



Published by G. P. Putnam's Sons, Penguin

*Climbing the Stairs* is the winner of the 2009 Julia Ward Howe Club Award and the ASTAL RI Book of the Year Award has received several other honors, including ALA/YALSA Best Book for Young Adults, Booklist Editor's Choice Best Book of the Year, NYPL Book for the Teen Age, CCBC choice, Bank Street College of Education Best Book, NCSS/CBC Notable SS Trade Book, Capitol Choice, PA School Library Association Top 40, CLN Top 25, ALA/Amelia Bloomer Book, Starred Reviews in Booklist, PW and VOYA, Shortlisted for RARI, UT, SC and ME state awards, Booksense Notable, Booklinks Best New Book, and PW Flying Start.

### **Climbing the Stairs: Teaching nonviolence through literature**

This handout was collated by Padma Venkatraman, PhD (Author, CLIMBING THE STAIRS, G. P. Putnam's Sons, Penguin). It draws heavily upon and is deeply inspired by collaborative work done together with Diane Kern, PhD (School of Education, URI) and Kathryn Lee Johnson, EdS (School of Education, URI). One of the plans in this handout is a modification of a plan presented by Bethany Lisi, MA (Corporate & Foundation Relations Manager, Queensborough Community College). All three of these scholars are co-authors, but any errors in this document are Dr. Venkatraman's alone.

#### **Background statement from the author:**

When I started writing *Climbing the Stairs*, I was head of a school in the United Kingdom. I saw students faced with different kinds of violence, overt and subtle – name calling, bullying, and caste-like cliques. At that time, I decided to become an American citizen and was thinking deeply of the issues facing our nation. We were at war with Iraq then, and we still are. As I grappled with the question of whether a person should ever act violently, and when and if and why a nation should engage in a war, my mind flew back to a different era, a different circumstance, a different culture, and a family – my own - that had debated the same two questions, many years ago in India, 1941. The result was my debut novel, *Climbing the Stairs*, which is loosely based on my family's history and inspired by the timeless question of the role of nonviolence in our lives and its impact on today's society. The material in this handout developed through collaboration with the educators listed above.

**RESOURCES:** 1. For more questions, virtual lesson plans, and other resources, please visit the author's website: [www.climbingthestairsbook.com](http://www.climbingthestairsbook.com) (Click the top schools/libraries; teachers/librarians tab).

2. Several lesson plans, discussion questions from each chapter of the book, and more are posted at Dr. Diane Kern's Wiki site (click on the left hand side tab entitled CLIMBING STAIRS):  
<http://uri-englishlanguagearts.wikispaces.com/EDC+430+431+Secondary+English+Methods>

### Lesson plans on teaching nonviolence using CLIMBING THE STAIRS

#### Plan 1: Making a text to self connection and expanding student understanding of the role of nonviolence in their everyday lives

1. Begin by asking for a show of hands in answer to the question: Have you ever witnessed something you disagreed with or strongly disliked?
2. Next, ask students to think, write, and if they are comfortable with one another, to pair up (turn and talk to their neighbors) and then share with the group: How did you act/react to this situation (that you disliked/disagreed with)?
3. READ ALOUD FROM THE PROTEST MARCH CHAPTER; end with "Appa was strong. He was tall. He could have pulled the officer down, off the horse, thrown him on the ground and kicked him. But he did not."
4. Discuss an alternative that readers might have been hoping for, such as: "Appa pulled the officer down off his horse, thrown him to the ground, and kicked him to save the woman and himself." Why did he not do this? How did appa voice his disagreement in this chapter? What message does Appa's sacrifice send to Vidya, and the reader? In what ways does this scene show Appa's strength? What impact do his actions have on others at the march? When is it appropriate to challenge the beliefs of a society? What are the most effective ways to take a stand against an injustice?
5. Discuss: Think back to the incident you disagreed with (incident remembered at the beginning). Did you disagree nonviolently? If yes, would you like to share that – with the rest of the class? If not, can you think of a nonviolent way to act if a similar situation were to arise again?
6. Discuss hypothetical situations in which students might find themselves and nonviolent strategies they might use to diffuse tension in those situations.
7. Listed below a set of nonviolent response strategies to teach children (adapted from Cecil, Nancy Lee and Roberts, Patricia L. 1995. Raising Peaceful Children in a Violent World. San Diego: LuraMedia). Discuss where in the novel Kitta or Vidya use any of these possible responses:
  - a. Count to ten and take a few deep breaths.
  - b. Assess the situation, accept responsibility and apologize sincerely if you should.
  - c. Reach out and listen to the other person and try to understand their point of view.
  - d. Meet halfway by compromising, finding common ground, sharing, or taking turns.
  - e. Pat the other person on the back or reach out with reassuring words.
  - f. Explain where you are coming from and talk things over – discuss, don't react.
  - g. Agree to disagree (if you cannot compromise).
  - h. Calmly walk away or ignore bad behavior (if discussion is impossible).
  - i. Elicit help from a responsible adult if the situation is explosive, threatening, or dangerous.

#### NONVIOLENCE/VIOLENCE CONTINUUM IN THE NOVEL

+ ve/neutral	negative
Mahatma Gandhi	Hitler
Britain as part of WWII allied force	Holocaust and Axis powers
Indians as nonviolent protestors	British as colonizers, perpetrators of injustice

Victims of caste (low caste servants)	Indians as perpetrators of caste in their society
Women as victims of gender inequity	Men (every caste) gender inequity perpetrated
Women victimized by other women	Matriarchs oppressing others; family hierarchy
Every character has some good	Every character has some negatives (even appa)

## Lesson Plan 2: Teaching Kingian nonviolence using CLIMBING THE STAIRS

1. Photocopy and distribute the six principles of Kingian nonviolence.
2. Divide the class into at least 6 groups and assign one principle to each group.
3. Ask each group to select a scene from *Climbing the Stairs* that connects to the one nonviolence principle that group has been assigned.
4. Ask students to complete the Book Connection Guide Sheet as a group.
5. Ask students to individually explain (in their own words) what the principle their group was assigned means to them and provide an example applicable to their everyday lives.
6. Vocabulary activity. Brainstorm words that describe nonviolent or violent actions taken by characters in CLIMBING THE STAIRS and words that describe their character traits. Help students explore connections between these behaviors and subtle forms of violence they may indulge in such as name-calling or bullying, to heighten their awareness of violence and make text-to-self connections. A list of vocabulary words is provided as an inspiration for this activity.

### Six Principles of Nonviolence: The Kingian Philosophy

#### 1. Nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people.

Nonviolence is an active resistance against what is wrong. It requires the courage to stand up for what is right and just, sometimes in the face of strong social pressure to “just go along,” and the courage to resist impulsive “lashing out.”

#### 2. The Beloved Community is the framework for the future.

The goal is not to humiliate others, but to win them over to a new, shared view. At the end, you want to be able to join forces. Pursuing justice and truth together brings the “beloved community” closer, where everyone lives together in peace.

#### 3. Attack forces of evil, not persons doing evil.

The goal is to solve problems, not to attack people. People who seem evil are also victims of the conditions that make up the problem. Attacking them personally can lead to more problems.

#### 4. Accept suffering without retaliation for the sake of the cause.

Nonviolent people are willing to “put themselves on the line” in order to stop the cycle of violence and create better conditions. Remember that there is already a lot of suffering going on. Let suffering be for a worthwhile purpose, but never inflict it on others.

#### 5. Avoid internal violence of the spirit as well as external physical violence.

Physical violence starts with attitudes and feelings of anger, hatred, and resentment. The

person who has those feelings is hurt first and most by them. Feelings are contagious, and also affect many people who are not the “target” of the moment.

## 6. The universe is on the side of justice.

Justice inspires people, and injustice does not. Dr. King said, “The arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” The outcome of the struggle will be justice. It may not be today or tomorrow, but eventually faith and justice will prevail.

### Example of Student Response from a *Climbing the Stairs* Connection Guide Sheet

#### NONVIOLENCE CONNECTIONS – *Climbing the Stairs*

**Principle of Nonviolence:** #4. Accept suffering without retaliation for the sake of the cause.

**Scene:** Page 51

**Summary of scene:** A policeman is beating a woman to death. Appa comes to her rescue, but he is also beaten as he protects her.

#### **How does this scene connect to the Principle of Nonviolence?**

Appa does not retaliate but simply continues to help and protect the woman, which is his immediate cause and his contribution to the larger cause of freedom and peace.

#### **What nonviolent character traits does the character from the above question exhibit?**

Appa was brave, courageous, compassionate, daring, responsive

#### Character Traits Associated with Nonviolence:

Attentive	Encouraging	Intelligent
Aware	Endurance	Kind
Bighearted	Exuberant	Logical
Brave	Fair	Loving
Calm	Faithful	Loyal
Caring	Forgiving	Optimistic
Cheerful	Friendly	Patient
Clever	Generous	Peaceful
Concerned	Gentle	Pensive
Conscientious	Giving	Persevering
Controlled	Grateful	Persistent
Cooperative	Helpful	Pleasant
Courageous	Honest	Polite
Committed	Hopeful	Positive
Compassionate	Hospitable	Rational
Considerate	Humane	Reliable
Curious	Humble	Respectful
Daring	Humorous	Responsible
Dedicated	Imaginative	Responsive
Determined	Independent	Reverent
Devoted	Industrious	Risk-taker
Eager	Integrity	Self-confident
Empathetic	Interest	Scrupulous

Selfless	Supportive	Understanding
Sensitive	Talented	Useful
Sincere	Tenacious	Valiant
Skillful	Thankful	Versatile
Smart	Thoughtful	Vigilant
Sociable	Tolerant	Warm hearted
Strong	Trusting	Wise
Sympathetic	Trustworthy	

### Other activities or guided questions you might use with your students:

1. **READER RESPONSE JOURNAL ACTIVITY:** Together with students, find six different scenes in *CLIMBING THE STAIRS* to demonstrate each of the six principles of nonviolence. Direct students to write in their reader response journals about an everyday situation (either one they have faced or a hypothetical situation in which they might find themselves) in which they could use one of the nonviolence principles.
2. **ESSAY WRITING:** Choose one Principle of Nonviolence and write an essay defend how the principle is displayed through the actions of one character in *CLIMBING THE STAIRS*, citing three pieces of evidence from the text.
3. **SOCRATIC SEMINAR:** Create a poster centered around the quote “A part of me was alive in appa” (Place the quote at the center and paste student responses to this quote around it to create a large poster that could be hung on the classroom wall). Use this quote to spark a Socratic seminar and to gain an understanding of violence of the spirit vs. physical violence. Discuss – what part of appa was still alive? What did appa give up and what did he preserve when he made his sacrifice? What might Kitta give up in the future and how might the war change his character? What part of Kitta might be destroyed after he becomes a soldier? How do wars affect soldiers? How are the wars of today impacting the lives of those in who are in the military to serve our nation? How are their families affected?
4. **ESSAY WRITING:** Set the theme for a discussion on nonviolence by downloading and playing the YouTube Video of rapper Common singing “A Dream”. Help your students identify how different artists (Common, rapper, YouTube, music vs. Venkatraman, author, *CLIMBING THE STAIRS*, novel) interpret Mahatma Gandhi’s and Dr. King’s dreams of nonviolence.
5. **VENN DIAGRAM:** Use a Venn Diagram (Intersecting circles labeled India and America) to encourage students to list first the differences, then the similarities between the two cultures. Reiterate the idea that despite cultural differences, basic human ideas, characteristics and behavior are the same. As the author of *Climbing the Stairs*, I believe that while culture helps shape us, it is we – as individuals – who shape cultures. Extremes of thought exist within cultures as much as among them (as seen in novel when the characters of two equally Indian and Hindu men – Appa and Periappa – are compared).

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(focus on fundamental and universal themes in *Climbing the Stairs*, based on Barton’s QC)

1. **NONVIOLENCE :** Have you ever stood up for something you believed in? Describe; What was the main event in this chapter and how do you know? Cite the text at least 2 times; How did Appa feel once he knew the protest march was “coming this way” and he had Vidya in the car with him?; Do the events of “The Protest March” chapter remind you of events in other print or nonprint texts?; Why do people choose to

respond to violence with nonviolence? How did you stand up for what you believed – violently or nonviolently? Can you think of a nonviolent way to approach that situation if it were to arise again?

**FREE WRITING:** What is your understanding of “nonviolence”? Does the principle of peace impact your daily behavior?

**RESEARCH ACTIVITY:** Do you think nonviolence can work against injustice today, and what are some situations after the Gandhian Indian freedom struggle in which nonviolence has been used as a means of political protest?

2. **WWII or FORGOTTEN HEROS:** If you were to imagine a World War II soldier, what would come to your mind?; How did Kitta and Vidya disagree about the war. Cite the text to support your answer; How does Vidya deal with Kitta’s choice immediately and did it change as the story progressed? What other World War II novels have you read and how does the perspective in these novels differ from those of the characters in Climbing the Stairs? How has Kitta’s perspective on the war broadened your understanding of that era of World history?
3. **SPIRITUALITY:** Is there any distance between the philosophy of your religion and its observance? What specific principles of Hinduism does Vidya learn from amma, appa, and the books she reads in thatha’s library? Cite the text. How do the Indian traditions observed in thatha’s house differ from the true ideals of Hindu philosophy cited in the text by Vidya? Can you give examples of Vidya’s actions that you feel reflect some of her stated Hindu beliefs reflected by Hindu scriptures quoted in the novel? In what ways does the novel demonstrate the distance between the spiritual and philosophical underpinnings of the Hindu religion and some of the banal customs followed by Indian society? What other texts have you read in which the protagonist grows in his/her understanding of the inner realities of a faith, or else undergoes spiritual growth? How is your religion similar to and different from Hinduism? Did you learn anything new about Hinduism from the novel that surprised you or challenged your earlier ideas about the religion?
4. **SOCIAL JUSTICE:** Is there a caste-like system in your school, family or community? If yes, what do you think is the underlying cause of inequality? What was the main event of the chapter entitled “Saidapet”? How does Vidya’s meeting with the Gypsy woman help Vidya grow? In what way is the house in Madras a prison and in what way is it a safe place? What stories or poems have you address social inequity and poverty? Why do you think people don’t always treat everyone the same way?
5. **DIFFERENTLY ABLED PERSONS:** Do you know anyone who is differently abled, and if so, how has knowing them changed your behavior? What purpose does appa’s mental disability and his extended family’s treatment of him have in the story? How would the novel be different if he had died (given that Vidya’s family would have had to move to thatha’s household and that appa’s demise would not have changed the major incidents that fuel the plot after the beating)? Cite the text to support your answer. Why do you think periappa and periamma treat appa so badly? How does this practice conflict with their stated belief in non-violence? Have you observed people choosing to ignore traditions that do not further their agendas?
6. **LIBRARIES, BOOKS, READING:** Have you ever read a book that changed your life? What are some of the books that Vidya reads in the library that influence her views or behavior – cite the text. How do the books Vidya reads help her understand the universality and commonality of human experience? Have you read Pride and Prejudice or any books by Jane Austen? Why do you think Vidya did not want to

read her work, and is your reaction to Austen's work different? What are some purposes that libraries served in the past, how has this changed today, and how do you think the role of libraries might change in the future?

7. **COURAGE:** Have you ever acted courageously or seen someone defy an unjust law? Why is Vidya afraid to climb the stairs and why does she decide to do so? Cite the text. List some of the themes in the novel. How does the title "Climbing the Stairs" work as a metaphor to fit these different themes? Pay particular attention to abstract meanings the title acquires that do not involve Vidya directly. What other novels or poetry that you know has metaphorical titles? Would you have chosen to climb the stairs if you had been in Vidya's position? What aspects of her character does this show, and how do those aspects of her character carry her through the other events of the novel?
8. **METAPHOR, SYMBOLS, LANGUAGE:** In the first chapter, Vidya and Kitta discuss the swastika symbol – which has a very different significance in India (especially in 1941) as compared to the Western world today (in the post-World War II era). What role do symbols play in our everyday lives, if any? How are the symbols used in your culture and language different or similar to other world languages and cultures? What symbols and metaphors does the author use in this novel? How does the metaphorical image of climbing a staircase into the unknown work to fit the various themes (such as social justice, national independence, coming-of-age, nonviolence, spiritual awakening) in the novel?
9. **BRITISH COLONIZATION:** The British are an important presence in Vidya's world as both oppressors of the Indian people and as fighters against the Nazis. How are the British characterized at the beginning of the novel? How does this change by the end? How do Vidya's various personal encounters with kind British officers contribute to this characterization? What books does Vidya read in the library that help her understand the similarities between Indian and Western cultures? How does the idea of universal experiences challenge the foundations of British racism and Colonial rule? What are some other ways in which the novel provides counter examples to a one-sided view of the British and White racism? Where does World War II era Japan fit into this discussion of racism?
10. **CHARACTERIZATION:** Multilayered characters: How does the author create dimensionality in the characters? For instance, how is appa's character deepened by his action of sending the family servants away when his brother visits (at the beginning of the novel), instead of showing upfront how he runs his household? What does appa gain from hiding his true beliefs and in what ways does this indirectly support maintaining the caste system? Have you ever suppressed your beliefs in the face of social or familial pressure?
11. **PLOT** (Open-ended nonviolence debate): Why do you think the author chose to leave the novel open-ended? If you had the chance to write a sequel to the story how would you have it continue? What would happen to Vidya? Raman? Kitta? Would you try to answer the debate on violence versus nonviolence or would you leave this open-ended as the author did?

### Cross-curricular connections:

### Theater arts - Lesson Plan 3:

1. Perform: a READER PLAY ADAPTATION OF KITTA AND VIDYA quarreling about war and violence (pages 163-165 in the hardcover version of the book, in the chapter entitled Pongal). An entire reader play adaptation is available from “Weekly Reader” Magazine’s January issue (theme: Passage to India).
2. Ask: Did Kitta and Vidya disagree peacefully?
3. Discuss: Levels of violence and subtle (verbal) vs. physical abuse, moving from an understanding of violence as purely physical to an understanding of violence of the spirit (emotional violence). What are some different levels of violence or nonviolence? Have you ever been a silent spectator of or taken part in bullying/name-calling/forming cliques? Was appa a silent spectator sometimes?
4. When you disagree with someone else, how do you react? Does your reaction depend on the person or the circumstance? How did Vidya react at first and did her reaction change? Neither Kitta nor Vidya changed their points of view and they agreed to disagree in the end – what does that say about their relationship? Were they from the same culture? Are there differences of opinion and culture within your families/circle of friends?
5. Ask the students to share examples of when they had a disagreement with a family member or friend and acted in a respectful way to solve the problem (sitting and talking, not yelling, not fighting, looking at things from the other person’s point of view, etc.).

**History - Lesson Plan 4:** CLIMBING THE STAIRS lends itself to connections with the American Civil Rights movement (explore the MLK Jr. Mahatma Gandhi connection); Other ways to link in with the history theme - Facing history and ourselves; Peace and Nonviolence; MLK connection; nonviolence within our own nation, our cultures, ourselves.

1. Read aloud from CLIMBING THE STAIRS. Discuss what the father did – how did he voice his disagreement?
2. Discuss the political nature of the conflict in the reading. What two countries were in conflict?
3. Does this remind you of anything that happened in American history? Who was in conflict at that time? (Civil Rights Protests).
4. Discuss other nonviolent protests in world history and other nonviolent protestors in American history (Women’s Right to Vote, WWI – Jane Addams, etc.)
5. Discuss when we need to be peacemakers. Ask students to list the names of some peacemakers they know of.
6. Discuss current world conflicts. Where do they come from? Discuss underlying issues such as competition for political spoils and land, racism, religious intolerance, and tribal identity. Suggest that ultimately, lasting peace comes from within the communities in conflict through mutual respect and compassion.

The novel also provides a unique (non-European) perspective on World War II by discussing the contributions of the British colonies including the world’s largest all-volunteer WWII force. This aspect of world history could be a starting point for a **research activity** to discover more about the **forgotten heroes of WWII**, and the topic “forgotten heroes” could be used to spur an **essay writing exercise**.

**Music:** (a) Sing “We Shall Overcome” in Hindi with your students (b) play the rapper Common’s “A Dream” music video from *Freedom Writers* (c) play Indian classical music in the classroom.

**Fine Art:** Draw Kolams and Krishna footsteps on the classroom floor

**Mathematics/ Research:** Invite children to conduct research about ancient Indian mathematics. Three excellent source books on the subject written for an adult audience are: *Lost Discoveries* by Dick Teresi, *The Crest of the Peacock* by George Joseph and *The Argumentative Indian* by Amartya Sen.