for themselves and others, and that's what we'll do in this class. We'll write about the places we live and the ways we live; we'll do some creative work; we may even see what it's like when we change things in our own lives and then write about our experiences. We'll spend a lot of time looking at each other's writing, and some time looking at writing from outside the class. We'll explore freewriting (informal writing in which the only rule is that your pen doesn't stop moving), pre-writing concentration (thinking, visualizing, imagining all that we can about our topic before we put anything down in writing), and revision. And we'll talk a lot, too. This class will involve hard work, but we should all be learning and seeing results.

The writing we do over the course of the semester will culminate in the production of a collaborative book at the end of the term (so start thinking about what you'd like your "About the Author" blurb to say – but don't forget that there will be a substantial amount of effort involved before you're ready to write that blurb). This book will be a "peace project" to which each of you will contribute one or more pieces. You'll come away from the course with a group effort that's a record of your time here, and, I hope, with a sense of yourself as a writer.

This will be an experiential class in many ways: we'll look closely at things we may not be used to looking at with such attention, and we'll experiment with different writing "prompts" and situations. Mainly, we'll have the experience of writing a lot, and the enjoyment of seeing where we end up.

Social worker and activist Jane Addams wrote:

**The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain, is floating in mid-air, until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life.**

*[This section encourages students to begin (or continue) thinking of themselves as writers as well as suggesting some, but not all, of what the class will entail. I've incorporated Blitz and Hurlbert's "book" idea, which, they note, has reliably engaged students. I've tried to avoid making the stated goals, here and above, too grandiose (although they may already be so); it seems better for students to get more than they expect out of the course than less.*

*I've added a quotation from activist Jane Addams to bring a female perspective to the table and to reflect the inclusive, collaborative spirit that I hope will develop in the class.]*

## While We're in Class

We'll spend a lot of class time writing, reading, and discussing, both as a large group and in small writing groups. One of the most important thing we can do for each other to make the class work is to provide presence, that is, to be "all there" when we write, listen and respond.

Respect for ourselves and others in the course will be an essential part of a successful class. Humor is encouraged, but not at the expense of your classmates.

Since we'll be examining nonviolence in this class, it will be worth our time to expend some effort discussing discussion itself: how can we make it work to the best advantage of everyone without putting some people down or leaving some voices out? How can the individuals in our class (or any class) – the usually quiet folks, the boisterous ones, and everyone else – all be heard?

Although we will work on making sure that everyone has a chance to speak, please expect to also spend some time in this class in silence. The word “silence” is often preceded by the adjective “uncomfortable,” but this need not be the case for us. Sometimes we may want to simply think about our writing without actually *doing* any right then and there; at other times, it may be appropriate to simply *sit* with what we've been talking about, without insisting on the necessity for more speech at that particular moment.

Mohandas K. Gandhi, the famous Indian proponent and practitioner of nonviolence, wrote:

**Hundreds of nations live in peace. History does not and cannot take note of this fact . . . History, as we know it, is a record of the wars of the world, and so there is a proverb among Englishmen that a nation which has no history, that is, no wars, is a happy nation.**

*[This portion of the syllabus explicitly introduces elements that are part of the underpinning of the course: respectful communication, discussion that aims to include everyone, and occasional (perhaps regular, depending on students' wishes) silence. Also noted here is the fact that some meta-level attention will be paid to these issues – how and why are these things important?]*

*One general guideline for full-class and small-group discussion will be that we all wait until each speaker is finished before going ahead with our own comments. As mentioned, I've seen this practice in action in a different context, but Blitz and Hurlbert tell us that Hurlbert uses a form of this technique during peer-review sessions. Each student makes a positive comment, followed by a suggestion for revision phrased in the form of a question (“Could you...?”) while the person whose work is being discussed takes notes but does not respond until all suggestions have been presented (146). Brookfield and Preskill (1999), in their book of guidelines for “democratic” class discussion, recommend a similar exercise called the “circle of voices” (80). Their helpful book also includes ways to think about and deal with how much we speak as teachers, and to think about and behave toward students who monopolize discussion or those who rarely talk. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the recurrence of common themes that we've seen in our sources, Brookfield and Preskill mention “mindfulness” as one of the important “dispositions” of good democratic discussion (8); mindfulness is the foundation of the practice taught by Thich Nhat Hanh, and Nhat Hanh student O'Reilly's “deep listening” seems clearly related to both Nhat Hanh's teachings and Brookfield and Preskill's “disposition.”]*

The Seville Statement on Violence, written in 1986 by a group of international scientists, argues that war and violence are not “programmed into us” biologically. It is available on a United Nations webpage ([http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=3247&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=3247&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)). Among other things, it says the following:

**IT IS SCIENTIFICALLY INCORRECT to say that war or any other violent behaviour is genetically programmed into our human nature.**

### Schedule

This is a general idea of how the course will work over the semester, and will almost certainly change. Our online schedule will have the latest version with specific dates.

#### **Week 1**

Class welcome; self-introductions

What this class will involve

What does good writing look like?

What is nonviolence? Discussion and writing about our own thoughts, and some brief readings from Martin Luther King, Jr., Leela Fernandes and The Onion

Introduction (or re-introduction) to freewriting

*[This sample schedule incorporates many of the elements considered throughout the project. But, as with almost all class schedules, it would change throughout any given semester. It also obviously does not represent the only structure possible, even within the general model I've been discussing. I have not commented on every element here, but have tried to clarify points that seem to invite discussion.]*

*The schedule begins with students at the center of the course, by way of student self-introductions or “ice-breakers.” These can take many forms. O'Reilly, in Radical Presence, offers the suggestion of asking students to supply, among other information, an ending to the prompt, “I'm the one who...”, which is helpful on a practical level for instructors and which also gives each student a chance to consider some of the traits that supposedly define him or her (this topic might profitably receive some critical attention later in the course, in discussion or a freewriting prompt: are we simply a bundle of characteristics?).*

*The first week logically also includes an introduction to the course – which would give a teacher some chance to articulate his or her personal vision of the class and of nonviolence – in addition to an opportunity for students to look at what they as a class consider “good writing” (everyone is asked to bring in an example of such work) and to examine their own conceptions of nonviolence. Thus the focus of the class stays on writing, but everyone is also able to look at the overarching theme of the course. The listed readings could certainly change, but The Onion article mentioned earlier seems like a good piece to help ease students, many of whom might be familiar with the publication, into the topic. (Another*

*Onion* article, “Naïve Teacher Believes in her Students,” is not about nonviolence but may serve as a good source of humor and discussion at the outset of this class, which really needs to be grounded in some kind of idealism on the part of the instructor.) Part of the initial thinking about nonviolence will happen on paper, as freewriting is introduced as a regular practice in the course.]

## **Week 2**

*Connections with the Places We Live*

Go outside and write about it

Local field trip – campus and nearby

Begin working on your “place portrait” (written study of your home and neighborhood)

Writing groups form; short drafts of place portrait due to group members

## **Week 3**

*Further Connections*

Begin “connection lists” (lists of what you’ve given and received and what trouble you’ve caused in relation to people, places, things)

Continued work on place portraits

Small group meetings

## **Week 4**

Continued work on place portraits

Continue connection list

Place portraits due

*[As the course moves into subsequent weeks, other approaches and assignments discussed earlier come into play. One aspect not previously mentioned at length is the importance of small-group work, which gives students a “home” in the class. Except in extreme cases, groups should remain the same throughout the semester so that students have a chance (though, as always, there are no guarantees) to build comfort, rapport and trust among a group of others. The writing group is not a new idea, but O’Reilly invests it with particular significance for this project, claiming that it*

*functions specifically as a peacemaking strategy: it encourages us to listen to each other and figure out ways of criticizing without inflicting terminal injury, and it helps us learn to accept criticism without rancor. The writing group forces us to stake out the terrain between our own and other people’s view of reality; hence, it reinforces both personal identity and the sense of relationship to a community. (Peaceable 33)*

*Concurrent with the first project, we see the “connection list.” In fact, this is a re-christened version of the naikan exercise: thinking about what has been received and given and what troubles have been caused on the day the writing is done. In practice, students (and the instructor, for whom it would be appropriate to do much of the course writing along with students) would be asked to make such a list for four days of the week on two consecutive weeks, and then to reflect briefly in writing on their experiences with the exercise. This would provide an early opportunity for students to write about writing – in*



*this case, to write about writing that is at least somewhat contemplative in nature. Thus, students write “spiritually” without the necessity of religious overtones. This exercise may need some accompanying discussion and guidance to help students make more than vague claims that “this assignment taught me a lot” or the like; a minimum length guideline and requirement of specific examples from their lists along with commentary should be useful in this regard.]*

### **Week 5**

*Personal Connections with Nonviolence and Violence*

Reflecting on reflecting: writing about your connection list

Readings on nonviolence: Mary Rose O’Reilley, Mohandas Gandhi, Jesus of Nazareth, and Thich Nhat Hanh

Discussion as a class and in groups

Begin work on “you and nonviolence/violence” paper

### **Week 6**

Continued work on “you and nonviolence/violence” paper

Finding violence in language – bring in two articles from a popular magazine (i.e. *Time*, *Newsweek*) and examine them for violent metaphors. What alternatives are available?

Examining your own writing for violent metaphors

Small group meetings

Writing conferences

*[The “you and nonviolence/violence” paper asks students to shape an essay about their personal experiences with nonviolence or both nonviolence and violence. Eckert assigns a somewhat similar paper “about a time when they (students) personally tried to make peace” (par. 4). I envision the project a bit more broadly as one that encourages students to look at how their lives have been shaped by peace, or by peace and violence (we’ve all been influenced by varying combinations of both, but this project asks students to look at least at the nonviolent aspects, which they very likely may not have been asked to consider as such). Additional readings and discussions about nonviolence are scheduled immediately before this project begins, allowing the class to consider multiple ways of thinking about the role of these factors in their personal formation.*

*Also included in this part of the course is attention to violence in both popular writing and students’ own compositions. Though, as I have hinted in the Introduction here, combing every one of our texts for linguistic violence may not be the best use of our effort, being aware of the presence of such language in our work certainly may be one step in a nonviolent direction. M.J. Hardman, presenting the results of a workshop at an Organization for the Study of Communication, Language and Gender conference, offers an interesting list of alternatives to violent metaphors that could provide a good way to engage students. Hardman suggests alternative metaphors from gardening and cooking, among other categories. Thus “This is a battle over principles, not just opinions” can become “This is rooted in principles, not just opinions” (Hardman 43) and “You can’t mount a successful attack if you’re afraid to speak up” can be reconceived as “You can’t have a gourmet meal if you’re afraid to turn on the stove” (45).*

*We have not thus far discussed some potential issues that may arise from a project such as this, which, in asking for personal examinations of violence, could lead to some deeply personal revelations on the part of students. If we decide to work within a framework such as the one proposed here, we do need to be prepared for such occasions. However, we would not be the first teachers to deal with these concerns – and we would not be the first to have thought deeply about them. Newkirk asserts that although instructors are often uncomfortable with the idea of being put in the position of “therapists” and are fearful of having to respond to work whose revelatory nature makes it seem as if it “can’t be treated as writing” (19), students who write very personal pieces may best be served by not having such writing (and the experience it relates) “stigmatized” but by “having it treated as ‘normal’ – that is, writing that can be responded to, critiqued, even graded . . . Paradoxically, the writing can most effectively be therapeutic by not being directly therapeutic” (19-20). In an examination of female students’ writings on experiences of physical and sexual violence, Michelle Payne questions the very notion that such work should be seen only, or even primarily, through a psychotherapeutic lens:*

*I don’t want to dismiss the importance of that perspective. However, I do want to emphasize that being abused is not only a psychological trauma. Sexual abuse is a trauma created in part by cultural and historical beliefs [Payne also goes on to make similar arguments about non-sexual physical abuse and eating disorders] . . . So, if a writing classroom can be a site for critiquing power relations, for contextualizing experiences and beliefs within historical discourses, then it can be a site to analyze and contextualize one’s experience with bodily violence. (11)*

*Payne calls for us to question our “belief that emotional and intellectual responses can’t coexist or inform each other” (30) and concludes her work by arguing that student discourses about bodily violence should not be considered inappropriate in writing classes:*

*Writing teachers don’t need to be therapists to renew humanity in our classrooms, and we don’t need to reinforce the violence that has destroyed someone else’s humanity by banning that person’s story from the classroom or rallying around our roles as gatekeepers of the rational class. (128)*

*O’Reilly, while also well aware of the fact that she is not a professional counselor, suggests that students may indeed be healed by the act of writing (particularly freewriting) and that, rather than being frightened by any mention of “teaching writing” and “doing therapy” in the same breath<sup>2</sup>, we would do well to “see what [the connection] has to tell us” about our jobs as composition teachers, which require “a great deal of psychological and spiritual insight . . . conveyed primarily in the depth of our listening” (47). If healing does occur, says O’Reilly, it is primarily “self-healing. The teacher’s job is not so much to counsel as to provide an atmosphere of safety and to keep out of the way of the process” (47). As for concerns about frightening tendencies being loosed if we ask students to write honestly*

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<sup>2</sup> We see “interesting parallels” between psychotherapy practice and the study of a piece of writing, O’Reilly points out: “What recurs? What is emphasized? Why this word and not that? What is the meaning of this pattern of images?” ([Peaceable](#) 47).

*about their experiences with violence: O'Reilley notes that, in over twenty years of teaching, she has read no more than two pieces of student work that impressed her as "dangerously violent or perverse" (46).*

*We cannot guarantee that we won't run into difficult situations, but we can respect our students as writers and keep the focus on their writing while still being sensitive to what that work is telling us. The model I am proposing here does not have "healing" per se as a particular goal – "connection" is more what I hope for – but if students find that their writing in a course like this heals them in any way, we will have achieved more than planned.]*

### **Week 7**

Continued work on "you and nonviolence/violence" paper  
Small group meetings  
Writing conferences

### **Week 8**

*Connecting with Creativity*  
"You and nonviolence/violence" paper due  
Begin work on short story/poem(s) about your aspirations  
Small group meetings

### **Week 9**

Continue work on short story/poem(s)  
Short story/poem(s) due  
Class readings of creative work

*[The small creative writing project listed here requests a short story or poem (or series of short poems) about students' wishes for the future – theirs or the world's, or both. Encouraging students to mix fictionalization and/or poetry with their hopes turns a rather straightforward topic into something with greater potential – as well as providing opportunity to ponder how fantasies are constructed and how, as Elbow notes in one of the epigraphs to Chapter 1 here, "in writing we can go straight for how things ought to be" ("Foreword" xiii). Although creative writing and composition are customarily separated, Newkirk, for one, bemoans the division between them, arguing that "the alliance of composition to creative writing is essential for creating space for personal writing" (104). O'Reilley, in a section of *The Peaceable Classroom* entitled "Conform, Go Crazy, or Become an Artist," says, "Let's all be poets. Let's make this so much a part of our self-definition that nobody stands out, nobody has to be asked, 'Who Do You Think You Are?'" (89). It would be worth devoting at least one session to readings of student work by volunteers to encourage the feeling of "poet-ness."]*

### **Week 10**

*Connecting for a Common Goal*  
Begin plans for collaborative book project built around course themes  
Planning conferences (following written/spoken/silent brainstorming sessions)

“Publishing” groups form

### **Week 11**

Continue work on individual and group elements of book project  
 Small group meetings (both original and publishing groups)  
 Individual conferences outside class time

### **Week 12**

Continue work on book project  
 Small group meetings  
 Rough drafts of individual segments due  
 Class discussion about our progress – what remains to be done?

### **Week 13**

Continue work on collaborative book project  
 Small group meetings

*[Approximately the last third of the semester is allotted for a book project; having had experience writing in various modes and reading and thinking about nonviolence, students at this point in the course will have the opportunity to design their own writing project, related to the theme of nonviolence in the broadly-defined way we've been examining it – but the project will also need to fit into the overall scheme of the class book. Students, then, need to think individually and as a class about how their projects can combine into some kind of cohesive whole. Additionally, they need to assign amongst themselves – with guidance, naturally – tasks related to the production of the book (such as editorial duties for the whole and for different chapters or sections, artistic direction, etc.). “Publishing” groups will thus be formed, giving students a chance to set, and move toward, clear goals with (most likely) different classmates than the small group members they've worked with thus far. The instructor will almost certainly need to make her- or himself available outside of class time to a greater extent for this last segment of the course.]*

*This may be a wise place to ask for outside reading or research. Despite the centrality of personal writing in the course, the goal of bringing students into dialogue with others certainly may, as evidenced in the work of some of our fellow compositionists of nonviolence, lead to the use of non-student writing as source material. Among the possibilities for projects are: finding the “peace” in a war story or poem or even a piece of popular rhetoric, to see if the text may be struggling against its own violent leanings; a research project on a nonviolent movement or figure (Eckert, for instance, assigns such a project); a rhetorical analysis of an instance of nonviolent rhetoric or action (a la Gorsevski, who looks – at greater length, however, than students would do – at a number of cases of such rhetoric); or a revised version of one of the earlier projects, such as a creative-nonfiction narrative about one specific encounter with nonviolence or violence or a “place portrait” with more research involved. Students wishing to substantially revise or expand one of their earlier projects from the class could, if fellow students agree, be assigned additional responsibilities in the production of the book since they would not be writing entirely new pieces. However, as Harris suggests, we should not downplay the*

*importance of revision; indeed, fashioning the course book entirely out of revised earlier pieces would be a viable alternative to the model presented here. In any case, given the fact that a relatively limited amount of time is allotted for the book project in this model, engagement and refinement rather than length or bulk in students' individual segments for the book should be the goal.*

*While a full lesson in desktop publishing would be beyond the scope of what I have in mind here (Blitz and Hurlbert, on the other hand, seem to spend more time on this), it seems that a book could fairly easily include at the very least a student-designed cover, table of contents and author information, and be simply bound at a relatively low cost (a "lab fee" in the course could cover readings and a copy of the finished student book; the cost would still likely be lower than textbook costs in many courses). A "book release" party, as suggested by Blitz and Hurlbert (148), is held in the final week of class to allow students to celebrate what they've accomplished. Part of the grade for the book is individual, and part is a "whole class" grade given to every student who appears to have put a fair share of work into the project.]*

#### **Week 14**

Final elements of collaborative book project due: individual segments, art, cover, table of contents, etc.

Begin "action" project: "personal habit change challenge" or "compassion observation" exercise

#### **Week 15**

Written and spoken reflection on the course and on action project

Book release party

*[Beginning in the penultimate week of the semester, the "action" project asks students to choose a personal "habit change" challenge for seven days, or to take notes during the course of that week on instances of compassion they observe (including those they participate in – and the project would encourage them to initiate more compassionate contact than usual in that week). In both instances a relatively short written reflection is due in the last week, and time will be spent talking about students' experiences during the week and during the course. This is an excellent place to have a final discussion of the role of personal change and caring in broader plans for a "better world."]*

#### **Grading**

Grades are something most of us would generally prefer to do without, but at their best, they can give you an idea of how well your writing is working in the eyes of someone else.

Here's the grading scheme for the course:

Your work on the "place portrait" will be worth 15% of your course grade.

Your work on the "me and nonviolence/violence" project will count for 15% of your grade.

Your work on a short story or poem(s) will be worth 15% of your grade.

Your work on the collaborative book project will be worth 25% of your grade; of this number, 60% will be based on your individual work and 40% will be a grade that the class receives as a whole for the project.

Your written response to the “action project” will count for 10% of your grade.

Your participation, engagement, and other work for the course will count for 20% of your grade.

*[Ideally, it probably goes without saying, grades would not be a part of a course like this. Given the near-certainty that we will have to give grades, however, this schema attempts to at least emphasize the importance of community work by including a partially collaborative mark for the book project, as well as highlighting participation and engagement as a sizeable factor in the overall grade. Grading may indeed be an institutionalized manifestation of what Juanita Ross Epp and Ailsa M. Watkinson call “systemic violence” which “may take the form of conventional policies and practices that foster a climate of violence, or policies and practices that appear to be neutral but result in discriminatory effects” (xi). Barsh and Maylor mention “capricious” grading in their discussion of teaching as violence (3) and, as teachers of writing, many of us can probably testify to the difficulty of, for instance, separating grades from students: do we grade students that rub us the wrong way unfairly (or even artificially boost their grades to prove to ourselves that we’re not being unfair, thus perhaps being equally unfair in a different way)? Are we able to give the later work of students who have performed poorly on early assignments an equal chance at a good grade? Questions of this sort seem to have no easy answers.]*

*The probable necessity for grades can also be viewed, however, as a sort of positive: another humbling reminder of the difficulty of removing ourselves as teachers from complicity in the violence our students encounter. As Payne notes, “[w]hen we acknowledge that we are all capable of victimizing and potentially becoming victims of violence . . . we dismantle the binaries” (120).]*

Peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh, who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote:

**Peace is present right here and now, in ourselves and in everything we do and see. The question is whether or not we are in touch with it.**

## Conclusion

You cannot prefabricate techniques of nonviolent action and put them into a book . . . [t]he basic requisite is that you have the essence, the substance of nonviolence and compassion in yourself. Then everything you do will be in the direction of nonviolence.

-Thich Nhat Hanh

My suggestions for an “ideal” nonviolent composition course represent one particular vision of such an endeavor. It is, however, a vision grounded in pedagogical approaches and beliefs similar to ones shared by an increasing number of educators in composition and English at large and beyond. It is a vision that emphasizes consideration of the personal and spiritual – of the self and others – for both students and teachers, and a vision that encourages us to adopt an interdisciplinary viewpoint as we seek connections rather than differences. It is also, of course, a vision that, when carried into a living and breathing classroom, is sure to go “wrong” in many ways, and we as teachers will need to be ready for challenges both expected and unexpected. Humility will be a key aspect in our work even when things seem to be going well because, as we have seen, even a commitment to a project like this will not be enough to free us from complicity in everyday violence. We must simply do the best we can.

We should note that a variety of additional models present opportunities for bringing nonviolence into the writing classroom. Many compositionists interested in the topic may have to work within more rigid curricular structures than the one imagined in my proposal, while others may simply wish to use different methods than those advocated here. Similar projects have been discussed in, for example, composition-based service learning, in which

students write for “real” purposes for peace and social-justice organizations and advocacy groups (Heilker, 1997; Bacon, 1997). Likewise, a more traditional civic-writing course could be an excellent place to focus on nonviolent social change, and the subject of nonviolence would undoubtedly be a worthwhile basis for the writing-intensive-first-year-seminar model now in use at many institutions. Indeed, a search of the World Wide Web reveals listings at a number of schools for first-year seminars on nonviolence or related topics, under various disciplinary headings. Also, as many universities shift to a writing-in-the-disciplines approach, it is easy to imagine asking students to write about nonviolence from the perspectives of different disciplines such as biology, psychology and literature. Teachers working within any of these models might also want to politicize their presentation of nonviolence more than I have suggested – as a group of scholars and teachers called Rhetoricians for Peace seems to be doing by concentrating attention on governmental rhetoric related to the latest war in Iraq.

These other models would, of course, present their own problems from the point of view of our analysis. Approaching nonviolence as a seminar subject to be “learned” about primarily through readings and analytical writing could be quite valuable in its own way, but would be likely to downplay the essential inner aspects of nonviolence, as would focusing entirely on writing about nonviolence in civic or disciplinary genres. A service-learning approach to writing on nonviolence, while more action-oriented and theoretically the most likely of these other models to affect students at a personal level, also runs the risk of forcing students to bury their “own” voices in favor of the voices of others, as well being likely to prompt student resistance and charges of indoctrination if students are asked to



compose documents for organizations whose beliefs differ from their own (Heilker, 1997; Bacon, 1997).

While student resistance would also be one of the dangers of an overtly politicized class on nonviolence – for instance, one that looks at the Bush administration’s policy on Iraq from a leftist position – the greater problem might be the tendency of such an approach to demonize political “others” without examining the deeper roots of violent – and nonviolent – behavior. (Interestingly, overt student resistance receives little mention in the work of those I’ve referred to most often in this project, possibly because of the level of personal engagement teachers such as Blitz and Hurlbert, O’Reilly, and Eckert seem to encourage. While we cannot discount the possibility that these writers are glossing over instances of such resistance, the level of frankness that otherwise pervades their work suggests that this is not the case.)

Ultimately, though, we need the testimonies of any of us attempting to bring nonviolence into composition, in order to better understand what we’re doing and how it’s working (or not working), as well as to announce to our discipline and to our world that we exist: that there are many of us interested in bringing writing and nonviolence together in our students’ consciousness. On a parallel track, those of us on the more rhetorical end of the rhetoric-composition spectrum need to continue the work Gorsevski and others such as Rhetoricians for Peace have begun by studying the characteristics of nonviolent rhetoric and working toward making the resulting knowledge an integral part of our theoretical base. Those among us who are so inclined must also work to make discussion of spirituality more common and acceptable in the academy. The similarities I have highlighted between a spiritual viewpoint and a social constructionist perspective may provide at least one way of

furthering the conversation as we consider ties between viewpoints often thought of as quite different.

Finally, all of us will need to keep open minds as we seek expanded definitions, theories and possibilities. For instance, while I have critiqued possible alternatives to my proposed course, it is true that the model I advocate might just as well benefit from the influence of some of these different approaches. But in any case, all our fretting about syllabi needs to be put into perspective: most idealistic-but-realistic teachers working for peace seem to agree that any given single semester is unlikely, in itself, to really change the attitudes and lives of most of our students. Even in their late teens, they have absorbed so much violence – whether via images, words, physical blows, or otherwise – that the limit of our influence may be akin to a suggestion, the planting of a seed. We can take action that seems to be in our students’ interest, but they must ultimately take action for themselves.

Many of us, indeed, may be unable or unwilling to enact *any* sort of explicit approach to nonviolence even if we sympathize with the ideal of a more peaceful reality. Those of us for whom this is the case might consider Jonsberg’s idea of a “hidden curriculum of peace” (34), in which our presence to students is the key component. For all of us interested in this project at any level, in fact, the most important work of nonviolent pedagogy may be accomplished simply (or, more likely, complicatedly) through our qualities of presence and attention. It is likely that there are ultimately no quick fixes, no magic course plans that provide the “right” answer. Instead, our greatest task as teachers may be taking good care of ourselves, and perhaps changing those selves if necessary – which will probably be harder for many of us than designing a “good” syllabus. As Moffett suggests, what ultimately may be needed is a new conception of education, a change to a focus on “total personal

development” which, Moffett asserts, “naturally includes . . . relating well to other people and creatures” (7) and which thus “leads not to egoism but to empathy” (16).

In the meantime, however, we may be a small part of progress by sharing our skills as writing teachers and our presence as human beings. Neither a changed teacher nor a fantastic course plan can guarantee results, but our commitment to *doing something* – beyond the thinking and writing which are in themselves so important – may be a step in a more peaceful direction.

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