

## “The Role of Education in Achieving World Peace”

lecture by Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad, Ph.D.  
Minaret of Freedom Institute

To the Conference on “Preventing Violence and Achieving World Peace”

Education is the most important tool we have in teaching about tolerance and trying to achieve world peace. The question is how can tolerance be taught? I do not think you can teach tolerance the way you can teach a skill.

Let me preface my remarks by asking you to consider the amount of violence in and around so many of the government schools here in the United States. This is not a new phenomenon and even in my own day going to school public school back in the 1950s, a relatively genteel time, there was bullying, and there were also gang wars as was illustrated in the musical “West Side Story” that was on Broadway and made into a popular movie. If tolerance is mentioned as one of the American values taught in the public school system then why is it that it seems to fail to give fruit as far as peacemaking on the school grounds?

I think the problem is the government schooling is only partly educational, as it also has the objective of socialization, including the indoctrination of a sense of national identity that sets the pattern for and facilitates military enterprises. This is seen in ways that may not be obvious. The so-called school spirit around a football game, the extreme intensity of “pep rallies” in getting students to identify with their school as opposed to another school with the only difference between the two schools being part of the same school system is their geographical location. What is the purpose of this? It provokes such excesses as pranks against rival schools that get out of hand. Its alleged positive purpose is to cultivate and facilitate a sense of identity, to cultivate a sense of social solidarity that is put into the relatively peaceful but symbolically warlike atmosphere of football games and other sports. As with algebra, where  $x$  plus  $x$  always equals  $2x$ , regardless of what  $x$  stands for, the fervor of pride in one’s school constitutes a dress rehearsal for the sense of identity with one’s country. The passion for winning the symbolic war of the football game is emotional practice for the passion of commitment to the actual guns and bombs war that lies down the road. As in algebra, where the formulae are always the same even though the variables may change, the formulae of socialization remain the same; it’s always “us against them” although the definitions of us and them change from rehearsal to war to serve the purposes of the state.

My first point is there is a difference between schooling and education. Education is something that continues throughout our entire lives. It begins before we go to school and continues after we leave school and goes on hopefully both inside and outside the classrooms. I very much appreciated my college education, but as wonderful as my classes were, the so-called “bull sessions” in the dining halls were an opportunity to learn a lot that I wasn’t when learning the formal curriculum because I was hearing from other

students not just about the classes they were taking, though I picked up much information about that, nor just about our common interests in literature and music, and such, but also an opportunity to learn about their backgrounds, their experiences, who they were, their religions and cultures. This is part of education that contributes to that feeling of tolerance and the possibilities of peacemaking with which we are concerned.

Schooling is functional in terms of training, for example, for particular vocations. Schooling is very valuable and is considered indispensable for the study of medicine. I suppose one can teach oneself medicine, but we won't issue a license to practice medicine to someone who has done so without having attended a medical school and passed the exams necessary for licensing. One can be trained in peacemaking *techniques*, so they could be taught in schools, but tolerance and peacemaking as an art are different, and schooling can only serve to facilitate that kind of education. The American educational system in particular was not designed to get that kind of education that we are aiming for here, but rather was to prepare students for work in the factory system. Read the literature on the public education movement at the end of the 19th beginning of the 20th centuries and you will see that supporters such as the Rockefellers were clear about what they wanted to achieve.<sup>1</sup>

I think it is dangerous to view schooling as identical to education. The premise that knowledge is a body of facts to be memorized represents an attitude that is a serious problem. It's a bad enough problem in the United States, but is much worse in the Muslim world. There, you are considered to be well educated if you have memorized a certain body of facts and you can regurgitate them on command. That is not education. The educated person has acquired the ability to think for oneself. Not only should we contrast American colleges with too many of the madrassas in the Muslim world in order to make this point, but we should also contrast the madrassas of today against the madrassas of the classical era, the Golden age of Islam, when students primarily went to the madrassa to study the Qur'an, not as they do today, to merely memorize the Qur'an and regurgitate the words, or actually the sounds, of a given surah on command, but to understand what it meant. Today if a student in a madressa asks the teacher what a verse means, the teacher is likely to get annoyed with the student and say why are you wasting our time with a question like that? Just pronounce the words correctly, *tartîl* and *tajwîd* with the right pitch and phrasing and don't give any thought to the meaning. When in the old days you studied the Qur'an for meaning you learned the most valuable skill one can acquire in school: literacy. There are about 5,000 different words in the Qur'an. If in addition to learning these words, one masters the Arabic grammar by which additional words are generated from the verbal roots of known words, one is well on the way to having access to all the knowledge recorded in Arabic. One has the power to continue one's education in libraries and bookstores (and online) by being able to look things up. It's fascinating to me that the very first word of the Qur'an revealed to Muhammad (peace be upon him) is "Read!" followed by verses that refer to man's unique ability to acquire exogenous knowledge.

---

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., John Taylor Gatto, *Weapons of Mass Instruction: A Schoolteacher's Journey Through the Dark World of Compulsory Schooling* (Gabriola Island BC: New Society, 2009)

“Read! And your Lord is most gracious, who taught (the use of) the pen, taught man that which he knew not.” (96:4-5)<sup>2</sup>

The ancients defined man as the rational animal, that is, the animal who thinks. Today, we believe that man may not be the only thinking animal. Some people believe dolphins think, and no less of an expert than Jacques Cousteau claimed that killer whales are more intelligent than humans.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps they are, but no killer whale will ever read a book or look something up on the Internet.

We are not limited to the information that we have memorized. What we remember is the framework that makes it easy for us to access the other information we may need. We all remember that “In nineteen hundred and forty-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue,” but in what year did Magellan depart to circumnavigate the globe? There is no need to remember because we can always look it up.

If I am right to condemn the view that education is a matter of memorizing a body of knowledge, then what is true education? I think that the poet Kahlil Gibran identified it best in his response to that question in his book *The Prophet*, “No man can reveal to you aught but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of your knowledge.”<sup>4</sup> The duty of the good teacher is to facilitate that understanding that's going on within the brain of the student, not to be a pitcher that pours knowledge into a waiting vessel, but to be a stimulant.

Let me give you an example from my own personal experience with the social sciences. I loathed the social sciences in high school, and I'm sure that is one reason I went into the natural sciences. My high school teachers of history and geography felt—and one geography teacher said so in so many words—that the only way to learn those subjects is by rote, to memorize a collection of facts. The memorization of an endless list of places was boring to me and these subjects were taught as if they were meaningless. Knowing that all of these things could easily be looked up, I thought they were pointless besides.

When I went to college I had made up my mind to be astronomer, but Harvard has requires students take a variety of courses, which was fine with me. I had no problem with taking the humanities courses, for I always had an interest in literature, drama, and music, but the social sciences were something else. One course looked somewhat interesting, however. It was Samuel Beer's course on “Six Revolution in European History.” It was totally different from what I've been taught in high school. It was not about memorization, but about using political theory to the study of six major historical events and to try to derive a theory of the role of ideas in history. It was a revelation. History was not a list of unconnected dates and places; it was a great drama that unfolded

---

<sup>2</sup> Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Text Translation and Commentary* (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Cousteau, “Killer Whales,” an interview with Kim Marshal-Tilas. 5/28/2002. <http://whale.wheelock.edu/archives/ask02/0133.html>. Accessed 1/3/2010.

<sup>4</sup> Kahlil Gibran, “On Teaching,” *The Prophet* (New York: Knopf, 1966), p. 56.

with social forces played out on a grand stage where one could seek to examine dynamic processes in order to correctly understand the underlying principles that were at work. In other words, the serious study of the society could be a true science just as the study of the heavens was, an idea to which I had never been exposed until I got to college. Now, I could be educated, which I could not have been earlier, because I had a new understanding of what the social sciences were about.

I was a practicing astrophysicist for many years, but in the late 1980s and early 1990s I switched fields and have since been engaged in political science and economics especially as they relate to Islamic studies. This is just my experience, but it confirms what I think is a general principle. My reason for changing fields was not any dissatisfaction with the natural sciences, but because I thought the people who were doing the social sciences with regard to the Muslim world and Islam were uneducated. They were well schooled; they had degrees, but they didn't have that depth of understanding that would allow them to think critically and scientifically. Since I've gotten into the field professionally, I realize that I was too harsh. There are a number of very fine people working in the field, but they seem not to have had a lot of attention or influence. Fortunately, things are changing.

Here is another issue regarding education. Have you ever noticed how many of the leaders of terrorist organizations and advocates of terrorism are engineers and doctors? This by itself should prove that schooling is not sufficient to inculcate tolerance or to achieve peace. Partly, this is because so many educated people in the Muslim world go into engineering and medicine and so there is a sort of a selection effect. For every one engineer or doctor who advocates terrorism one can name a hundred who are opposed to it, so the proliferation of engineers and doctors among terrorists is a little misleading, but not completely. It illustrates the point that just merely having earned an advanced degree in the sciences does not make one into a peacemaker. Something else is required.

To look for that missing element, consider the relationship between cosmopolitanism and tolerance. We tend, with a little bit of discrimination, to associate a more tolerant attitude with urbanization and cosmopolitanism. If you are raised in Brooklyn, New York, and your neighbors are of various ethnic backgrounds you tend not to be as ethnically biased or bigoted as you might be in some small rural community where everybody has identical ethnic backgrounds. This is because when we know one another as people, then we see one another as human beings. Direct knowledge is best source of education.

When I first met people in the oil industry I was astonished at how empathetic they seemed to be to Muslims. It was because so many of them had lived in Muslim countries and they knew Muslims. They were not going to be affected by the stereotypes they see on television or in movies because they have seen reality and they know those depictions are nonsense. Similarly, you'll see the stereotypes Muslims have of the Western world are

usually not shared by those Muslims who actually been in the West—cases of culture shock notwithstanding.<sup>5</sup>

If you can't have direct knowledge can education make up the difference? My argument is going to be affirmative. It is not a perfect substitute for direct experience, but reading about other cultures from unbiased sources, or better yet from sources within another culture itself, can go a long way.

If you can mingle with people of different backgrounds in an academic setting, that can be educational. Again I draw on my personal experience. When I was in high school, I was a supporter of the War in Vietnam, but when I went to college I changed my position. The main factor changing my mind was meeting people from Vietnam who gave me a perspective in a new dimension of what was going on there that was not to be found in the newspapers. The American media parroted the government line that the opponents of the American presence were all advocates of a communist takeover. There were some Vietnamese communists, but there were also nationalists who did not welcome foreign troops on their soil.

Let us now consider the education of some peacemakers I have selected for study: Jesus (peace be upon him), Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Fethullah Gülen. What do these people have in common? Let's take a look at their education. It may be unfair to include Jesus in this group since we who are Muslims and Christians believe that he was taught by God, but, regardless of one's religious belief, historically, Jesus was a rabbi and therefore he had that strong emphasis on education found in Judaism in general. That he embraced that culture of independent critical thinking of which I speak is attested to by the reports of his debating the learned elders even as a child. Besides being educated, he was open. He did not only talk to the scribes and the Pharisees. He talked to all the people including the common people, even the prostitutes and thieves—even the tax collectors. Another interesting factor is that his ideas were original. He didn't simply rehash what the Pharisees taught, but reached his own conclusions, some of which shocked his contemporaries.

Thoreau was also well educated. He went to the prestigious Concord Academy and to Harvard University, but Thoreau was not a cosmopolitan in one respect: he did not travel much outside of Concord. He boasted of the fact that his most of his travels were in Concord, but Harvard would expose him to the broader world (as it did for me), through books, lectures, meetings with traveled students and professors and visitors. He was also original, and he did not apologize for his originality. He even chided his mentor Emerson as in the famous story in which when he went to jail for opposing taxes that supported slavery and the war against Mexico. Emerson came to visit him at the jail and asked him "What are you doing in there?" and Thoreau responded, "Waldo, the question is what you

---

<sup>5</sup> Sayyid Qutb is often offered as an example of how exposure to the West can radicalize a Muslim, but I believe that people who attribute his radicalism to his culture shock ignore the context. His radicalization coincided with the Israeli occupation of Palestine, and

doing out there?”<sup>6</sup> Part of the Transcendentalist movement with which Emerson is associated, Thoreau’s spirituality is palpable in all his writings, from the naturalism of *Walden* to the moral righteousness of the essay on civil disobedience.

Gandhi went to University College of London and was schooled to be an attorney. His education went beyond the technicalities of the law, however. He traveled in England and South Africa, and read Thoreau and the Qur’an—although he was a Hindu. He demonstrated that same openness we see in the others. Someone who though only as lawyer and not as a roundly educated man would not write of Thoreau’s jail experience as Gandhi did:

Seeing the wall of the cell in which he was confined, made of solid stone 2 or 3 feet thick, and the door of wood and iron a foot thick, he said to himself, “If there were a wall of stone between me and my townsmen, there was still a more difficult one to climb or break through before they could get to be as free as I was.”<sup>7</sup>

Gandhi’s spirituality was so well impressive that he earned the honorific “Mahatma,” meaning “Great Soul.”

He sees Thoreau’s refusal to pay the poll tax not as the act of a law-breaker, but as the inspiration for the civil disobedience movement for which Gandhi would become famous and which would in turn inspire Martin Luther King.

Martin Luther King, Jr., attended the Atlanta University Laboratory School and Booker T. Washington High School and because of his high scores he went to Morehouse College even without having finished his schooling at Booker T. Washington (he skipped both the ninth and twelfth grades). He entered Morehouse at the age of 15 and graduated with a BA in sociology. He held many degrees including a bachelor of arts, bachelor of divinity, and doctor of philosophy. He was also an original thinker and obviously a very open person as well as he could communicate with and inspired not only his own people, but the white majority as well. Of course, Rev. King was a Christian minister, even though secular admirers of his achievements seek to gloss over his religious credentials.

Fethyullah Gülen is an anomaly as far as his lack of much formal schooling, but he is consistent with my thesis, because he was self-educated. His openness is demonstrated by the variety of literature he was reading, all kinds of Western literature as well as Turkish literature. It clear that Gülen sought to learn as much as he could. Whatever mentors may have facilitated his education, we know that he has facilitated the education of many. His religious and spiritual commitment is well-known, if sometimes misrepresented as fanaticism by secular critics.

---

<sup>6</sup>Wendy McElroy, “Henry David Thoreau and ‘Civil Disobedience,’ Part 1,” Freedom Daily (7/25/21005) <http://www.fff.org/freedom/fd0503e.asp>. Accessed 1/10/2010.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

We can draw an educational paradigm for peace from what we have found in common among these otherwise very different people—who have different races, ethnicities, religions, economic class and levels of formal schooling. What I see as common threads among these case studies of the education of peacemakers are:

- They all were highly educated, even if it was self-education
- All were open to everything, not focused on a narrow source of learning
- They were all original critical thinkers
- They were all spiritual people

This last is often overlooked by people who claim religion is the enemy of peace or the cause of war. I would say that the opposite is true is people with this kind of spirituality that become peacemakers, unlike, say, Ayman al-Zawahri who is very well-schooled, but lacks spirituality, his professions of religiosity being confined to the fervor of his commitment to a particular vision of orthopraxy, rather than to the spiritual aspects of religion, that encompass the highest principles of love. Justice, mercy, compassion, and universal brotherhood.

Then it follows from this analysis that to educate peacemakers our educational paradigm must embrace:

- high standards of literacy (rather than simply formal classes)
- openness
- critical thinking that encourages originality
- and spirituality

I believe that all of these elements are present in the insights of Fethullah Gülen in his schools and that is why he has been so successful in education for the promotion of peace. It is interesting he started out as a preacher and decided in the middle of his life to focus on education and then started the some 800 schools attributed to his inspiration and support. I think that the real secret of his success in bringing about the spread of tolerance and peacemaking is that he is focused on these elements highlighted in this paper.

So what can we do? First, become a mentor. As the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, “Those of you who are here tell those who are not here.” Everyone has some knowledge that we can share with others, especially with young people. But do not seek to “pour” your knowledge into the minds of your protégés, but rather stimulate them to discover the truth for themselves, and to inspire openness and spirituality by example. As Kahlil Gibran said:

The teacher who walks in the shadow of the temple, among his followers, gives not of his wisdom but rather of his faith and his lovingness.

If he is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind.

The astronomer may speak to you of his understanding of space, but he cannot give you his understanding.

The musician may sing to you of the rhythm which is in all space, but he cannot give you the ear which arrests the rhythm nor the voice that echoes it.

And he who is versed in the science of numbers can tell of the regions of weight and measure, but he cannot conduct you thither.

For the vision of one man lends not its wings to another man.

And even as each one of you stands alone in God's knowledge, so must each one of you be alone in his knowledge of God and in his understanding of the earth.<sup>8</sup>

It is of interest that in the Gülen schools the teaching of values is by example and by extracurricular content. Gülen schools do not tell the students, "Sit down and we'll explain to you how to be tolerant." This would not work, and in any case in Turkey it is illegal. Rather, the teachers are people with values whose lives are an example to the students and who are available for extracurricular contact with the students.

Another factor, often overlooked, is the importance of giving young people responsibility. Sometimes this is thought of as "keeping them busy," as in "Idle hands are the devils playground." What I am proposing is more than that. The idea is not simply to keep them busy, don't just give them "busy work" to do, but give them actual responsibilities. There is a difference. I think the reason high school students get into gangs is because they are treated in high schools (and at home) as if they are elementary school students. They are not. Fifteen is the age of majority in Islam; thirteen in Judaism. We are treating young adults as if they are little children. If we don't give them responsibilities there are drug dealers out there looking for people to keep their books, or act as enforcers, or salesmen, or chemists, if we don't give them like responsibilities as the treasurers, sergeants at arms, promoters, and researchers of high school, extracurricular, or religious organizations. Responsibility is the key and there is no better way to learn than by experience.

[Return to home page](#)

---

<sup>8</sup> Gibran, op. cit., pp. 56-57.