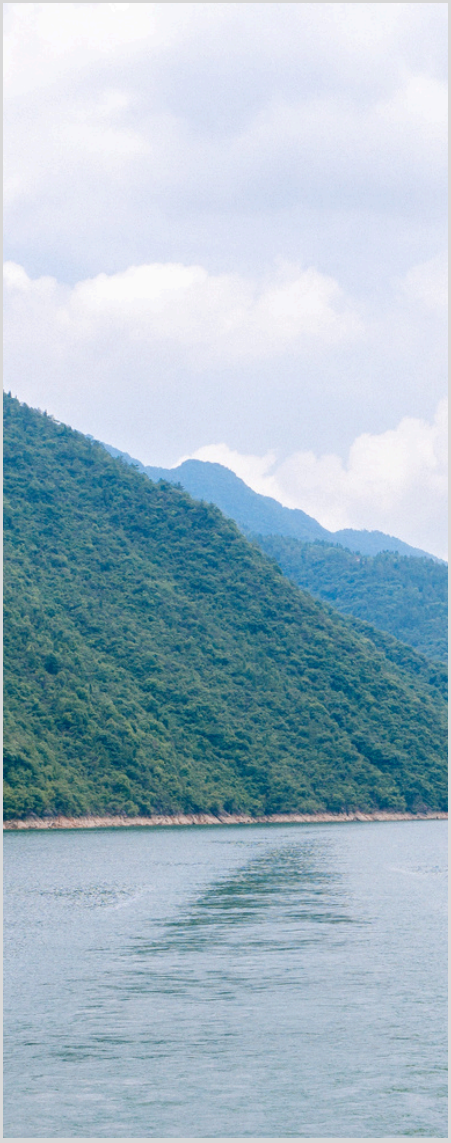






PATHS to PEACE

Written by Julie Lillie

There are infinite paths for seeking and being in peace. Change, transformation, and evolution happen in form and formlessness. Education has the power to realize the vision of living in just, positive peace globally. The perspectives and voices of children and youth must be raised and centered in this process.

As you journey into a bit of my path to peace, I invite you to reflect on the relationship of pain, presence, and peace in your life, community, nation, and throughout the world. As you reflect, can you still hear the voice of your child-self within?

Heart of an Educator

My path within peace and justice education emerged in childhood. It started with being in loving conversation with the natural world around my rural Wisconsin home. As my cats and stuffed animals could attest from their many lessons, in my heart I have always been an educator. In elementary school, I responded to playground needs by setting up a system of peace circles for friendship and conflict resolution that continued for years. In middle school, I noticed an inequality and upon learning about Title IX, advocated and succeeded in forming a girls school soccer team. In high school, I developed community service projects like reading buddies with younger kids. A social studies teacher engaged us in critical consciousness and justice-centered inquiry far beyond the White-centering textbook, which became a core part of my teaching and learning practice. As I began college, I was questioning the role of schooling and knew I wanted to become an educator who cared for and prioritized the development and needs of the whole child while co-creating spaces of belonging, healing and joy.

Throughout my career, I have had many roles (teacher, coach, leader, coordinator), which helped me develop a micro and macro view of our preK-12 public school systems. It has been an honor to witness the genuine care of children and youth demonstrated by so many. My teaching style has been inspired by guides who facilitate the child's self-directed learning journey, know when to withdraw or hold space for children's genius and their empowered choice and voice to rise. One such peacemaker I was honored to (un)learn with was Leech



Lake Anishinaabe Elder, Ida Downwind-Bald Eagle. Ida opened, expanded, and immersed me in Indigenous ways of knowing and being - both in education and within my personal growth and healing. Her mentorship helped shape much of my approach to peace education.

When George Floyd was murdered in 2020, I was a teacher and literacy coach near the Minneapolis site. Though my colleagues, students, and I had already been engaging in anti-bias and anti-racism (un)learning, I felt even more urgency to expand and deepen this work. I had led teams in redesigning our literacy curriculum to be more culturally relevant and inclusive of people of the global majority, but inequities were often upheld in the White-centering hidden curriculum that continued patterns of injustice, social oppression and racial stereotyping. For years, I had been coaching and

leading professional learning about trauma informed care, yet I continued to observe adults disregard the foundational regulatory needs of children (and themselves) because of the long list of rote academic benchmarks and test results that were the top priorities. Despite my colleagues and I doing our best to deliver engaging and impactful academic lessons and activities, there were far too many children with unmet needs, as well as anxiety, depression and/or apathy about schooling.

I was feeling pulled to make a change in my educator role and impact, but there was a voice I hadn't allowed myself to deeply listen to - and it was demanding to be heard. My body, who I now see as one of my greatest teachers, urged me to create space for an internal transformation.

Change: Pain Into Presence

Throughout my life, I put value on doing–getting things going and done–and physical activeness. Intermittently, I was forced to slow down to navigate injuries, surgeries, treatments, poor healing, and other health challenges. Bodily dysfunction, disease, and pain became a 'normal' part of my experience. By 30, I was diagnosed with a connective tissue disorder. I was increasingly in survival mode due to the breakdown of my body. Work and daily living tasks like bathing, dressing, driving, cooking, and cleaning had become increasingly challenging, unsafe, and painful. I felt so much joy being with children, but the physical demands left me collapsing in exhaustion and tears of pain. Anchored to my educator passion, and with the help of body braces, tape, internalized ableism, and stubborn determination, I pushed through the pain as long as I could. However, the surgeries, diagnoses, treatments, medical leaves, accommodations, and schedule reductions stacked up and there was a real possibility of having to stop teaching and applying for disability. As the world and my community navigated the Covid-19 pandemic, I felt my identity, independence, and vitality slipping away. And yet, I also held hope that my health could stabilize; that healing was possible.

An overarching theme emerged... **I had to learn to BE, not just to DO.** I needed to learn to slow down, listen, and lovingly surrender. To be at peace even in the presence of pain.

My mom always told me, *"this too shall pass."* For a long time, I thought she was referring to how that current injury and pain would eventually pass, but now I understand that everything is in a state of change.



Julie Lillie and Ida Downwind-Bald Eagle

Change itself is the only constant! Energy keeps transforming, mimicking the flow of our stories and the cycles of our natural world. With care from my family and friends, interventions of a wizard-like care team and a huge investment into cutting edge regenerative medicine, gratefully my nervous and musco-skeltal system began to transform! My body and I continue our journey of being, listening, managing, stabilizing, healing, strengthening... of changing.

My body has been a powerful messenger and teacher. For this I am (now) eternally grateful. I realized that I did not need to suffer and could pause and find peace and joy in the simplest of moments. For example, a wave of appreciation for being able to move my body to give and receive a hug. I hold an awe-filled smile for the automaticity of the breath and how it anchors me to the present moment. Even in the most challenging of times, presence and gratitude can shift us from despair.

As I entered the next phase of healing, I returned to my wonderings about how I could best serve children, educators and our communities. I now had an embodied understanding that nourishing and balancing the needs of the body, mind, emotions and spirit was foundational. I understood that education, too, must shift to emphasize the art of living, of humans being - not just humans doing!

Clarity in Purpose

After 16 years in diverse preK-12 urban school settings, it was painful to see how our systems failed to meet the needs of far too many children.

This happens through the many injustices that exist and are ignored, perpetuated or upheld, as well by putting the social, emotional, and mental health needs of the children secondary to academic performance. I enjoyed the school-site roles and their positive ripples, and yet I knew I wanted to help reimagine and evolve schools to prioritize student voice and choice, global citizenship, human and nature rights, social justice, critical consciousness, nonviolence, and whole child / holistic social emotional learning. I believe the primary roles of education ought to be to empower learners; to celebrate diversity; foster environmental stewardship; enhance overall well-being; enable personal and collective growth; hold space for wonder, critical thinking and problem solving; and to ultimately disrupt oppression and break the cycles of poverty, trauma, violence, and war. As I deepened my practice of 'being', I was able to distinguish and trust the voices within. I received clarity about my life's purpose: to help mainstream peace and justice education.

Five Peace Actions

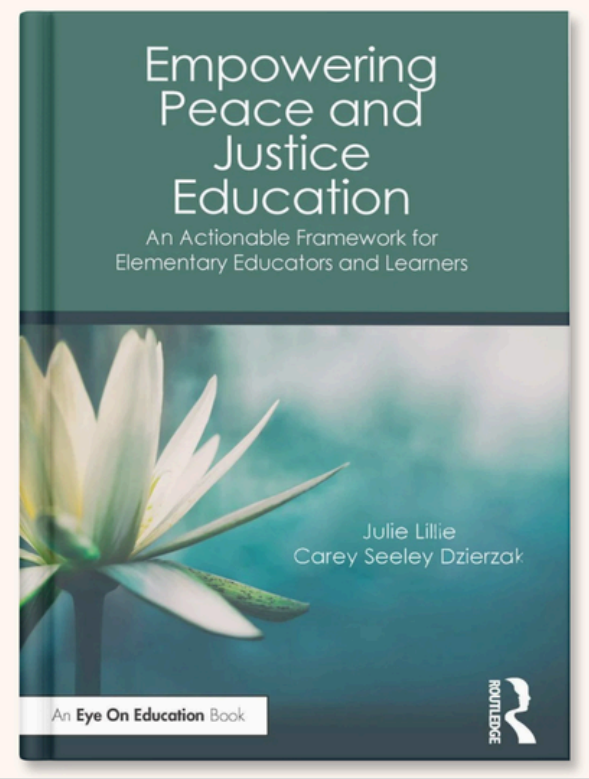
As I considered how to help advance peace education, I shifted to consulting to allow more flexible space for my continued healing and strengthening. In beautiful synchronicity, a former colleague, Carey Seeley Dzierzak, reached out for leadership coaching. Carey was leading her school in becoming an International Peace Site and introduced me to the empowering Five Peace Actions. The peace actions spoke so powerfully, succinctly, universally, and personally to my journey and educational values. I fell in love with them, became a Peace Ambassador, and have since centered the Five Peace Actions in my life and work.

The Five Peace Actions are:

- Seek Peace Within Yourself and Others
- Respect Diversity
- Protect Our Environment
- Reach Out In Service
- Be A Responsible Citizen Of The World

The Five Peace Actions were created by World Citizen Peace, who empower us to create a just and peaceful world. Please consider supporting World Citizen Peace by becoming a Peace Ambassador, as an International Peace Site, or committing to living in alignment with these peace actions.

As my vision for advancing peace education strengthened, Carey and I realized we were meant to fill an essential gap in peace and justice education: a guide for elementary educators and learners. As Toni Morrison spoke, "If you find a book you really want to read but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it" (1981). So we did!



Our resulting professional and conversational guidebook, ***Empowering Peace and Justice Education: An Actionable Framework for Elementary Educators and Learners***, unsurprisingly centers around the Five Peace Actions! The book features research, philosophy, our stories, along with global 'Peacemakers in Practice' and over 100 'Put It Into Practice' lessons to embed peace education into one's life, classroom and school culture. Drawing on our combined 40+ years of experience in education, we emphasize literacy integration, culturally relevant pedagogy, trauma informed care and co-creating brave, democratic spaces for a more just and peaceful world.

Comprehensive peace education, like what we outline in ***Empowering Peace and Justice Education***, shares connection with many approaches such as international and comparative education, social justice education, social emotional learning, human rights education, education for sustainability, climate justice, restorative practices, decolonization and more. This is peacelearning. Peacelearning (yes, no space there!) is a powerful word that demonstrates the compound and interconnected nature of learning and peace. Pursuits of peace cannot be separated from learning.

I am also founder of The Peace Pad, a consultancy dedicated to sharing the Five Peace Actions and advancing peace and justice education within learning environments, organizations, businesses and communities. Peace education is for everyone - at all ages and stages of life. On my site, you can access many free resources to support us all on our journey of seeking peace. I believe education has the power to realize the vision of living in just, positive peace globally. I am dedicated to co-leading a movement that results in peace and justice

education being prioritized for and with all of our children within our preK-12 educational systems, policies, schools, leaders, teachers, families, and communities.

"Peace education is both a philosophy and a process of learning and being that creates a world in which all people live in harmony with oneself, each other and the environment."
~ Julie Lillie & Carey Seeley Dzierzak (2025)

Take Peace Action

I am an advocate for a deep and transformational peacelearning process. I also understand this is not a small undertaking. A change in the human consciousness and society will take more than my book and efforts - it will take all of us! However, I believe this transformation is already in motion within the larger space-time continuum. Every individual impacts the collective, and the collective impacts the individual. I call on educators, leaders, parents, community members and children to be aware of and engage in their evolutionary role of creating a world in which all people, beings and organisms have their basic needs and rights met and live in harmony with others and planet Earth.

Co-creating just cultures of peace also requires a disruption of the status quo and the many 'isms that uphold oppression and perpetuate violence. All forms of oppression, marginalization, racism, sexism, classism, ableism, ageism, heterosexism, antisemitism, mico-aggressions, bias, prejudices, stereotyping, and discrimination can and should be explored in developmentally sensitive ways in our school communities. As leading advocate for critical pedagogy Paulo Freire stated *"All education is political; teaching is never a neutral act."*

We all must take a stand and prioritize co-creating brave spaces that honor all identities and allow for developmentally sensitive conversations about harm, pain, structural violence, systematic oppression, and the exploration of peaceful alternatives and solutions. Our students' voices and experiences are integral to this work. Peacelearners need democratically co-created brave spaces for exploring ideas and solutions, to give feedback and to share their hopes and dreams in creating a world of both justice and peace for all. How will you clear, hold, and co-create space to raise up the voices of all children?

Prioritizing and balancing being and doing may be our most important action (and nonaction) within this peace and justice educational movement. In seeking peace, we must listen deeply to the pain, suffering, love, and joy within ourselves and others. The insights mirrored in relationship with ourselves, others ,and our natural world deepen resilience and anchor understanding. Could it be that through pain, our most trusting inner voice illuminates the path and peace is ultimately realized?



“Pursuits of peace cannot be separated from learning.”



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