

Adapted from William M. Timpson, Edward J. Brantmeier, Nathalie Kees Tom Cavanagh, Claire McGlynn and Elavie Ndura-Ouédraogo (2009) *147 Practical Tips for Teaching Peace and Reconciliation*. Madison, WI: Atwood

## **UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENT BELIEF AND FAITH SYSTEMS**

As Abraham Lincoln famously asked for at his first inaugural address, when the threats of Civil War were very real but no one could have imagined the horror of 600,000 dead, so many more wounded and scarred, and great regions of the land laid waste, “The mystic chords of memory stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the organ when again touched, as surely they will be by the better angels of our nature.” Despite the occasional and violent antagonisms that emerge along the fault lines of competing religions, we can look for the “better angels” of peace and reconciliation that reside within each.

### **58. Keep the Faith about Peace and Reconciliation**

When the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 occurred in the U.S., Bill Timpson was scheduled to meet his large lecture class for first-year students later that morning. He had often used music as a way to transition into a particular topic. For example, he had used Bob Marley’s reggae classic *One Love* as a general and optimistic introduction to his course, *College Learning for a Sustainable Future*. On this particular day Timpson found himself wanting to say something about hope and faith in the darkest hours. He quickly went to the soulful *a cappella* by a wonderfully original African-American and politically aware group called *Sweet Honey in the Rock*. Their song, *I Remember, I Believe*, chronicles a faith that helped them and so many others through the hardest of times.

*I don't know how my mother walked her trouble down  
I don't know how my father stood his ground  
I don't know how my people survived slavery  
I do remember, that's why I believe*

*I don't know why the rivers overflow their banks  
I don't know why the snow falls and covers the ground  
I don't know why the hurricane sweeps thru the land now and then  
Standing in the rain, I believe*

*I don't know why the angels woke me up this morning soon  
I don't know why the blood still runs through my veins  
I don't know how I rate to run another day  
I am here still running, I believe*

*My God calls to me in the morning dew  
The power of the universe knows my name  
Gave me a song to sing and sent me on my way*

*I raise my voice for justice, I believe* (Reagon 1995)

In the midst of conflict, what music speaks to your hopes? When you need to reconcile differences, what sustains your faith? What “angels” help you wake up to meet another day?

### **59. Utilize Contemplative Practices in Counseling and Education**

Achieving a sustainable peace and some reconciliation for old wounds means much more than the cessation of violence. It demands serious study. For example, those studying to become counselors and teachers are in need of understanding their own world views and cultural perspectives as well as those of their clients and students. Spiritual and religious beliefs and practices are important aspects of this cultural perspective taking. In a course developed at Colorado State University, Nathalie Kees creates an environment where counselors and teachers can experience a variety of contemplative practices from many of the major world religions and spiritual traditions.

The experiential nature of this course is helpful in two ways. Students are able to experience, in a non-threatening way, some of the beliefs and practices of religious and spiritual traditions that may be very different from their own. Secondly, students can choose to incorporate various practices in their own lives and professions in whichever ways seem appropriate. Examples might include; practicing mindfulness meditation as a way of staying centered and present focused when working with clients or students, individually or in groups. Experiencing mindfulness meditations such as Buddhist Tonglen, Hindu Yoga Nidra, and Christian Centering Prayer, helps students see the universality of some of the practices and beliefs of major world religions. Mental health practitioners and teachers from various spiritual traditions serve as guest presenters and allow students to ask questions in a safe and non-judgmental atmosphere. Transferring new awareness and understanding to their personal and professional lives is done through discussions, papers, and projects; drawing upon literature in the fields of counseling, teaching, religion, and spirituality.

### **60. Emulate Some Quaker Peace Practices**

As a practicing Quaker, counseling student, and life coach, Maggie Graham describes several Quaker peace practices that can be adapted for both individual and group use. Quakers have over 300 years of history in advancing peace, and the structures that this faith community has developed give respect to individuals’ views, provide a forum for free expression of those views (even when those views may be unpopular), and build in space for deep reflection.

One mechanism for fostering reflection is the Quaker testimony. Rather than follow a specific creed, Quakers follow the idea of God (other words that are often used here include *Inner Light* and *divine*) in each person, with the expression of that spirit varying across individuals. Quakers (also known as Friends) have a peace testimony, but it is not

a written epistle as the name suggests. Rather, it is the suggestion that individuals seek guidance within and follow those inner leadings.

On the simplest level, “testimony” means “bearing witness” and the Friends’ long heritage of witnessing to peace can be found in public statements and personal reflections, in their refusal to bear arms in times of civil and international conflict, in acts of prophetic confrontation and of quiet, reconciling diplomacy. But these are merely outward and visible signs of inward conviction. This conviction springs from a living Spirit, mediated through the human experience of those trying to understand and follow its leadings. (Leavitt 2004) (See <http://www.pym.org/publish/pamphlets/peace.htm>)

One fruitful exercise is to develop a personal peace testimony by writing down your own beliefs regarding peace. Use your personal peace testimony to guide your actions, and reflect daily on whether you follow your own beliefs and your own inner leadings. What would you write in your personal peace testimony? When your personal actions stray from your beliefs, gently guide yourself back to your own convictions.

Quakers also have a practice of posing queries to themselves or within a group. Queries are open-ended questions that invite deep reflection. They provide a structure for examining our own core beliefs, and because Quakerism has such strong roots in peace activism, many queries have already been posed in Quaker writings. Examples include:

- ❖ How do I nourish peace within myself as I work for peace in the world?
- ❖ What are we doing to remove the causes of war and destruction of the planet, and to bring about lasting peace?
- ❖ Do we reach out to all parties in a conflict with courage and love?  
(<http://www.quaker.org/pacific-ym/fp/pymfp2001pg042.html>)

If you developed your own queries, what would they say? Who would you like to ask to consider your queries?

Quakers often gather in a forum called worship sharing where they address queries aloud. They take turns speaking from silence to share their personal reflections on pre-arranged queries. The forum cultivates respectful listening rather than a dialog or discussion, with silence punctuating each person’s sharing so that both speaker and listener may absorb and integrate what has been spoken.

If you were to host your own worship sharing, whom would you invite? What would be your agenda in arranging a worship sharing? How would you preserve the spirit of the gathering and encourage deep listening?

### **61. Create a Clearness Committee**

Have you struggled with a personal decision that impacts peace and reconciliation, e.g., your role as an activist on local issues or as a mediator in resolving a conflict at work?

When people grapple with an intensely personal decision, finding their way to clarity often goes beyond speaking to friends, journaling or mulling over the issues as they see them. As committed pacifists, Quakers/Friends developed clearness committees to aid members of Quaker meetings in making personal decisions. Life coach, Maggie Graham, describes how these practices can be used.

“Within the Quaker community, the process for forming a clearness committee is triggered when a Friend with a personal concern approaches his or her Meeting (the equivalent of a church, synagogue or mosque in many other faiths) with a request for a clearness committee. A committee of three to five people is appointed, and logistical arrangements are made for the committee’s first (and sometimes only) meeting.

“The clearness committee begins with a statement from the requestor, either verbally at the start of the meeting or in writing prior to the meeting. Silence punctuates each person’s contributions to the meeting, with the substance of the speaking centered on open-ended questions addressed to the requestor. The tone of the clearness committee meeting is one of deeper reflection and support for the person at the center of the committee. The requestor drives the meeting either with responses to the questions or with spoken reflection. Generally, a clearness committee meets for two to three hours at one sitting, and it may reconvene over the course of several weeks or months as the requestor seeks further clarity.

“The purpose of the committee is to provide the requestor with the space and time to examine the issues facing him or her in a supportive environment. Questions are posed by committee members without an agenda, often following intuition and leadings. Giving advice is forbidden, and the contents of the sacred forum are generally not discussed beyond the structure of the committee meetings. The meeting is held solely in support of the person at its center.”

If you were to request a clearness committee, what you want to discuss about your contributions to peace and reconciliation? Whom would you invite? To structure it according to Quaker practice, consult Parker Palmer’s *The Courage to Teach* (1998).

Quaker practices offer many other structures that can be easily adapted for individual and group use. Information about the Quaker faith and practice can be found at <http://www.quaker.org/pacific-ym/fp/index.html>.