

Why Peace?

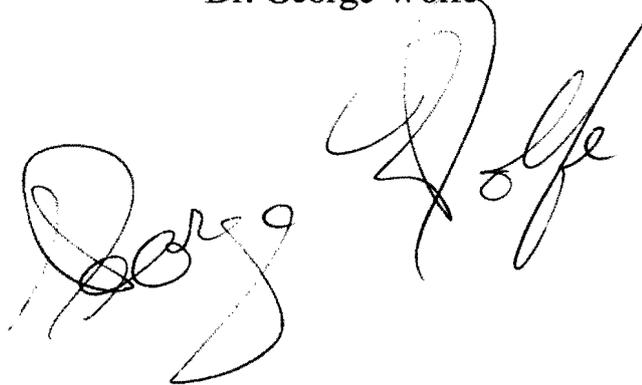
Stories of Activism and Altruism in Indiana

A Senior Honors Creative Project

by

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The image shows two handwritten signatures in black ink. The signature on the left is for Elyse Chudzynski, featuring a large, stylized 'E' and 'C'. The signature on the right is for Dr. George Wolfe, with a prominent 'W' and 'F'.

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Abstract

Graduating from college is an enormous transition, and once made it can be especially difficult to integrate past hobbies and interests into daily life. This includes the work of an activist. After finding myself approaching this transition I had questions regarding activism and the commitment, passion, and motivation involved. Psychology has many theories on aggression and war; however, some psychologists have, instead, focused on the altruistic individual or the committed activist. I explored this aspect of human nature by interviewing six individuals, all located in Indiana, who actively work for social or political change. This project broadens the meaning of the word activism to include any type of action that may improve the life of another or help a community to grow. The interviews are presented in the form of film with an introduction and conclusion narrated by David Chudzynski. The stories shared by these six individuals offer encouragement and advice for those hoping to incorporate activism into life after college.

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* I would also like to thank all those I interviewed: Gerry Waite, Bibi Bahrami, Brenna Cussen, Earl Muterspaugh, Charlie Swander, and Dr. George Wolfe. Without their selfless acts and open hearts I would not have been able to complete such a project. They are true role models and I am grateful for their generosity and participation.

* Finally, I would like to thank my father, David Chudzynski, for narrating the film, as well as the rest of my family and friends who encouraged me throughout the semester.

During my sophomore year at Ball State I attended the public showing of the film *Uncovered: The Whole Truth About the Iraq War*. I didn't know it then, but attending that event eventually led to my own film: *Why Peace? Stories of Activism and Altruism in Indiana*. The movies are unrelated as far as content, but it was at this event that I discovered the campus organization Peace Workers and began my personal journey toward activism. As I was becoming an informed citizen I was, in essence, thrown into various causes and I felt it was time to become a member of something larger than myself. After two years as an executive member of Peace Workers, I learned a number of valuable lessons, including skills relating to activist organizations and peace movements. I discovered the inevitable debates that arise in these types of groups, the right and wrong ways to recruit, and the constant emergence of new issues and interests. This was the first step in my own journey, and as I struggled to be an effective Peace Worker I began to look to others.

This past summer I wanted to explore how other peace groups might work and how they stay active despite their other time commitments. Living at home in South Bend I decided to attend the Michiana Peace and Justice Coalition (MPJC) meetings. It was there that I met a number of individuals who have their own careers and yet are still committed to activism and serving their community. After a few meetings and events with these individuals, I learned that dissent is a natural part of every peace group and it can oftentimes be beneficial. Over the summer I also met with Paul Mishler, a member of MPJC and a labor studies instructor at Indiana University South Bend, who gave me some further insight into activist organizations. He addressed the transition that college activists must make, leaving the position of a student and becoming an independent adult

with a career. I honestly hadn't considered it, but after talking with Paul I realized that incorporating community service and/or activism into my daily life after graduation would be a difficult task.

This got me thinking. I wanted to learn more, but the summer was short and soon I was back at Ball State asking myself some important questions. As a senior I began to wonder where I might be the following year. This caused overwhelming anxiety and led to a dispassionate, half-hearted commitment to service, activism, and Peace Workers. Luckily I encountered this dilemma during fall semester instead of this spring. After calming my "future plan fears," I began to ask myself some other daunting questions. I was a little less nervous this time, and the questions were ones that I felt could be answered, if I devoted an entire semester to them in the form of an Honors Thesis. My questions related to my personal experience in Peace Workers but also to the broad definition of activism. The questions included:

"Why was it so difficult to recruit new people to Peace Workers?"

"How do you know when your actions are effective?"

"How will I stay active in the future?"

"What does it mean to be an activist?"

and

"What is activism, anyways?"

This is where my major in psychology began to intervene. I began to study the theories behind war, aggression, and violence. I found a long history of scholars suggesting various origins of violence and reasons for war. Since psychology has existed, various new concepts have arrived including the concept of unconscious aggression

developed by Sigmund Freud. Freud suggested all humans have a death instinct, *Thanatos*, which he characterized as an unconscious need to destroy in order to prevent self-destruction. He described human behavior during war as disillusionment, a perversion of intellect, reason, and scientific thought, but claimed this impulse was primitive compared to the expectations we fulfill in society. Thus, when our own societies place restrictions upon our behavior and breed hatred for other nations and peoples, our instincts are allowed expression and we are capable of cruelty and evil (MacCurdy 1918).

Freud is famous for many reasons but I was intrigued, to say the least, when I discovered his correspondence with Albert Einstein on this very subject. The thought of these two monumental characters discussing world matters was exciting enough that I considered writing an entire thesis on their correspondence. Einstein originally approached Freud on behalf of the League of Nations, whose Permanent Society of Art and Letters was trying to create dialogue between scholars in various fields. In the first letter Einstein asked a question that initially surprised Freud, yet it was one that Freud had tried to answer as a psychologist for many years.

“This is the problem: Is there any way of delivering mankind from the menace of war? It is common knowledge that, with the advance of modern science, this issue has come to mean a matter of life and death for Civilization as we know it; nevertheless, for all the zeal displayed, every attempt at its solution has ended in a lamentable breakdown.”

In that same letter Einstein went on to ask the additional following questions:

“How is it that these devices succeed so well in rousing men to such wild enthusiasm, even to sacrifice their lives? Is it possible to control man's mental evolution so as to make him proof against the psychosis of hate and destructiveness?”

These are legitimate questions and their impact continues to fuel many of today's non-violent anti-war activities. Although I lacked Einstein's eloquence, I had asked myself similar questions throughout my studies. The Einstein-Freud correspondence helped to cement some of my personal feelings regarding war and violence, but at the same time I was being pulled in another direction. In my research on the psychology of war I found another idea that addressed these questions from a new perspective. While many believed aggression was an integral part of human nature, there was another side to human behavior, a peaceful nature. I first encountered this concept through the work of Dr. Rachel MacNair and her use of Dr. Martin Seligman's positive psychology.

A New Perspective

Historically, most researchers in the past have studied humans as animals that go to war, but Rachel MacNair (2003) offered a new perspective. Instead of the violent human, some modern psychologists have studied the pacifist, the conscientious objector, or the anti-war activist. MacNair used the term peace psychology to describe what she studied. She defined peace psychology as “the study of mental processes and behavior that lead to violence, prevent violence, and facilitate nonviolence as well as promoting fairness, respect and dignity for all, for the purpose of making violence a less likely occurrence and helping to heal its psychological effects.”

MacNair used Martin Seligman's concept of the optimistic explanatory style as a model for non-violent activists. Seligman is the founder of positive psychology, a relatively new approach which combines aspects of behaviorism and humanism in order to offer a scientific approach to understanding life without neglecting talents and values. When used as a cognitive therapy, patients are first encouraged to reexamine their life. The therapist then asks the patient to attribute their situations to positive characteristics, thus developing a process in which optimism improves the patient's perspective, and generating the optimistic explanatory style (Seligman 1994). Many have responded to Seligman's studies with their own interests, quickly building the field of positive psychology (Schultz & Schultz, 2004, p.472). MacNair hypothesized that promoters of peace and non-violence actually used the optimistic explanatory style in their analyses of life, and this process allowed them to keep their commitments and stay motivated.

Their work and the questions they sought to answer inspired me to pursue this area of study. However, I did not want to perform an experiment. Instead I wanted to hear the honest, straightforward stories from those who display this side of human nature everyday. I wanted to understand the reasons for the compassion and commitment of those around me. My goal was to focus my attention on the personal experience of those who act for peace on a daily basis. I wanted to hear their stories in person and ask questions in order to gain another type of knowledge not found in scholarly articles. From this point I went on to choose those individuals that I would interview. I felt I had encountered a number of role models, yet I needed a better understanding of their personal experiences in order to learn from them.

While I knew some of the individuals prior to this project, it also gave me the opportunity to meet others as well. I knew both Gerry Waite and Dr. Wolfe through Peace Workers, and I met Brenna Cussen the previous summer through MPJC. I was previously aware of AWAKEN, but had not officially met Bibi Bahrami, so I was pleased to have the chance to get to know more about her experience and organization. Dr. Wolfe provided me with contact information for Charlie Swander and Earl Muterspaugh who were kind enough to let me photograph their work at the food pantry, in addition to the interview. Originally I wanted to label each of these individuals activists, but during the interview process this label became cloudy. After talking with some who did not identify themselves as activists, I wondered if this was the most accurate description. In the end, however, I found that part of my purpose in the project was to expand the popular definition of activism to include any type of work that is meant to improve social or political conditions. Using this definition, I was able to explore various forms of activism from anti-war protests to feeding the hungry.

In order to share this new definition of activism with my audience while simultaneously satisfying my creative desires, I chose to tell these people's stories through video and photography. I have always enjoyed Ken Burns documentaries, and with my background in photography and some experimentation in editing, I was excited to create a project that I could share with others. My initial excitement, however, was at times overshadowed by my immense fear and confusion. Writing the interview questions and contacting my interviewees was the easiest part. I imagined a few weeks of interviews followed by a leisurely month of editing, perfecting every moment of the movie and capturing the essence of these individuals. It turns out making a movie is not

supposed to be a one-person job. Not only was I faced with camera work and a faulty tripod, but I was also a novice in the program I used to edit. This led to many frustrating nights. I discovered the importance of a storyboard, the tools of an editor, and the patience I was required to have in order to finish. The process was tedious, but in the end I am glad I gained the experience and chose to make a movie that I can now show to others who might be asking similar questions.

The Interviews

After my first interview with Gerry Waite I discovered that sunlight is not always the best light. I also found out how difficult it can be to control my own comments. I knew if I spoke while he was talking I was bound to lose a whole section of footage, but I still couldn't refrain from a few "Mm Hmm's" and "Ha ha's." Gerry was open to talk about his own journey in becoming an activist and discussed his involvement with SOAW, Veterans for Peace, and teaching in the prisons. He stressed the importance of living each day with justice in mind. Gerry also explained that much of his motivation comes from the people surrounding him that continue to spread that message.

My next interview was with Brenna Cussen, who was speaking to seventh and eighth graders at Stanley Clark School in South Bend, Indiana. My tripod legs had begun to slip from their spots and I had to improvise with some heavy-duty clamps to keep the camera up in order to tape Brenna's speech to the kids and the interview afterward. I secured my camera and was able to really talk to Brenna. Her story was especially important to tell because of her somewhat recent transition from student to full-time activist, which she touched on in her interview. She has committed her life to social

justice and lives as an example each day. Brenna's experience in Sudan is only one of many inspiring acts that led me to ask for her story.

The day after I talked to Brenna I drove back to Muncie to meet Earl Muterspaugh and Charlie Swander at Friends Memorial Church. Earl and Charlie offered another perspective in my exploration of activism. Both individuals are retired, yet choose to dedicate their time to the food pantry at their church. It made me realize that there is yet another transitional time in our lives when we have the option to stay active in our communities. It is by no means required, but according to Earl and Charlie it has helped them stay healthy. Earl and Charlie did not consider themselves activists, and like many of the other individuals their service was directly tied to their faith. In all my interviews the individuals spoke informally and candidly, telling me, and not the camera, what they really felt and thought about their service.

Bibi Bahrami and George Wolfe were the last two individuals I interviewed, and they each brought a new light to my project. By that time I was comfortable with the camera and was able to focus only on the interview. Bibi's organization, AWAKEN, was a product of her own experiences and the distress she saw in her hometown in Afghanistan. When our nation called for the rebuilding of Afghanistan, Bibi felt it was her duty to take a leading role. In addition to her personal attachment to her service, Bibi also shared her struggles. She addressed activism from a parent's perspective and told me of the sacrifices she has had to make because of her participation in AWAKEN. She had originally hoped to found an organization like AWAKEN after her six children were old enough to take care of themselves; however, after the events on 9/11 she knew it was the

right time. The time she has lost with her children has been difficult, yet Bibi made a decision and overall, her children share their mother's pride.

Dr. Wolfe's main form of activism has been through peace education and so he touched on a number of key elements within peace movements and personal activism. At one point he brought up an interesting concept. He told me that one does not decide to become an activist, but instead one is thrown into a situation and feels it is imperative that something be done. Other individuals also addressed this type of introduction to an issue, and Dr. Wolfe gave a personal example stemming from his involvement with the defense of peace studies and academic freedom. Dr. Wolfe closed with a suggestion I had not considered. He said the easiest way to stay committed and motivated is to choose an issue that relates to your stage in life. As a college student, I had tried to tackle too many issues, but with this advice, choosing an issue might become easier.

The Research

In order to build upon the ideas of these *activists* and cement my own beliefs, my next step was to find supporting evidence. After talking with each of these individuals I found additional research to defend their comments and experiences. The work of Rachel MacNair and Martin Seligman began my investigation of activism and altruism, but many others have tried to understand the peaceful side of human nature through empirical studies. McAdam (1988) discovered that 1960's activists who kept in touch with their fellow activists were more likely to still be active in the 1980's. This finding supports the idea discussed by a few of my interviewees. Brenna especially stressed the importance of having a network of individuals who believe in similar causes and actions. Gerry also

mentioned the motivation he derives from his interactions with student activist groups, the variety of groups at the SOAW protest, and his friends from Veterans for Peace.

Wilson and Musick (1999) used the motivational model of reward to describe why individuals continue or quit volunteer activities. As in any productive job or activity, individuals are more likely to persist when they are rewarded. They hypothesized (Wilson & Musick 1999) that as individual resources decreased so would the tendency to volunteer. These resources might include free time or personal health, according to Wilson and Musick. They also believed that social networks and an individual's perception of others' participation in voluntary activities might affect the future of their own volunteering. If no one else is doing the work, one might be more likely to give it up, yet if one's social network, neighborhood, church, or school, supports and builds upon the activity then an individual might continue.

McPherson (1981) completed a number of studies assessing the characteristics and circumstances that led to extended voluntary service. This research produced a number of results including evidence that the type of activities an organization executes, the ties an individual has to the group, and the intensity of service all contribute to how long an individual will participate. These studies defined "volunteering" in a very broad sense, including volunteer sports teams, while the focus during my investigation was on those who served others in an altruistic manner, yet some of his results still apply. Earl and Charlie noted that the physical work involved in the food pantry kept them active in a way other types of service would have failed. In addition, their ties to the food pantry were also strong due to its affiliation with their church.

When looking specifically at altruism, Hunt (1990) described a number of research studies that provide different reasons for altruistic behavior. Some included the effect of social settings and status on an individual's helpful state while others addressed the influence of mood or emotions on altruism. Hunt concludes by suggesting altruism is a result of various circumstances from genetics to environment and its appearance is dependant on the situation. The situation for each of the individuals in my film was unique. Bibi was given the opportunity to act after the Taliban left and we were rebuilding the country. Brenna was simply asked to go to Sudan, but once there the genocide became one of her dominant issues. Gerry was told of the atrocities in South America in his church, while Dr. Wolfe was pulled into the fight for academic freedom in his workplace. And finally, after years in the workforce, Earl and Charlie were asked to serve their community through the food pantry which they agreed to in accordance with the Great Commission.

Each individual I interviewed provided a distinct example of activism, but more importantly they all offered their stories so that others may learn from their experiences. As I prepare for graduation I realize I am about to make the transition from student to employee. With the help of Gerry, Brenna, Charlie, Earl, Bibi, and George, I am closer to understanding what that means and what it will take to stay active. Their personal commitment has been an enormous motivator. A strong social network is necessary to build commitment, and I am lucky to have met such wonderful role models. One of the most important characteristics of these role models, which I was able to share through film, was the fact that each of these individuals was a normal, everyday citizen, living in Indiana, and yet their accomplishments were so impressive. Einstein and Freud asked the

question “Why war?” while the research I completed urged me to ask “Why peace?” I’m still not sure of the answer, but I know it is a valuable question that these individuals begin to answer through their actions.

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