PEACE TEACHERS IN AND FROM CALIFORNIA'S SOLEDAD PRISON

By

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*A Transcommunal Cooperation News “In Sight Pamphlets Series,” #1. April 7, 2016* [Permission is hereby granted by the author/editor to freely cite, circulate, and reproduce this essay.]
Over the past ten years I have been a volunteer with the “Prison Project” of the community organization Barrios Unidos, teaching courses on peacemaking and transcommunal cooperation in California’s penal system, most recently at Soledad State Prison (officially, “the Correctional Training Facility”). In the midst of the harsh realities of long sentences and prison life, I see positive ever-evolving creative ethical energy and intense intellectual drive among the incarcerated men with whom I work. They offer examples of hope for those trapped in corrosive dead-end streets of poverty, violence, and economic displacement that undermine so many urban and rural communities.¹

An outstanding example of this positive and creative energy is the highly diverse, multi-ethnic/multi-racial gathering of Soledad men who have taken the initiative of developing their own peace-making class. They call themselves the Cemanahuac Cultural Group. “Cemanahuac” is an Indigenous Mexican Nahautl-language word meaning “One World.” Many in Cemanahuac are former students in my Soledad classes. Now they are the teachers of an expanding number of students in the facility. The objective of the “Transcommunality/Kingian Non-Violence Class,” they write in the syllabus, is the promotion of peace, mutual respect, and tolerance; as well as the recognition and appreciation of the value of diverse cultures” as “Warriors for Peace” both “within and outside of the prison community.” The Cemanahuac group warns that we should not define “Peace and Community in what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the “World House,” as happening only in the minds of men but also of women.” We must have “gender peace in social justice.” “Male on female violence” subverts the very meanings of “harmony and justice.”

One of my Soledad students (an observer of human behavior) says, “within any prison setting, there are dividing lines among those who make up the general inmate prison population. These classes, successfully challenge us to break down the prison-based Berlin Wall—Racial Dividing Lines.” He attributes a “period of peace” at Soledad partially to the “change in mindset that these classes have brought about.” This change in social-consciousness helps to open the spaces and the moments that allow for constructive engagement among diverse people coming from different affiliations and cultural settings.

¹ The Barrios Unidos’ “Prison Project,” providing educational and cultural support to the incarcerated, was started by BU founder and Executive Director Daniel Nane Alejandrez. The assistance and understanding of key pro-active wardens, past and present, along with a variety of helpful Correctional Officers, and dedicated civilian prison staff, who sponsor the classes, make possible the Prison Project’s educational activity inside the walls. The Prison Project benefits from the support of Harry Belafonte, Danny Glover, former Student Non-Violent Coordinating worker and longtime activist Elizabeth Martinez, the singer Gina Renee, and Luis Rodriguez (author of Always Running, La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.) among many others. For more information see www.barriosunidos.net Mail address: 1817 Soquel Avenue, Santa Cruz, CA 95062
Through their words and deeds, the Cemanahuac group is positively answering a still relevant question raised by the pivotal civil rights activist Ella Baker, who co-founded the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). She said in 1969:

...the big question is what is American society--Is it the kind of society...that permits people to grow and develop according to their capacity, that gives them a sense of value, not only for themselves, but a sense of value for other human beings?²

In their highlighting of “peace, tolerance, and mutual respect,” alongside their emphasis on positive personal transformation into “Peace Warriors;” and the “recognition and appreciation of the value of diverse cultures;” the men of the Cemanahuac group are indeed contributing to a United States that will be able to respond with a resounding “YES” to Ella Baker’s question.

For readings, the class draws in part from Paul Wallace’s *White Roots of Peace* and my book, *Transcommunality, from the Politics of Conversion to the Ethics of Respect*. Both books are informed by the important conflict resolution model of the Native American “Great League of Peace” that put an end to the early 15th century wars among five Iroquoian nations in what is now upstate New York³. Kazu Haga’s inspirational and internationally known methodology of “Kingian non-violence” coming out of the Oakland East Point Peace Academy, is a key dimension of the class⁴. Also employed is the film documentary “Grounds for Peace” about the long established Corrymeela Community peace and reconciliation organization in Northern Ireland.⁵ Additional recommended resources for those taking the class include: the Martin Luther King anthology, *A Testament of Hope*; Ron Snider’s *Nonviolent Action: What Christian Ethics Demands but Most Christians Have Never Really Tried*; and Eknatha Easwaran’s *Nonviolent Soldier of Islam*, about Bachah Khan, the important Pashtun Muslim pacifist and non-violence advocate of liberation from the British Raj, who was a colleague of Gandhi.

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² Ella Baker was speaking to the Institute for the Black World in Atlanta, Georgia in 1969. This speech can be found in Joanne Grant’s *Ella Baker: Freedom Bound*, (John Wiley and Sons, New York, 1998).

³ These Five Nations are from east to west (roughly from what is now Albany to Buffalo) the Mohawk, the Oneida, the Onondaga, the Cayuga, and the Seneca. They are the Haudenosaunee or People of the Longhouse. The classic Haudenosaunee longhouse with its many autonomous compartments for different families all living in that one structure, is a valuable metaphor for unity from diversity and diversity from unity. That key image was drawn on by the Peacemaker Deganawidah for the organization of the Great League of Peace. It shapes my concept of “transcommunality.” M.L.King Jr.’s “World House” is a similar image. For an important analysis of the possibilities for, and barriers to peacemaking see John Brewer’s *Peace Processes: a Sociological Approach*, (Polity, Oxford/Cambridge, 2010).

⁴ East Point Peace Academy contact information: info(at)eastpointpeace.org Mail address P.O. Box 30652, Oakland, CA 94604.

⁵ Martin Doblmeier, Director/Producer, South Carolina Educational Television and Journey Communications, Ltd., 1969. Corrymeela Community contact information Corrymeela@corrymeela.org Mail address. Corrymeela Community, 83 University Street, Belfast BT7 1HP
The Cemanahuac class has rigorous homework assignments, and well-developed themes for group discussions based on the readings. These group discussions offer practical cooperative settings in which diversity of perspective can safely and productively be discussed. Each student in the class is responsible for analyzing and then presenting his thoughts on a key theme in the reading in each class meeting. Everyone in the class models useful ways to interact, through agreement and constructive disagreement, both of which enhance learning. Their enthusiasm for learning and strong work ethic puts them on par with the best students I have taught at Yale, Harvard, the University of Utrecht, and the University of California. Their effective efforts in developing the class defy negative stereotypes and the impacts of prison life, while offering practical pathways for personal and societal growth.

Those who have taken or are currently in the Cemanahuac “Transcommunality/Kingian Non-violence” class; as well as others involved in previous BU Prison Project classes, who, having received parole, are now helping their communities on the outside, are men transforming themselves into teachers of peace, justice and equal opportunity. For example one alumnus, now living in a major Mexican border city, organized and runs a half-way house giving guidance and support to men recently released from U.S. prisons\(^6\). He says that he is using “transcommunality principles” to make the human relationships in the house a success, while assisting the bilingual residents to secure safe, legitimate jobs. A second alumnus now works for a Homeless Services Center. Another man, a U.S. Army veteran, is providing counseling and guidance to help veterans in northern California negotiate the Veterans’ Administration structure. Yet another is now providing guidance to inner city youth who want to escape “the madness” of street violence in order to “make something of themselves,” and so avoid what he went through over many years of incarceration.

In 1967, Martin Luther King posed the challenge, “Where do we go from here, chaos or community?” Today we face a world enflamed and divided by many voices proclaiming a politics of emotion, fear, and distrust among entire populations. In contrast, this Soledad story, and many others like it, offer encouragement about peoples’ potential, even in the midst of difficult sometimes dangerous circumstances, to build bridges of the human spirit across which respectful, rational, and compassionate community can be, and is being created.

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6 The “half-way house” thus becomes a cousin to the “Longhouse” and “World-House.”
Author Biographic Profile.

John Brown Childs is Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He is the author of; Transcommunality: from the Politics of Conversion to the Ethics of Respect (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2003) among other books. He is Co-Editor (with Jeremy Brecher and Jill Cutler) of Global Visions: Beyond the New World Order (Boston, South End Press, 1993); Editor of Hurricane Katrina, Response and Responsibilities (Santa Cruz, CA, New Pacific Press, 2005); and Co-Editor with Guillermo Delgado-P of Indigeneity, Collected Essays (Santa Cruz, CA, New Pacific Press, 2012). He took part in the Civil Rights Movement in Montgomery, Alabama in 1965 as a member of “Friends of SNCC” (Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee). In 1997 he was awarded the Fulbright, “Thomas Jefferson Chair of Distinguished Teaching” in the Netherlands at the University of Utrecht. As a volunteer with the community organization Barrios Unidos and its “Prison Project,” he teaches courses about, “transcommunal cooperation and peacemaking” to those incarcerated in the California prison system. He was born in 1942, in Boston’s Bataan Court Housing Project, in the Roxbury section of that city. Of African-Madagascan and Native American descent, he is a registered member of the “Massachuset-Ponkapoag (Big Hills-Sweet Water) Tribe of Indians” in Massachusetts.

For information about submitting short one to four page essays on peacemaking/cooperation to this series, please contact John Brown Childs, Editor, jbcchilds@ucsc.edu