

## Peace is a group effort

by Margaret Keyser

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She was there, quiet, not sharing in the bubbly conversations of this high school teenage group. They were all participating in an exercise I gave them to do: to go back into their childhood and think about conflicts in their lives--at home, in school, with friends and so forth. They were to use crayons and give expression to their experiences in art form. After some time they all talked about their drawings, except this young girl, who sat nervously listening to the rest of the group. Following the exercise, they all left for their next after-school activity and I encouraged her to stay behind and show me her drawing. I was extremely concerned by what I saw: seemingly innocent pictures of a child growing up, leading to the sketch of a gun at the bottom of the page. When I asked her about the gun, she fearfully, yet, as a matter-of-fact, explained how she contemplated taking her own life that very week ... then shared some more about her painful childhood, including the loneliness of having no one to talk to.

That experience made me realize how incredibly important it is to see and hear a very serious, urgent cry for help from a young child. It also made me realize the importance of spending time listening without judgment, and with compassion and understanding, to create the safe space for someone to share their pain.

Not all stories need to have a grim outcome, though. When I asked a large group of students in my workshop about their professional aspirations, they listed things like becoming an attorney, a computer programmer, a medical doctor and a number of other professions. Yet again, listening accurately to what they said--for example, "not music ma'am, but theatre"--was essential in establishing a trusting relationship with them in order for them to open up more.

On another occasion I heard a fourteen-year-old young man say how he hated his parents. After probing why, he exclaimed in anger, yet resolutely, "Because they don't listen to me. The only people who listen to me are my school friends and you." Needless to say I kept on listening to this young person until I didn't see him again for years. Then, surprisingly, I heard from him a year ago. He is now a responsible adult with a family and career of his own.

The gun drawn by our first teenager could have been a knife or any other dangerous object. The 14 year old young man could have ended up differently ... perhaps. We can't always predict the specific outcomes of a young life without a listening ear, or the support of an adult that takes time to see and hear their pain.

In all my conflict interventions I share the importance of deep and transformative listening--that by genuinely listening to a different view, a conflict can turn around for the better. But, even more so, improving one's listening skills on a daily basis can also save someone's life-- particularly that of one of our young people who desperately need us.

The very complex public debate around gun violence is an important one to be had, but so is the debate on violent crime in general, and the importance of the adult listening presence in the lives of our children. If self-interest could give way to common interest, perhaps our conversations and actions will be less polarizing and conflict-igniting. Perhaps, if we move these conversations to our common interests--in this case our children (as it should be of human life in general)--we might find more even tables of conversation and ideas that will bring about mutual understanding, concern, compassion and actions that could lead to an atmosphere of safety, care and peace of mind for all of us as we go about our daily lives.

Peace is a group effort, states the bumper sticker on my car. It is a sticker designed by Judy Cunningham, an associate with the Quaker Peace Centre in Cape Town, South Africa. My sticker is already torn on one side, and I replaced the original one many times, but I decided to keep it despite the tear, because it means a lot to me. It's message helps me understand that, despite our differences in dealing with conflicts, especially violent conflicts, the life of a child is in our hands until they grow into adulthood, and some of the best ways to be there for them is to listen and have them to see us all working together as a team helping them, being there for them. "Peace is a group effort" is in fact an appeal to come together despite our differences, to make things better, even for one child.