

Stories of Everyday Peacebuilding

by Susan Foster

During Black History Month and Women's History Month our class spent some time focusing on famous peacemakers. We learned about Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks, Mother Theresa, and others. We also spent a good deal of time looking at problems in the United States, in our neighborhoods, and in students' home countries. We thought about possible ways to approach these problems as participants in civil society. Sometimes these conversations ended with all of us feeling overwhelmed and small in the face of the situations we face.

I wanted to help students see that acts of building peace are all around us; that, in fact, we are all peacemakers. I wanted to concentrate on ways that we and people we know build peace every day. I decided to use storytelling as a way

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for us to share our personal experiences with peacebuilding. To get us started, I told a story of my own about a time when I was robbed and left

penniless while traveling in another country. A woman in a housekeeper's uniform, without a word, gave me enough money for bus fare back to the town where I was staying. It was probably half a day's earnings for her.

Students were very interested, especially since the peacemaker in my story was someone just like many of them—a housekeeper struggling to make ends meet—who really changed my outlook and shaped my experience of the country I was visiting. This woman turned a frustrating and scary experience into something hope-affirming. Her actions made me feel like I am not alone;

no matter where I am, there are people with compassion. Our common humanity doesn't depend on nationality or culture or color.

Students were a little intimidated, at first, by the idea of telling their own story of an experience with building peace. Once they had time to think about it (as homework after the previous class), they all had an important and powerful story to tell. Students worked in pairs telling each other a story of a personal experience with "building peace." Then, each student gave one or two "snapshots" of their partner's story. I listed these on the board. Suddenly, these little acts gained relevance and power in the greater context of "peace building."

When we discussed the experience, some students expressed amazement at the rich experiences and bravery of some of their classmates. Students began to see that the things necessary to build peace can be simple; that simply taking the time to see someone else's situation and taking small but significant steps to connect and/or help can make a huge difference for both people. And there was a sense that this is what is needed to build community in general. There was also a sense that none of us is alone. There are endless opportunities to be community and help each other and these things can be very simple acts.

This activity built a sense of solidarity and comfort in our class and helped students to see that ordinary people can build peace. As part of the lesson, each student wrote a story to illustrate "building peace." These essays were submitted to *The Change Agent* for publication. Two students' pieces were chosen and are printed in this issue. Look for them in other sections.

Susan Foster is a teacher of ESOL at Everett Literacy Program, in Everett, MA. She has been working in adult education in the Chelsea and Everett communities since 2002.