

‘Sowing, cultivating, harvesting and spreading the seeds of peace’: In honour of H.W. van der Merwe

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This is a personal narrative. As it unfolds, I weave in some qualities that I believe characterised H.W. van der Merwe and his work as a pioneer in the development of peace studies and conflict resolution in South Africa. It is also a reflection on my association with H.W. and the influence this association has had on my own amazing journey in the field of peace education and conflict resolution.

It starts with a poem (Goslett 2003) written by a Grade 6 pupil after a life skills workshop, ‘Seeds of Peace’, which I facilitated in 2003. The poem has travelled widely and has been a source of inspiration for many. It is a beautiful illustration of how H.W.’s influence in encouraging the planting and cultivation of seeds of peace has yielded a rich harvest:

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*A sunflower seed
Does not grow into a weed.
It has a lot of power
To grow into a beautiful flower.
We all need joy, laughter, happiness and fun
Just like the flower gets all this from the sun.
Sunflowers don't like aphids or bugs.
Like hatred, conflict and violence cause us not to give hugs.
So plant a seed of peace in your heart
And as you go through life, make sure you play your part.*

I first met H.W. van der Merwe 50 years ago, in 1963, at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa, where he was my sociology lecturer. He arrived at Rhodes that year after getting his Ph.D. in sociology from the University of California. He must have been about 34.

I left Rhodes in 1965, and H.W. left in 1966. So that was it, in terms of our association ... or so it seemed. In 1968, H.W. founded what became known as the Centre for Intergroup Studies (CIS) in Cape Town. He remained as Executive Director until 1992, serving as senior consultant for two more years. CIS was renamed the Centre for Conflict Resolution (CCR) in 1994.

H.W. and I connected again some 23 years after our time at Rhodes. I had moved to Cape Town and I met with him and Ampie Muller, senior consultant at CIS, about a temporary position to help organise a seminar entitled 'The Influence of Violence on Children'.

Two more temporary contracts with CIS followed, both of them in an administrative capacity, first for a 'Mediation and Conflict Intervention' (MACI) programme, and then for an 'Alternative National Service' seminar. What an introduction this was to the value H.W. embraced of networking broadly and drawing on the voices, contributions and perspectives of a wide sector of people!

H.W. offered me a one-year contract in 1990 to look at the feasibility of setting up a programme to equip South African children with conflict management skills. 'The die was cast.' I stayed.

My initial and subsequent meetings with H.W. proved to be the catalysts for my going beyond being a temporary contract worker to becoming a pioneer in the field of school-related peace education in South Africa and developing a career that has spanned 24 years. Nearly fifteen of these years were as a Centre employee, and the last ten years, as an independent practitioner. The meetings started me on a journey I feel privileged to have travelled.

Credit must also be given to Ampie Muller. It was he who first suggested to H.W. the importance of the Centre getting involved in the area of children and youth, and who walked alongside me for much of that early time. The point, however, is that H.W. embraced Ampie's idea and helped make it a reality. H.W. was a great source of support for me. He believed in me. He encouraged and motivated me, while giving me tremendous freedom to create, learn and grow. He was passionate about his work ... I became passionate about mine.

Those years in the build-up to the first democratic election were intense and exciting. H.W. attracted a rich stock of thinkers and doers to the Centre in permanent, temporary and visitor capacities. People wanted to be associated with the Centre. I certainly did. I'm proud of the association and grateful for the exposure I had.

'Conflict Resolution Among Youth' (CRAY), later entitled the 'Youth Project', was formally launched in 1991. Its primary goal was to build capacity by equipping, empowering and encouraging teachers and other educators, and to promote peace education and constructive conflict resolution among young people.

Thus began a process of asking for funding, gathering and developing material, and, as H.W. did, building connections. A collection within the Centre's library became a valued resource for educators.

Teachers with whom we shared ideas agreed about the need, and made peace education happen in their own school communities. They too, like H.W., myself and others, were visionaries and pioneers. This ability to be a visionary was characteristic of H.W.'s work: seeing something valuable and driving it ... or at least encouraging it. The pioneering work of the Youth Project was acknowledged in 1995 when it was awarded the first Education Africa Premier Award (Western Cape) for the contribution it had made to education.

The range of participant groups over the years has included not only children from as young as four years old, primary and high school pupils, tertiary education students, teachers and parents, but also staff at 'places of safety', young people in development programmes, youth offenders, senior citizens, farm workers and gender activists. I, together with other Centre colleagues, also worked with the Silveira House peace-making programme in Zimbabwe, sharing much of the Youth Project methodology. My passion for reaching young people has continued unabatedly. An umbrella title, 'Seeds of Peace', encapsulates both what the work is about, and our roles and responsibilities as cultivators of these seeds.

Three examples of the incredible ripples from those early days of the Youth Project follow:

In 1998, a close working relationship with the Western Cape Education Department's Safe Schools Programme (SSP) was established, with the Youth Project advocating for the inclusion of conflict resolution training in their activities. Two teachers trained by the Youth Project were seconded to the SSP. This was an exciting development in that it afforded an education department-based opportunity for spreading the message about the value of peace education and school community-based conflict resolution, and for creating a multiplier effect.

Another example is the work with the General Motors South Africa Foundation (GMSAF) in Port Elizabeth which began in 2006 and has included facilitating a number of programmes focussing, inter alia, on peace education and conflict resolution, bullying, relational and restorative

practices, narrative encounter, community building and school leadership, much of it in partnership with the Eastern Cape Education Department. Under its own 'Seeds of Peace' umbrella, GMSAF has taken this 'work' on board, amending, adapting and using it in its individual way. More visionaries and pioneers – passionate about peace, sowing and spreading the seeds.

My involvement with the (Washington, D.C.-based) Search for Common Ground (SFCG) organisation in Lebanon was a spin-off from the Centre time under H.W.'s directorship. Susan Collin Marks, Senior Vice-President of SFCG, had been a colleague then. In 2008 she suggested that the Beirut office contact me when they were looking at peace education options in Lebanese schools. I was invited to facilitate a train-the-trainers programme in 2009, followed by four residential workshops, in 2010 and 2011 respectively. These were with principals, educators and counsellors from public schools throughout the country.

Lessons, stories and resources from a South African peace education journey were woven into the tapestry of the workshop process, and in turn, those of the participants have been taken into and enriched South African peace education processes.

The SFCG engagement was a demonstration of the value of facilitating communication – a value H.W. held dear. As I was working predominantly with Arabic speakers, I used a translator. My workbook was translated too – what a gift having the English front to back and the Arabic back to front in one document, as if meeting face to face! We also interacted through creative activity, role-play, drama, music, song, dance, exercise and celebration. Communication happened in powerful and cultural ways. One participant spoke of coming together from different places and ending up 'sitting at one long table'. Subsequent stories told of the impact on participants and their communities. As these lovely words illustrate: 'I'm carrying the seeds of peace with me'.

There have been so, so many highlights in the course of the journey on which H.W. encouraged me to embark. I realise that I, and the wonderful people who worked with me, made things happen, but it was H.W. who first

Valerie Dovey

created the 'space' for these early seeds of peace to be introduced, sown and cultivated in many school communities. Thousands of educators and young people have subsequently been reached in direct and indirect ways, and they have reaped the benefits of peace education because of this.

In the words of a Tonga proverb (Mumpande 2001):

Chakalima moya
(It farmed the air – There is a bumper harvest!!!)

Sources

Goslett, Kirsten 2003. Poem by a Grade 6 pupil, Rustenburg Girls' Junior School, Cape Town.

Mumpande, Isaac 2001. *Tusimi* (Tonga Proverbs). Harare, Silveira House.