Julia Ward Howe Boston Authors Club Award

*Bank Street College of Education Best Book
*ALA/YALSA Best Books for Young Adults
*Booklist 2008 Best Books of the Year
*2009 New York Public Library Books for Teen Age
*2009 CCBC choice
*NCSS/CBC Notable SS Trade Book 2009
*Capitol Choice, 2009
*CLN Top 25 07-08
*ALA/Amelia Bloomer 2009 Book
*Starred Review, BKLST
*Starred Review, PW
*Starred Review, VOYA
* PW Flying Start
*Shortlisted for RARI
• Shortlisted for UT State Award
• Shortlisted for ME State Award
• Shortlisted for SC State Award
*Booklinks Best New Books
*Booksense Notable
The material for this talk

CLIMBING THE STAIRS: TEACHING NONVIOLENCE IN THE CLASSROOM THROUGH LITERATURE was developed in collaboration with my colleagues

Dr. Diane Kern

Ms. Kay Johnson

and Ms. Bethany Lisi.

Some of the slides I include were made by one or other of these co-authors and all the teaching ideas presented here were inspired by the work we did together.

These generous educators have given me written permission to share this material. I am happy to present and disseminate this material with their consent.
Writing *Climbing the Stairs*

- Albus Dumbledore at Harry Potter-esque school in England
- Dealt with issues of violence (overt and subtle e.g. forming caste-like cliques)
Questions of Current Relevance

1. What, if anything, does nonviolence mean in my life?

2. When, if ever, should a person or a nation act violently?
Larger Issues of Violence and Peace

- Thinking of becoming a United States citizen
- What do I feel about the wars our country has been and is involved in?
- Same questions asked in another context by my family…

www.wewerethere.defencedynamics.mod.uk/ww2/india_1.html
INDIA, 1941

A TIME OF TURMOIL

AN ERA OF CONTRAST
Mahatma Gandhi
Embodiment of Peace
Adolf Hitler

Personification of Violence

www.wewerethere.defencedynamics.mod.uk/ww2/india_1.html
India fighting nonviolently for independence...
A world engaged in war…

www.wewerethere.defencedynamics.mod.uk/ww2/india_1.html
Well known: Gandhiji’s Ahimsa Movement – World’s 1st successful nationwide nonviolent freedom struggle
Largest all-volunteer force in WWII from Indian subcontinent
Indians fighting with allies for the freedom of the world, but not free themselves (subjugated by Britain)
Families torn apart by political tension

What would you have chosen to do?

- Fight nonviolently for Indian freedom?
- Voluntarily enlist?
Character born out of my question

• Narrator’s brother, Kitta
• Struggles most directly with nonviolence vs. violence
When I began writing, I heard the voice of a woman
• A teenage girl standing at the foot of the stairs
• Afraid to climb to the forbidden library
PROTAGONIST

- girl was my mother
- she climbed for me
THEMES

Vidya’s voice spoke about . . .

1. Gender equality (this was immediately picked up and mentioned in all the starred reviews etc.)
2. Social justice (caste)
3. Courage, preservation of hope etc.

WHAT WASN’T MENTIONED WERE THE OTHER THEMES SUCH AS:

WWII / Holocaust era from an Indian viewpoint
Hindu Philosophy and Spirituality

- Vidya grows in her understanding of the inner realities of Hinduism

- Vidya learns to distinguish between philosophical underpinnings of a religion and unjust societal traditions (a divide that exists in every religion/society)

- Appa vs. Periappa: extremes of thought within cultures and within families
  - Appa’s liberal and egalitarian ideals are as firmly rooted in Hinduism and Indian-ness as Periappa’s conservatism
..and the question that inspired me in the first place: nonviolence

- Nonviolence an active force for social change and in daily life
- Violence at various levels: overt and subtle; political and personal
- Appa’s imperfections: a silent bystander at Thatha’s home, although a hero during protest march
- Every character struggles with ideal of nonviolence
Multiple Perspectives on Nonviolence

- STRENGTH OF CHARACTERS
  Kitta & Vidya - both equally strong
- Kitta and Vidya agree to disagree
  leave the violence vs. ahimsa question open-ended
- Neither person/path “wins”
  though Vidya (and her father) believe in nonviolence
Universality of Human Experience, Ideals

- Through books and exposure to Indian and Western literature, Vidya understands the fundamental similarities between cultures.
- Similar ideas and feelings expressed by Indian and non-Indian authors.
- Nonviolence connection: USA/India (Civil Rights - Gandhiji)
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So, I decided to work with colleagues Diane Kern and Kay Johnson (URI) to use CLIMBING THE STAIRS as a means to teach nonviolence in the school curriculum. I’ll quickly go over 4 of our ideas...
A discussion guide is available: www.climbingthestairsbook.com
Additional materials including an older version of this presentation

http://uri-englishlanguagearts.wikispaces.com
Text-to-Self

Free writing

Write about a personal experience related to violence or nonviolence.
Have you ever stood up for something you believed in? Describe. Do you think you handled this situation violently or nonviolently? Why?
Read or ask students to read or better still, get me to come to your school and read aloud from “The Protest March” chapter.

End with “Appa was strong. Appa was tall. He could have pulled the officer down off the horse. But he did not.”
Discuss how appa behaved. Then

Relate back to free writing (or the question about how student handled a situation they disliked)

By asking them to think/discuss

Can you think of a nonviolent way to handle this situation if it were to arise again?
Lesson Plan 2: Principles of Kingian Nonviolence

1. Courageous Way of Life
2. Beloved Community
3. Attack Problems, NOT People
4. Suffer without Retaliation
5. Avoid Internal & External Violence
6. Universe is on the Side of Justice
Explore the Principles on your own ahead of time

1. Read and understand each principle (discuss with a colleague)
2. Write in your words what this principle could mean to middle/high school students
3. Think of a (personal) example of each principle that the students will be able to understand

www.uri.edu/nonviolence
Explore the Principles

1. Divide class into 6 groups. Assign 1 principle to each group
2. Write in your words what this principle could mean to middle/high school students; Ask each group to discuss what they think it means and then share with class
3. Give a personal example of this principle
Connect each Principle to the text of CLIMBING THE STAIRS

1. Divide class into 6 groups. Assign 1 principle to each group.
2. Ask each group to
   1. discuss what they think it means (help, guide discussions as necessary)
   2. find an example of this principle in CLIMBING THE STAIRS
   3. share with class, citing an example from this text
3. Ask students individually to explain the principle in their own words
Lesson Plan 3: Climbing the Stairs, nonviolence, youtube

- Think-pair-share compare the two YouTube videos
- Write an essay comparing different means of communicating the message of nonviolence (advantages/disadvantages of using music versus using a novel to get people to think and question)
Lesson Plan 3: Climbing the Stairs, nonviolence, youtube

- Ask the students to listen to Common (the rapper’s) rendition of “I have a dream” on YouTube (freedom writers video)
- Ask them to watch Padma Venkatraman’s video on CLIMBING THE STAIRS (Penguin Young Readers Group’s YouTube)
Lesson Plan 4: Socratic Seminar / Poster using the following quote:

Climbing the Stairs
Padma Venkatraman

"This is a poignant look at a young woman's vigilance to break from expectations and create her own destiny." — SLF
Toward the very end of the book, Vidya says:

“...A part of appa was still alive …”

1. Ask students to write what this means to them on a slip of paper, in large writing

2. Have students answer this question: Did you expect Kitta to make the choice he did (to voluntarily enlist for WWII?); Why or why not? Do you think Kitta will survive the war? If so, will at least a part of him die?

3. In hindsight it is trivial to discuss whether nonviolence would or wouldn’t be effective against Hitler – instead, discuss (i) What part of ourselves do we save when we act nonviolently? (ii) What might we sacrifice when we go to war? (iii) Do you know a war veteran, or if not, have you read about how some of our own war heroes suffer after seeing action in Iraq/Afghanistan etc. (iv) are there ways in which we might act nonviolently in our homes and schools and countries to try and prevent a future war (or a future dictator from rising to the top)?
My next novel

ISLAND’S END

Summer 2011

Lesson plans…

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Faith is taking the first step when you cannot see the stairs
Dr. MLK Jr.

www.climbingthestairsbook.com

padmasbooks.blogspot.com

facebook

The Penguin Speakers Bureau arranges my school visits

Thanks for being here today.

I hope you’ll stay in touch!