

There Are Quakers in the South Bronx!

Bill Leicht, Bulls Head-Oswego Meeting

For more than 300 years Friends have braved social conflict and sought justice. Yet today we often feel troubled or confused by conflict. We face it. We try to smile thinking, "Opportunity to grow." Still our hearts cry out, "Avoid bad feelings!" Have we lost touch with our tradition? Or may our ambivalence actually be inviting us and our Society to grow? Perhaps considering our peace tradition in relation to a peace-seeking martial art, may clarify our wavering at conflict to reveal Way opening. So it has been with me.

I'm writing in the Peace Zone office of Iglesia San Juan Bautista, a tiny Latino Episcopal church, before putting on my *dogi* uniform and leading its Peace Dojo. I share the space with Peace Zone's director, Santos Bobet, a former drug dealer, who found enlightenment and a life mission from his prison relationship with an older member of La Asociación ÑETA (considered a "gang" by the authorities). Over the last few years his organization has renewed and renamed itself La Asociación Pro Derecho del Confinado and developed in the spirit of nonviolence. Santos has learned the effectiveness of nonviolence and has brought young people in from the street, sharing with them his own knowledge of nonviolence. He gives street credibility to the SJB Peace Dojo.

The path that brought me to this place and this work was long. Gerry Smith of Fifteenth Street Meeting had been teaching during the sixties at a South Bronx middle school. I, a non-Quaker, had been "witnessing" at the end of the sixties with the Ghetto Brothers, a large street organization (officially termed a "gang") in the area. In 1971 when Gerry and I met, he asked me, "What do you need?" I needed to produce a video. Gerry simply came through and together we shot and edited members' reactions to a then-current antidrug campaign. The production helped change antidrug advertising—and as a direct result in 1976 I became a Quaker.

I had witnessed the Ghetto Brothers respond to the killing of their Minister of Peace. Yellow Benjy said, "Black Ben was about peace. The GBs are not going to war over his death." The GBs assembled 100 gang leaders. Without the help of mediators, social workers, or teachers they negotiated a peace agreement that held for about 10 years in New York City. The movie *Flyin' Cut Sleeves, Children of the Street*, distributed by Cinema Guild, records that saga.

Watching those organizations, I observed that the most effective peacemakers also were martial artists. As a peacemaker I was impressed enough to take up aikido, a nonviolent martial art, in 1983. To my surprise I learned that its core principle is **love!** Now a member of Fifteenth Street meeting, I presented my leading with an aikido demonstration at the meetinghouse in 1985.

My meeting sent me on to Bulls Head-Oswego Monthly Meeting to learn about Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) from one of its founders, Larry Apsey, and from Steve Angell. In a few months I had completed AVP facilitator training and set about integrating aikido and AVP with the encouragement and help of many.

Forty years after I began to work with South Bronx youth organizations, I still work there. Instead of witness I head Urban Visions, Inc. (<http://urbanvisionsinc.org>), which develops projects in nonviolence. I am a Quaker peace warrior; as I termed Larry Apsey and Steve Angell: They sought peace and struggled for justice physically, mentally, and spiritually. I set up, tested, and now run a "peace dojo" model that integrates Alternatives to Violence Project and aikido methods as a comprehensive physical and verbal nonviolence training. Urban Visions has peace dojos in a New York City public school, the Episcopal Peace Zone youth project, and a Presbyterian GrandParents Family Apartment Complex both in South

Bronx. Its model has also spawned similar peace dojos in Goshen, Ind.; Awassa, Ethiopia; São Paulo, Brazil; and now Chicago.

What happens in a peace dojo? Affirmation, Attention, Trust, then Transformation occur in the person and the group. The order is important. First Affirmation: We repeat failed behaviors, because we are afraid of losing the little that we have. When we affirm we can grow and loosen the hold of fantasy and fear. Then Attention: We can pay attention to reality both internal and external. We notice that we are not alone, but rather surrounded by potential allies and resources. And Trust: We build a sense of community and trust, because we are positive and responsive and others need those qualities too. Finally Transformation: It occurs when we let go of fears from the past and fantasies of the future to connect wholly to the person in front of us (whom we previously had considered an adversary). That connection is *musubi* in Japanese, it is the conduit through which Transforming Power flows irresistibly into a crisis to find in it an opportunity for new growth.

Affirmation, Attention, Community, and Transformation may seem concepts, but all have equivalent physical states, which must be perceived and then understood, trained, and used skillfully. Affirmation applies to Center, an awareness that seems to dwell deep in the body below the navel. Attention that arises from that Center does not stop with a gaze but extends through all perception in and around the body. Japanese term this attention *zanshin*. Community awareness flows naturally from true Attention, because you know the intentions of those around you from nuances and hints. Transforming Power is the integration of all these states, in Japanese *musubi* (or more accurately, *iku-musubi*).

Transforming Power stories are a part of AVP and of peace dojos. One of mine happened on Lexington Avenue and 51st Street in Manhattan. A crowd was ahead at the intersection. I stepped out on the curb just as a woman started to move toward the focus of a crowd: two youths fighting in the street. I moved right behind her, and as she started to extract and calm the younger, smaller youth from under the larger one, I caught the latter's arm gently, preventing him from hitting the youth he had been pounding. Without talking to each other, the woman and I cooperated in separating the fighters until each went his way, as she and I also did. Transforming Power had brought us together and directed our wordless physical, mental, and spiritual cooperation.

Children and adults in a peace dojo have fun or they wouldn't continue to come. That spontaneous spirit of play is an aspect of Transforming Power. They bow to each other at the beginning to show respect and readiness to play and learn. They warm their bodies with exercises that prepare muscles and establish perceptual and movement patterns. Most importantly they learn to breathe together. When they practice verbal skills, they notice how their bodies feel and react. When they do physical techniques, they notice what words would go with the actions and when. They learn to meditate to empty the clutter of mind and body habits. They play the Kitty Game to find natural movement and community with others. They assemble in Council Circle to solve and celebrate group problems and achievements. All of these are explained more fully in pictures and words at <http://urbanvisionsinc.org>.

And what is my task now? I learn more from the learners about how they learn and teach others how to facilitate this process. It is my time to give back in the Bronx and elsewhere what I have learned. On the board of Aiki Extensions, Inc., an international association of aikidoists formed in 1997, I advocate for the needs of youth and the unity of nonviolence, verbal and physical. From the Bronx and elsewhere aikidoists concerned about peace and justice in the world's ghettos have come forward to join me contributing their own skills and insights. Street organizations, schools, agencies, and religious institutions have become interested in how nonviolence can serve their peoples and gain justice peacefully.

Although now a member of the rural Bulls Head-Oswego Monthly Meeting, I travel to the Bronx a few days each week. Moreover my meeting has lavished time and concern in my clearness and oversight committees, trying hard to teach me how to ask for and use spiritual support. Members have welcomed my Bronx associates to Bulls Head and have attended peace dojo and the Bronx Worship Group in the City. Larry Apsey advised me early how to wait until "Way opens." Others have given me contacts and held me and our family in the Light as occasion arose.

Now that we have established the need for a facilitation training center for peace dojo work, we need to find people with access to major financial, political and social resources. We invite them to join us in developing cadres of "peace warrior" trainers who can help humankind to begin to live more justly and peacefully together (and with our natural environment). Specifically we need a blue-ribbon board that can guide our developing discipline and group to the resources needed. We are almost ready to replicate the peace dojo model worldwide. If Friends are moved to nominate others or to consider serving themselves, we would be very grateful. Though this is an interfaith task, we believe that a Quaker spirit at the Center will help greatly. I have reached 70 and need to assure our continuity and spiritual leading so far as I can. As Mohandas K. Gandhi first suggested and A. J. Muste amplified, "There is no way to peace. Peace is the Way."