

Hope, Peace and the Power of Young People

By Craig Kielburger and Marc Kielburger¹

Christine's Story: Hope in A Country Ravaged by War

We first came to know Christine during a trip to war ravaged Sierra Leone. Like civilians all over the world caught up in armed conflict, she had endured nearly unimaginable suffering. Like so many in her country, she had first-hand experience with the horrors of war. By the time we met, she and her family had been marked by a series of tragedies: the brutal rape of a young niece, the abduction of a nephew and the torture of a brother held in prison. She recounted to us how friends and neighbors had endured similarly appalling acts of violence, often perpetrated by members of their own communities. All too frequently, she told us, atrocities were committed by local children forced to follow orders under threat of death, drugged in order to obediently mutilate and kill. Listening to her story, we silently wondered how she could possibly bear the pain that surrounded her.

We learned that instead of despairing in the face of tragedy, Christine found the courage to respond with resilience, compassion and hope. Under the most difficult of conditions she now works to help of those in her community most desperately in need of assistance: children, the aged and the suffering. We soon came to recognize Christine as one of the most generous and vibrant people that we have ever met. When we ventured to ask how she found the strength to help some of the very people who had caused her pain, she told us that although it was far from easy, her own future as well as that of country depended upon the willingness of ordinary people like herself to act in the spirit of forgiveness and compassion. Christine's devotion to working towards reconciliation and peace in her community and country continues to be an inspiration to us. Her story is a powerful reminder that that peace *is* possible, and that it is *made* possible through the efforts of individuals committed to its realization.

The Possibility of Peace, The Power of Youth

Today, there is a widespread tendency to see peace as a distant dream all but lost amid increasing strife. In recent years we have witnessed both the explosion and escalation of a series of conflicts around the world. These wars often take place within states, and, alarmingly, they are conducted with a callous disregard for human life that makes civilians of all ages popular targets of violence. All too often, the international community has turned a blind eye to the atrocities that have occurred as a result. Meanwhile, cynics and pessimists across the political spectrum proclaim war natural and peace an illusion, loudly lamenting the grim future facing the next generation.

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Certainly, the youth of today face profound challenges in a world beset by violence. We have seen that children are particularly affected by the horrors of armed conflict, with entire generations growing up in the midst of violence and destruction. In many places war has become a way of life, and life a desperate battle for survival that many quickly lose. Over the past decade alone, more than two million children have died and six million have been injured as a result of war. Those that survive must bear the moral and spiritual scars of their ordeal in addition to the physical ones. Such scars are a powerful testament to the horrors of war. Yet, we must recognize that in the presence of hope they do not preclude the possibility of peace.

It is now clear that a sustainable peace will never be achieved through simply suppressing conflict. We firmly believe that peace *can* be achieved—through a commitment to breaking the cycle of hatred and violence that sustains war. It is thus young people who represent the key to peace, for it is they who are new generation of peacebuilders. If we are to foster peace, we must begin by investing our time, energy and resources in young people in war-stricken countries such that we encourage them to embrace the virtues of peace and cooperation. Thus, the time has come for us to see young people as something more than simply “adults-in-waiting” and instead recognize, empower and celebrate the power of youth to build a peaceful world. Ultimately, children and youth must be recognized as the leaders of today, as well as tomorrow.

Breaking cycles of violence involves ensuring that children have the chance to grow up secure in an atmosphere of tolerance, respect and compassion. It means putting an end to deprivation, and the desperation and bitterness it breeds in a world in which only a select few have access to plenty. Beyond this, it requires a commitment to providing children with the opportunity to acquire vital conflict mediation and communication skills, and nurturing their leadership abilities from an early age. This means making it possible for all children to obtain an education. Creating an environment of peace and understanding involves, moreover, a commitment to allowing young people to voice their ideas and concerns in a supportive environment where their contributions are truly valued. With each step that we take to ensure their physical, emotional and spiritual well being, and with each move that we make in support of their peace building efforts and aspirations, we realize our hopes for a true and lasting peace.

A Network of Children Helping Children

Through our work with Free the Children (FTC), we have had the good fortune to witness the progress that young people are taking in achieving world peace. Founded in 1995, Free the Children is an international network of children helping children engaged in innovative education, peacebuilding and leadership programming. In our view, all of these realms of activity are intimately connected, and all three are essential to creating a peaceful world. Education and leadership training provide the foundations upon which peace building occurs, and the success of peace building initiatives provides further opportunities for education and leadership.

Through the hard work and dedication of young people around the world, Free the Children has constructed 400 schools in 21 developing countries, many in war affected areas. These schools provide children at risk with the skills and knowledge necessary to realize their potential as productive members of their communities. In an effort to promote a broader understanding of the plight of children caught up in violent conflict, Free the Children has entered into a partnership with the United Nations (Office of the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict) to raise awareness about, and provide educational opportunities to children in war affected areas. The Youth Ambassadors for Peace initiative mobilizes youth in developed countries on this issue through education, advocacy and action campaigns. Through such efforts, young people in both the developed and developing world are provided with the tools necessary to become the peacebuilders of both today and tomorrow.

Free the Children's success in both administering major grassroots development projects in many of the poorest and most conflict ridden regions of the world and implementing effective leadership programs on a global level speaks to the power of children to act as agents of positive change on the largest scale. The dedication on the part of the organization's young supporters to creating an environment conducive to lasting peace in even the most war-torn areas suggests that children all over the world believe that peace is possible, and are committed to realizing this dream through constructive action. Their achievements are a striking testament to the capacity of young people to engage in meaningful and effective actions in support of peace.

A Philosophy of Hope

We sincerely believe that the success of people of all ages in working towards peace both has been, and must continue be founded upon a philosophy of hope which encourages individuals from all walks of life to reach out beyond themselves in order to create a more just, tolerant and compassionate world. We have dubbed this approach to life one of "me to we", whereby people of all ages embrace service to others for the benefit of all. This approach is one that emphasizes the value of community and the importance of making common cause with the members of the local, national and global communities in which we all build our lives. While this philosophy certainly does have lofty goals, it is not one of distant dreams but rather everyday life.

If our experiences with charitable work have taught us anything, it is that peace begins with the decisions that each of us make on a daily basis about how to interact with others and impact the world in which we live. In our lives we are all confronted with challenges both large and small. Every day, we all have choices to make about how we will respond to the environment in which we find ourselves. In many ways this realization brings us back once again to the story of Christine which began this piece, impressing upon us the power of ordinary people of all ages to hold hope and build peace through everyday decisions. Ultimately, peace is realized whenever we, like Christine, choose hope over despair, forgiveness over bitterness, compassion over cruelty and constructive action over inaction and destruction, and work to empower others to do the same.

