

My Quest to BePeace

Many of us have had turning points in our lives when we suddenly found our sense of purpose. I had a vivid experience at the age of ten that has guided all my efforts toward world peace. It was the fourth of July, and my brother, sister and I were waiting for it to get dark so that we could begin the fireworks. Suddenly, I got the idea to walk down our country road.

I strode off by myself and soon was captivated with the beauty of the sunset as it filled me with peace. I started talking aloud saying, "I wish all people around the world could have this feeling of peace." Then I found myself listening as my intuition whispered to me, "You will work for world peace." My ten-year-old mind couldn't fathom how I could do that and still have a husband. But then I was flooded with a deep reassurance that I would have a man by my side that would be my equal and support this work." When I returned from my walk, I was so filled with inner fireworks that I turned my share of the sparklers over and sat in silence the rest of the night.

As it's turned out, I am working for peace and I do have my beloved husband, Juan Enrique Toro, by my side. When Juan Enrique and I were first contemplating just how to put our lives together, he told me about a country that had no army and identified with peace: Costa Rica. At his words, the intuition I had at the age of ten sprang back to life. I knew that somehow I would be involved in supporting this national model of peace in Costa Rica. That evening, Juan Enrique and I celebrated our newfound dream of life in Costa Rica by going out for ice cream and now, sixteen years later, here we are working to upscale the Academy for Peace of Costa Rica to the national level!

This work grew out of my own desire to be an authentic peacemaker. I found it was easy to talk about peace but I lacked clarity about the "how-to" of peaceful living. I was also motivated by the lack of peace with which I had handled some issues in my life. So I researched social and emotional learning methodology for over ten years looking for the best methods for "feeling peace" and "speaking peace."

I founded a small school and tried a method with the children called *HeartMath*. I was profoundly impacted by how it worked with one boy who had been hitting his classmates and I began using it in my own life. Ultimately, I chose it as the most effective method for consistently "feeling peace."

Later, at a time when I was in despair over the increasing violence in the world, I took *Nonviolent Communication* training with Dr. Marshall Rosenberg. As a result, I found hope for world peace again and chose this method for its reliable approach to "speaking peace."

Once I was clear on the two methods, I tried combining them and was surprised by how this enhanced them both. This discovery evolved into the practice that we now call *BePeace*. More than any other tools, using the skills of *HeartMath* and *Nonviolent Communication* together as *BePeace* have prepared me to be a peacemaker at every moment.

After I had the “aha” of *BePeace*, I wanted to pass it on to teachers so they would be supported to have peaceful, creative classrooms. I gathered people together who had passion for this vision. At the time, I wasn’t well established enough to start a peace academy so I called the individuals that were learning these skills the “Peace Army.”

Now, with the credibility we have established by training teachers, students and parents for four years, the facilities that we have developed and the endorsement of the government, we have become the Academy for Peace of Costa Rica. We are working diligently to upscale to the national level by May 2010 when President Arias, our Nobel Peace Prize laureate, leaves office. In this way, we will have the first national peace academy in the world firmly established. Perhaps this will inspire other countries to do the same.

In November 2007, I was invited to do a speaking tour in Japan on Costa Rica’s peace model. On the last day, a man shoved a book into my hand and I read it on the way home. It was the story of a Japanese saint who had traveled all over the world, praying and working for peace. After all of his experiences, this saint concluded that the most powerful thing that we can do for peace, besides modeling it ourselves, is to create a national model. Then human beings will see with their own eyes that peace is not just a dream, but an achievable way of life.

We must prove that peace works on a grand scale and I believe that Costa Rica is our best bet for demonstrating this. Each country has its gift to give to the world and it seems that Costa Rica’s is to be a model of peace. Costa Rica’s unique history, leaders, citizenry and circumstances have put it in a position to model peace. When an Olympic athlete sets a new world record, it actualizes the potential of the whole human race. Likewise when a country sets a new “world record” for peace, it actualizes the potential of all countries. I know that having a model will benefit all nations, because it is already happening: many countries are already inviting us to come and introduce the idea of an academy for peace to their leaders.

Just as I have an intuition in my heart for peace that has been my North Star, it seems that Costa Rica has an intuition in its collective heart for peace that guides its destiny. I am continually hearing about new efforts that Costa Ricans are making to model peace and care for the environment. I am proud to be a part of those efforts.

At the conclusion of each Academy for Peace training, we say this motto: "Before directing the lightning in the sky, we must first harness the storms in our own hearts." These words mean to me that, as we gain the technological power to do things like "directing the lightning in the sky"; we had better develop the peace in our hearts to use that power for good. For many years, I didn't have a solid "how to" when it came to developing peace in my heart. Now this Missouri farm girl is finally learning to be a peacemaker and, as my power for good grows each day, I know all human beings can do the same.

Costa Rica is still a developing country and has many of its own challenges. It needs help from others to succeed in this endeavor so that all of humanity may be blessed with greater peace. I invite every peacemaker on the planet to join me in using your imaginations, your intentions, your funds and your voices to help us create the first national model of peace.

Let there be peace on earth, let it begin with me and let it now continue with the establishment of the first national model of peace so we may hold peace high for all to see!

Oceans of gratitude,

Rita Marie Johnson
Founding Director
Academy for Peace of Costa Rica
Rasur Foundation