

City At Peace

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A Poetics of Peace

If we sat next to one another, you and I, say during a chance meeting on an airplane, and we cared enough to talk to one another, eventually one of us would probably ask the other about our occupation, what we did for a living. One of us might say, "What do you do?" If you asked me, I'd say, "I'm the drama director of a project called "City at Peace," in Santa Barbara, California."

You might then ask, "What is it?"

I would have your ear for a while. For, with great pride I would say, "'City at Peace' is the most significant endeavor of my life."

"Why?" You might ask.

Because, what we are doing is finding young people whose lives are about to freeze into the fear and pain of despair, and we thaw their lives with the warmth of unconditional love (for real). We give them a place to express their fears, pain, anger, and their love. What is sad is that we seem to be the only place they have to express these feelings. They do not feel safe expressing them at home, at school, or among their peers on the street.

"We can all use some of that." Sitting next to me, you might think and say. I would agree.

"City at Peace" - Santa Barbara is the fulfillment of mediator Nancy Davis' dream to combine mediation and conflict resolution skills with the performing arts, to teach young people to resolve the conflicts of their lives, peacefully. I would tell you that it has been my honor to create and lead the drama component of this project. And that along with Richard McLaughlin, our artistic director and Nancy Davis, in creating this project, our lives and the lives of the young people who participate with us have changed for the better.

I would tell you that Nancy Davis seeks out the young people in our community that are in the most trouble. That she goes to juvenile detention facilities, group homes, continuation schools, probation schools, half-way houses and street corners, always trying to find young people who want change but have yet to find a safe place to undergo that change.

As I scan my mind for the faces of my young friends at "City at Peace," the list of their troubled backgrounds appears as follows: a teenage mother, an alleged carjacker, various violently abused children, a heroin addict, gang members, incest sufferers, various children that have carried out assaults with a deadly weapons (using from golf clubs to firearms), habitual truants, sexual abuse sufferers, children of violent alcoholics, neglected children.

Who in our group, I wonder, does not fit within one of these profiles? A middle class young woman whose father ignores every one of her significant accomplishments while he dotes on his son, her younger brother.

We do not judge the young people we work with. We do not try to fix them. We do not invest much time in trying to find out why or how they've gotten where they are today. We accept them as they are. We view them through the lens of their highest potential.

Each "City at Peace" participant does attend an extensive mediation and conflict resolution training. These trainings give them opportunities to role play their real life conflicts. We foster respect and caring for self and others,

while always looking for the non-violent path to resolve each conflict.

Our approach to conflict resolution is modeled after the Quaker - Alternatives to Violence Project (A.V.P). We strive to empower young people to liberate themselves and others from the burden of violence. A.V.P's and our fundamental belief is that there is a power for peace in everyone, and that this power has the ability to transform violence.

Each week we begin our meetings by reviewing and/or amending our ground rules. Seeking to unify our group rather than to make divisive decisions that might satisfy some but exclude others, we arrive at our ground rules by consensus not by vote. We also have lots of fun thinking up different penalties for breaking the ground rules. For example, for a "put down," we decide that the offender has to make amends by paying the offended with "three sincere complements." Or, a penalty for breaking any ground is to make the rule breaker of the rule roll a peanut across the room with their nose. Each week a different person takes their turn at enforcing the ground rules. (This has evolved for one person being the enforcer, making that person, usually me, the authority figure and all around bad guy.)

A most vital aspect of our project is our "check in" circle. Here, our group of anywhere from 15 to 25 people (which includes a handful of adults) sit in a big circle. In turn, we share whatever has been pressing on us during the week. Everyone has the "right to pass.," which is another ground rule.

It is during these "check in" circles that most of us express the joys and pains of our lives. I can not forget the first meeting of our last fall session, when a Vicki a 14 yr. old shared her obsession with suicide with us. She said it was because of her father's physical abuse of her and her family.

That afternoon, as we continued sharing around the circle, it stunned me to hear over and over how almost all of the young people and some adults, including myself, shared

their serious thoughts and feelings about having contemplated suicide recently.

We explored the subject through open ended questions all afternoon. "How often do you think about it?" "What do you do when you feel like you're going to do it? "What can we do to help each other stick around?" This gives us an opportunity to express feelings that otherwise might lead to isolation but that here, open each of us to insights and understandings about ourselves and each other that otherwise might never have occurred and that could lead to untimely death.

That day, we encouraged everyone to write down their thoughts and feelings about suicide. This was our way of beginning to transform our conflicts into something we could share with the community. In this way we established a link with ourselves, each other, and with our community around an issue of great concern to us all. What follows are excerpts of Vicki's narrative as it was shaped and performed in our show:

Hi. My name is Natalia. (just as I changed her name for this story she used a different name for our performance.) That's me sitting next to my brother, Armando, over there. I write in my diary when I feel helpless and depressed. Diary, I'm in so much pain. My parents are going off on each other . . .

I remember when my Dad used to smack us for like dumb reasons. He'd yell at us when we're just messing around...and like he hardly lets us do anything around the house...and when we have friends over, he'd give dirty looks. He's always looking at my friends. He'd keep on staring at them and I'd really get embarrassed. So now, I don't even have friends over.. or if I do, I really don't care. He's always calling my Mom names too...like calling her a "bitch"... or she's "stupid"...and he makes her feel like she's not worth it . . .

My Mom really tries to talk back to him, but she's having a really hard time believing in herself. Ever since I was a little girl, I've always heard

them fight like cats and dogs. He always said that he was going to change but he never changed. He just got worse. And I'd have to put up with that every day...every day. I mean I couldn't handle it any more. Armando tried to help, but he wasn't very good at it either. . .

The first time I thought about trying to commit suicide, I didn't tell anybody about it. I kept it to myself. It was just me. But when I picked up the gun I just couldn't do it. When I felt the coldness of the gun against my temple, I couldn't bear to take the life God gave me...no matter how painful it might be. But that was before it happened. Oh Diary. I don't trust my Dad any more. It all started the time I picked up the baby and my breasts got too close to his arm. Oh Diary...there's something I haven't told you about. A year ago... he was drunk...and the only people in the house was me and him. I went into my Mom's bedroom to get something from her drawer and he walked in. I was in my P.J. shirt and as I tried to walk out, he threw me onto the bed and you can imagine what happened next. I felt so dirty afterwards. I felt violated. I thought my Dad was supposed to be my protector. I knew fathers and daughters were supposed to have relationships...but not like this. What am I going to do?

On that airplane, time would not allow me to tell you of all the deep conflicts and issues that we have shared in our "check in" circles. Of how they have been shaped into scenes, songs, poems, dance numbers, and visual images. I would however ask you to imagine how it must feel to a young person, who until then had almost no positive reinforcement, to hear a soon-to-be father in the audience, sitting with his expectant wife, share how the "City at Peace" show has changed the way he would proceed along the path of being a husband and a father. How it made him think deeply about his huge responsibility and the effect of his actions on his family. This from a show made 100% from the thoughts and feelings of our young people.

I would tell you, however, that at each of our weekly sessions we eat a meal together. And, that some of our young people profess to showing up only for the food; and how I wonder "which" food it is that they are really talking about. That perhaps it's the soul food we deliver throughout our afternoons together, which end with another circle in which we all hold hands and feel our connection before going off in our separate directions.

If we had time, I would say that with "City at Peace" we are honoring the same archetypal forces of Dionysus, the god of youth, wildness, excess, and drama that the ancient Greeks worshipped and out of which emerged what we now know as our modern Drama and Theater. I would share my imaginings with you that just as Dionysus served his Greek culture, in ancient times, our young "at-risk," wild, violent, and yes troubled young people have so much to teach us in our time.

I would tell you that so far, my lesson has been what I believe is the only commandment worth having: "Love Your Children." A commandment which, if followed, would trivialize the need for any others. I would say to you, that if we loved our children that they would make the peace.

What would you say?

Biographical information: Jose Angel Santana is a graduate of the Neighborhood Playhouse School of Theater, in New York City, where he studies legendary acting teacher Sanford Meisner. He originated roles in three world premiers of Pulitzer Prize winning playwright David Mamet's works, most recently in Mamet's adaptation of Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* with Oscar Nominee (Fargo) W. H. Macy, directed by Gregory Mosher. He has also originated the leading role of Julio in Academy Award Nominee (*Reds*) - Trevor Griffiths' *Real Dreams* directed by Mr. Griffiths and opposite Oscar winner Kevin Spacey. Mr. Santana received critical praise for his

film debut as "Jose-the Junkie" in Sidney Lumet's *Prince Of The City* and is remembered as the "strange" Boutique Owner opposite Madonna in *Desperately Seeking Susan*. Among his other featured performances in film are, Benny in *Batteries Not Included* with Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn as well as roles in: *Night Hawks*, *The Pope of Greenwich Village*, *Garbo Talks* and *The Morning After*. On television he has guest starred on *Miami Vice*, *Hill Street Blues*, *The Twilight Zone* and most recently as Detective Miller on *Beverly Hills 90210*. Mr. Santana has taught "Directing Actors" at the N.Y.U. Graduate Film School and has taught the Meisner Technique at the N.Y.U. Undergraduate Drama School in association with David Mamet. He is the founder of the Actors In Training, a school for aspiring professionals in Santa Barbara, CA., and is the Drama Director of Santa Barbara's "City at Peace" project.