**Peace literacy**

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Philadelphia is ‘awash in guns’: More people were shot there in 2022, hundreds fatally, than in larger cities including New York and Los Angeles. In this ‘country’s poorest big city’, most shootings take place in neighborhoods shattered by multiple forms of racial discrimination and endemic poverty. The market in legal gun sales is also booming there, the culture of fear driving citizens to carry guns for safety. Further complicating solutions is the progressive district attorney’s and the chief of police’s disagreement over models of crime enforcement in the city.

On the other side of our country, a miraculous alternative to the seeming nihilism of West and North Philadelphia neighborhoods breeds hope. The winter 2022 Boston College magazine carries the story of Fr Gregory Boyle who began working 34 years ago as a pastor in the poorest neighborhood in Los Angeles, one with the highest gang activity and ‘shootings morning, noon and night’.

He started a school at his church for youth dropped out or expelled from their schools, offering a growing number of services. Beginning with Homeboy Bakery, he initiated nine more businesses employing youth from rival gangs under the umbrella of Homeboy Industries. The program, which helped lower the gang-related homicide rate in LA, is ‘the largest gang intervention, rehab and reentry program in the world’.

A simple wisdom infuses Fr Boyle’s success: “I’ve learned that kindness is a universal language…Seemingly small acts like visiting people in the hospital or juvenile hall are never forgotten. I’ve also learned that violence is often sparked by a lethal absence of hope…At Homeboy, we seek to cherish the wounded…because making someone feel cherished often leads them to the best version of themselves.”

Many studies and lived experiences, like Fr Boyle’s, refute the prevailing perception that violence – whether male violence against women, gang violence, or war between countries – is inevitable. Among those challenging the inevitability of human violence is West Point graduate, Iraq war veteran, and now peace activist Paul Chappell, who has dedicated his life to incorporating peace literacy into educational curricula. In his book Soldiers of Peace Chappell recounted that he had 12 years of math through Calculus II, yet uses few of his math skills in daily life; but he graduated from high school illiterate in peace, a literacy he desperately needed.

As a mixed race, Korean/African-American/white child growing up in Alabama, he felt himself a racial outcast. By high school, he was full of rage. He reflects with irony and regret that “the education system had not given me a single hour of training to help me understand the nature of rage… In fact, much of what I learned in school taught me to suppress my empathy and conscience and to view purpose in the narrow context of accumulating material wealth.”

Peace literacy is as crucial as learning reading, writing and mathematics, and it cannot be left only to parents, Chappell cautions. Schools must teach the history of strategic non-violent campaigns that won civil rights and women’s rights; the arts of listening, asking questions to achieve clarity and understanding, cultivating empathy and mutual communication; the skills of disciplined resolution of conflict, and recognizing verbal and advertising manipulation.

Excerpted: ‘Peace Literacy: Every Student Needs It’. Courtesy: Commondreams.org