

Nonviolence – A Wellspring of Hope for a World in Flames

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What does it mean to practice nonviolence in a “world in flames”? The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well gives us a clue.

John 4:7, 9, 13-14

7 There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give Me a drink.”

9 The Samaritan woman said to Him, “How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?” (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)

13-14 Jesus answered and said to her... whoever drinks of the water that I will give shall never thirst... the water that I will give will become a well of water springing up to eternal life.”

Jesus is radically countercultural. He breaks down cultural taboos by engaging a Samaritan woman. He talks about water for life, a water of the spirit, a water of power.

Today the putdown, the quip, the reductive stereotype is the norm. In a recent article in the *Star Tribune*, Karen Heller, a reporter for the *Washington Post*, describes how the ancient tensions between generations have become much sharper.

“In 2019 the baby boom was blamed for almost everything,” she observed. “An entire generation was perceived to be operating as a giant monolith, mind-melded in its intention to make young people miserable for the rest of their long lines.” Greta Thunberg, the Swedish young woman who has gained attention for her passionate warnings about climate change, was named Person of the Year last year by *Time* magazine. I don’t want to diminish the importance of her message, but I want to call attention to the intergenerational hostility she conveys. In her United Nations address

she bitterly accused older generations. “You are failing us,” she said. “But young people are starting to understand your betrayal.” Older people reciprocate. Myrna Blyth, vice president of the AARP, replied to the term “Okay Boomer,” with “Okay Millennials we’re the people that actually have the money.”

Heller identifies social media as a cause of growing hostility. Conflict is “fueled by the rapid, reductionist, and unrestrictive nature of social media, which makes it far too easy to cast verbal stones,” she says¹ Social media generates more dangers than scathing putdowns. As I will describe the Sunday after next, social media is part of a digital revolution that undermines face to face human contact and contributes to what one recent article in *Psychology Today* calls “an epidemic of loneliness.”² The solution is not to abandon technology. It is to take up nonviolence.

In challenging Prospect Park United Methodist Church to become an ambassador for nonviolence, let me recall our history.

Today, the Reconciling Ministry Network we symbolize on our weekly bulletin has more than a thousand congregations. It was founded in 1983 by a few people who wanted to welcome lesbians and gay men into full participation in the church. They chose the name to convey the need for *reconciliation* between gay and lesbian people and the rest of the church community. Prospect Park was a pioneering member.

The decision to become a Reconciling Congregation involved intense discussion. Sara Evans and I were lay leaders then and I remember well the discussions and debates which spread from sermons to coffee hours, from adult education to dinners in our homes. For more than 30 years PPUMC it has been a leader in this work.

Today our whole society needs a new reconciliation if we are to change a culture of hate to a culture of respect and good will. I hope this month's focus on nonviolence will begin another period of PPUMC leadership in Reconciliation. Today I clear away some misconceptions about King and Gandhi and describe the nonviolence philosophy I saw play out in the civil rights movement.

Awakening the Better Angels

Last fall during a celebration of the 150th anniversary of Gandhi's birth in the Twin Cities, Ajay Skaria, a young historian at the University of Minnesota who studies Gandhi, put the challenge this way:

“One of the dangers of an event like this is that we all come, pay homage to Gandhi, and go away with no change in our relation to ourselves or the world. Gandhi has become – like Martin Luther King – one of those figures whom everybody invokes, including those whose lives are opposed to everything that Gandhi stood for. Whenever I am asked to attend a Gandhi event, I worry that I might participate in this process of taming Gandhi.

Skaria says, “The challenge is to...ask: what is the nature of his nonviolence?”³ That is also the challenge for us in engaging the movement's legacy of nonviolence.

The historian Paul Taylor observes that, “It has become common to think of King's legacy as a matter of service.” This “reduces a challenging vision to superficial ethic of abstract altruism.” King believed in random acts of kindness, as the bumper sticker puts it. But as Taylor puts it, “The King of ‘MLK Day’ calls citizens more or less as they stand, simply to service the polis, more or less as it stands.”.

King's nonviolence drew not only from Gandhi's *satyagraha* but also from a theological tradition called "personalism." Personalism "stressed the sacred [and] inviolable dignity of persons" and "promoted an educational process that activated the potential of individuals within and across communities." This was a strong current of philosophy at Morehouse College, where King went as an undergraduate.

Personalism was also the philosophy of Howard Thurman, dean of Marsh Chapel and professor at Boston University where King went as a graduate student. Thurman, who had an immense influence on King, argued that "the most important thing in life for any [person] at any time is the development of [their own] best self, the incentive to actualize [their] potentials."⁴ As you can see, this recalls Abraham Lincoln's famous call for Americans in the Civil War era, filled with hatred toward each other even more acute than hostility today, to live out the "Better Angels" of their nature.

It is no surprise that John Wood, the young communications director of the Better Angels depolarization group, has become an eloquent champion of a new nonviolence. Anna sent out a video of one of John's talks entitled: "Social transformation through self-transformation."⁵

People remember nonviolence today wrongly. They believe it is pacifism —the refusal of violence in any circumstance. Even more widely they think it is a useful tactic, marches or sit-ins or civil disobedience without violence.⁶ Both are wrong as the essence of nonviolence, which is a *transformative philosophy of everyday life*. It involves spiritual, moral, and psychological disciplines that refuse to *demonize* opponents or reduce them to caricatures. It advances public love instead.

In *Stride toward Freedom*, Martin Luther King develops a profound account. Nonviolence is struggle, not inaction. It seeks to understand opponents, not to defeat or humiliate them. It distinguishes between evil actions and those who commit them, recognizing we all have potential for both good and evil. It starts with change in oneself. King wrote, “The nonviolent approach . . . first does something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it. It gives them new self-respect. It calls up resources of strength and courage they did not know they had.” Crucially, King proposes that nonviolence depends on a love he called *agape*, a Greek word used to indicate love of the stranger in the public sphere, not personal or intimate love. This is *public love*, respect for the potential all including adversaries.⁷

Nonviolent philosophy was embodied in the dignity and actions of the everyday people at the heart of the movement, including women like Dorothy Cotton and Septima Clark, leaders in the citizenship schools sponsored by King’s organization. Their example had an enormous impact on me, an angry young southerner of Scottish descent who was sharply critical of my segregationist peers and family. As Karuna Mantena describes in a new collection on King’s philosophy, nonviolence challenged hatred with a different message:

“Marches were...to be slow and deliberate. Songs and prayers cultivated unity, solidarity, and emotional resolve among protestors...to onlookers they communicated something equally important, an inner calm and resiliency that is very different from what we now associate with the paradigm of disruptive protest...Nonviolence chooses to whisper rather than scream, to draw people close and cultivate the willingness to listen.”⁸

Nonviolent philosophy was taught in hundreds of citizenship schools across the South. Working in these I saw how they generated a cross-partisan politics which the historian Charles Payne calls “developmental politics.” Put differently nonviolent politics awakens our better angels. In the citizenship schools people learned power “to,” not only power “over.”⁹ “Whether a community achieved this or that tactical objective was likely to matter less than whether the people in it came to see themselves as having the right and the capacity to have some say-so in their own lives.”¹⁰ Such power was generative, open and created, not consolidated and controlling. In 1967, King brought together public love and power:

“One of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites, so that love is identified with a resignation of power and power with a denial of love. It is this misinterpretation that caused the philosopher Nietzsche, a philosopher of the will to power, to reject the Christian concept of love. It was this same misinterpretation which induced Christian theologians to reject Nietzsche’s philosophy of the will to power in the name of the Christian idea of love. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive and love without power is sentimental and anemic.”¹¹

Public love prefigures a future good society, what King called the beloved community, what Gandhi called “constructive nonviolence.” The civil rights movement struggled to make the transition from struggle *against* segregation to development of strategies for building inclusive community. But recent nonviolent philosophy and

practices, what I call nonviolent public work, has advanced this vision. I will describe these on January 26.

I end with an example of nonviolence in action, the famous March on Washington, August 28, 1963, widely known and little understood. I was lying on my father's hotel floor in a sleeping bag the night before the march and heard King practice "I Have a Dream." The memory flows through me like a well water of life.

The march drew on a relational process taking place in communities before the event itself. As Zeynep Tufekci, a scholar of marches, put it in the *New York Times* when comparing the March on Washington in 1963 with the Women's March after Trump's inauguration in 2017, "The [1963] march drew a quarter of a million people but it represented much more effort, commitment, and preparation than would a protest of similar size today, in the world of social media such as Facebook and Twitter, cell phones, and email." Tufekci emphasized the slow process of building relationships and discussing the march in advance, far different from what takes place in today's mobilizing campaigns.¹² March preparations included extensive nonviolent trainings.

The march was not a protest. Bayard Rustin, march organizer, stressed that the goal was to "win over the middle" of society by engaging their interests and dreams, not rally the already convinced.¹³ To this end, the program notes of the march urged participants to act with dignity and discipline even if provoked:

"In a neighborhood dispute there may be stunts, rough words and hot insults, but when a whole people speaks to its government the quality of the action and the dialogue needs to reflect the worth of that people and the responsibility of that government."

The marchers walked as a “whole people” taking responsibility for “the quality of [their] action and the dialogue.”¹⁴ That is what we need again.

¹ Karen Heller, “A War of Words,” *Star Tribune*, January 5, 2020.

² Dhruv Khullar, “How Social Isolation Is Killing Us,” *New York Times* December 22, 2016; Frank Ninivaggi “Loneliness: A New Epidemic in the USA,” *Psychology Today*, Feb 12, 2019.

³ Ajay Skaria, “Thinking with Gandhi: The meaning of moral courage and the evil of equality,” ABC News Religion site, October 22, 2019.

⁴ Paul Taylor, “Moral Perfectionism,” in Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry, *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 37, and Paul Harvey, “This Theologian Helped King to See the Value of Nonviolence,” *The Smithsonian*, January 12, 2018 <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/this-theologian-helped-mlk-see-value-nonviolence-180967821/>

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BU6WoOXTcQg&feature=youtu.be>

⁶ Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action: Part One, Power and Struggle* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973); for discussions see April Carter, “The Literature on Civil Resistance,” in *Civil Resistance and Power Politics: The Experience of Non-violent Action from Gandhi to the Present*, ed. Adam Roberts and Timothy Garton Ash (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 25–42; and Mark Engler and Paul Engler, *This Is an Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt Is Shaping the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Nation Books, 2016).

⁷ From Harry C. Boyte and Marie-Louise Ström, “Nonviolent Civic Life Worksheet,” January 24, 2017.

⁸ Karuna Mantena, “Showdown for Nonviolence: The Theory and Practice of Nonviolent Politics,” in Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry, *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), pp. 87, 97.

⁹ Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 68.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Martin Luther King, “Where Do We Go from Here?” delivered to the convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, August 16, 1967.

http://Stanford.edu/group/King/publications/speeches/Where_do_we_go_from_here.html .

¹² Zeynep Tufekci, “Does a Protest’s Size Matter?,” *New York Times*, January 27, 2017.

¹³ For a splendid description of Rustin’s strategic vision for the march, see CNN, *We Were There*.

¹⁴ The roots of the march are detailed in Charles Euchner’s *Nobody Turn Me Round: A People’s History of the March on Washington* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010) and also the CNN documentary, *We Were There: The March on Washington—An Oral History*, hosted by Don Lemon, 2013, cnnpressroom.blogs.cnn.com/2013/08/01/we-were-there-the-march-on-washington-an-oral-history-debuts-friday-august-23-at-1000pm-et-pt/. Program notes in author’s possession.