

Peace Begins at the Edges

By Nicolai D. Tsuzuki

The absence of peace isn't always loud. It doesn't always come with sirens or smoke. Sometimes, it's quiet. It whispers in hallways and classrooms. It hides in the spaces between us — in the way people look at each other, or don't look. Sometimes, the absence of peace is a child being told, in a hundred different ways, that they don't belong.

For the longest time, I believed peace was about treaties, leaders, or the big speeches at the UN we see on TV or read about in the news. But now I know peace starts much smaller. It begins in the daily decisions we, as individuals, make — to treat each other with empathy, to try to understand rather than judge, to listen rather than assume.

Allow me to formally introduce myself. I am Nicolai Kazuyuki Diaz Tsuzuki. I am Japanese, Colombian, and American. I've lived in three countries and experienced three different educational systems. Through these experiences, I've learned lessons that shape who I am today — the figure I now proudly embrace and stand by.

When I was six, my family relocated from the United States to Japan — my mother's home country. I hoped for familiarity, safety, maybe even a sense of belonging. But Japan, a largely mono-racial country, introduced me to a different reality. I was seen by my peers as a *hāfu* — half — or a *gaijin*, a foreigner. I wasn't "fully" Japanese. My Colombian heritage made me stand out, and soon I became a target. Through verbal and physical bullying, I was reminded again and again that I didn't quite fit. But I told myself I could handle it.

Until the fourth grade.

I was pinned down, verbally insulted, and beaten with solid dodgeballs — not because I said anything, not because I did anything wrong, but simply because of how I looked... and how I didn't look. That day, I realized that even in the country where my mother was born — where I had biological roots — I could still be seen as a stranger.

I was hurt, confused, defeated, and betrayed. The people I thought were my friends just watched. They stood by as I was treated this way.

I didn't feel safe in the classroom. I didn't feel safe in the hallways. I didn't feel safe in the bathrooms. I didn't feel safe outside my home. It was quiet. Silent.

But Yuma brought color and sound back into my life.

Yuma is a friend I will forever cherish. When I was at my lowest, unable to attend school or leave my house, the phone rang. It wasn't the school or a teacher. It was Yuma. He called me every day. He visited occasionally. And then, one day, he told me:

"I'll come get you tomorrow morning, and we'll walk to school together."

Mind you, he lived half an hour away from me. And I lived another half hour from the school. But he showed up. And for the next week, he walked me to and from school every day.

I look back on that week often. I remember Yuma — a ten-year-old boy who walked me back into the joy and success I am lucky to experience now.

At first, carrying all three of my identities felt like a burden. In Japan, I was too foreign. In the U.S., I was misunderstood. In Colombia, I felt distant. Sometimes, I hated it. But Yuma taught me something that stayed with me: peace begins with identity. With accepting yourself.

Who are you? Isn't it lovely?

Each human being is beautiful, from the inside out. Belonging doesn't come from fitting into a mold — it comes from building bridges between cultures, people, and ways of being.

Through this acceptance, I began to see the gifts each culture had given me. From Japan, I learned the value of harmony, responsibility, and a deep connection to nature and each other. From Colombia, my father's homeland, I inherited the passion of a people who've endured conflict with resilience and joy. And from the United States, I learned to speak up — to question systems, dream big, and believe that change is possible.

Today, I study at Pearson College UWC — a school built on the idea that peace is possible when young people from around the world come together not just to talk about peace, but to live it.

At Pearson, I live with students from all over the world — even from countries in conflict with one another. Yet here, conflict is set aside. In class, justice is debated. In the forest, we plant trees native to our lands. In the dining hall, we celebrate Ramadan and Lunar New Year — sometimes in the same week, sometimes on the same day.

One of my favorite things said by our head of college, Jason McBride, is this:

“Students set aside conflict and put each other's well-being first — checking in on each other during hard times.”

It's not perfect. But it's real.

Peace doesn't mean always agreeing. It means choosing to stay at the table — and by each other's side — even when it's hard.

At Pearson, we live this reality through composting systems, zero-waste initiatives, and shared community responsibilities. Our school doesn't just teach sustainability — it practices it.

And that's why I believe sustainability isn't just about policy. It's about habits, systems, and the values we pass on. True sustainability is rooted in the daily choices we make — how we treat the Earth, and how we treat each other.

So what's my blueprint?

I want to help build a world where peace isn't limited to policy papers or conference rooms, but lived in daily reality. Where empathy shapes the systems we live in. Where youth are equipped not to lead change someday — but now.

I don't want to wait for change to come from above. I want to live my values, day by day — to be someone who stands up for those pushed aside, and helps create spaces where *everyone* belongs.

My blueprint is about redefining where peace is made, and what defines it — not as the absence of conflict, but the presence of dignity, equity, and joy.

Because I truly believe peace begins at the edges — even with those who've been pushed aside, misunderstood, or ignored. Or those who are there to pull people into our colourful, cheerful world.

I've been there.

And I want to be someone who pulls others in.

Pearson has taught me that peace and sustainability are deeply connected. You can't have peace if people don't have food, clean water, or safe homes. And you can't protect the environment if people are fighting just to survive.

I've seen how climate change hits hardest in the places least responsible for it — and how Indigenous communities here in Canada who have been the true stewards of this land for generations.

We may not be identical — but that's what makes us human.

We all want to be seen, heard, and safe.

And if we can start replacing judgment with empathy, assumption with listening, and fear with love...

Then maybe peace isn't just possible.

Maybe it's already beginning — in the daily interactions that happen at the edge.

Peace doesn't start in silence or at the center — it starts at the edge.

In small acts and quiet courage.

Like a boy who showed up for his friend.

That's the kind of peace I want to build — and invite you to build too.

Thank you.