

# WITH EYES TO SEE



## PEACE AND JUSTICE CONCEPT: CONSCIENTIZATION COLOMBIA AND SOUTH AMERICA

ideas for  
teachers

who want  
to  
integrate  
social  
justice  
concepts

into what  
and how  
they teach

November  
2004

The title of this newsletter, *With Eyes to See*, comes from a book of the same name written by Arthur Melville, a former Catholic priest. Mr. Melville, like many people the world over, wanted to help those "less fortunate" than himself, and his journey took him from his home in the United States to the highlands of Guatemala. And, much like many priests, nuns, Peace Corps volunteers, etc., he learned Spanish, was assigned to a small town, and began to "help." As Mr. Melville spent more time with Guatemalans, he began to shed many of the stereotypes he carried with him about the economically poor in Latin America, and about the indigenous Mayans in particular, replacing them with his actual experiences as he lived, ate, worked, and ministered in the community.

*Always an outsider, I faced continuously the decision of whether to accept their offer and penetrate the nature-based culture or to observe it from my alien niche and neglect their gift. Openness to new ideas required that I refrain from making my own values and beliefs absolute--a difficult task for one who was the product of a technologically-developed society.*

*Arthur Melville*

As Mr. Melville suspended many of his long held beliefs, prejudices, and views of the world, he developed the ability to truly SEE the Guatemalan *campesinos* (peasants) and learn from them. Living with people of another culture, and being open to learn from them and their world view, one cannot help but to critically examine the "truths" ingrained in us by our culture, and recognize that there are many truths in this world, and many ways to see an object, approach a problem, or live one's life.

This "seeing" others and "re-seeing" oneself both have a profound impact on one's life. Mr. Melville, upon learning about the lives of impoverished Guatemalans, could no longer ignore the root causes of their poverty and oppression, much of which was caused by his own country and perpetuated by his own Church. He was also no longer the same person, and he saw life, and his own life, through a different lens, one closer to his true self.

*Different factors motivate different persons to begin questioning their lives, but once begun, there is no turning back from the questioning...growth is both joyful and painful: joyful because the heart is lifted to a new height of vision and action; painful because death to the old self is necessary for rebirth.*

*The Reverend Suzanne Fageol*

One doesn't have to travel to another country to develop EYES that SEE, but it does take having contact with people unlike oneself, and a commitment to refrain from making one's own "values and beliefs absolute." The following classroom exercises hope to help students do just this, with a focus on the people of Colombia and South America.

CONCERN AMERICA

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### Concern America in Colombia

Concern America (C/A) is a small nonprofit, nonsectarian, nongovernmental development and refugee aid organization that partners with materially poor communities in "developing" countries in projects to assist them to move their communities out of poverty. In the U.S., C/A offers social justice education to groups of youth and adults. As part of its mission abroad, C/A operates the following project in Colombia:

**Colombia:** The project works with more than 70 communities in this war-torn country to train community-based health promoters and midwives, the majority of whom are Indigenous and Afro-Colombian. The violence in the area, the result of the ongoing civil war in Colombia, coupled with the remoteness of the communities, have led to extremely poor health and economic conditions. The project is serving a vital need for health training and support where no other such services exist.

"Human beings in communion liberate each other."  
Paulo Freire

"We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs.

To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment - and that is not easy."  
Lisa Delpit  
Educator

6-12

### What's Up in South America?

With the recent presidential election in this country dominating the news, most of us missed hearing about another important election in our hemisphere. Just two days before the U.S. election, Uruguayans elected their first leftist/socialist president, a doctor named Tabaré Vázquez. In the last few years, left leaning governments have been elected in other South American countries like Brazil (Luíz Inacio Lula da Silva) and Venezuela (Hugo Chávez); progressive people's movements have gained much power and influence in other countries as well like Bolivia, where in 2003 the president was forced out of office by massive protests across the country, led by an Indigenous man named Evo Morales.

This recent political shift to the left in South America gives rise to many possible classroom activities:

- Learn about the current political situation of each South American country, and general themes that cross borders (try doing a Google news search on each country, or do a general key word search e.g. "left politics South America"). Take Venezuela for example: depending on who you believe, President Hugo Chávez is either destroying his country or is the model of a people-centered leader. Such polarized views exist in most countries, of course, and are a great way to make learning about other regions fun.

- What are the responses and actions of the United States towards South American countries? The war in Colombia? The coup attempt of Hugo Chávez in 2002? The new president of Uruguay? The monetary crisis in Argentina? Articles and web sites abound with information on the U.S. and South American countries, ranging from the views and actions of government officials in this country to critiques and analysis from various quarters. Search on the web to get a taste of the range of possibilities (e.g. "U.S. policy Chile).

### How Was Your Time Away?

As discussed on page 1, living in another country and culture can be a life changing experience. Have each student interview someone who has lived abroad such as immigrants, volunteers, missionaries, business people, etc. Possible questions include: • Why did she go? • Did the goal of the travel change over time? • Did his view of the people/country change? • Were her personal values affected? • What new customs/values from his time away have been incorporated into his life at present? • Does she feel the media in this country does a good job of portraying the people from that country/culture? • Does he recommend living abroad for a time?

6-12

## Map It for a Change

6-12

Maps are excellent learning tools that can be used across the curriculum: geography, history, math, art, and more. The *CARTOGRAM* is a map that highlights features other than area. The cartographer tries to keep countries (or counties, regions, etc.) in their same relative position and shape, but the size is larger or smaller based on the statistics being mapped: a cartogram on immigration would make Arizona larger than Alaska, for example.

Creating a cartogram is a great way to learn new information, challenge how we perceive the world, and be creative. With the presidential elections still fresh in our minds, use the maps from [www-personal.umich.edu/~mejn/election/](http://www-personal.umich.edu/~mejn/election/). These are a series of U.S. maps with the famous "red" and "blue" States, but when done by population size, by county, and by percentage of Republican and Democratic votes, the maps look much different. A great tool for talking about election results!

Use this same idea with South America. Choose various topics to map, have the students research the necessary statistics, and then do cartograms based on their findings. Try things like poverty in each country, indigenous peoples, emigration, and more.

(For an example of a cartogram lesson, "Using Cartograms to Learn about Latin American Demographics," visit <http://retanet.unm.edu/>)

## Solidarity Versus Despair

2-12

When learning about native peoples, economically impoverished groups, war torn countries, and natural disasters, we often "feel sorry" for others because of the suffering they endure. While this feeling is real and an important indicator of our capacity as humans to feel sympathy, it often promotes cynicism and hopelessness: "What can I do about the poor in Colombia?!" **Solidarity**, on the other hand, encourages us to recognize our common needs and struggles and similar situations close to home, promoting a climate of action and hope.

- The next time a lesson leads students to "feel sorry" for another group, ask a student to look up the word solidarity in a dictionary. Discuss the definition, and then ask the students to "relook" at the situation in solidarity terms, finding the needs they have that are the same as the group in question. On a related note, it is often hard to feel solidarity when studying situations in other countries or other communities. Problems such as homelessness, poverty, violence, etc. can be found in most communities in this country. By focusing on related local issues first, students will be less likely later on to stereotype Latin America, Asia, or Africa simply as completely unlike the United States. (exercise adapted from *With Eyes to See*, Nov. 2002, *Earth Charter II*)

## Coffee and Kids?

4-12

What part does each of us play in the ongoing coffee crisis in the world? What we buy determines to a large extent what the market provides us. More and more people are buying fair-trade, shade-grown, organic coffee, and as a result, companies and stores are stocking more of it. This means more farmers get a living wage for their labor, and the environment is protected from harmful chemicals, erosion, and loss of habitat.

While most children are not coffee consumers, they are part of institutions where coffee is consumed like schools, churches, and families. Students can investigate what type of coffee their school buys for the faculty, for example, and research and present alternatives which promote a healthy environment, all the while learning about school bureaucracy, economics, school budgets, purchasing, and activism. (exercise adapted from *With Eyes to See*, Feb. 2003, *Earth Charter III*)

"Our country is materially poor, but our people are rich in spirit, happiness, love, friendship, and hope." Gladys, a Colombian woman living in asylum in the U.S.

"Despair demands less of us, it's more predictable, and, in a sad way, it's safer." Rebecca Solnit, author of *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*

# RECOMMENDED

"I was given the "list" of the poor. What else can I do but help?"  
Julia, a Guatemalan midwife and health promoter, herself from a subsistence farming family

"In every man there is something wherein I may learn of him, and in that I am his pupil."  
Ralph Waldo Emerson

## RECOMMENDED

1. The Cartogram mapping exercise comes from the web site [www.ladb.unm.edu](http://www.ladb.unm.edu). A project of the University of New Mexico, the Latin America Data Base (LADB) is the "first Internet-based news service in English about Latin America" with coverage back to 1986. Click on the "RetaNet" link for a great selection of lesson plans on the Americas.

2. World maps are a staple of the classroom wall, and most are based on the 400 year old Mercator Projection. On this map, however, Africa and Greenland look the same size, despite the fact that Africa is fourteen times larger! Many newer maps exist which try to correct these distortions: the "What's Up? South!" map reverses the poles, challenging the viewer to re-examine the notion that North is "up" and why; the revolutionary Peters Projection maps the world by actual land area, creating many visual surprises; there are many more! Visit [www.odt.org](http://www.odt.org) for a wide array of choices.

3. Ever feel as though your work for social justice isn't making a difference? For hope, try Rebecca Solnit's book *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, in which she looks at recent events in our world and the "unexpected victories that we win as we walk the road to a more just and sustainable world."

## CONCERN AMERICA

is an international development and refugee aid organization that sends doctors, nurses, engineers, educators, and nutritionists as volunteers to train and empower the materially poor in Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Colombia, Guinea, and Mozambique.

In support of these projects, Concern America offers educational services in California which include:

- \* The St. Nicholas Project
- \* Walk Out of Poverty
- \* Infusion Method Workshops for teachers
- \* "Training for Transformation" Workshops for adults
- \* School and parish consulting for the implementation of the Bishops' Pastoral: "Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions" (June, 1998)
- \* Lending library for resources of peace and social justice

Feel free to contact the Education Coordinator at Concern America for more information on any of these projects.

**Developing a Heart that Yearns for Justice and Paulo Freire:** arguably the most important educator from South America is the Brazilian Paulo Freire. Mr. Freire's pedagogy has influenced education and community development efforts the world over, and his vision guides much of the work of Concern America both in our field projects in Latin America and Africa and in our social justice education work in this country. Want to learn more? Join Concern America's Developing a Heart that Yearns for Justice workshops which infuse Freirian methods into an experience which invites people from all walks of life to place building a just world at the heart of exercising leadership.

For more information about the Developing a Heart workshops, which include a separate workshop on Freire himself, go to [www.concernamerica.org/socialjustice.html](http://www.concernamerica.org/socialjustice.html), or call Concern America directly.