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Introduction to *Cultivating Peace 2019*

On April 16, 2007, a terrible tragedy happened at Virginia Tech. The violent actions of one individual took the lives of 32 members of a thriving community. In the years immediately following the shooting, members of the Virginia Tech community were compelled to address the issue of mass violence. Other communities around the world quickly came to regard the events of April 16th as a touchstone. With Virginia Tech in the global spotlight, the time was right for the University to host an ongoing conversation.

Visionary founder of the Center for Peace Studies and Violence Prevention at Virginia Tech, Dr. Jerzy Nowak (whose wife, Dr. Jacqueline Couture-Nowak, lost her life on April 16, 2007), proposed a symposium to center the voices of students in transdisciplinary research and practice of violence prevention and peacebuilding. In November 2010, with the support of generous donors, in particular the Cobbe Foundation based in North Carolina, this dream was realized. Virginia Tech's higher administration, including Provost Mark McNamee and College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences Dean Sue Ott Rowlands, added a concurrent event: an invitational, international Summit on Violence Prevention Education. The Summit convened leading researchers and noted practitioners in the field of violence prevention to share research, engage in dialogue, and advance best and promising practices approaches to critical issues related to violence. This high-profile event afforded students exposure to leading scholars and practitioners, while providing an opportunity for student researchers to present their work in a larger setting.

While we expected (and got) a large contingent of students from Virginia Tech and other Virginia institutions like George Mason University and Hollins, to our delight we also had participants from Drake University in Iowa and University of Warwick, London (both via Skype), as well as Universidad del Salvador, the University of Southern California, Brandeis, and Kean University (Newark, New Jersey). It has been our pleasure to host students from Kean at every subsequent symposium.

The keynote speaker for both events was Dr. Dan Olweus, a research professor of psychology from Norway, considered a leading expert in bullying research. Bullying in schools continues to be considered a strong indicator of escalated community violence, including suicides. Olweus' approach focused on peer bystanders, helping students appreciate the seriousness of peer aggression, and giving them the means to intervene.

The student symposium succeeded beyond expectations. Presentations were dynamic and eclectic, exploring topics such as service learning in at-risk communities, harnessing the power of new media in addressing violence in critical places like Darfur and Rwanda; examining philosophies of morality and

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violence; as well as microaggressions, bullying, and strategies for fostering caring school communities. The symposium also showcased the arts, bringing students, Summit participants, faculty and staff together in hands-on workshops, and a prominent local scholar of Middle Eastern music led the participants in a dance, celebrating the gifts of a part of the world most native U.S. citizens associate with war and terrorism.

One of the most powerful memories I have of the first “Cultivating Peace” Symposium is the Theater of the Oppressed workshop. MFA candidates in Virginia Tech’s program in Directing and Public Dialogue first led a brief training on combining Image Theater and Forum Theater techniques for promoting conversation about violence. In Image Theater, one participant places a few others (usually 2 or 3) in a frozen-action position, as in a game of Statues. Forum Theater technique allows “spectators” to intervene and reconstruct a scene. What struck me foremost about the workshop was that the room was made up of ethnically and economically diverse participants to an extent one does not normally see at an academic conference. What an extraordinary opportunity to create an environment of empathy. One participant, a journalist who reported on mass shootings and other collective trauma, became flustered for a moment when she discovered she had an internal barrier against emotional involvement with the things she was observing. When the rules of engagement dictated that she could not be a mere spectator, that what she witnessed was not separate from her, she had a breakthrough that she said would stick with her forever in her professional life.

Over the years, “Cultivating Peace” has maintained its student-centered focus and the transdisciplinary vision of its inception, examining issues of violence that are in the current spotlight outside academia as well as in current scholarship, including police culture, campus sexual assault, transitional justice, white supremacist violence, and the resiliency of survivors of violence. We have been fortunate enough to attract exciting keynote speakers willing not only to give public lectures to enrich our communities, but also to engage in workshops with students. Past keynote speakers since Olweus have included Dr. Johan Galtung, the founder of the academic field of Peace Studies; Adam Mazo, a filmmaker whose documentary, *Coexist*, examines the complexities of government-mandated reconciliation in post-genocide Rwanda; Timothy Phillips, a pioneer in the field of Transitional Justice and founder of Beyond Conflict, a global initiative which contributed to reconciliation processes in Northern Ireland, El Salvador, South Africa, and many other nations; David Smith, former Director of the United States Institute for Peace and an independent consultant on careers in peacebuilding; and, most recently, Dr. Howard Zehr, founder of the field of Restorative Justice.

In 2019, Virginia Tech joined with James Madison University to co-sponsor the Symposium, and it is encouraging to witness the continuing evolution of CPSVP founder Jerzy Nowak’s vision for student scholarship. With the publication of these student papers from *Cultivating Peace 2019*, we hope to preserve the legacy of the Symposium and inspire future contributors.

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