



Why Our World
Needs Peace Literacy

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NUCLEAR AGE PEACE FOUNDATION
Committed to a World Free of Nuclear Weapons

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Humanity's Greatest Invention

Imagine if there were a high school in America today with a zero percent literacy rate, a high school where none of the students or teachers know how to read. Would this high school get national media attention? Actually, it would probably get international media attention, because today we recognize that literacy is the foundation of education, and we have constructed our society around literacy.

Now imagine going back in time to 1200 BC in ancient Greece. This was around the time period of the Trojan War between the Greeks and Trojans. In 1200 BC the Greek and Trojan societies were almost completely illiterate. This is why none of the characters in the *Iliad*, which takes place during the Trojan War, know how to read. Not even the kings and princes know how to read. Achilles, Odysseus, Hector, and Priam are very intelligent, but they are illiterate.¹

Imagine trying to convince the Greeks and Trojans in 1200 BC that they should have universal literacy. Would this be an easy or difficult thing to do? It would be very difficult, because how do you explain the concept of universal literacy to

people who have never heard of reading and writing?

If you told them, "Writing is a process where you make marks on something, and the marks symbolize sounds," they might respond, "What is the point of that? Why go through all that trouble? Why not just use your voice to communicate, or send a messenger to relay your message?"

If you said, "Literacy allows you to read books and letters," they would respond, "What is a book? What is a letter?" Explaining what books and letters are to people who have no concept of literacy would be difficult, but explaining what we use literacy for in the twenty-first century would probably be impossible. Literacy is more important now than it has ever been, because today we have expanded our use of literacy to include email, text messages, the Internet, Facebook, ordering from menus, buying subway tickets, using street signs to navigate, and much more. How could you possibly explain the concept of the Internet to people living in 1200 BC? How could they even begin to comprehend what the Internet is, if they don't even know what literacy is?

If you are living in a small nomadic hunter-gatherer tribe, then you don't need literacy. But if you are living in a large agricultural civilization consisting of several hundred thousand or several million people, then literacy becomes essential. That is why large agricultural civilizations all over the world eventually reach a point where they try to develop a written language, whether in ancient China, India, Babylon, Egypt, Carthage, Rome, or on the other side of the globe in the land of the Aztecs and Mayans.ⁱⁱ

Literacy is something we often take for granted today, but why is literacy so important? When I ask this question to audiences, they often say that literacy is important because it allows us to distribute information. But there are two larger reasons why literacy is important. The first larger reason is because as Francis Bacon said, "Knowledge is power."ⁱⁱⁱ There is a reason why American slave owners made it illegal for slaves to learn how to read. There is a reason why the Nazis burned books and why throughout history dictators have banned books. There is a reason why Malala Yousafzai was shot in the head for trying to promote literacy and education for women, and there is a reason why the Taliban doesn't want women to become educated. When you deny people literacy, you also deny them power.

The second larger reason why literacy is important is because literacy not only allows us to distribute information, but literacy also gives us access to entirely new kinds of information. One of the new forms of information that literacy gives us access to is history. History cannot exist without literacy.^{iv} This might sound odd, but the reason history requires literacy is because without literacy, you cannot separate history from mythology. If you were to ask an ancient Greek man in 1200 BC who his ancestors were, he might say, "On my father's side my distant ancestor was Zeus, and on my mother's side my distant ancestor was Aphrodite." That would sound normal back then, but that would sound very strange today.

Because they lacked a written history, the ancient Greeks and Trojans also did not seem to have any historical memory that they once lived as nomadic hunter-gatherers for countless generations. Instead, they seemed to believe that their ancestors, after being created by Greek deities, had always lived in an agricultural civilization. Another new form of information that literacy gives us access to is science. Literacy makes every scientific field possible, because literacy allows us to organize and analyze information in new ways. So if you like electricity, then thank literacy. In addition, complex math cannot exist without literacy. Algebra, geometry,

trigonometry, and calculus require a written language.

Because literacy allows the human mind to expand and explore in so many ways, literacy is perhaps humanity's greatest invention. Humanity discovered how to use fire, but we invented literacy. Some people might argue that the wheel is humanity's greatest invention, but history, science, and complex math can exist without the wheel. They cannot exist without a written language. Unlike spoken language, walking, and other natural human abilities that are as old as our species, reading and writing are not natural human abilities, but relatively recent inventions.

A better term for the ancient Greeks and Trojans living in 1200 BC is not illiterate, but preliterate, because they did not yet understand why literacy was an essential step in their society's evolution. They lacked awareness of what literacy even meant, because when you live in a preliterate society, you don't realize you are preliterate.

Now the point I want to make is, what if all of us in the twenty-first century are living in a preliterate society and we don't even realize it? We are not preliterate in reading, but in something else. What if we are living in a society that is preliterate in peace, and a major reason why we have so many national problems, global problems, and even personal and family

problems is because our society is preliterate in peace. Just as literacy in reading gives us access to new kinds of information such as history, science, and complex math, literacy in peace also gives us access to new kinds of information such as solutions to our national and global problems, along with solutions to many of our personal and family problems.

The Seven Forms of Peace Literacy

There are seven forms of peace literacy. The first is *literacy in our shared humanity*. What does it mean to be human? If you ask a hundred different people what it means to be human, you will probably get a hundred different answers, because we are preliterate in our shared humanity. Think about how difficult it would be to dehumanize people if we were all literate in our shared humanity. Think about how difficult it would be for someone to manipulate our human vulnerabilities if we were fully aware of the many ways people exploit these vulnerabilities.

The second form of peace literacy is *literacy in the art of living*. Living is the most difficult art form, and most of us are not taught how to live. As a child I was never taught the many essential life skills that are part of the art of living. I was never taught how to resolve conflict, calm myself down, calm other people down, overcome fear, focus my mind,

inspire people to accomplish seemingly impossible tasks, lead from a foundation of respect rather than intimidation, develop empathy, be a good friend, have a healthy relationship, challenge injustice, be happy, cleanse myself of hypocrisy, find purpose and meaning in life, develop my sense of self-awareness so that I can critique myself honestly, and help humanity create a more peaceful and just world.

Some children learn these skills from their parents, but many parents do not know these skills, and many children learn harmful habits from their parents. I grew up in a violent household and had a traumatic upbringing, and literacy in the art of living has also helped me overcome my childhood trauma, control the homicidal rage that resulted from that trauma, heal my psychological wounds, and find purpose, meaning, and happiness in life. All people want purpose, meaning, and happiness in life, but our society is not literate in the healthiest ways to achieve this.

The third form of peace literacy is *literacy in the art of waging peace*. In the military I saw how people in the military have excellent training in how to wage war, but most of us have no training in how to wage peace. If people were as literate in the art of waging peace as soldiers are in the art of waging war, our world would improve significantly.

The fourth form of peace literacy is *literacy in the art of listening*. All of us know that many people in our society do not know how to listen well. To truly listen we must develop empathy. If we do not empathize with people we cannot really hear what they are saying. When we do not listen with empathy we hear only their words. But when we listen with empathy we also hear their emotions, hopes, and fears. We hear their humanity. Increasing literacy in the art of listening is one of the most important endeavors we can be involved in, because the inability to listen causes so many of our human problems, and everyone likes to be listened to. In all of human history, nobody has ever seriously said, "I hate it when people listen to me! I can't stand it when people listen to me!" Nobody ever says, "My spouse and I have to go to marriage counseling, because my spouse listens to me all the time and I can't take it anymore!"

The fifth form of peace literacy is *literacy in the nature of reality*. So many of our misconceptions about peace result from our misconceptions about reality. And the last two forms of peace literacy are *literacy in our responsibility to animals* and *literacy in our responsibility to creation*. As human beings we have the power to protect our planet or drive ourselves and most life on Earth into extinction. We have become our own greatest threat to our survival, which is an

alarming yet incredible fact. If we do not become literate in these seven areas, our species will not survive.

Peace Literacy Means Survival Literacy

Peace literacy is the next step in the development of our global civilization, because peace literacy is necessary in an interconnected world where the fate of every nation is tied to the fate of our planet. Because of the dangers posed by nuclear weapons, war, and environmental destruction, being preliterate in peace puts humanity and our planet at great risk. During an era when humanity has the technological capacity to destroy itself, peace literacy means survival literacy.

As a child in school I spent many years learning to read and write, but I did not learn peace literacy skills. If humanity is going to survive during our fragile future, we must create a world where a high school with a zero percent peace literacy rate would get national and international media attention, just as a high school today where none of the teachers or students know how to read would get national and international media attention. Peace literacy educates us on solving the root causes of our problems rather than merely dealing with symptoms, which is another reason why the survival and wellbeing of our country and planet depend on peace literacy.

When peace literacy is concerned, every bit helps us improve our personal lives, the lives of those around us, and our planet as a whole. What is better, a society where three percent of people are peace literate, or a society where ten percent of people are peace literate? What is better, ten percent or thirty percent? It is estimated that around eighty-three percent of people today are literate in reading.^v Imagine how different our world would be if eighty-three percent of people were peace literate, or if over fifty percent of people were peace literate. Today I would contend that less than one percent of people are literate in all seven forms of peace literacy. We must work together to change that. Human survival, along with the survival of most life on our planet, depends on peace literacy.



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The Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, founded in 1982, is a voice for those committed to exercising conscience and choosing a decent future for all humanity.

ⁱThere is one possible reference to writing in the *Iliad*. In his introduction to the Robert Fagles translation of the *Iliad*, Bernard Knox says, “In Book 6 [of the *Iliad*], Glaucus tells the story of his grandfather Bellerophon. Proetus, king of Argos, sent him off with a message to the king of Lycia, Proteus’ father-in-law; it instructed the king to kill the bearer. [He] gave him tokens, / murderous signs, scratched in a folded tablet . . .” This reference is so vague that it is unclear whether these “murderous signs” were part of a written alphabet. Whether these scratched markings represented a written alphabet or just coded symbols, they seemed so mysterious that they are described by characters in the *Iliad* as signs and scratches. The written languages known as Linear A and Linear B, which existed in ancient Greece, seem to have been largely forgotten during the time of the Trojan War. Linear A and Linear B seem to have been used primarily for inventory, and it is likely that relatively few people ever had access to those written languages.

ⁱⁱThe Incas might have attempted to record information through a system of knotted strings known as “khipu.” Also, written languages seem to start out being used for inventory before being used to tell stories. A society can have a written language for many centuries before using it for history, science, and complex math.

ⁱⁱⁱFrancis Bacon, *Sacred Meditations* (Radford, VA: Wilder, 2012), 22.

^{iv}*Classical Mythology*, Lecture 1, The Teaching Company, DVD. In the first lecture, professor Elizabeth Vandiver discusses how literacy makes intellectual disciplines possible.

^vStatistics on Literacy, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/education-buildingblocks/literacy/resources/statistics>.

The Seven Forms of Peace Literacy

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HUMANITY

LITERACY IN
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LITERACY IN
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LITERACY IN
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LITERACY IN OUR
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TO ANIMALS

LITERACY IN OUR
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TO CREATION

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