



An Introduction to Peace Literacy

*And why it will be critical for
navigating the VR revolution*

Interview with Paul K. Chappell, Executive Director Peace Literacy Institute

Hosted by Zoe Weil, Institute for Humane Education, April 2022

Introduction

Paul K. Chappell is an international peace educator, author, and founder of Peace Literacy. He graduated from West Point, was deployed to Iraq, and left active duty as a Captain. Realizing that humanity is facing new challenges that require us to become as well-trained in waging peace as soldiers are in waging war, Chappell created Peace Literacy to help students and adults from all backgrounds work toward their full potential and a more peaceful world. Peace Literacy frames peace not merely as a goal, but as a practical skillset—a literacy like reading and writing—that needs to be taught and practiced from pre-K through to higher education. Peace Literacy empowers people to create peace that is realistic, resilient, and sustainable, while helping to develop humanity’s full capacity for empathy, conscience, reason, and evidence-based hope. Paul grew up in a violent household in Alabama, the son of a Korean mother and a Black father who was a veteran of the Korean and Vietnam wars. These experiences were part of what compelled him to forge a new understanding of war, peace, rage, trauma, and our shared humanity. We are honored that Paul serves on the Advisory Council for the Institute for Humane Education.

Zoe Weil: What does Peace Literacy consist of? How does one **teach it?**

Paul K. Chappell: When I was at West Point, I saw how the military gives people excellent training in waging war, and I realized that our society gives people almost no training in waging peace. In fact, much of what people learn from our society teaches them harmful habits that inhibit their ability to wage peace. Peace Literacy consists of the idea that peace is not merely a goal, but a competency – a literacy – similar to reading and writing, which we can learn to use with greater and greater effectiveness. In the twenty-first century, we can no longer settle for peace as an abstract concept or sentimental wish. Peace Literacy is a rigorous and strategic approach to peacemaking that is based on the recognition that we must take waging peace at least as seriously as the military takes waging war.

Peace Literacy consists of 3 basic elements. The first is the development of nine human **capacities**, which we call the **muscles of our humanity**. One of these capacities is hope, which most people do not think of as a capacity that is similar to a muscle. Instead, most people think of hope as just a belief or a feeling, which you either have or don’t. However, hope is like a muscle, because it requires strengthening and development, and can become more powerful in degrees. Like a muscle, hope can atrophy when it is

not stimulated and used. The kind of hope that Peace Literacy cultivates is what we call realistic hope, which is based on evidence, experience, and ideals. Realistic hope is proactive and connected to action, and is very different from wishful thinking, which we call naive hope. Unlike realistic hope, naive hope is passive and often derives from feelings of helplessness.

In addition to the muscle of realistic hope, the other muscles of our humanity are: empathy, conscience, appreciation, reason, discipline, curiosity, language, and imagination. In our society, people often use the word thinking to mean only reason, but all of these muscles of our humanity can affect how we think as much as reason can. For example, realistic hope can drastically affect how we think and how we reason. A person with a strong muscle of realistic hope thinks very differently than a hopeless person or a person who has only naive hope. The muscles of empathy and conscience can also drastically affect how we think and how we reason. If you are in a vulnerable situation and need help from someone, would you want this person to be thinking with empathy and conscience about you, or would you want this person's thinking to be completely devoid of empathy and conscience?

The muscle of appreciation also drastically affects how we think and how we reason. In Peace Literacy, we say that stewardship is the highest expression of appreciation, because appreciation allows us to not take the many gifts of life for granted. Gifts of life such as health, friendship, and democracy are fragile, and can be damaged and destroyed when we aren't behaving as responsible stewards and protectors. Appreciation encourages us to never take these gifts for granted, to savor and make the most of them, and to do our best to protect them.

The second element of Peace Literacy is the building of **skills**. Peace Literacy skills require us to flex the muscles of our humanity. To offer just one example, listening is a skill that requires me to flex my muscle of discipline, because discipline allows me to focus my mind and concentrate. If you are talking to me, and I cannot give you my attention because I am unable to focus and concentrate on anything you are saying, then I cannot really listen to you. In order to truly listen, I must also flex my muscle of empathy. When I flex my muscle of empathy, I am capable of hearing not only your words, but also your humanity.

The third element of Peace Literacy involves increasing the accuracy of our **understanding**. To play basketball well, you need muscles, skills, and an accurate understanding of how the game works. In a similar way, to create a more peaceful and just world, we need the muscles of our humanity, Peace Literacy skills, and an accurate understanding of how the world works. George Washington's doctors believed that fever and inflammation were caused by too much blood being in the body, so when he woke up one morning with fever and inflammation, they ended up bleeding him four times, causing him to lose about 40% of his blood volume. He died during this illness, most likely from an infection. The massive amount of blood that his doctors drained from his body could have also contributed to his death. Accurate understanding is important, because it is not enough for doctors to just have empathy, conscience, reason, and skills. When people with empathy and conscience don't have an accurate understanding of the root causes of problems, such as the root causes of illnesses and social problems, they can cause harm. As the old saying goes, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions."

Peace Literacy offers a deep and accurate understanding of the many subjects relevant to the creation of a more peaceful and just world, such as the tangles of trauma; the root causes of aggression; the critical

importance of our non-physical needs such as purpose and meaning, belonging, self-worth, explanations, and expression; the relationship between our human vulnerability and our technology; the behaviors that can reliably build shared trust between individuals, communities, and nations; the limitations and risks of waging war, and the power and potential of waging peace, just to mention a few examples.

The three elements of Peace Literacy: capacities (the muscles of our humanity), skills, and accurate understanding, can be taught in three ways. They can be taught through *curriculum*, scaffolded in age-appropriate ways for pre-K through adult education. They can be taught through *example*, when adults lead by example by practicing Peace Literacy. The third way that Peace Literacy elements can be taught is through *culture*. We can create a culture in a school, workplace, family, community, and society that strengthens Peace Literacy and nurtures the full development of our humanity.

Zoe: You've expressed grave concerns about [virtual reality](#) and augmented reality as well as great interest in using these technologies for Peace Literacy. Can you talk about the dangers and opportunities these technologies present?

Paul: My first experience with an augmented reality device occurred in 2002, when I was in the army and wore night-vision goggles for the first time. I looked up at the night sky and was astounded by what I saw. I saw countless stars – so many stars that I could barely distinguish constellations. I could clearly see the band of the Milky Way – an incredible sight – and I was seeing all of this through an embodied experience. When I say “embodied experience,” I mean that I was seeing the night sky in a way that was not confined to a two-dimensional video or stationary telescope, but I was seeing it all around me, as a reality that I felt embodied within. This was a transformative experience that led me to think differently about reality, because these night-vision goggles allowed me to perceive a hidden reality, a deeper reality, that was previously invisible to my naked eyes.

In our society, there is a popular assumption that reality is defined by what our physical senses can perceive – by what our eyes can see, our ears can hear, and our bodies can touch. However, there are hidden realities, deeper realities, that exist beyond what our physical senses, such as our naked eyes, can perceive. For example, night-vision goggles and telescopes reveal a vast universe, filled with countless distant worlds that are all around us, which are hidden from our naked eyes. Looking through a microscope also allows us to see a hidden reality, a deeper reality, that is invisible to our naked eyes. Microscopes reveal a hidden reality filled with viruses, healthy and harmful forms of bacteria, and other microbes. George Washington's doctors did not know that this microbial reality existed and permeated their bodies and surroundings – this reality was hidden from their conscious awareness – which is a primary reason why they had such an inaccurate belief about the cause of Washington's illness.

In my book series I write about experiencing severe childhood trauma, and how this caused me to develop a mass shooter personality in high school. Tangles of trauma, which include rage, mistrust, alienation, numbness, self-loathing, and a ruthless worldview, can greatly distort how we perceive reality. Rage and other tangles of trauma can affect how things look and sound to us. When I was enraged, people would look evil to me and deserving of destruction. When I was enraged, I would often hear hostile intentions in people's words, when no hostility was intended. Rage can also affect how things feel, taste, and smell. When I was enraged, my sense of touch, taste, and smell lost their relationship to joy.

Just as there is a hidden reality, a deeper reality, in the form of a vast universe that is far larger than what our naked eyes can see at night, and just as there is a hidden reality, a deeper reality, in the form of a microbial world that is all around us and everywhere within us, there is a hidden reality, a deeper reality, when trauma is concerned. Many millions of people in our society and around the world, including many leaders of nations, inhabit a subterranean world of trauma to varying degrees, which distorts their perception of reality. Just as our naked eyes, unaided by a microscope, see symptoms of the microbial world – such as infection and fever – our naked eyes, unaided by Peace Literacy, see symptoms of the subterranean world of trauma – such as rage, ruthlessness, numbness, addiction, and self-destruction.

The virtual reality and augmented reality devices that will emerge in the coming years will be very different from the VR/AR devices that have existed up to this point. As augmented reality devices, night-vision goggles don't have any spatial computing capability – they cannot assign context to their physical surroundings, project digital objects into your field of view, or allow you to become embodied as a digital avatar – and virtual reality as it exists today is nowhere near its full potential. Because VR/AR technology is so early in its development, most people today don't realize how dramatically it will transform humanity's relationship to the subterranean world of trauma. VR/AR devices, which will become mainstream at some point in the 2020s, will cause our physical world and the subterranean world of trauma to merge in new and unprecedented ways, allowing trauma to become amplified and to spill out into our physical world in ways that are more dangerous than ever before. If we don't give people Peace Literacy skills that can help them navigate this subterranean world and heal the pain within it, the results will be catastrophic.

Trauma is a problem that humanity has been sweeping under a rug, but it comes out sideways in the form of racism, cruelty, addiction, suicide, extremism, and many other symptoms. VR/AR will lift up that rug and create a greater need than ever before for us to confront, understand, and heal what is under there, because the consequences of ignoring trauma in a world with mainstream VR/AR will be so severe.

VR/AR will also have many positive uses. An essential positive use is the creation of immersive and engaging Peace Literacy VR/AR curriculum that strengthens the muscles of our humanity, develops our Peace Literacy skills, and increases the depth and accuracy of our understanding. VR/AR will be one of the primary writing instruments of Peace Literacy, because it can translate all of the ideas in Peace Literacy into interactive, multi-sensory allegories that take people on an epic journey into the human condition. When we go on a journey into the human condition that strengthens our empathy, appreciation, conscience, reason, curiosity, imagination, and the other muscles of our humanity, we can perceive hidden realities, deeper realities, that reveal the full power of our humanity, the root causes of racism, war, and other human problems, practical solutions for addressing these problems, and many reasons to have realistic hope.

Zoe: You and I are both huge **Star Trek** fans, so I have to end with this question. What role has **Star Trek** played in your thinking? Why does this show matter?

Paul: I grew up watching *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, which is about a future where humanity has ended wars, poverty, hunger, and abuse toward animals on Earth. One of the many insights that I gained

from watching this show is that ultimately, what can create this future, and what can save humanity from itself, is not technology, political systems, or laws. What can save humanity from itself is the power of ideals, and investing a lot of effort in developing our humanity so that we can meet the enormous challenge of living according to our ideals. Our ideals are like the hands of a sculptor, and our technology, political systems, and laws are like clay. Just as a sculptor's hands can shape clay into a beautiful form, our ideals can shape our political systems, laws, how we use technology, how we educate people, and the values of our societal culture into the beautiful foundation for a more peaceful and just world. Tangles of trauma such as rage, a ruthless worldview, and numbness can also sculpt the systems and society that we live in, which again is why it is so important to confront, understand, and heal trauma. *Star Trek* is one of my reasons for realistic hope. I see it as a story about the power of ideals, the power of our humanity, and the urgent need for the peace that we are capable of creating.

Conclusion and **Call for Urgency**

Paul: When we strengthen our muscles of empathy and conscience, we become stronger in our ability to treat others with compassion. In addition to empathy and conscience, we also need muscles such as curiosity, reason, and imagination in order to gain a deeper and more accurate understanding of the problems that cause so much harm, and to create practical solutions for these problems. The muscle of imagination is especially important, because every innovation and step toward a better world requires the use of our imagination.

Of course, trauma makes all of this exponentially more difficult, because of how trauma can numb the muscles of our humanity, distort our perception of reality, weaponize our imagination, and urge us to meet our non-physical needs such as purpose and meaning, self-worth, and expression in unhealthy and harmful ways. My life is proof that Peace Literacy can help us make progress in the challenging journey to heal trauma.

One of my goals is to help people view the healing of trauma, and the growth of Peace Literacy, with a far greater sense of urgency and commitment *before* VR/AR becomes mainstream, because this technological revolution will break down a metaphorical dam between our physical reality and the hidden reality of humanity's unconscious pain. This broken dam will result in a tidal wave of destructive consequences. The size of this tidal wave will be equivalent to the amount of unhealed trauma in our society and around the world.

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Thank you!