

Come Join the Circle: LessonSongs for Peacemaking
A Conversation with Paulette Meier
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What inspired you to create the songs on *Come Join the Circle: LessonSongs for Peacemaking*?

For a number of years, I was working as a peace educator and consultant for schools in Kentucky and Ohio, training teachers and students in conflict resolution, peer mediation and other things having to do with building a caring, supportive school community. (I still work with schools, but now as an education advocate for children with challenging behavior problems.) Singing has been a long time passion, especially songs with a message - the folk tradition. So I always incorporated singing into my training programs with students and found that they loved doing it. At some point I decided to apply my budding songwriting skills to create my own songs, both to reinforce the specific skills I was teaching and to raise relevant concerns for discussion. The songs on *Come Join the Circle: LessonSongs for Peacemaking* were directly inspired by the students I was working with and grew out of the conflicts and issues I saw students struggling with in schools every day. Though the songs are upbeat and danceable, they deal with serious and sometimes even painful issues that routinely confront kids in schools.

What are some of the issues and emotions that these songs deal with?

I think there are a range of feelings, from the sadness of feeling hurt and left out as in *Clothes Don't Make the Person*, to a feeling of righteous anger, as in *Strategy Wheel*. I like the term "peacemaking," because peacemaking implies action. In our work as peace educators, we don't see "peace" as the absence of conflict or everybody simply being "nice" to each other. Children are legitimately angry. Anger is usually sitting on top of a lot of fear, hurt and abandonment around unmet needs. What I'm trying to convey is that there are appropriate and helpful ways to deal with anger and conflict between people. That's why I use words like "stand up, peacefully" - to get across the notion of standing up for oneself, speaking out, not pushing conflict under the rug.

For instance, when kids sing the song, "Listen!" they love it, and I think in large part because it speaks to their lack of feeling heard. Often when I've asked kids to say what it means to "listen," they've said in response: "To obey an adult." I think kids are lectured at and told to do things, accompanied with the words "You listen to me!" from adults so much so that they begin to associate the act of listening with obeying!

There are effective ways to introduce the idea of listening and expecting others to listen to you. When I work in a classroom and we're sitting in a circle, sharing and passing a "talking stick," if a couple of students start talking and ignoring the student who's addressing the group, I just say to the student who is trying to speak, "Wait. You deserve

to have the attention of everyone in the room." Kids are not use to being spoken to like this, and you can usually hear a pin drop afterwards.

Why do you think kids find this so arresting?

Kids often are not respected in our society the way I have seen them respected in some cultures. I think they are surprised when an adult tells them they DESERVE respect. I think many students have internalized a message that they are a problem and a nuisance, or that they only deserve respect if they do exactly as the adults tell them. The internalized message affects their relationships with peers; they may not see their peers as deserving of respect either, or they don't know how to give it. The songs represent my desire to help kids understand that they can become allies to each other, that they all deserve respect from each other.

Can you give us some examples of how this works with real kids?

The song "Come On Board" uses words like "healing," and "compassion" and "justice" and "liberation." These are not words you normally hear on a children's CD. But they are words that elementary-aged kids can learn and understand. I haven't had a lot of opportunities to use that song in a classroom, but the idea for the song came out of some work I was doing with all the 5th graders in a school. This was a school where unless one looked deeper, one would see a pretty homogeneous group of students, Caucasian and Christian. In one session, we were looking at differences and similarities as part of an effort to help them appreciate their diversity and celebrate their commonalities. There was a fair amount of unspoken emotion in that school around class background. Some kids lived in mobile homes, some on farms, and others lived in new suburban "estates." Many of the kids came from Native American backgrounds (long ago assimilated and in so many cases, forgotten) and from Appalachian backgrounds. I wanted them to experience being proud of their heritage, and I wanted the kids in mobile homes and farms to feel pride about where they lived. We did what's called a "stand up if" activity where they stand up when I call out a certain category that they identify with, and all those sitting clap and cheer for those standing. (This is an activity from the National Coalition Building Institute's programs on prejudice reduction.) They had a chance to talk about, among other things, what was neat about living in a mobile home, and what was great about living on a farm and what it was like living in a new house. We also did an activity where they shared with each other how they could tell when they were being respected by others in their class. There was a lot of vulnerability and risk taking, with kids sharing some things that they had gotten put down about and they wanted it to stop. And at the end of the day, I saw two of the "farm boys" walking towards the bus with their arms over each other's shoulder, recounting together all the things they learned that day that they had in common. That was a special thing to witness!

But another important lesson that can be done with the "Come on Board" song is to have the kids explore the various identities listed and which of the groups have felt hurt or disrespected by another group, what it means to be treated with justice and to be liberated and why justice and liberation need to be part of healing.

Similarly, "Martin and Robby" came out of my awareness that even young boys are putting each other down for showing feelings of hurt and fear. I expanded an activity where the kids brainstorm all the "put downs" they hear at their school. They look at the list and are invited to share which ones they think would be really hurtful and which ones weren't so hurtful. We also talk about put downs they might consider just teasing. They inevitably learn they have differences of opinion about what's hurtful, and it might be hard to tell what the effect of someone's teasing might be. If it hasn't come up in the discussion yet, I ask the question: "What if a boy falls down on the playground and cries. Are there any put downs then? That sparks another long list of put downs, which easily leads into a discussion about gender bias, oppression of gay people, etc. I also give information about scientific evidence that shows that releasing feelings (like crying), with positive attention from someone, actually helps our bodies heal faster from both physical and emotional pain. Then we do an activity with role plays, where children get a chance to figure out and practice effective things to say or do to respond to verbal put downs without attacking back.

We have a far way to go in our culture to get to the point where it's safe for boys to show their vulnerable feelings with each other, I'm afraid. But teachers are in a great position to move things forward. Holding regular classroom discussions on these kinds of topics can really help to get the many unspoken issues around respect out on the table and dealt with.

There is a lot of diversity represented on your CD, both in the styles of music as well as in the performers. How did this come to be?

For a number of reasons, I suppose. I consider myself still somewhat of a novice songwriter, and it was a challenge to try to figure out how to craft a reggae song or a blues song. It was fun to discover how to do it! The "Dealing with Feelings" song was my attempt at writing a rap song. As the neighborhood kids said to me when I asked them to listen to it upon its completion, "Well, Ms. Paulette, it's OLD style rap. But it'll do." I ran into James Oglesby in a coffee shop in my neighborhood ("One Mo' Cup"), playing percussion one night with another performer. We got to talking and I found out he was a hip hop artist. I asked him if he would write a song for me, and he agreed. It was about a year later that we actually got together to talk about it, but he came through with a wonderful song. It was something to see us together, planning how we would record it together on the CD! A 50 year old white woman and a 25 year old African American urban young man. I give James a lot of credit for crossing a bridge to work with me.

I guess you could say that I had a commitment to making the CD accessible to different kinds of kids. In part this comes out of the value I place on diversity in my own life. Some of the most significant events of my life have come when I've had the opportunity to see what it's like, inside, for someone who is very different from me. My world view expanded in leaps and bounds when I began to know and understand people who didn't come from working class, Catholic, German heritage families like my own. I wanted a

variety of voices, old and young, black and white, to be heard, not just my own. And in a racially divided city such as Cincinnati, I felt strongly that I wanted the voices of African American children, in particular, to be heard on my CD. I asked Lois Shegog, a music teacher and assistant director of a women's choir in Cincinnati (MUSE) to help me with a kid's chorus. She is a strong African American leader in Cincinnati, a wonderful role model for lots of young women. I was delighted when she agreed to work with me and organized a group of her students from an inner city school to learn the songs. It was something to see- the crossing of cultures in the studio recording process. David Archer, who arranged and recorded most of the songs, is a recent import to Cincinnati from England. The 5th and 6th graders in the chorus got quite a taste of British culture when he and his wife, Liz, hosted us in their house for two days while we were recording. There are many stories about the involvement of all the players on the CD - like that of James Sivitz who I'd hired to fix my kitchen plumbing and while doing so heard me playing "Canned Peas Blues" and told me he could "put a mean harmonica track on that." And then 8 year old Carmen Austing, born in El Salvador, who blew us away with her perfect performance on the entire harp part, key changes and all, on "Good Friends." I could go on and on! I just feel so fortunate to have had so many wonderful people involved with this project.

"What are some resources that parents and educators can turn to for more ideas?"

My website www.lessonsongs.com has links to several good resources and experts in the field of conflict resolution. LessonSongs Music is also about to publish a classroom activity guide that will offer practical activity ideas relating to each of the songs on Come Join the Circle: LessonSongs for Peacemaking.