

Teaching Non-Violence in a Violence Addicted World

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I am an itinerant educator with a carpet-bag full of Gandhi's inspiring quotations, King's lofty pronouncements and Freire's participatory education exercises. My vehicle is an airplane, my classroom a refugee camp or community center, and my circuit is the globe. To give shape and support to my work as a peace educator, I founded and direct a small nonprofit organization called Karuna Center for Peacebuilding. 'Karuna' means 'compassion' in Pali and Sanskrit, a name selected because of my deep connection to the Buddha's teachings on compassion and lovingkindness.

Our students are adult learners determined to participate in the development of a more peaceful life for their communities. Local or international educators share the group leadership with me, and translators stand by our side, making sense of our teachings to speakers of Swahili, French, Sinhalese, Arabic, Bosnian or Kinyarwanda. A difficult task in the best of circumstances, teaching nonviolence in today's violence-addicted world may seem like an anachronism to some, a throwback to the idealism of the 1960's, or an endeavor of futility.

Yet there are eager students for this itinerant educator, adults and youth living in war-torn or war-threatened countries who have seen more than enough violence and suffering, who are ready for the skills of peacebuilding and nonviolent responses to conflict. There are community leaders on every continent seeking methods to preserve life and change society through active nonviolence. Some

of these leaders admire Gandhi or King, Mandela or the Dalai Lama, Jesus or Buddha. Many scarcely know these apostles of peace, but come to nonviolence through their reverence for life and their own despair with war-making, hatred and violence.

We who teach nonviolence are introduced to potential participant groups through a global network of nongovernmental organizations, a kind of peace-underground. Frequently, our students and local partner organizations do not use the Internet; many, in fact, do not have computers or even reliable electricity. Karuna Center's approach is to appear only upon earnest invitation from groups with community representation and support. Nonviolence education is not imposed, but invited and explored together. We have no set notion of what is right for any community, and no moral authority to recommend a way of life that might result in detention or death for its members. Our responsibility is to present the teachings of the great practitioners of nonviolence, to explore religious roots of nonviolence, to encourage thinking about social injustice and systemic violence, to hone our skills in communication and reflective listening, to collaboratively invent possible nonviolent responses and to practice those alternatives in the classroom-laboratory with great diligence. Communities then make their own choices, hopefully from a more informed place than before their education in nonviolent conflict transformation commenced.

Conflict resolvers and nonviolent activists come from a variety of countries, faiths, humanistic traditions and backgrounds. We teach on all continents, sometimes in home territory, often far away. Due to the interlocking economic and political structures that maintain oppression and silence opposition, our coverage is minuscule and our public acknowledgment in the media almost nil. We are celebrated when our leaders win Nobel Peace Prizes, but the arduous work that results in a peace treaty or finally creates the liberation of a people from dictatorship or oppression receives

scant attention. The lure of violence and sensationalism overshadow the nonviolent revolutions of our own times: the overthrow of Marcos in the Philippines, the dismantling of the USSR, the division of the former Czechoslovakia, the transfer of power in South Africa, the tumbling of the Berlin Wall.

Nonviolence may encompass all areas of human activity. We may challenge ourselves to contemplate nonviolence in the innumerable decisions we make each day. Nonviolence can become our path, our way of life, described by Martin Luther King as “a way of life for courageous people.” Nonviolence might also be viewed as a method or strategy of social change. Present in all religious traditions, nonviolence holds that the means and ends of social change are related: peace will not be the fruit of our persistent preparations for war. Jesus reminded his followers that “figs do not grow from thistles.” Gandhi taught that “the means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree, with the same inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree.”

Reflecting on inner nonviolence, we remind ourselves that to create peace we must “be peace.” There exists, in other words, a seamless web between being and doing, between the inner state of mind and its outward interpersonal or worldly expression. Just as one cannot achieve peace by preparing for war on the sociopolitical level, one cannot be peaceful in interpersonal relationship without a certain amount of equanimity, awareness and control of violent tendencies internally. Thus we acknowledge that peace begins at home, the internal home that each of us must guide and monitor with great vigilance.

We in the movement for nonviolence believe, however, that we must simultaneously guard and monitor our social configurations with equal vigilance. Oppressive laws, institutional racism and economic injustice can be as violent and destructive as physical

violence. We must tend to the systems in which we persons are embedded with the same care that we lavish on our inner landscape. Personal nonviolence must be cultivated, with equal attention paid to social structures and their influence on the lives of all beings. Nonviolence thus embraces human existence from the intrapsychic level to the international stage, in webbed feedback loops of mutual cause and effect.

Through deep reflection and intense experience, Dr. Martin Luther King developed a model of “Six Principles and Six Practices of Nonviolence.” This template interweaves the inner psychological and spiritual refinement of nonviolent discipline with the social/communal practice of nonviolent social change. Dr. King speaks of redemptive suffering, personal conversion, and faith in a ‘God of Justice’ as well as education, negotiation and direct action. Perhaps more than any other leader in our own era, King became the prophet of the ‘beloved community,’ through which our commitments to internal transformation, communal responsibility and nonviolent love would be expressed.

For many of our seminar participants, the religious dimensions and traditional cultural roots of nonviolence are especially significant now, as a point of opposition to the fundamentalist commandeering of religious teachings to advocate violence. In the US, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an eighty year old pacifist organization, has spawned a number of Religious Peace Fellowships including its newest, the Muslim Peace Fellowship. Each of these groups contributes to our understanding by producing literature on the roots of nonviolence in its teachings, underscoring leaders through the ages who have opposed war and guided social change out of these spiritual insights. Historical figures and Nobel Peace Laureates appear in all religious traditions, as do their contemporary followers. The inspiration of highly developed individuals who lead movements of social liberation based on religious principles encourages the connection

between our striving for inner peacefulness and its outward expression.

Nonviolence, however, is not of necessity tied to religious belief or expression. Dr. Gene Sharp of Harvard's Einstein Institute, one of the world's leading academic authorities on nonviolence, writes from a pragmatic, non-theistic point of view. Sharp's books focus on the history and strategic uses of nonviolent responses to political violence. A practical as well as a precise and strategic thinker, Sharp has given the movement excellent tools: his list of "One Hundred Ninety Eight Methods of Nonviolent Action," "Historical Examples of Nonviolent Struggle," and clear definitions of active nonviolence, nonviolent resistance, civil disobedience, nonviolent struggle, non-cooperation, civilian-based defense, and many other terms used by practitioners. Sharp reminds us that while we confuse "passive" behavior with nonviolence, "passive is plainly inaccurate to describe recent cases of nonviolent noncooperation and defiance." Sharp cites examples such as the nonviolent defiance of the political regimes of Burma and China, which did not result in peaceful political change of regime, but did require enormous courage, cooperation and organization by tens of thousands of participants schooled in nonviolence.

To explore the history of nonviolence and the religious and cultural roots that exist in a particular culture, we ask participants to reflect on the history of their people and perhaps to chart a "timeline" of that history, highlighting nonviolent incidents and methods. We explore problem-solving in the home and community, teasing out methods of nonviolent conflict resolution, communal mediation and negotiation practices. Additionally we investigate signs of forgiveness and reconciliation together, which vary widely from one culture to another. In workshops with African participants, one spoke of killing a goat and spilling blood together, another about spilling water on the ground together to wash away grievance and

hurt. Traditional Rwandan society utilize the custom of “hagu,” which means “lawn.” In this public space, the community gathers to mediate a conflict. In many African societies, traditional negotiation by councils of elders serves as the judicial authority. The “palaver,” or “long-talk,” is also time-honored in African villages as a method of hearing all sides of a dispute and coming to a mutually satisfying solution. Thus we honor the ancient lineage of nonviolence that is in fact rooted in all traditional societies, but overlooked, unidentified and taken for granted. By reclaiming traditional religious or cultural wisdom, participants are not “westernizing” by embracing nonviolent techniques to solve inter-communal tensions and restore harmony, but are truly utilizing what belongs to their own society.

At the same time, new ideas, techniques and infusion are added to the traditional wisdom. In Zambia, we used Attenborough’s epic film “Gandhi” with a group of young adults. Each evening we viewed one hour of the film, stopping to reflect on Gandhi’s superb strategic gifts, religious depth and unswerving commitment as he practiced nonviolence to confront the world’s then-mightiest empire. One student later wrote in his evaluation that “studying the Gandhi film was the most significant educational experience of my life.” In Sri Lanka we also showed “Romero,” the story of the Archbishop’s conscientization to the personal and structural violence of his society, and his conversion to work for the liberation of his people, for which he gave his life. Participants identified with the awakening process, the importance of committed religious leadership and the deep structural forces that keep alive the cycles of violence and revenge. The US Civil Rights Movement frequently serves as a model and case study in our workshops, because my own direct involvement and the realizations of personal and social liberation of those with whom I worked are still vivid and energizing.

In our workshops, we encourage participants to see nonviolence as

a way of life, an expression born of a deep reverence for all beings. We share experiences of personal and structural violence we have inflicted and received, followed by examples of nonviolence, our own and others. Some seminars focus on “Active Nonviolence for Social Change,” and in those we concentrate on social analysis and the tools for organizing communities, building solidarity and overcoming structural oppression. We study methods of resistance, from strikes to civil disobedience, from fasts to protests. Other seminars are more concerned with “Dialogue and Inter-Communal Conflict,” where we facilitate the learning of dialogue process with members of groups in conflict, as we do between Israelis and Palestinians. In some communities, such as recent work with Bosnian women, the need is for personal and communal healing, whereas in Nepal our workshops concentrated on developing leadership skills in indigenous communities based on the teachings of the Buddha. Many times we will be offering “Training of Trainers,” especially on a second or third visit to a region, preparing local facilitators to become the primary educators for their community. I understand all of this work as ‘peacebuilding,’ in that we increase the capacities and conditions that make peace possible. Workshops may focus on “Conflict Transformation,” where we practice skills of mediation, negotiation and communication. No two workshops are alike, as the regions, participants, needs, and stages of conflict vary enormously. And no workshop is predictable. In this method of learner-centered adult education, the agenda develops through the participation of the group and shifts as needs are identified and new realities or new conflicts emerge.

Often I wonder what we can accomplish in workshops that last only a few weeks, are facilitated by at least one outsider, understood through translators, and often take place in war-torn countries where the dangers of opposition and the reality of violence are fully present. Two years ago I went to Mugunga Camp in Goma, Zaire, then the largest refugee camp in the world,

home to 200,000 Hutus who had fled Rwanda after the genocide perpetrated by their people against the Tutsis. Two of us taught nonviolence and social change to about 100 Hutu refugees. I experienced such insignificance as I surveyed our humble offering, tiny staff, raggedy copies of handouts from Gandhi and King, and little bits of wisdom and encouragement. What difference could our presence possibly make in the magnitude of this tragedy and the ongoing suffering? We offered our hearts, taught everything that might be useful, embraced the participants who all risked greatly to attend, and left after a few weeks knowing that the Rwandan crisis needed hundreds of educators staying long periods of time to possibly effect the situation in Goma.

A year later I was invited back to the same camp. What a joy to be greeted by familiar faces who so happily showed me their tent-headquarters of “Apronovi, the Center for the Study of Nonviolence.” With enormous surprise, I discovered that 17 such centers had sprung up in the year since our last visit, all founded and staffed by our participants, each center using copies of our materials on Gandhi and King translated into both French and Kinyarwanda. This moving testimony reminded me once again that the spirit works in mysterious ways, that “small is beautiful,” and that people in the most distressed of circumstances, members of an ethnic group accused of a horrific genocide, can long for, embrace, practice and teach the perennial wisdom of nonviolence. In our violence-addicted world, where weapons of war are numberless, where minds are numbed to ever-increasing levels of violence, the call of spirit and the hopes of people still move forward, inching toward a future of less despair, more possibility, a bit of dignity.

Gandhi said that “everything you do will be insignificant, but it is very important that you do it.” With no illusions of grandeur, with very modest expectations, I embrace this particular insignificant work as my path, my teacher and my spiritual calling. I meet people of great nobility and I bow to the courage they demonstrate

in the face of unimaginable suffering. I learn from their humility and generosity. They learn from my carpet-bag of tools. Hearts touch and expand. We interconnect, then part. In the violence-filled world that engulfs the life of workshop participants, a seed has been planted. Perhaps it will grow.