

Why Our World Needs Peace Literacy

An excerpt from Paul K. Chappell's book *Soldiers of Peace: How to Wield the Weapon of Nonviolence with Maximum Force*

Preliterate in Peace

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 knew 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.ⁱ

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 e-mail, 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, Sumer, 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 audiences this question, 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 that, 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 that 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. If you have ever benefitted from antibiotics, then thank literacy. In addition, complex math cannot exist without literacy. Algebra, 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 that 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.

Humanity's understanding of democracy has been evolving, and we have to consider the likely possibility that our understanding of democracy in the twenty-first century is still very limited. Just as the ancient Greeks did not have plants such as universal human rights and women's rights in their garden of democracy—plants that people today realize are essential to democracy—our society is missing another plant that is just as essential. That plant is peace literacy.

Furthermore, just as the ancient Greeks *were not even aware* that universal human rights and women's rights were needed in a healthy democracy, most people living today *are not even aware* that peace literacy is needed in a healthy democracy. Most people living in 500 BC had never even heard of ideas such as universal human rights and a woman's right to full political, social, and economic equality. In a similar way, most people living today have never even heard of the idea of peace literacy.

A democracy that lacks peace literacy will eventually destroy itself in one way or another, because peace literacy gives people the kind of education that inoculates them against manipulation and the seductive lies that spread hatred, dehumanization, and irrational fear. A democracy is only as wise as its citizens, and peace literacy is necessary to generate the wisdom that can protect our society from one of humanity's most dangerous powers: the muscle of language.

If humanity remains preliterate in peace, the future of American democracy, along with all democracies around the world, will be a dangerous one. A future where humanity is preliterate in peace will also be dangerous in many other ways. I grew up in a violent household and had a traumatic upbringing, and peace literacy has helped me transcend my childhood trauma, control the homicidal rage that resulted from that trauma, heal my psychological wounds, and find purpose, meaning, and happiness in life. Peace literacy empowers us to heal the underlying causes of trauma and rage in our society while increasing our purpose, meaning, and happiness in life.

If humanity survives its current global challenges by becoming peace literate, then people in the future will think, "Why didn't people back then realize they were preliterate in peace and that they needed peace literacy? It seems so obvious! No wonder the world back then was so violent and unjust." Although the need for peace literacy seems obvious, the mission of spreading peace literacy is very challenging right now, because so many people today are fond of easy answers and quick fixes that merely address the shallow surface and do not confront the root causes of our problems. Peace literacy is not offering easy answers and quick fixes, but is instead a deep and complex solution to deep and complex problems.

The garden of democracy is filled with a wide variety of plants, but peace literacy is a tree that we need to cultivate in this garden. The tree of peace literacy has seven branches that are capable of bearing fruit that nourishes progress, peace, and the unfolding of our full human potential. These seven branches are metaphors for the seven forms of peace literacy. During an era when humanity has the technological capacity to bring death to our species and most life on Earth, the tree of peace literacy is a tree of life that can protect, serve, and elevate life.

The Seven Forms of Peace Literacy

Literacy in Our Shared Humanity

Literacy in our shared humanity gives us practical and realistic answers to the following critical questions. What does it mean to be human? What is the human condition? What do all people have in common regardless of what culture or time period they live in? When we understand our shared humanity we can see through the illusions of dehumanization, realize when people are trying to manipulate our human vulnerabilities in order to take advantage of us, and achieve our full potential as human beings. An oak tree knows how to be an oak tree. It doesn't need a mentor or role model to guide it. A caterpillar knows how to turn into a butterfly and thrive in the world. It doesn't have to attend school or be instructed by its parents. But human beings, more than any other creature on the planet, must learn to be what we are. We must learn to be human.

Literacy in the Art of Living

Living is the most difficult art form, and most of us are not taught how to live. Many children do not learn the essential life skills that are part of the art of living. 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. Examples of healthy human functioning are also largely absent in the media. How often do you see people on television resolve conflict in a peaceful and loving way? All of us want purpose, meaning, and happiness in life, but our society is not literate in the healthiest ways to achieve this.

Literacy in the Art of Waging Peace

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, how much different would our world be?

Literacy in the Art of Listening

All human beings like 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!" 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.

Literacy in the Nature of Reality

So many of our misconceptions about peace result from our misconceptions about reality. Only by understanding reality can we fully know why peace is so practical, powerful, and necessary. Only by understanding reality can we develop realistic hope.

Literacy in Our Responsibility to Animals

At the center of ethics is the following question: how should we treat the least powerful among us? How should we treat children, the mentally disabled, prisoners, and marginalized groups? Since animals have so little power—they cannot organize a violent or nonviolent rebellion against us and they are unable to defend themselves with speech—what ethical responsibility do we have to them? How can a greater understanding of ethics improve our treatment of our fellow human beings? Genocide, slavery, and rape are just a few among the many injustices that result from harming those who have less power.

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 peace, 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 knew 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 well-being of our country and planet depend on peace literacy.

Where 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 3 percent of people are peace literate, or a society where 10 percent of people are

peace literate? What is better, 10 percent or 30 percent? It is estimated that around 83 percent of people in the world today are literate in reading.^v Imagine how different our world would be if 83 percent of people were peace literate, or if over 50 percent of people were peace literate. Today I would contend that less than 1 percent of the global human population is 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.

Author Bio

Paul K. Chappell graduated from West Point in 2002, was deployed to Iraq, and left active duty in November 2009 as a Captain. He is the author of the Road to Peace series, a seven-book series about waging peace, ending war, the art of living, and what it means to be human. The first five published books in this series are *Will War Ever End?*, *The End of War*, *Peaceful Revolution*, *The Art of Waging Peace*, and *The Cosmic Ocean*. Chappell serves as the Peace Leadership Director for the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation. Lecturing across the country and internationally, he also teaches courses and workshops on Peace Leadership and Peace Literacy. His website is www.peacefulrevolution.com

To learn more about how you can become involved in learning and spreading peace literacy, visit www.peaceliteracy.org

ⁱ There 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 Glaucus tells the story of his grandfather Bellerophon. Proetus, king of Argos, sent him off with a message to the king of Lycia, Proetus' 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. Also, the written language Linear B was known by a tiny amount of people and used primarily for inventory. As many classics scholars note, Linear B was not used in the ways that other more developed writing systems in the ancient world were used.

ⁱⁱ The Incas recorded information through a system of knotted strings known as *quipu*. 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.

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

^{iv} *Classical Mythology*, Lecture 1, The Teaching Company, 2007, DVD. In the first lecture, professor Elizabeth Vandiver discusses how literacy makes intellectual disciplines possible.

^v Statistics on Literacy, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/education-building-blocks/literacy/resources/statistics>.