

“IS IT POSSIBLE TO TEACH WRITING SO THAT PEOPLE STOP KILLING EACH OTHER?” NONVIOLENCE, COMPOSITION, AND CRITICAL EXPRESSIVISM

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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

Perhaps what I am encouraging ... 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?

—Mary Rose O’Reilley

A small, quiet movement within composition studies, focusing on connections between nonviolence and the teaching of writing, was arguably established by Mary Rose O’Reilley’s 1993 *The Peaceable Classroom*, in which O’Reilley asked “Is it possible to teach English so that people stop killing each other?” In O’Reilley’s wake have come works such as Michael Blitz and C. Mark Hurlbert’s *Letters for the Living: Teaching Writing in a Violent Age* (1998) and essays by compositionists such as Sara Dalmas Jonsberg and G. Lynn Nelson. Such attempts to link composition and nonviolence have often been characterized by advocacy of what might be termed an expressivist approach to writing pedagogy. And yet a primary element of the notion of nonviolence is, of course, the relationship between self and other. How, then, could expressivist writing, with its focus on the personal, possibly lead to less violent ways of being in society? Below, I attempt to explain this seeming paradox by arguing that attempts at nonviolent composition provide signal examples of critical expressivism (a term I want to embrace, at least in the present context)—an approach foregrounding writing that is simultaneously based on personal experience and intimately connected with how individuals relate to one another.

NONVIOLENCE, THE PERSONAL, AND THE SOCIAL

To locate the origins of nonviolent sympathies within rhetoric and language studies, we might go at least as far back as Kenneth Burke, whose early cold war *Rhetoric of Motives* is offered as a small gesture “to counteract the torrents of ill will” he observed in the world of his time, sentiments that drove him ever more to believe “that books should be written for tolerance and contemplation” (1969, p. xv). Burke takes pains, for instance, to point out the irony of war, “that ultimate disease of cooperation:” a thousand instances of rhetorically induced coordination must occur to make a single destructive martial act possible (1969, p. 22). Elizabeth Ervin argues, meanwhile, for the impact of Wayne C. Booth’s World War II experiences on his development as a rhetorical theorist, and quotes a late piece of his writing: “human love, human joining, ‘critical understanding’ as a loving effort to understand—that has always been at the center [of my endeavors]” (Booth, as quoted in Ervin, 2003, p. 190). But in the contemporary era of composition and rhetoric, O’Reilley’s *The Peaceable Classroom* is probably the best-known work explicitly focused on nonviolent English teaching, and not only because of its very quotable articulation (borrowed from Ihab Hassan, one of O’Reilley’s graduate-school professors) of the “Is it possible ... ?” question. Much of the book’s impact stems from O’Reilley’s honesty about her life, about the situatedness of her perspective on nonviolence, and about her failures. Relatable yet provocative, and endlessly quotable—“bad teaching ... is soul murder” (1993, p. 47)—the book follows O’Reilley’s attempts to enact a pedagogy of nonviolence, from the beginning of her career in the Vietnam era up through the then-recent first gulf war. The primary foundational element of her pedagogy is teaching personal writing (in perhaps all three of the senses articulated by Peter Elbow in this volume) to her students: “First of all, as teachers in the humanities, we encourage students to explore the inner life” (1993, p. 32). But—and this point is crucial in a discussion of critical expressivism—O’Reilley insists that

our second goal should be to help the student bring his subjective vision into community, checking his insights against those of allies and adversaries, against the subjective vision of the texts he studies, and in general against the history of ideas. The classroom, then, must be a meeting place for both silent meditation and verbal witness, of interplay between interiority and community. (1993, p. 32)

She goes on to write that “finding voice [in writing]—let’s be clear—is a political act ... it 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” (1993, p. 58). Preemptively asking the question her reader might be formulating—“What Does This Have to do With Nonviolence?”—O’Reilley argues that “war begins in banality, the suppression of the personal and idiosyncratic” (1993, p. 59) and in linguistic abstractions such as “sacrifice” and “glory” (drawing on terms taken from Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*) (1993, p. 60). Abstractions have their place, she notes, “particularly in manipulating broad areas of cultural consensus,” but “before we buy into an abstraction, we need to know what *we* think” (1993, p. 60). Here again she writes of the connection between the personal and the communal, but in this case, rather than focusing on how the community must bring the individual vision into check, O’Reilley reverses the argument: socially-constructed, and possibly dangerous, abstractions must be checked against individual perspectives and experiences.

Claims about the importance of the individual viewpoint for nonviolence are also advanced in Michael Blitz and C. Mark Hurlbert’s 1998 *Letters for the Living: Teaching Writing in a Violent Age*. Blitz and Hurlbert suggest that their work “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” (Blitz & Hurlbert, 1998, p. 21). With Blitz and Hurlbert, unlike in *The Peaceable Classroom*, samples of personal experience-based student texts make up a sizable percentage of the book; it is this direct inclusion of student writing that perhaps most distinguishes *Letters for the Living* as a “composition” work (despite her interest in the teaching of writing, O’Reilley might be said to identify more as a literature scholar and poet than a compositionist). The book, however, is similar to O’Reilley’s in a couple of key ways: it foregrounds a writing pedagogy that asks students to bring their subjective experiences into conversation with a community; and it is itself written in a highly personal style, although structured mainly as a chronological transcript of an ongoing email exchange between the co-authors. Blitz and Hurlbert muse about the role of violence—and peace—in their students’ lives as well as their own. The three main textual threads running through the book—the authors’ messages to each other, their students’ writing (mostly embedded in the email 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 composition studies literature. In some sections, the effect is soothing, as these two friends trade late night messages. But in any given chapter, the reader is never far from a jarring personal account from a student: a neighborhood murder,

family violence, a friend's suicide. In this sense, *Letters for the Living* embodies its twin subjects: the violence of students' worlds and the world at large, and the 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.

This focus on peace, not just violence, and on the personal also distinguishes another notable contribution to this conversation about composition's possible relationship with nonviolence: a 2000 special issue of *English Journal*, entitled "A Curriculum of Peace," that emerged in the wake of the 1999 Columbine High School shootings. Though *English Journal* is primarily aimed at secondary school instructors, this issue includes contributions from college compositionists Sara Dalmas Jonsberg, Marsha Lee Holmes, and G. Lynn Nelson, among other university instructors. (Sadly, of course, prominent college shootings such as those at Virginia Tech would soon take place after this issue appeared.)

Nelson insists that a "personal story" must be at the heart of any attempt to work toward peace through teaching writing: "Deny me my stories, as the modern dominant culture does, and I will eventually turn to the language of violence" (2000, p. 43). Indeed, he insists that his writing classes and workshops at all levels are built around variations on the simple injunction, "tell me a story" (2000, p. 45)—but, citing O'Reilly's concept of "deep listening," he also emphasizes the importance of fostering audience attentiveness in those classes. That is, stories do not achieve their full value when they are mere expression; they have to be heard, not just told, and in the classroom this means that a community of listeners must be constructed, including students and the instructor. So the personal cannot be disconnected from the social.

Jonsberg, meanwhile, invokes this connection in her own way, insisting on the importance for nonviolent teaching of respecting what each individual student brings to the classroom and to her or his writing and reading. Respect in this context is

born of understanding first the source of a reader's unique vision—seeing that there are reasons behind a particular reading of a text, reasons of experience, gender, religion, cultural, and/or linguistic background. With that introspective understanding comes an awareness that others will read differently, out of their experiences and genders and religious training and so on. (2000, p. 30)

The "unique vision" of the individual, then, can be simultaneously honored for its own value and understood as a perspective to which social factors make an absolutely crucial contribution. Further, "introspective understanding" leads not to self-absorption but to knowledge of a commonality with others: other

people are different, paradoxically, for the same reasons I am “myself”—because of personal experiences and a mix of socializing elements.

Jonsberg thus follows O’Reilly, Blitz and Hurlbert, and Nelson in arguing for a pedagogy that gives pride of place to the stories and voices of individual students, without in any way discounting the importance of the social (that is, fellow students and the teacher, but also the world at large). Below, I offer pedagogical possibilities in presenting a small toolbox of projects and practices that might aid the composition instructor inspired by nonviolent principles. But first I want to point out another of Jonsberg’s arguments that highlights a second key commonality in the work of many compositionists of nonviolence. Jonsberg suggests provocatively 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” (2000, p. 28). For Jonsberg, a posture of absolute respect and acceptance on the teacher’s part is critical; she strives for a classroom where “all members are welcome in the fullness of their being” (2000, p. 30). Nelson’s valuation of deep listening seems to arise from a similar place. O’Reilly bluntly argues that the “adversarial stance” (1993, p. 30) of many traditional teaching methods leads to “academic brutalization” (1993, p. 31), and that the little things we do matter, down to our comments on student papers: “rude and demoralizing labeling of student work” is one example of how students are “insulted, bullied, and turned into objects,” planting “seeds of violence. It follows, therefore, that the first step in teaching peace is to examine the ways in which we are already teaching conflict” (O’Reilly, 1993, p. 31).

TEACHERLY REFLECTION

But how can we conduct such an examination? O’Reilly’s and Blitz and Hurlbert’s longer texts point toward an answer: as teachers we should reflect with seriousness and honesty on our own lives, considering how they connect to and influence what we do in the classroom. Blitz and Hurlbert claim in their introductory chapter that “writing and living and teaching are not separable. As you will see, our lives are in this composition [*Letters for the Living*] as our students’ lives are in their compositions” (1998, p. 2). And indeed, even though their book is overwhelmingly focused on their experiences with their writing students, a reader also witnesses the two teachers wrestle with fears for their own children; relate stories of troubled visits to dying hometowns; and recall quiet moments when they sat peacefully as friends, staring into the night. These details are offered not gratuitously but as part and parcel of Blitz and Hurlbert’s project of wondering how they might help their composition students navigate violent landscapes; one gets the impression that these teachers are better able to

sympathetically encounter their students' writings by reflecting on their own values, goals, and experiences vis-à-vis peace and violence. Their work, then, grows out of a desire to "stop pretending that that our real lives are secondary or irrelevant to the work of teaching" (1998, p. 2). O'Reilley, for her part, has followed up *The Peaceable Classroom* with two similarly personal and candid volumes (1998's *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice* and 2005's *The Garden at Night: Burnout and Breakdown in the Teaching Life*) focusing on teachers' lives as they relate to the classroom. In the view of these compositionists of nonviolence, critical expressivism isn't just for our students; it's for us too. Any teacher who's been unable to banish from her head a negative comment from a student evaluation, or been troubled for days afterward about a testy exchange in the classroom, knows that our teaching hours influence our non-teaching ones. But a moment's thought will reveal that the influence runs in the other direction as well, and the critical expressivism of Blitz and Hurlbert and O'Reilley's own writing helps us consider some of the connections between violence, nonviolence, and what we bring into the classroom from outside it.

Part of what we bring into the classroom, of course, is our personal sense of highest meaning and purpose, of our connection with the rest of the universe and how we might act to deepen that connection: what I will call our spirituality. In considering the history of nonviolence, we do a disservice to figures such as King and Gandhi if we forget how entwined their spiritual ideals were with their commitments to turning the other cheek. Of the compositionists of nonviolence, O'Reilley in particular is unabashed about the influence of her spiritual beliefs and practices, to the point where Peter Elbow, in his foreword to *The Peaceable Classroom*, classifies the book's subfield as spirituality (xi). Earlier, I cited O'Reilley's claim that "finding voice [in writing] ... is a political act"—but here I want to note her parallel claim, given equal weight in the text, that "finding voice is a spiritual event" (61), the province of prophets; and a "prophet, or a prophetic writer, calls us to a higher standard of what we could be. That's simply a prophet's job description" (62). In this view, the spiritual and the political are as tied together as the personal and the political: an individual's spiritual experience—which may be triggered by finding voice in writing—gives rise to a call for the betterment of the community. Certainly, O'Reilley seems to suggest that this pattern holds for her. Each of her books on the teaching life is substantially concerned with her experiences as an eclectic mix of Quaker, Buddhist, and Roman Catholic, and how these traditions motivate her to be a particular kind of person, writer, and teacher (a nonviolent one, among other things). She notes in *The Peaceable Classroom* that her purpose in highlighting her spirituality is not to forward "dogma" but instead to foreground the importance of "discipline: a way of being-in-time that these traditions propose" (73).

Variously referred to by O’Reilly as contemplation, deep listening, presence, mindfulness, or being awake, such discipline—which for O’Reilly is particularly influenced by the teachings of the Vietnamese Zen practitioner Thich Nhat Hanh¹—helps a teacher to actually be there with students, paying full attention in the given situation: in the classroom, during office hours, while planning class or commenting on papers.

“Spirituality” in this sense, then, involves not so much a set of beliefs as a set of practices and ways of understanding, and relating to, others and the world. For O’Reilly, we know that the frameworks of Buddhism, Quakerism and Catholicism feed these ways of being. Blitz and Hurlbert are quieter about their relation to established spiritual traditions, though Hurlbert occasionally quotes the wisdom of a rabbi neighbor, and fondly remembers the “peace be with you” of the Catholic masses of his childhood. But in any case I think that we can see, in these teachers’ deep concern for student well-being and their intense personal reflection, a commitment to the same values that spirituality-in-education proponent Parker J. Palmer approvingly attributes to O’Reilly in his foreword to *Radical Presence*: “seeing one’s self without blinking, offering hospitality to the alien other, having compassion for suffering, being present and being real” (ix). When Blitz and Hurlbert ask in *Letters for the Living*, “what if . . . peace depends upon a constant, incremental, local, personal vigil?” (1998, p. 56), they seem not far from the mindfulness-based notion of “being peace” forwarded by Thich Nhat Hanh in books such as *Being Peace* and *Peace is Every Step*. And at the same time they hint at why their pedagogy is based on personal writing: the “local, personal vigil” is what they encourage in their students’ experience-based compositions, and exemplify in their own prose in *Letters for the Living*.

Nhat Hanh’s notion of interbeing also seems worth mentioning here; it’s the idea that every seemingly separate thing in the universe is in fact, from a certain perspective, connected in a web of interdependence. For example, the computer keyboard I’m typing on wouldn’t exist without the sun and soil that helped grow the food for its designers; or without the ancient creatures whose compressed remains created the raw material for the petroleum-based keys; or without the inventors of the letters represented on those keys; and so on and so on. According to Nhat Hanh, to really understand the theory we have to be able to see its truth at an intuitive level, not just logically. But I think understanding it logically can still be valuable for a project involving composition and nonviolence. As teachers and scholars of language and writing, we have little problem accepting a similar theory about texts: any given book, for instance, is written in an alphabet the author did not create, using a language of words with rich histories and ever-shifting meanings, and indebted to myriad other texts and thinkers—either implicitly or explicitly—in its allusions, quotations, adherence or lack thereof

to genre conventions, and so on. So we may be especially well-positioned to accept a theory of interbeing. Our familiarity with Burke's notions of rhetorical identification and consubstantiality may also help us appreciate a perspective highlighting connection. It's important that we not understand interbeing in a manner that denies the existence of difference.² Rather, in the Buddhist tradition of embracing paradox, we see that from one perspective things are separate, whereas from another (perhaps more profound) viewpoint they're inextricably connected. My point here is that if one of our operative frameworks—or terministic screens, to use Burke—as teachers is a perspective of interbeing, we may be bolstered in our efforts toward nonviolent teaching: simply speaking, we come to understand that hurting others means, at a fundamental level, hurting ourselves. And it's not hard to see the connection with critical expressivism, if by this term we mean the notion that in writing (from) the self we must inevitably encounter, and consider our relationship with, others and society. As Blitz and Hurlbert suggest, quoting Nel Noddings, "We need to create curricula which include ample 'opportunity to study response, beauty, and almost mystical interdependence'" (1998, p. 83).

The purpose of this discussion of spirituality is not (necessarily) to call for teachers to take up any particular reflective practice (e.g., meditation, contemplation) but to point out spirituality's importance in one of the most frequently cited texts (*The Peaceable Classroom*) among compositionists of nonviolence, as well as to show how certain spiritual perspectives align with both a nonviolent stance and a critical expressivist one. More broadly, my focus on teachers' spirituality is one way of calling attention to the importance compositionists of nonviolence place on the value of deep listening to students and to committed, continuing self-scrutiny on the part of instructors; for those so inclined, a discipline of personal spiritual practice may help support such attentive teaching and honest self-reflection.³ Those for whom the notion of "spirituality" feels problematic may, of course, draw inspiration from other wells and frame the values underlying their commitment to nonviolence in different terms—"humanist," "feminist," "progressive," or something else.⁴ Similarly, in what follows, I include pedagogical suggestions that might be understood as spiritual by some, but simply secular by others.

WORKING TOWARD A COMPOSITION CLASSROOM OF NONVIOLENCE

To this point I've written mainly about the philosophical perspectives informing attempts at nonviolent composition. Here I'd like to talk a bit more practically, discussing possibilities for assignments, activities, and classroom

practices drawn from or inspired by the work of compositionists of nonviolence as well as by the notion of critical expressivism. Obviously, composition is taught in a wide variety of contexts, and my suggestions encompass first-year as well as advanced composition courses, themed and non-themed courses. This examination is certainly far from comprehensive and interested readers are, of course, encouraged to consult cited works for further information.

LONGER ASSIGNMENTS

If we strive to work toward peace in our teaching of composition, we might ask students to write about violence and nonviolence explicitly, or we might ask them to focus on these issues in less direct ways. In attending to the personal and the local when thinking about where peace, and violence, reside, Blitz and Hurlbert detail a project that asked students to reflect upon and research various aspects of their cities and neighborhoods and compile a collaborative class “book.” For the first part of this assignment (the focus of an entire chapter in *Letters for the Living*), Blitz’s students, most of them based in New York City, corresponded with Hurlbert’s rural Pennsylvania students to describe their respective cities and neighborhoods and their lives there. Blitz and Hurlbert write, “in every case” students reported this letter-writing aspect of the course as their favorite (1998, p. 96). The potential value of such a place-based approach for students’ critical rhetorical understanding is articulated by David Seitz elsewhere in this volume. Further, a local approach is in keeping with the work of some writers in ecocomposition, a subdiscipline that seems allied with composition and nonviolence; for instance, Derek Owens offers a “place portrait” assignment (2001, p. 30) designed to help students think about their immediate environments. Ecocompositionist Christian R. Weisser, meanwhile, asks students to write a paper about their “relationships with non-human others” (2001, p. 92), an assignment certainly relevant to present purposes since a robust vision of nonviolence would extend to nonhuman animals as well as the natural world at large.⁵

Compositionist Michael Eckert, author of “Writing for Peace in the Composition Classroom,” asks students to think more directly about peace and violence as well as about the role of rhetoric in both when he assigns a paper focusing on “personal argument style” in which “students tell a story about a time when they personally tried to make peace” (*Writing for Peace*). Marsha Lee Holmes, arguing that meeting violence head on is an effective strategy for understanding and ameliorating it, suggests having students focus on their experiences with violence in popular culture such as music, television, and film. Citing Ann E. Berthoff, Holmes believes that such an approach is pedagogically effective because it “begin[s] with where they are” (as quoted in Holmes, 2000, p. 105), calling

on texts with which students are intimately familiar to allow for deeper thought about students' relationships with those materials and with the various kinds of violence they represent (physical violence, to be sure, but also mental violence as well as racism, sexism, homophobia, and the like).

INFORMAL WRITING

Perhaps unsurprisingly, O'Reilley is an unabashed fan of freewriting, which for her specifically means "automatic" writing or writing without stopping or editing, not just informal writing in general. Sometimes calling it "prewriting," O'Reilley (1993) cites the practice as one of the key "tool[s] of nonviolent discipline in the writing class" (p. 43). She goes so far as to suggest that in outlining "what we now think of as a process model of teaching writing," early freewriting proponents "Macrorie, Elbow and their colleagues were laying out, I believe, a pedagogy of nonviolence" (pp. 38-39); in other words, modern composition, with a focus on process almost a given, is in some ways inherently a nonviolentist enterprise. For O'Reilley, freewriting moves students away from being "generic products" formed by years of conformist socialization: "in prewriting ... we begin to listen to voices inside. They may surprise us" (p. 44). So far, so expressivist. But characteristically, O'Reilley goes on to connect interior and exterior: the inner voices accessed through freewriting may also "surprise the world, which badly needs new ideas" (p. 44). However, she does not believe in surprising the world with raw freewriting, preferring to employ some type of intermediate "focus" exercise that allows the reader to revisit the material, shape, amplify, cut, explain, and edit ... thus, we teach both appropriate sharing and appropriate restraint" (p. 51). Journals, long a mainstay of composition courses, could serve well as a medium for such "sharing" in a course working toward nonviolence, motivating regular writing practice and self-reflection—on the part of teachers as well as students.

READINGS

The appropriate role of writings generated by authors other than the students in the class has long been debated in composition; although it's probably safe to say that most composition classes include outside readings, the issue is worth raising again in the context of a critical expressivist pedagogy of nonviolence, at once concerned with students' personal stories and with an outside "topic" (nonviolence/peace). However, the seeming conflict need not be. Students can certainly respond from experience to outside readings, and these could be texts with or without overt nonviolent perspectives; in fact, the argument could be

made that a critical expressivist approach would—or should—by definition put students’ own experiences into dialogue and tension with existing texts and cultural conversations. O’Reilley reports that her “peaceable classroom” experiment began with a literature course on War and the Modern Imagination featuring authors such as Hemingway and Vonnegut (1993, p. 20); as mentioned, Holmes calls on familiar texts from students’ pop-culture experiences; and Blitz and Hurlbert’s Interstate Neighborhood Project occurred in the context of the two teachers’ research writing courses, where students were responsible for finding and using outside sources. However, teachers can expect challenges—for instance, Blitz and Hurlbert (1998) report rather glumly on a widespread failure in their students’ work that semester to “make connections between the insights they created about their own lives during the letter writing in the first half of the semester and their research” about their neighborhoods detailed in the final class book project (p. 128). Eckert (*Writing for Peace*), for his part, details two assignments built mainly around outside texts: one asks students to research a “peace hero” (e.g., Jane Addams) and to write a Rogerian-style encomium about that figure for a skeptical audience; while the other requires a comparative-contrastive argument about two literary representations of “nonviolent sentiment.” Though these projects lack overt expressivist elements, we can certainly imagine that they might be modified to include experiential input from students, including in accompanying writer’s-letter-type reflections.

CLASSROOM PRACTICES AND PERSPECTIVES

What other practices and attitudes might characterize a writing classroom of nonviolence? Another standby of many classrooms, the peer-response group, is likely to be one. O’Reilley (1993) writes:

I think the writing group—as envisioned by contemporary writing theorists—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. (p. 33)

Blitz and Hurlbert (1998) summarize their teaching style thusly: “A workshop pedagogy: an organic, creative, socially responsible pedagogy” (p. 138). So yet again, in this view, critical expressivism and nonviolent pedagogy are under-

stood as intertwined.

There is also the question—hinted at above in Eckert’s “peacemaker” assignment—of how to approach the concepts of rhetoric and argument themselves with students. Although some scholars, such as Sally Miller Gearhart (1979), have provocatively suggested that “any intent to persuade is an act of violence” (p. 195), others, such as Barry Kroll (2008) and Richard Fulkerson (2005), have proposed that we instead re-envision rhetoric in different, more peaceable terms. Kroll, in a 2008 *College Composition and Communication* article, introduces writing students to possible parallels between the martial art of aikido—which focuses on meeting physical attacks with minimal force and an intention to do no harm—and more harmonious ways of arguing with adversaries; he suggests that taking such a rhetorical approach may be akin to “practicing the art of peace” (p. 468).⁶ Fulkerson, meanwhile, surveying feminist critiques of argument, wonders if rhetoric could be reconceptualized as “partnership rather than battle” (and, relevantly for a discussion of critical expressivism, notes that his attempts to encourage students in this direction include requests for personal experience as part of their research-based arguments).⁷ Teachers seeking shorter activities along these lines might ask students to play around with metaphor in the vein of M.J. Hardman (1998), who has suggested possible alternatives, drawn from realms such as gardening and cooking, to violent and war-based metaphors; for instance, “This is a battle over principles, not just opinions” can become “This is rooted in principles, not just opinions” (p. 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” (p. 45).

Finally, as I’ve pointed out, many compositionists of nonviolence make persistent cases for the importance of our quality of attention with students, and even mundane pedagogical practices can take on new meaning when viewed through this kind of lens. In her fellow teachers’ meetings with students, O’Reilly (1998) witnesses deep presence, respect, and a gift for cultivating students’ own understanding of their experiences: “I see my colleagues practicing this patient discernment as seriously as any Zen master, though they may call it simply draft conferencing” (p. 3). I’m enamored of the idea of using a “back-and-forth” attendance-keeping sheet for every student: each class session, the sheets are distributed, and each student signs in on her or his sheet with some kind of very brief note or question to the teacher, either formal or informal. The instructor collects the sheets and writes a very brief response to each student before the next class, when the cycle begins again. The response process can take as little as five minutes per class for the teacher, and a written dialogue between the student and teacher is established for the entire semester, ideally fostering a greater sense of connection.⁸ Other daily practices matter too: in *Letters for the Living*, Blitz and

Hurlburt (1998) quote a holiday card from a former student, Jeremy, who shares the good news of a new job as a Youth Division caseworker, noting that in his employment interview he cited Blitz as the teacher who “made the most serious impression” on him during college. Jeremy at first found “weird—almost corny” Blitz’s daily practice of greeting the class by saying “I’m glad you’re here.” But Jeremy “started to admire” the practice because he “could tell [Blitz] meant it,” and he emphasizes the practice’s importance to other students by recounting the time Blitz forgot to greet the class and was prompted by “that girl in the front” of the room. “So you see,” the student concludes, “you made a difference to me and so I want to wish you happy holidays and God bless you” (pp. 65-66). Surely all of us can work at making at least this kind of difference as teachers.

CONCLUSION

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.

—Thich Nhat Hanh

My goal here has been to highlight some of the core claims of compositionists of nonviolence, and in so doing to argue that notions of nonviolence in composition and critical expressivism can be mutually illuminating. Although I agree with much of what these teachers have to say, I don’t mean to present their ideas unproblematically. It’s worth noting that Blitz and Hurlburt and O’Reilly in particular do not sugarcoat the accounts of their attempts at the peaceable teaching of writing. But for my part, in the limited space of this essay, I’ve largely played Elbow’s believing game, and I’ve certainly left unaddressed many concerns that might be raised about appropriate goals for teaching writing, politics and religion in the classroom, and issues of terminology raised by Elbow himself in this collection. So too has the lack of space prevented me from sufficiently examining the influence of feminist, virtue, and care theorists on pedagogies of nonviolence. And more activism-oriented critical pedagogues and purist proponents of nonviolence may feel that the approaches discussed here don’t go far enough in the direction of social action and explication of nonviolent philosophy. Certainly, these are all points worthy of discussion.

On a more positive note, readers may have noticed that many of the suggestions here don’t necessarily lead us very far astray from where we already are in terms of the philosophy and practice of teaching writing. This, then, is another of my goals: to show what we’re already doing right, and to hearten writing teachers by suggesting that many mainstay activities of our classrooms can be seen as peaceable (and critical expressivist) if viewed through the kind of lens of-

ferred here. I'm pointing out, in other words, that we might consciously reframe our work in nonviolent terms. I want to appeal finally to Jonsberg's notion of a "hidden curriculum of peace" (p. 31) in which there might or might not be overt mention of nonviolence but behind which there's certainly a reflective teacher, searching within—and allowing students to do the same—in order to foster connections without.

NOTES

1. English educators who have read bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* will recognize Nhat Hanh's name since she, like O'Reilly, identifies his philosophy as foundational for her, both personally and as an educator.

2. Since I've mentioned Burke here, I'd like to point out (especially in the context of a conversation on nonviolence) that we've been reminded by scholars such as Krista Ratcliffe (2005) of the importance of keeping difference firmly in mind when we invoke notions of identification; if we neglect difference, we may neglect those most marginalized or othered by it. In his essay elsewhere in this collection, Eric Leake similarly considers some of the complexities and paradoxes inherent in concepts of identification and empathy as they relate to self, other, and difference. I also want to acknowledge that contemporary "spirituality" as a construct has come under criticism for reasons related to questions of self and other: individualistic spirituality, increasingly privatized and unmoored from institutions such as churches that have traditionally been concerned with social justice, may breed quietism and narcissism and allow injustice and inequality to grow. In fact, this line of argument—advanced in works such as Jeremy Carrette and Richard King's 2005 *Selling Spirituality*—has definite parallels with some of the most well-known claims against expressivism in composition studies. It's well worth noting here, however, that Carrette and King single out Nhat Hanh as a contemporary spiritual figure who bucks this narcissistic trend, instead advocating a socially-engaged spirituality.

3. Those for whom a discussion of spirituality qua spirituality resonates may wish to investigate the interesting and continuing conversation on this topic within composition and rhetoric. Among the sources I'd recommend would be the edited collections *The Spiritual Side of Writing* (1997), *The Academy and the Possibility of Belief: Essays on Intellectual and Spiritual Life* (2000) and *Presence of Mind: Writing and the Domain Beyond the Cognitive* (1994); *College Composition and Communication* articles by Ann E. Berthoff et al. ("Interchanges: Spiritual Sites of Composing," 1994) and Gesa E. Kirsch ("From Introspection to Action: Connecting Spirituality and Civic Engagement," 2009); and numerous essays from the *Journal for the Assembly of Expanded Perspectives on Learning* (JAEPL), such as Briggs, Schunter, and Melvin's "In the Name of the Spirit" (2000).

4. As scholar Ursula King (2008) notes, “some people may ... reject the language of spirituality, but may nevertheless espouse what one might call spiritual values through commitment in their lives to care and concern for others, or to such values as social justice, work for racial and gender equality, or for peace making in their communities” (p. 111).

5. Weisser (2001) also calls for the development of an “ecological self” (Weisser 86) in scholars’ conceptions of identity, suggesting that ecology be taken not just as a metaphor for writing and knowledge but considered literally to include all aspects of our environments. In an assertion easy to link with Nhat Hanh’s interbeing, Weisser writes, “ecological selves perceive their interconnection with others and comprehend the degree to which their own identities are inseparable from the non-human world—a recognition that the material world ‘out there’ is part of our identity ‘in here’” (p. 86).

6. Relevant to my earlier arguments here, Kroll (2008) repeatedly notes the importance of spirituality in the development and practice of aikido, finally suggesting in his concluding paragraph that more peaceable ways of arguing are in line with aikido’s insistence that “physical goals and ethical/spiritual ideals are enacted simultaneously” (p. 468).

7. Somewhat ironically, however, Fulkerson (2005) is quoted by Chris Warnick elsewhere in this volume referring to arguments against expressivism as “poundings at the cannons of postmodernism” (p. 655, as quoted in Warnick). It’s worth pointing out that the article Warnick cites shows that Fulkerson doesn’t ally himself philosophically with expressivism despite his advocacy of first-person accounts of personal experience in student argumentative writing.

8. Thanks to C.J. Opperthausser for introducing me to this idea.

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