

A Promise to Our Kids: We Won't Kill You

Book review of A Promise to Our Children: A Field Guide to Peace

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At a certain point, as I was reading the book I’d recently been sent, a strange transformation began occurring: Gradually, as I moved ever deeper into it, I wasn’t so much reading as quietly singing a hymn . . . participating in a chant.

The book is [A Promise to Our Children: A Field Guide to Peace](#), by Charles P. Busch, an online version of which was sent to me by Adam Vogal, president of the Oregon Peace Institute.

The book isn’t so much about ending war as it’s about, well, loving children. And children are massacred, again and again and again and again, as the military forces of the world fight and kill, not so much one another, but rather various random swaths of humanity — a.k.a., civilians — who simply happen to be present when the bullets are fired and the bombs go off. They’re in the way. They’re collateral damage.

Early in the book, Busch, who is director of [Fields of Peace](#), points out that “in World War I, the ratio of combatant deaths to civilian deaths was nine to one. In World War II that ratio changed dramatically. Every one combatant death was matched by one civilian death. Today, following the Vietnam War, and now Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, the ratio has again changed dramatically: one combatant death to nine civilian deaths.”

And a terrifyingly large percentage of those civilian deaths happen to be children, which is to say: “Far more children are killed in today’s wars than combatants. War has become the

killing of children.”

As Busch’s words hit home — *war has become the killing of children* — he’s not so much making an abstract point as bringing the news to us in whatever random moment of our lives we happen to be, sort of like parents responding to a knock on the door and learning that their son or daughter has just been killed in combat.

This is the promise the book urges us to make, indeed, to say aloud, to repeat on a daily basis: “I will not be a part of the killing of any child, no matter how lofty the reason. Not my neighbor’s child. Not my child. Not the enemy’s child. Not by bomb. Not by bullet. Not by looking the other way. I will be the power that is peace.”

What does this mean, for God’s sake? These wars aren’t my fault! As I read the book, I hurried past those words, but I couldn’t let go of them. Finally I read them aloud. I suggest you do the same. I’ll wait . . .

Somehow Busch manages to push readers a little closer to the planet’s combat zones, or perhaps what I mean to say is that he clarifies the concept of “combat zone.” If there is one, we are in it, but we can choose to live in such a way that we stand up to its wrong: that we do something, on a daily basis, to change the world. He concedes the simplicity of this idea, but notes that change often emerges from simple, seemingly naïve — usually debased and ridiculed — ideas: from Mahatma Gandhi’s Salt March in 1930 to Greta Thunberg sitting alone on the steps of the Swedish parliament building, demanding governmental action on climate change.

The only real solutions to conflict are nonviolent ones. I believe most people on Planet Earth know this, yet human civilization is organized in lethal opposition to itself, with a global annual military budget in 2021 of [more than \\$2 trillion](#), half of which is American. Think how many children we’re prepared to kill!

Indeed, all hail [Herman Goering](#), who said during the Nuremberg Trials: “Naturally the common people don’t want war: Neither in Russia, nor in England, nor for that matter in Germany. That is understood. But after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine the policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along. . . . All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked. . . . It works the same in any country.”

In contrast, let me introduce Mary Gordon, a Canadian educator who has developed a curriculum called [Roots of Empathy](#), which Busch writes about:

“In a 4th grade classroom, a group of students sit in a circle on the floor. It is the first day of the school year. They are excited and a little nervous. They are waiting for the arrival of what the teacher said will be a ‘very special surprise.’ The door opens, and in comes a mother holding her 6-month-old infant, Evelyn.

“The mother and child join them in the circle, spreading a green blanket for the infant to sit and roll and rest on. Every three weeks throughout the school year Baby Evelyn and her mother will return, and the children will come to know Evelyn. They will observe her development, her ability to sit up and express her desires and emotions. They will learn to name her expressions — hunger, tiredness, frustration, joy, anger, contentment. And the students will learn the proper way to hold an infant, and, one by one experience Evelyn’s warmth and fragility, and her preciousness.”

This is for real! Gordon's Roots of Empathy curriculum, which she developed in 1996, is now being used in a dozen countries, including Canada and the U.S. This is emotional — or perhaps what I would call spiritual — education, with an infant as the teacher.

"In the classroom where Baby Evelyn became the teacher, the students soon claimed her as their own. They welcomed her arrivals with singing and gifts — drawings, paper necklaces, poems, and flowers. They loved her and wished they could take her home with them."

This differs a bit from the established school norm, where the emotional education process, which takes place primarily on the playground, is often led by bullies, who teach kids how to be either jerks or victims.

The Roots of Empathy curriculum teaches, my God, empathy: reverence for vulnerability. Who knew that could be taught? But if the development of empathy is not simply left to chance — if children start becoming aware of it, start valuing and understanding it, in their preteens — they will probably be less susceptible, as adults, to the Goering dictum, less likely to be dragged into war, less willing to dehumanize others, less willing to kill their children.

The concluding metaphor in Busch's remarkable book — his hymn — is about the great forests of the world, which may seem to consist of thousands of individual trees, but every forest is, in fact, one entity, a single life form connected at the roots.

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