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Education for Peace-Building and Preventing Extremism¹

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In this essay, I reflect on my life story as an Armenian-Lebanese, and analyze my experiences with war and peace in terms of the Armenian Genocide, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Lebanon's civil war. In light of these experiences, I concluded that the message and example of peace, which I had learned at home, church, and school, were in severe contrast with each other, and difficult to reconcile. During the earlier periods in my life, I knew that providentially my disappointment was with human nature, and that the frame of peace had to be larger, and its reach had to be deeper than what I had witnessed. Within a Christian framework, I began to believe that humans' task was to reconstruct hope in life among one another. Rooted in these experiences and perspectives, I conclude my essay by offering practical advice for peacebuilding in educational institutions and beyond, while sharing a story from my childhood as an illustration for hope and bridgebuilding.

Years ago, a professor of preaching warned us students that we should avoid speaking on such topics as 'peace' and 'love' as they are themes about which everything and anything may make some sense, and at the same time our speech about them may sound useless and really ineffective.

Let us dare today to disobey the professor in order to unpack a number of notions about peace. First, some perspectives on my personal background, which I thought I should share as I came to define those perspectives about peace and myself, particularly cases where I really felt the absence of peace all around me.

Imagine in the following three instances how necessary and difficult it was for me to even imagine peace. From my childhood to my teenage years I had already learned that we, while being ethnically Armenians, lived in Lebanon, that is in an Arab country. Why so? Because during and after World War I the vast majority of Armenians in Cilicia and Anatolia and the other parts of Turkey and Armenia had been either massacred or deported to the deserts of Syria or into other neighboring lands through the Armenian Genocide which the Ottoman Turks had perpetrated against the Armenians. This meant that our identity and history as Armenians in the diaspora had a distinct and thick filter, as we were away from a homeland where our grandparents had their homeland some one hundred years ago. The feeling was a move from a homeland into a never land, or into another land, and into a new land. These represented varieties of relationships and psychologies of land.

¹This is an edited transcript of a keynote address which Rev. Paul Haidostian, Ph.D., President of Haigazian University in Beirut, Lebanon, gave at a conference on religion, politics, and peacemaking which took place at the College of Saint Benedict / Saint John's University (CSB/SJU) in Minnesota, USA on October 29, 2018. This thirty-first Annual Peace Studies Conference was sponsored by the Jay Phillips Center for Interfaith Learning at Saint John's University, CSB/SJU's Department of Peace Studies, and Haigazian University, with funding provided by the Jay and Rose Phillips Family Foundation of Minnesota.

In the first instance, if the past had been marked by war and genocide during World War I for us, then the present when I was a child and a teenager implied a lack of peace with things, places, memories and people of an Armenian past. As a result, much was being or was to be reconstructed for us as Armenians.

In the second instance, living in Lebanon, an Arab country, we learned very early on that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict put us all in a state war so that mini-wars or mega-wars could erupt at any moment in and around our country. We learned to really expect a looming war, and not only to view it as a possibility. During my lifetime, these wars actually came true, and for many of us in Lebanon such wars occurred many times.

In the third instance, as Lebanon had witnessed local civil wars among its various religious sects and their armed men during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a new and devastating civil war also erupted when I was thirteen years old, a war that lasted for more than fifteen years and only ended as I reached my years of doctoral studies.

During those years, which comprised my teenage years and youth, daily life hour-by-hour was a toiling exercise of avoiding danger. I could really present these stories for hours, recounting different instances of the lack of peace. Imagine then as a result of these factors, my ethnic belonging as an Armenian was in a state of war with a country, Turkey that had enjoyed impunity from perpetrating the Armenian Genocide for long decades and did not even recognize the genocide, which it had committed. So this was a conflict with respect to memory and global injustice and one could not even find the front or the demarcation line at which I or others could try to fight or solve matters. Because this was a conflict with respect to memory and global injustice, I found myself asking, “Where is this war, and where is its front?”

In the midst of this situation, my country Lebanon was divided across Christian, Muslim, and Druze lines, mostly in aggressive ways. As I said, the synonyms of the whole Middle East region where we lived, was terror and turmoil as I was growing up. Actually in 1987, when I came here to the USA to study, the minute I said “Middle East,” I knew which bell was ringing in people’s minds; this did not require too much thinking. People believed that the term “Middle East” referred to terrorizing or war. As you can see, it was very natural for us in Lebanon to not expect peace around us. I hope you will take note of this matter, young friends, because it is very serious to grow up not expecting peace.

Upon reflection, I have realized that peace, the message and example of peace, which I had mainly learned in a few places – that is, peace and its message, which I had learned at home, at church, at school were in severe contrast with each other. The lack of peace, that is the opposite of peace, which I had witnessed in repeated actions and in dangerous potentials all around me, raised the important question: “What sustained me as a youth? What I believe sustained me as youth is that I had first learned to expect the goodness of life and human beings before learning anything else. I had first learned to expect the goodness of life and human beings within the Christian framework of faith. This may be a luxury which is not afforded by all or granted to all. If faith is fully launched in the early ages of human beings, it gives those persons the generous opportunity of being raised as a generation of persons who look for peace. In this spirit, those

who want to work for peace or make peace, may create peace at least somewhere and it may function as a yeast for more peace with others elsewhere.

When the Lebanese civil war started in 1975 and the city of Beirut was divided between Christian East Beirut and a Muslim West Beirut, we lived in the northern besieged city of Tripoli, Lebanon where the war was less severe and, as a family, we listened every evening to the Radio Monte Carlo Arabic news service from France. It gave daily accounts about the war in Beirut. During the first months of the civil war, those daily news reports provided the numbers of dead in Beirut, especially in that city's center. I remember, that on some days, it was one-hundred and twenty-five dead, as well as one-hundred and forty injured. There were approximately two hundred casualties every day in Beirut's relatively small downtown.

As a thirteen-year-old, who was interested in political and global issues, I remember listening to Radio Monte Carlo saying to my father innocently, "If only the United Nations heard about this, they would surely intervene and stop the killing." When I was thirteen, I had just learned about these international organizations, and believed that they had not heard about this civil war. I believed that once those organizations would learn about this civil war, it would be impossible for them to not do anything. This was idealistic of me. By the way, I have always been intrigued by the fact that the antonym of idealistic is realistic; which, in my view, is a problem. Anyway, let me go on. Soon after, in 1975-1976, I started witnessing killings on the streets and kidnappings in front of our residences. In one instance, I watched a group of approximately three or four armed men and a Mercedes limousine. I still can imagine these people who put their masks on their faces in our yard, and kidnapped and allegedly killed one of our neighbors. A few days later, our neighbor's mutilated body was found in a river. As a thirteen or fourteen-year-old, I wanted to go to the funeral, which is not typical. I do not know why I wanted to walk in the procession of that funeral, in view of the fact that people were crying and carrying the casket as they moved from the home to the church and then to the cemetery. I wanted to walk with hundreds of others, and some of the kidnappers were among the mourners, and people knew it but were afraid to talk. My idealistic views on human dignity, peace, integrity and kindness were being shattered.

Here is another important idea which I invite us to remember: I was disappointed with human nature. I remember saying, "This is not the world I would like to live in." Notice that I was not disappointed with other groups. I was not disappointed with opposing groups. I was not disappointed with evil people out there, but with human nature as the evil ones committed the crime and gentle ones looked the other way. Not many good Samaritans were present. Let me repeat: I was disappointed with human nature. Today, I am glad that I was disappointed with human nature and not with the other people. Considering other people as evil did not seem right to me. I know that providentially my disappointment was basically with human nature. Maybe that opened a theological window for me in my adult life to seek grace and to not simply or self-righteously take sides on this issue or the other and try to see who my enemy is. The frame of peace had to be bigger, and its reach had to be deeper. I know that our task was to reconstruct hope in life and among humans.

Let me move on now; enough of those difficult stories. Let me move on to some more general remarks. All of us are commissioned to be makers of peace and educators of peace. A general notion of education for peace often sounds too impractical and may undermine what may actually happen in real conditions or instances on the ground. You may plant the seed and someone may rob it, step on it or choke it. In most instances, we may not see the fruits of peace, whose seeds we planted, so we ask, “Why bother educating for peace?”

One realizes that it is not possible to work for peace, to prepare for peace and to build peace without telling and teaching about it through multiple layers. Approaching peace through multiple levels of education is not a neutral or tasteless endeavor. It is meant for humans to develop this approach in a balanced manner and to learn to change in order to interact properly to create peace and to do so enthusiastically. Some facts are known but let me repeat that peace is not the absence of war.

The following is one clear point. In 1987 when I first moved to the USA to study, a number of friends in the USA said to me that it was good that I had left the war in Lebanon. I remember that I responded by saying that this statement did not sound right to many. I also stated that my departure from Lebanon did not mean that I was at peace here in the USA. Some people thought that was not gracious of me. I should have been more grateful that I had left a situation of war and come to a country of peace. Yet, I said yes, the fact that I left the war there does not mean that I have peace here in the USA. They may have thought I was being cynical or philosophical; in fact, my description was from my heart.

Another fact is that peace is not an accomplishment nor is it automatically established where there are conflicts of interests and conditions. The fullness of egos and immature ambitions will always clash, and they need to be disciplined if not tamed. Peace is always the result of effort. Peace is not the most attractive news. This you also know. Nor is peace the most sensational accomplishment. Peace as such is considered to be dull news unless it follows major conflicts of breaking news and then its attraction will last for a very short time. For many years now, Lebanon has been enjoying peace on many fronts and yet the old and repeated news of conflicts persists and it creates greater interest than peace.

Lebanon has been enjoying peace for quite some years now and yet when we think about it, people want to remember it as a negative war place. Education that lays the foundation for peace is one of the key responses to conflict, war, and division. Education for peace is not the only option, as one needs local laws, information-sharing, communication, NGOs, non-politicized think tanks, international efforts, international standards, judicial systems, and the accountability on the part of many deterrent systems, among others. Education for peace has mainly the human beings in mind as agents and owners. Education for peace has human beings in mind, person by person, more than persons who have peace as an ideology or a profession.

We are in need of peaceful people who can create peace with others, among others and for others. Let me repeat this, my dear friends, especially my dear young friends: do not think about peace as a profession; do not think about it as an ideology. It is education, it is learning, it is giving, it is to be created anew within us, so we may spread the same news and the peace with

others. One peaceful and peacemaking person may accomplish more than dozens of my lectures on peace. If my lectures are not able to impact the personality of the learner and move them into more peaceful existence, then peace is not a teaching, it is a quality of living and being. Let me dare say that if peace does not start at home, then the task of the educators will be most challenging. Good education must not be one of the options. It is indeed our hope for any future life, both personally and collectively. There is no Plan B. Life without education leaves us at the jungle level, and educating for a future of peace is naturally an aspect of a good education. If education will not lead to peace or increase the potential for peace, then it is no education. When I say education, I do not merely mean a curriculum in an institution but the whole lifestyle, a mindset, a value system, a model of relationships and attitudes, as well as concrete programs.

Before moving on with further details, let me clarify that something called peace education like nature-friendly education or others may be branding techniques in schools. We have them in Lebanon as well, so I personally avoid favoring any particular model of peace education. Now about what I consider critical in any effort to educate people for peace is a long on-going and multi-generational process, not a decision by internal powers in a country or an external decision, influence or precondition. I say this in order to dismiss the political use of peace as a decision to be negotiated superficially or on the grounds of passing interest. You know what I have in mind? That this or that country will broker a peace agreement in a distant land after one meeting or two or three or five or by pressure or this or that. Those are temporary styles of peace. This is a simplistic approach to peace.

Educating people for peace also refers to value systems. What values? This is not a secret. I am not giving big news but there are values such as respect, service, awareness of other persons, self-critiques, creativity, kindness, social cohesion, team spirit, and empathy. These are notions and ideas that are foundational to good education, which are part of peace education, that would shape the personalities of individuals and be safeguarded by society and its systems and institutions.

Education for peace is also knowledge-based and does not exist in a vacuum. It is knowledge about history, diversity, and the other. It is also knowledge about external and internal models of harmonious and gentle living. Ignorant peace is temporary peace and the peace of the ignorant, at some level, is bondage to the other. It requires the development of skills and behaviors, and therefore needs formal and informal training. It needs to be rehearsed somewhere -- preferably at home, in the classroom, neighborhood, and at work so it may be implemented very widely.

One can identify peace and its education as it is influenced by something called inner tranquility and inner peace while grown from within the person's mind and soul. It moves on to peace with those of one's group and of one's kind and hopefully into the outer circles of peace with those of different types or opinions. There may be obstacles in our effort to educate for peace. Education for peace may be undermined by institutions or the partial implementation of constitutions that create a lack of harmony or lack of fairness and freedom. Peace always implies interconnectedness so any self-centeredness may stand in the way. Educational curricula which are heavily influenced or controlled by political choices or platforms are also a problem because

often when we think about peace, we have a model of peace or a solution for peace that fits our political agenda, and that is not what I mean by peace.

I will not refer to the problem of history but I should here mention that the more you read about your history, other's history and formal history, the more you will doubt the precision of the truths that are presented in those histories and these may also stand in the way of peace education. Another major problem in peace education or hindrance is that there are too many identities that are based on fear; this was mentioned in a previous session. There are too many identities that are based on fear and victimization, and perceptions or awareness of existential threats, whether historically or objectively, verified or not. Each group finds more common ground in the experience of the history of animosity than in anything else such as law, citizenship, common destiny, future, and hope. Each group may focus on some aspect, some period, some episode of history whether tragic or victorious and may base its ethos or identity upon that. In fact, much also depends on a group determining when its history started or when its victimization started. So this has no end, and peace has no chance, if all these hindrances are in place.

Now let me be constructive. For peaceful societies to be promoted and developed, instincts need to be disciplined as part of personality development, as formal education and as implementation of law and order. If you allow instincts to go wild, every human being -- to varying degrees -- will go wild and instinct will often win against everything else. We should realize that the opposite of terror are things like comfort, harmony, the freedom of self-critique, and multidisciplinary approaches. Priority must be given to the fact that the guns of all sorts have to stop. Otherwise, education for peace will have no chance; education will remain hostage and values and spirituality and other important matters will go into a moratorium for things to quiet down, and priorities will be set up in a different way. Education cannot guarantee peace as such, but it can counter such conditions as poverty, radicalism, illiteracy, ignorance, isolation, and uncritical living. It can create respect, humility, and appreciation of personal dignity. The way to promote peace in one area is also different from another area. So there is no one global technique for promoting peace or educating for peace even though some of the values, which I mentioned above, will be valid no matter where you go and whenever it may be. Therefore, specialized and local approaches are also necessary among us.

Let me come to the final part.

Peace building as strategy is not a response to war, nor can it readily stop wars. It is training for development, for harmony, creativity and life in fullness as we believe God intended for us. In this realm, we should learn to work for the peace of our neighbors as well, not our peace only; the peace of our neighbors, the peace of our enemies as we are to benefit when others are in peace within their systems, and our chances to have peace with them will certainly increase. Yes, with proper education for peace at home, school, university, and elsewhere we will participate in the transformation of the world.

The Haigazian University model includes points that I would like to share. In our Christian Muslim university community, the following have been the most basic approaches for living and

learning together. Maybe these have constituted a tacit curriculum for peace. I will list four points. These are not written anywhere, but I know that these are components of life at Haigazian, and they are like a tacit curriculum.

A fundamental question is: Why are Muslims and Christians on our campus living peacefully, at a time when tensions separate these groups elsewhere?

Here are four values, or possible strategies, that I can share:

1. As students come from different faiths, mainly Christian and Muslim, our effort is to invite the students to use their university experience to learn from each other and to learn about each other.
2. Our call is to have the students respect each other and not necessarily be convinced by each other.
3. Our programs are occasions for the students to learn to work together in teams, large or small.
4. Our value system encourages the practice of service to diverse societies together while students pursue their undergraduate studies. Service would not be by each group to its own community, but jointly in order to serve the diverse communities.

My call would be to help the new generations who have speedily learned to search for an enemy, to look in other directions instead. It is to help them first to seek to build solid bridges. As a child, my toys of choice were matchbox cars; that is, small metallic cars. So we lived in a church school campus where I had a whole campus, a garden, a yard, and lots of options. I loved building roads, building places where I could play with this; I probably had almost one-hundred matchbox cars, so I was 'well-endowed' and loved doing things with these cars. I loved having the space to build roads with cement, soil, water, and any other materials that I could find. Once in a while, I went to the main challenge of building miniature cities in our garden. I also furnished parking lots for my cars. The parking lots were the easiest of all the efforts. The most difficult and rewarding was the building of bridges that could hold for some good time.

Education for peace will never flow from the metaphor of the parking lots, but from the building of good roads and sustainable bridges.