



## Education

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# Everyone involved with schools should choose peace

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About five years ago, I first met and interviewed Teny Gross, the director of the Institute for the Study and Practice of Nonviolence. Lately I'm haunted by that first meeting, which I'll explain in a bit.

The institute hires and trains "streetworkers" whose job is to intervene where there is the potential for violence. These workers themselves come from the mean streets of South Providence, Central Falls and other struggling communities. A worried mom might call one of them to say her son is attending a party where she suspects there could be trouble. The streetworker goes to the party, or a local hangout or street corner, to teach young people how to solve disputes without fighting. Agencies all over the world have been trained in the institute's techniques for defusing violence.

Not fighting seemed like a valuable skill. Far too many problems with school bureaucracies, for example, are handled on a fighting basis. The very foundation of the public-school industry in the United States is an industrial-model conflict of interests between labor and management. Fights over school budgets and contract provisions can boil over to the point where the students are completely forgotten, like the ball that rolls off the court while enraged players go for one another's throats.

So I wanted to meet Gross and learn more about non-fighting.

I found the institute's offices on the third floor of St. Mark's rectory in South Providence. (The institute has since bought, renovated and moved into St. Mark's large convent house.) At a piled-high desk, surrounded by bookcases thick with books, including much classical philosophy, sat institute worker P.J. Fox. He warmly offered me a seat, hunted down the director and stayed put while Gross and I talked on a nearby couch.

For most of his adult life, the Israeli-born, elegantly-educated Gross has been working on the front lines, including in the Israeli army. He's totally fun to talk with, in part because he gets animated and impassioned. In the interview, his

riffs ranged from what happens to seventh and eighth graders on the streets during summer breaks from school — not pretty — to marveling that Americans sit in front of their TVs each night, steeping themselves in a culture of punishment and retribution. No one (including me, I remember thinking) ever seems to question the “trail ’em, nail ’em, jail ’em” plot premises of all the “Law and Order,” “CSI” and similar TV shows. How, Gross demanded, could America ever improve the fates of children growing up in poverty-ridden neighborhoods if the society as a whole couldn’t wean itself of blood lust for retribution — fictive and otherwise?

Twice, as our conversation rose to emotional crescendos, P.J. Fox gently interrupted to urge that we “choose peace.” Each time, the words had a visible effect on Gross. Peace is his vocation, however hot-under-the-collar he might get about it.

But when Fox admonished us for a third time, I turned to him. He looked at me like maybe this time I was actually listening, and while he was more gentle than even before, what I heard him say was “CHOOSE peace.”

Got it. Peace is a choice. And not one that is easy to make. When provoked, I can choose to fight or I can stand my ground and respond in a way that is civilized and respectful, hard though that may be. Yes, our feelings tell us that we have to fight back, that we’re being forced into vengeful behavior and retaliation. But we’re not. We CHOOSE to pursue accusation, sabotage, passive-aggression, flat-out yelling and all the other weapons of interpersonal warfare. We don’t have to.

That scene with Gross has been haunting me because the bad economy is wrestling our school communities to the ground with ugly choices. Disputes can inspire good debates about what is and is not working.

But surely we all see the fights coming. And even though the conflict is not conducted in front of the kids, the effects of all that adult battling does trickle down to them.

We need an Institute for Public-School Nonfighting. Who could train parents or older students to intervene on behalf of the whole school community? The budget realities will be miserable enough, but the bruising hostilities that go with them could actually be avoided, if we try. Since unhappy teachers won’t produce successful kids, there is no real conflict of interests here. The system must work for everyone.

The institute has a bumper sticker that says: “Choose Peace.” I’m going to start handing them out. Those of us involved with schools will act destructively if we don’t focus sharply on what’s best for the community as a whole, and for kids in specific. Yes, we all lose our tempers occasionally and need to ask humbly for forgiveness. And that would be good modeling for the kids, too.

But the bottom line is that no matter how horrible things are, we can definitely make them better by paying attention to how we treat each other.

So, especially during this holiday season, and continuing into the coming year with all its challenges, let us actively choose peace.

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