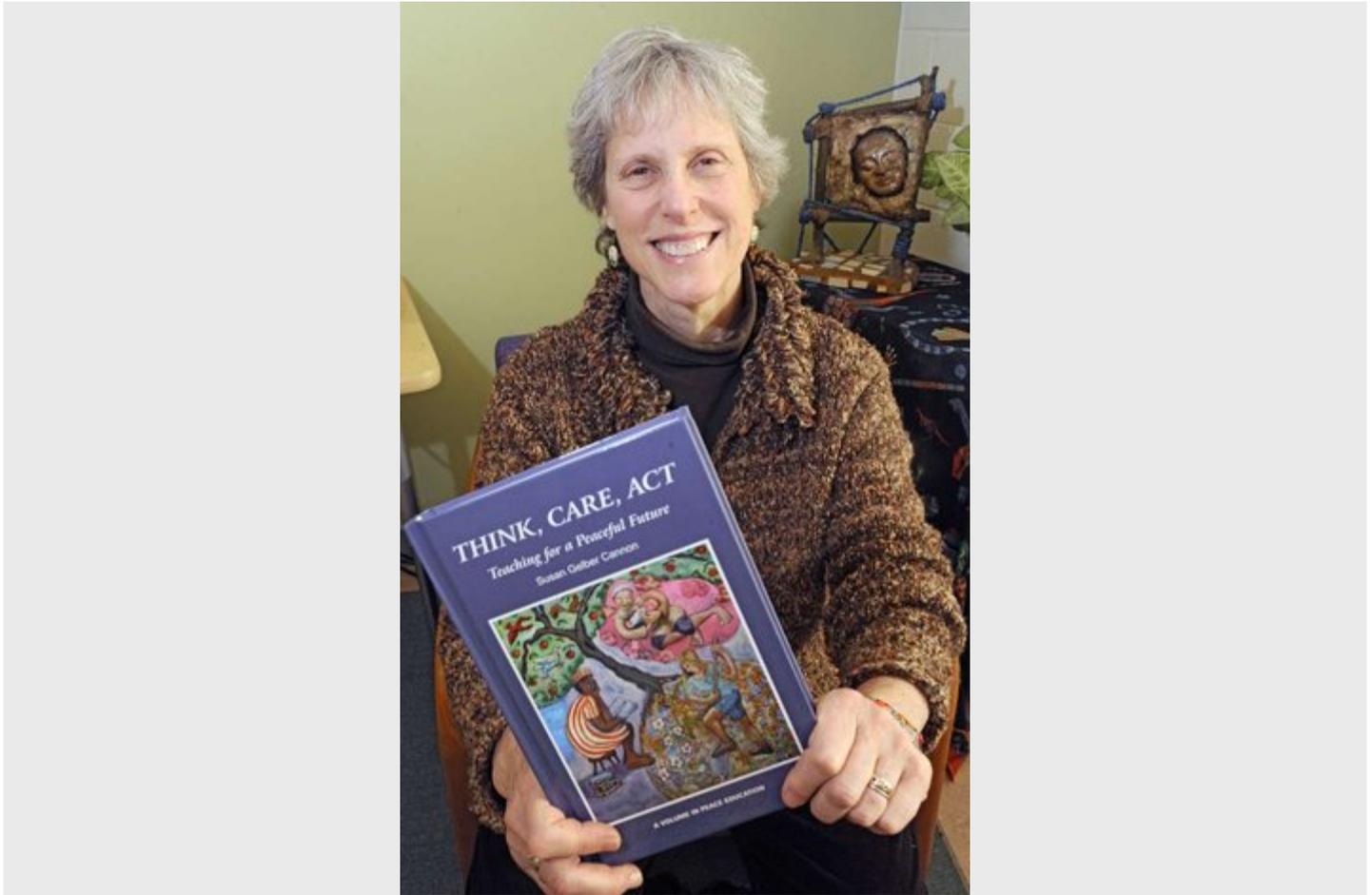


Well Being: A teacher with a passion to spread peace

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CLEM MURRAY / Staff Photographer

In her book and in the classroom at Episcopal Academy, Susan Gelber Cannon stresses the necessity to "think, care, and act" for peace.

When she was a girl growing up in Wynnefield, Sue Gelber's sleep was often interrupted by her father's screams as he struggled with nightmares triggered by memories of his experiences as a combat infantryman during World War II.

Come daylight, Fred Gelber talked about the war as a series of funny stories. But once, during a conversation with a grandson, he dropped his guard.

"War is hell," Gelber confessed. "The first battle was my baptism by fire. I was one of the walking wounded. . . . There were thousands of dead people lying around. Not just one, but thousands."

Years later, after her father had died, Sue asked her then 90-year-old mother, "How did Dad go through all he did and still carry on a normal life?"

"He fought the war every night for 60 years," her mother replied, turning away.

Sue Gelber is Susan Gelber Cannon now, married for 38 years to artist J. Kadir Cannon. She is the mother of two grown sons and lives in Narberth. She is also a middle school teacher of English and history at the Episcopal Academy in Newtown Square.

But her passion for peace - rooted in her childhood recollections of her father's anguish - undergirds all she tries to do in the classroom. In her recently published book, *Think, Care, Act: Teaching for a Peaceful Future*, she describes peace education as "an umbrella" that encompasses a wide range of learning, including critical and creative thinking, conflict resolution, and multicultural and antibias education.

"My interest in teaching students to think, care, and act is that it contributes to their well-being and the well-being of society," says Cannon.

"If they can think and they know how to care, they won't be overwhelmed by the negativity around them, and once I get them thinking and caring, I can inspire them to act and give them the confidence that they can change the world for the better."

Trained in moral development at Harvard, Cannon, 59, has taught middle school students in China and Japan and given presentations and workshops at numerous international conferences. She began researching the book during a sabbatical six years ago. She spent five summers writing and revising it. While the book is designed as a resource for teachers, with the requisite theory and philosophy, it also offers plenty of examples, practical advice and responses from students, and its larger lessons about the importance of peace - especially the possibility and necessity of achieving it - are relevant and applicable to everyone.

"Peace is considered by some a dirty word," Cannon told me the other day as we sat by the fire in her cozy Narberth twin, whose walls are adorned with her husband's art (including the painting that graces the cover of her book). "It means you're passive, you're going to surrender."

Instead of glorifying peace, "we are drowning our children in a sea of war culture," she laments. When she asks students to draw pictures of war, they quickly fill the page with explosions, blood, and guns. But when she asks them to draw pictures of peace, they sit at their desks, stare at the page, and ask, "What do you mean?"

"Why are we accepting this as a global society?" Cannon asks. "I'm not raising my kids to kill other mothers' kids. I'm not teaching my students to kill other teachers' students. We can do better."

Or, as she writes in her book: "We must help children see peace as a positive condition that includes constructive interpersonal and international relations, respect and empathy for all, and cooperative conflict resolution for the common good, rather than simply as an absence of conflict or violence."

A former puppeteer, Cannon has a theatrical bent. She realizes that good pedagogy adheres to Horace's dictum about the purpose of poetry - *dulce et utile* - to be sweet and useful, to delight and teach, to entertain and inform. There's a science to teaching, but teaching at its best is also an art, and for Cannon especially, a form of performance art, infused with enthusiasm, humor and purpose, which is why it's often so exhilarating and exhausting. She has been called "a coach in the gym class of the mind."

The walls and bulletin boards of her classroom are covered with inspirational sayings and provocative questions (Who makes history? Can a novel change you?), and pictures of people of courage and character who have crusaded for peace. Her style of teaching is to engage and improvise. She invites her students to help her "build" the course, and she solicits their feedback through report cards on her own effectiveness. She also actively works to keep parents informed and involved as well. Needless to say, she is opposed to the "skill, drill, and kill" mentality fostered by a focus on standardized tests.

On the first day of class, she challenges her students with two terms: meta-cognitive thinking (her definition: "thinking about what you're thinking about") and ethnocentrism (the arrogant notion that your tribe is the chosen people, the masters of the universe).

"To think means to question and analytically evaluate TV programs, what your parents and teachers say, what you read in the newspaper and on the Internet, and not just passively accept what people are offering you," Cannon says. Critical thinking is a form of "intellectual self-defense," she adds, borrowing Noam Chomsky's term, "because the whole world is trying to sell you something."

At the outset, Cannon tells her students: "I'm not going to tell you what to think, but I am going to make you think." Her typical approach to an issue: "Some people say this, some people say that. What do you think?"

Thinking also has a creative aspect - "the ability to imagine how to do things differently, and what a better world would look like" - which Cannon spurs by encouraging her students to envision utopian communities and how they might function.

To care means to develop and exhibit a sense of compassion and empathy, Cannon says - "to consider what it would be like to be that other person."

"If you say you're going to act for a peaceful future and change the world, it starts with how you treat your peers in the classroom," Cannon says. "You can't punch someone out on the playground or roll your eyes at the girl who's not wearing Uggs."

From there, caring expands to family, neighbors, the community, the nation, the world, to what Nobel Peace Prize winner Jane Addams in 1907 called "cosmic patriotism."

"If I'm on my game every day, I find a way to inspire kids to think, care, and ultimately to act - even if it means something as simple and basic as being nice to the kid next to them or not laughing when somebody drops their books," says Cannon.

Peace education is a long, slow process, she realizes, but this "optimistic realist" is undaunted. As one of her mentors once told her, "We work for the unseen harvest. There are consequences of the work we do."

Susan Gelber Cannon will speak at 7 p.m. Jan. 26 at Haverford College, in the Center for Peace and Global Citizenship Cafe, Stokes Hall, Room 104. Admission is free. For information, contact Karen Barton of the Bryn Mawr Peace Coalition at 610-525-3784 610-525-3784 or astrique@aol.com.

"Well Being" appears every other week, alternating with Sandy Bauers' "GreenSpace" column. Contact Art Carey at acarey@phillynews.com. Read his recent columns at www.philly.com/wellbeing

Find this article at:

http://www.philly.com/philly/health/20120116_Well_Being__A_teacher_with_a_passion_to_spread_peace.html?viewAll=y&c=y

For more about Susan Gelber Cannon's peace education philosophy and methods, visit her website with numerous resources for teachers, students, and community groups:

www.teachforpeace.org

Read her blog: <http://thinkcareact.blogspot.com/> Contact her: teachforpeace@gmail.com

Her book is available with web discounts from IAP:

<http://www.infoagepub.com/products/Think-Care-Act>