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Peace Studies 100

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Building Peace through Centers for Peace

“In the name of God, stop a moment, cease your work, look around you.”¹ While I was looking for quotes on the internet, with the subject of peace centers and peace-making work on the mind, I came across this quote by Leo Tolstoy. It completely summed up my idea of a center for peace. There are many peace centers located around the world including the PeaceCenter in San Antonio, Texas, Desmond Tutu Peace Center in South Africa, and Hiroshima Peace Center in Japan. They serve many purposes, but all have one common goal; to unite civilians and work together towards harmony. Selkirk College in Castlegar, BC is fortunate to have its very own Mir Centre for Peace on the historic land of the Russian Doukabours. Upon my first visit to the Mir Centre for Peace, I really did stop and look around to feel the history and beauty that I was absorbing. Each visit to the Mir Centre makes me think of the country of Bhutan in India where Gross National Happiness is measured instead of Gross National Product. Peace and happiness is a way of life in Bhutan, and this makes me wonder why other countries can't carry a similar logic. Peace centers are very important not only for peace-making, but for the journey towards being peaceful.

Ever since I watched a documentary by Michael J. Fox on his struggles with Parkinson's, I have wanted to travel to the country of Bhutan in Asia where prosperity is measured in happiness versus wealth in money. When Michael J. Fox visited Bhutan, his Parkinson's

¹ Quote by Leo Tolstoy - http://thinkexist.com/quotes/leo_nikolaevich_tolstoy/2.html

symptoms decreased dramatically, whether it was due to the altitude, or being surrounded by happiness, he is not sure. But one can be sure that “being content with what is and with what one has”² should lead to positive changes in your life. The Mir Centre for Peace gives me that exact feeling; being content. No matter how I’m feeling before I get there or how my emotions change for the rest of my day, the Mir Centre gives me a very ‘at ease’ feeling. There are many places in the world that would benefit from a peace center.

The importance of a peace center stretches beyond the goal of contentment and harmony. I believe that a centre for peace has the power to move a person’s way of thinking. Some may view this as a religious place, but it’s not. A religion is one way of thinking, and peace allows for so many thoughts and ideas to be developed. The beautiful thing about peace-making is that it is up to you. You have the power to mold the future, to create it, and every day, we live it. When a peace center is placed in a community with values that have been skewed, new beliefs are introduced that may have never even been thought of before. This is one step towards peace.

Happiness, harmony, and contentment all go hand in hand on the journey of creating a beautiful world to live in together, in peace. Peace centers are very important to the sustainability of society and interdependence. We may not all live like the people of Bhutan, but we can build off of their values and beliefs that have so obviously impacted many people’s lives.

² Quote by Bhutan's Prime Minister Jigme Thinley - <http://blog.beliefnet.com/freshliving/2009/05/fresh-living.html>

Quotes from Peace Studies 100 students' first class at the Mir Centre where they heard Myler Wilkinson speak on its history, September 16, 2008:

“On Tuesday, September 16th.... [our] class was held at the Mir Centre for Peace. Although I was a student five years ago at Selkirk College after I graduated from high school, I was unaware about the significance or history behind this beautifully restored building. ... [the] discussion captured the attention of the entire class.... As I listened to the discussion in class I became interested in the history behind Castlegar and the surrounding area. I was unaware that at one time the First Nation community living in this area was in conflict with the Doukhobor settlers...

.... I thought about the importance of the Doukhobor man bowing in a traditional religious manner to the [Sinixt] elder, showing his respect, and in my opinion, his offering of peace. I view this as a very bold statement.... I also see this in the layout and design of the Mir Centre for Peace which incorporated the Doukhobor tradition with the architecture of the house as well as the First Nation heritage with the smoke house situated nearby. The arrangement of these buildings only emphasizes the point that it is quite possible for different religions, traditions and races to live in peace in this world.... The Mir Centre for Peace is a great example how peace should and could be obtained in the world.” (Justin)

“I was quite taken by surprise... during our class time at the Mir Centre. On our way to the Centre I thought we were going to a small museum just off campus. However, I soon realized I was wrong. As we approached the house the first thing I noticed was the little house just sitting in the middle of the green field. The moment I saw the Mir Centre a feeling of peace and relaxation overtook me, just by looking at the Mir house's atmosphere.

As the class stepped into the Mir Centre I was taken by the inside structure of the house. I could instantly tell much work was put into building the perfect little house. Every inch of the building seemed created to perfection. As the class went up the stairs I felt a calm feeling.

As the class started I was looking forward to knowing about the history of the Mir house, and how it came to be. As we learned about the house, and the history of the Opening Ceremony I could see where the overwhelming sense of peace and prosperity came from....

As the class ended I took another look around the Mir Centre, trying to remember even the smallest detail of the building. I think the Mir Centre is a perfect example of peace....” (Jesse)

“I really enjoyed the time our class spent at the Mir Centre. It was very educational and I learned a lot about the area I had no clue about before. I especially liked hearing the various stories about the native peoples and Doukhobors of the area.... It seems that the entire peace studies idea was brought up from these remarkable people...

As for the environment of the Mir Centre... it seems relatively simple and basic but there really is something to that place. There is a unique sentimental feel to the land. A spiritual sense unlike any other I've experienced....” (Brett)

“I felt very fortunate to have been able to participate in the class trip to the Mir Centre for Peace. Not necessarily for the obvious reasons, being that the location and surroundings are beautiful, but rather for the feeling I got from this experience. While sitting inside the Mir Centre, I was overcome with a sense of calmness. Although I was primarily among a group of strangers, I was content as opposed to nervous. Unlike other instances where the environment is hostile and [the people] judgmental the atmosphere here was one of acceptance and understanding.

To be honest, it is not too often when I find myself in situations as the above—an environment where one is confident that he/she belongs there and has something to contribute.

My experience reminded me of a poem ... “Wild Geese” by Mary Oliver. The last line of the poem, for me personally, is symbolic as I believe it represents the following themes: each person has something unique to offer; and each individual belongs somewhere.

*“...Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination,
Calls to you like the wild geese, harsh
And exciting—over and over announcing
Your place in the family of things.”*

I feel this poem is pertinent to the trip to the Mir Centre, as I felt a sense of belonging, not only to the location but also to the group as a whole.” (Melissa)

“During last week’s Peace Studies class, held at the Mir Centre, I was given a chance to learn about what creates, and what sustains a vision of peace.... I was touched deeply... in hearing the story of how this all unfolded, the poignancy in part from the fact that there we were a class of twenty or thirty aspiring peacemakers, sitting with him in the building of which he spoke. We learned about the myriad of people who helped in the restoration and renewal of the structure, and of the meaning behind some of the pictures that grace its walls. I was particularly touched because I found my own sentiments echoing his. I, too, have a dream of creating a space where Peace can grow and flourish, and be a source of hope and sustenance for all. I feel deeply the calling to be of service to the world and humanity through my life and work. I sometimes am overwhelmed by the seeming complexity of such a task, and can falter in my actions. To hear such a tale as that of how the Mir Centre came to be gave me a renewed sense of purpose and strength. (Shamus)

“My experience in coming to the Mir Centre has been influenced by the people I have met at the Centre and within the community. At first glance the house seemed empty and a little cold, lacking a warmth that I couldn’t place. Grand but lonely, the house was quiet like a museum. But as my classmates filed in, it was like the house breathed new life and as the history came out, the walls seemed to talk. The dreams, values and passion that have gone into the Centre are what made me realize the profound significance of the Centre. Now when I walk in I feel at peace and motivated to be more a part of the Centre, community, and building a culture of peace. (Martha)