

WHAT OSLO GAVE BACK

*A reflection on the NCHC Partners in Peace Nobel Peace Congress,
and what a historian brought home.*

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*The following essay was written after returning from the
NCHC Partners in Peace Nobel Peace Congress, Oslo, Norway, May 27–30, 2026.*

Before I left for Oslo, I wrote a long essay about what I expected to find there. I traced the Anabaptist roots of Elizabethtown College, the family tradition of conscientious objection I carry, the life of W. Miller Barbour, the thread connecting Charles Coates Walker to Martin Luther King Jr. I argued the Declaration of Independence is not a completed achievement but an unfinished obligation, and I asked what a small Peace Church college in Lancaster County has to say about what America owes the world at two hundred and fifty years. I published the essay on LinkedIn the Monday before I departed and boarded the plane nine days later. What I did not know, and could not have known, was how much Oslo would give back.



The National Collegiate Honors Council's Partners in Peace initiative is a partnership with the Nobel Peace Center in Oslo, Norway. It recognizes Honors Programs creating, implementing, and assessing honors-level curricular and co-curricular projects highlighting the work of Alfred Nobel and the Nobel Peace Prize laureates. The initiative encourages college students to explore the lives and achievements of peace laureates, fostering an understanding of the leadership strategies needed to build peaceful communities. Beyond studying these figures, students accept the challenge to think globally and act locally, applying insights from the laureates to make a positive impact on their campuses and communities. I understood all of this before I arrived. What the congress gave me was a deeper understanding of the three institutions at the center of the work.



Delivering remarks near the conclusion of the NCHC Partners in Peace Nobel Peace Congress, Oslo, Norway, May 2026. The remarks addressed how experiential learning through the NCHC Place as Text pedagogy and City as Text exploration strategies enables students to achieve transformative cross-cultural experiences: meeting people, engaging places as primary texts, and practicing the art of citizen diplomacy and peacemaking in the communities they walk through.

Under the provisions of Alfred Nobel's will, the Norwegian Nobel Committee is charged with awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to the person or organization conferring the greatest benefit to humankind in the field of peace during the preceding year. I had read this sentence many times. Standing inside the Norwegian Nobel Institute, in the building where the committee does its work, across the street from where the prizes are awarded, the sentence stopped being administrative language and became something else: a charge, a summons, a description of a sustained institutional commitment to the proposition human dignity can be advanced on purpose, by specific people making specific choices. The institute is not a museum. It is an active deliberating body, and being in its presence changes your sense of what deliberation is for.



In front of the Norwegian Nobel Institute, Oslo, Norway, May 2026. Among the most extraordinary experiences of the congress was the opportunity to see the room where the Nobel Committee itself deliberates, a space carrying the full weight of more than a century of decisions about who has most advanced the cause of peace. More remarkable still was access to the institute's library and archives, which house the academic and intellectual resources informing those deliberations: the scholarship, the documentation, and the research foundations upon which the committee's judgments rest. To stand in that library was to understand the Nobel Peace Prize not merely as a ceremony but as the product of sustained, rigorous, scholarly engagement with the question of what peace requires.

The Nobel Peace Center, the museum for the Nobel Peace Prize, describes its purpose as using the ideas and accomplishments of the Nobel Peace Prize laureates to inspire a better and more peaceful world. Its education programs aim to engage

students and teachers around the world. Walking through its galleries, reading the laureates' words in the spaces built to honor them, I thought about my colleague Oya Dursun-Ozkanca's students in Lancaster County encountering the same laureates in her HON 246 course on refugees in global and regional context. The center is doing in Oslo what Oya does in Elizabethtown: asking students to take the laureates seriously as teachers, to understand not only what they achieved but how they thought, and to ask what their methods demand of the rest of us.



In front of the Nobel Peace Center, Oslo, Norway, May 2026. The center's galleries are extraordinary, each display a meditation on a laureate's life and work, on the specific circumstances that produced a specific act of courage or vision or sustained institutional commitment to human dignity. Yet among everything the Nobel Peace Center offered, nothing was more powerful than the bookstore. To see arrayed in a single

space the full collected writings of the Nobel Peace Prize laureates, alongside an impressive and genuinely interdisciplinary bibliography of scholarship about peacemaking, its history, its methods, its failures, and its possibilities, was to understand the prize as something larger than any single ceremony or any single name. It is a body of knowledge. It is a curriculum. It is an argument, accumulated over more than a century, that the work of building peace is intellectual work, requiring the same rigor, the same depth of reading, and the same sustained engagement with evidence and argument that any serious scholarly enterprise demands. I left with books. I always leave with books.

The National Collegiate Honors Council is committed to cultivating leadership and empowering academically motivated students to drive positive change through intellectual engagement. Celebrating sixty years as the largest professional organization of its kind, the NCHC brings together administrators, faculty, staff, and students from institutions spanning the full spectrum of higher education. Operating within the NCHC's International Education Committee, Partners in Peace enables students, faculty, and institutions to study and implement practices utilized by Nobel Peace Laureates in their attempts to achieve harmony and collaboration. A core mission of the NCHC involves opportunities for students to attain personal leadership development for the purpose of civic engagement born through academic study and active learning. The congress put all of this into a room together, and the result was something I did not fully anticipate: a genuine sense of collective urgency, shared across institutions and disciplines, about the work of peacemaking education.



Nothing in Oslo moved me more than Utøya. The island is a legendary leadership and political retreat center, operated by Norway's Workers' Youth League, hosting international seminars, democracy workshops, and summer camps dedicated to human rights, peace, and political leadership. It is a global meeting place for young activists, educators, and youth leaders to discuss freedom of expression, combat extremism, and build democratic skills. It is also the site of the July 22, 2011, massacre, in which a right-wing extremist killed sixty-nine young people attending a summer camp, most of them teenagers, members of Norway's Labor Party youth organization. The island features a dedicated education and remembrance center called Hegnhuset, which means The House Safeguarding. Built in 2016, it encloses preserved segments of the original café where many of the victims sought shelter, providing a space for reflection on democracy and history.

I was deeply and profoundly moved by the story of Utøya's ongoing, never-ending healing process, and by what it means in the context of international peacekeeping and the preservation and pursuit of developing democracies around the globe. The Norway I encountered at the congress was not a Norway of easy optimism or comfortable distance from violence. It was a Norway actively engaged in the work of remembering, of building democratic institutions strong enough to withstand the forces trying to destroy them, and of teaching the next generation of leaders why the work is not finished and cannot be assumed. In the context of the congress's argument about what peace education is for, Utøya was not a detour. It was the center.

I was equally moved by the Norwegian Resistance Museum, also known as the Norwegian Home Front Museum, located at the Akershus Fortress in Oslo. The museum collection focuses on Norwegian resistance during the occupation of Norway by Nazi Germany from 1940 to 1945. Established as a foundation in 1966, it was opened to the public in May 1970 by Crown Prince Harald in celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Norwegian liberation. The museum displays equipment, photographs, and documents from the war years, and its architecture moves the visitor chronologically from the prelude of the 1930s through liberation in 1945. For a historian whose first essay traced the Bonhoeffer and Barth arguments about the ethics of resistance to totalitarianism in the very years the museum documents, walking through those galleries was not merely instructive. It was personal. The theological arguments I had written about in the abstract became, in the fortress on the hill above Oslo harbor, something I could touch.

All of it reinforced everything I learned at the inaugural Peace Congress and the call to work toward peacemaking and social justice. It ties directly to the biography and companion documentary of W. Miller Barbour I have spent years building. It ties to the argument at the center of the first essay: America at two hundred and fifty years, the promise of the Declaration of Independence, the ongoing effort toward building a more perfect union, the recognition we have not yet arrived at our destination. Utøya, the Resistance Museum, the Nobel Institute, and the Nobel Peace Center are all, in their different ways, making the same argument: the work of building peaceful, just, democratic communities is never completed, can always be undone, and requires each generation to choose it again.



I returned from Oslo and redesigned a course.

HON 205 at Elizabethtown College had already been a leadership course, pairing Doris Kearns Goodwin's study of four American presidents with the development of students' own personal leadership narratives, culminating in the writing of Rhodes Scholarship statements. The course already studied Theodore Roosevelt as a Nobel Peace laureate. Oslo made clear the course could do more. Inspired by the congress and by the work of my Partners in Peace colleagues across the country, I expanded the course to examine all of the United States presidential Nobel Peace laureates and to ask the questions the Oslo congress itself was asking: what leadership strategies did the Nobel Committee recognize, and how can those strategies guide students' own efforts to build peaceful communities?

The redesigned course, HON 205: Leadership Theory, Presidential Nobel Peace Laureates, and Personal Narrative, now carries more than sixty percent of its content and graded work in direct engagement with the Nobel Peace Prize and its laureates. Students read Theodore Roosevelt's 1910 Nobel lecture and ask what peace with action looks like in their own campus communities. They weigh whether Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson might have earned the prize had the circumstances been different, and in doing so they learn to think carefully about what the committee has historically honored and what it has not. They read Jimmy Carter on post-presidential

peacemaking and Barack Obama on the tension between a just war and a lasting peace. They read Al Gore on climate as a peace issue. Each reflection carries an action component: not only what the laureate understood, but what concrete step the student can take this semester in their own community.

The course retains its original architecture as a preparation for the Rhodes Scholarship, which remains the most rigorous standard available for the writing of a personal leadership narrative. There is, as the syllabus notes, a striking through-line between the two pillars of the course. Alfred Nobel and Cecil Rhodes were contemporaries, both men of industrial-era fortune, both turning that fortune near the end of their lives toward an enduring summons to public leadership. Both legacies remain contested. Both ask their recipients to confront the very challenges bound up with the industries from which the fortunes came. Together they frame the question at the heart of the course: what does leadership in the service of peace actually require, and are you willing to provide it?

Think globally, act locally. The Partners in Peace initiative uses this phrase to describe its core pedagogical commitment. I used to understand it as a slogan. I understand it differently now. The Nobel Peace Prize is a global institution, its laureates drawn from every inhabited continent, its work spanning a century of human conflict and human aspiration. The students in my honors seminar in Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania, are local: most of them from Lancaster County or nearby, many of them having never left the mid-Atlantic region. The course now asks them to hold both realities at once, to understand the laureates not as distant figures in history but as practitioners of skills those students can begin developing in their own communities, in the specific, unglamorous, institutional ways the tradition of peacemaking has always demanded.



I walked back to Lake Placida the week after I returned. The baptismal font sat in front of the chapel and the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies exactly as it always has, unchanged by everything I had seen and heard and felt in Oslo. The arrangement of those three structures, the sacred pool, the house of worship, and the scholarly center, facing one another across the water, still made the same argument it has always made: belief, practice, and learning are not separate endeavors but a single one. Oslo did not teach me something new. It confirmed something very old and gave me a new way to teach it. The Declaration remains unfinished. The work of building a more perfect union remains unfinished. And on Tuesdays and Thursdays at nine-thirty in the morning in the fall of 2026, in the Honors Conference Room in Myer Hall, a small group of honors students at a Peace Church college in Lancaster County will begin their own portion of the work.



In front of Oslo City Hall, where the Nobel Peace Prize is awarded each December. Oslo, Norway, May 2026. The congress included the extraordinary privilege of entering the Great Hall of Oslo City Hall, the very room where, each December 10th, the Nobel Peace Prize is formally presented to the celebrated peacemaker before the assembled dignitaries of the world. To stand in that hall is to feel the full accumulated weight of the names and the causes the room has witnessed: from the early laureates of the twentieth century through the most recent recipients, each one called forward in this space to receive the recognition of a committee charged by Alfred Nobel himself with honoring those who have done the most for the brotherhood of nations. Words are inadequate to the experience. The room insists on seriousness. It asks you, quietly and without apology, what you intend to do with the time you have.

