

First Class
University Essays

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CLASS OF NONVIOLENCE

Nonviolence as a Way of Life

By Robert McGlasson

Most of us are familiar with the idea of nonviolence. It has been a powerful method for bringing about political and social change in movements led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in this country, and by Gandhi in India.

In this article I would like to discuss another, more inclusive view of nonviolence, which treats nonviolence not only as a political method, but as a way of life. Under this broader view, nonviolence is an active belief in the force of Love and Truth which is God's Spirit in each of us. It requires a prayerful disarming of and noncooperation with all forms and manifestations of humiliation, violence and hatred.

Such a view of nonviolence immediately shifts our focus from the political arena, where we are most accustomed to thinking in terms of nonviolence, to our daily lives and relationships with our family, our closest friends, our coworkers, as well as those whom we perceive to be our opponents.

And most importantly, at the outset we are faced with the violence within ourselves. The process of disarmament and noncooperation must begin with a laying down of the psychological weapons that we stockpile in our own hearts; otherwise, to act out of anger, jealousy, defensiveness, ill-will, hatred, or violence is to cooperate from the very start with those forces which we would seek to overcome and change in our political activities.

Nonviolence and Self-examination

A first principle of nonviolence as a way of life, therefore, is that we begin by examining and seeking to change our own hearts and actions. The first step, and one that must be taken each day, is a turning inward, a perusal of the soul to discover and lay open both the seeds and the wounds of violence deep within our own hearts.

When we subject our hearts to careful and honest scrutiny, we begin to see the petty violence that is legion within us—our bitterness against our family and friends; our resentment toward persons who have wronged us; our defensiveness toward those with whom we feel threatened or unworthy; our judgmentalness toward people who are different from us or who have different points of view; and our hatred for the very persons whose hearts we hope to change in the name of “nonviolence.”

We are faced at once with the recognition that we are connected to all of humanity; not just the part of humanity that is love and unity, but also the part that is hate and separation. We see that the lies told by the politician or the lawyer are rooted in the same dishonesty and deception that we practice in our own lives; that the racial prejudices harbored by our suspicious neighbors are our own prejudices; that the violence on the streets of our cities, or within our families is our own hostility and violence; that the hatred, division, and death that is perpetrated by

our churches and our governments is the same violence and hatred and ill-will that we plant, cultivate, and harvest each day in our own hearts, oftentimes toward those whom we love and care for the most. In short, even a quick look inside helps us to appreciate our direct participation in and cooperation with the very forces we would hope to change.

As a lawyer defending prisoners who are subjected to cruel conditions of confinement, especially those on death row throughout the South, I can attest to my own participation in many types of violence. At times my hatred for those who would seek to execute my clients is at least as intense as the hatred and anger that motivates their support for the death penalty.

And all of us are familiar with the “us against them” mentality that is pervasive in the “nonviolent” peace and justice movement. Who among us has not experienced the petty squabbling, territorialism, and ego conflicts in their work with groups committed to nonviolence.

When we take this first step in a nonviolent way of life we are confronted with the inescapable reality of our own complicity in violence. It is just at this point, however, that the seeds of nonviolence are planted within us. It is precisely when we acknowledge publicly the painful reality of our own contempt and ill-will that nonviolence as a way of life begins.

For at this crucial level of self-awareness, we start to understand that we are connected to those whom we perceive to be the worst among us and toward whom we are most contemptuous. Our

own hearts begin to change from hatred and misunderstanding to love and knowing compassion. The separateness starts to wither, and the sisterhood and brotherhood of humanity grows, right in our own hearts and bodies. This change is by definition the beginning of nonviolence as a way of life.

Recognizing our own violence is one thing (and for most of us with monstrous egos this is no menial task), but getting rid of it is another. We in the advantaged world who have all the resources that we need for building up a life of luxury have few if any resources for learning how to tear down the walls that separate us and the violence that consumes us.

Nonviolence in Response to Violence

Although nonviolence deals as much with our relationship to our friends as it does with our relationship to our opponents, nonviolence meets its most demanding test in response to hatred and violence. Nevertheless, if nonviolence is God’s will for us, then we must learn to accept suffering at the hands of those who do violence to us and to our brothers and sisters. This is a third principle of nonviolence: the necessity of gladly and humbly accepting the insults, arrests, and perhaps worse, inflicted on us by those whose hearts we want so badly to change.

Such a response is required under the first principle of nonviolence. If nonviolence means noncooperation with all forms of violence, then to meet violence with more violence would violate this first principle.

Also, a nonviolent response is the only one that will work a lasting change in our opponents’ hearts. Voluntarily taking

on the suffering inflicted upon us by our opponents is the means by which we can change the hatred in them to love. That is, the officials and persons who are putting us into jails, or hurling insults at our lifestyles and values, or depriving our brothers and sisters of necessary food, clothing, shelter, and even life will lay down their ill-will and become recruits for justice, peace, and sharing when they come to see the injustice of their ways through our joyful acceptance of the suffering they bring upon us. I am not advocating passive submission to evil and oppression, but rather the opposite.

Nonviolence does not mean, for example, that women should submit to the violence of men, or blacks to whites, or even children to adults. In fact, this would be passive cooperation rather than active noncooperation with violence. The type of suffering to which we should gladly submit is that inflicted upon us because of our noncooperation. It is suffering inflicted upon us by our enemies because we refuse to cooperate with their violence that will ultimately cause them to see the evil in their ways and change.

Some may differ with the view that nonviolence as a way of life necessarily requires us to take on and be subjected to suffering. I believe it is a necessity for several reasons. First, I think it is clear that we must empty our bodies and our hearts to make room for God's Spirit. For those of us in the advantaged world who live in a luxury of plenty, we carry much sin and guilt for our advantages and for the oppression we and our forebearers have perpetrated and relied upon to gain it. For most of us who have so much and who have obtained so much through dishonesty, robbery, slavery,

and mass slaughter, we have much to rid from our bodies and souls. Suffering, at least in my experience, helps me to empty myself of this baggage and to make room for the forgiving and compassionate Heart of God.

Second, because there are so many people in this world who themselves are born into a life of poverty, hunger, and oppression, nonviolence requires that we take on some of this suffering to connect to these suffering millions. If the world were different, perhaps we would not need to suffer in order to be in community with our sisters and brothers. But as it is, how can we hope to connect with all people in the world, to really see them as family, when we live with such great disparities in daily habits, consumptions, and agendas?

Finally, voluntary suffering brings strength and discipline, characteristics which are absolute requirements for any recruit for the nonviolent life who hopes to face his or her opponents with compassion. Without the fearless strength and discipline born of regular suffering, it would be impossible to face our opponents, who will want to cause us more pain and heartache, with the courage to care rather than the cowardliness of hostility. Just as a warring soldier recruit must be trained to become warlike through practice war-making, so too a person who wishes to face life's struggles nonviolently must become fearless of suffering through suffering.

Joy, Fulfillment, and Nonviolence

With all this talk about suffering, many might ask whether there is any room for joy and fulfillment in a nonviolent way of life. In fact, my experience and my belief

are that such voluntary suffering has as its source the same communion with God and with God's Spirit as joy, peace, and fulfillment. If by taking on suffering we are truly creating space within our hearts and our lives for God, and if it is true that God's Spirit grows within us in our suffering, then joy and fulfillment are inevitable.

One of the most profound experiences I have had of the joy in voluntary suffering comes from a death penalty trial in which I was involved over a year ago. The case was being tried in a small town in a rural part of the state of Georgia. Several lawyers in our office had spent literally months preparing to represent our client against the most notorious prosecutor/judge team in this part of the country. We knew from the outset that we were outsiders in this community, both in terms of where we lived and in our views about the right result for this trial.

During the trial we worked around the clock. We took one beating after another from the judge, who was at the beck and call of the prosecutor, and who at one point threatened to put us in jail and have us disbarred for the rigorous way we were defending our client. Even writing about this time brings back the familiar pain in my stomach: the gnawing loneliness, the fear of failure, the confusion of hoping to be able to turn the tide in this case, while knowing that the task was too great.

I remember when the jury returned to the courtroom late Saturday night after its deliberations, and the prosecutor read the verdict, sentencing our client to death. For a while I blocked the pain, as we tried to comfort the mother and family, who had hours before sat weeping on the witness

stand telling the jury why their brother, their friend, their son, should not be put to death for a crime he committed when he was just barely 17 years old.

The lawyers from my office then went to the jail to talk with our client about appeals, before heading back to Atlanta. While we stood in the waiting room of that tiny jail, mostly in silence, the pain rose up in me like an uncontrollable flood. As I wept, I reached out to find the solid, warm, comforting bodies of my colleagues, my friends, holding me as I wrenched with grief, and then finally as I grew limp with relief.

In reflecting on this time, I can see how much suffering we took on in that trial. The reverberations of pain still echo deep in my heart. And yet the joy of that moment of eternity in that dirty old jail, the joy of suffering to the point where your body and soul completely collapse in the love and support and forgiveness of your community can only be described as the joy of God's Spirit.

God was with us in that jail. God was in us, and in between us, filling the emptiness we had created through many long hours and days of suffering. And God is still in that empty space.

Nonviolence is also a commitment to Truth, just as God is the Truth. If Truth is our goal, then we are less likely to harbor violent attitudes toward those with whom we differ most strongly. First, we will be more open to hearing another's point of view, for we know we do not have a monopoly on the ultimate Truth. Second, when we have prayerfully searched our hearts and minds and come to a deeply held belief in some Truth which another would

ridicule or even oppose with violence, we will respond with love and compassion rather than heated passion. We will be able to respond nonviolently only because, in our soulful searching, we have already encountered these forces of violence and hatred. We will be able to see that we are connected to our would-be enemies, even at times, to their delusion, and so we will understand and act out of that understanding with persistence and patient strength.

Finally, because nonviolence means commitment to Truth, and because it requires connecting ourselves to the world, we should not be afraid to open our souls and our lives for public scrutiny. The more private our lives are, the more we are likely to continue to operate in the delusional vacuum of selfhood, cut off from those with whom we share deep in our hearts the closest bond and identity, which is God's Spirit. Openness to our human family means allowing others to challenge us, to correct us when we are wrong, to forgive us when we mess up, to support us in times of weakness, and to know our thoughts and views and motivations.

If We Listen Well

By Edward Guinan

For too long we have considered peace as the absence of conflict. We have approached the issue with this limited perspective and have directed our attention to the prevailing conflict of the moment, attempting to discover ways of reducing the destructiveness of the event. This approach is both necessary and desirable, but insufficient as we continue to approach the problem in a fragmented and isolated way. We continue to deal in symptomatic terms as if war and destruction and violence are the extensions and natural outgrowths of malignant attitudes, values, relationships, and beliefs that we continue to embrace.

Peace

Conflict will always be an integral part of human life but our methods of dealing with it need to change. We must be willing to develop and ongoing critical view of our values, operating premises and relationships, and a sensitivity to those about us.

Peace demands that one anticipate the effects of his views and actions on others and the unifying or destructive effects they may have. Most importantly one comes to realize that the “end” does not justify the “means”: we get what we do, not what we hope for or intend. You cannot improve a man through punishment, nor can you bring peace through war or brotherhood through brutalization.

Finally one comes to appreciate the reality that there can be not “wes” and “theys” in our lives but only brothers and

sisters – all children of God – all sacred and dignified. Destruction of any one of these God-gifts means a certain destruction of oneself, and a mystery that is gone forever from this small, fragile world.

Violence

Violence can be seen as destructive communication. Any adequate definition must include physical, verbal, symbolic, psychological and spiritual displays of hostility and hatred. The definition must include both our acts and our inactions and that which is done directly to people or indirectly to them through what they esteem. Many forms will take on a combination of these characteristics.

Violence should then include physical acts against another (i.e., the range of acts from personal attack to war which violate human autonomy and integrity); verbal attacks that demean and humiliate; symbolic acts that evoke fear and hostility; psychological attitudes that deny one’s humanity and equality (legal, institutional, and moral); spiritual postures that communicate racism, inferiority, and worthlessness (i.e., beliefs and values that demean or categorize). Violence then becomes a dynamic rather than merely an act.

Hunger, poverty, squalor, privilege, powerlessness, riches, despair, and vicarious living are forms of violence – forms that a society approves and perpetuates. We have been too willing to discuss violence in terms of ghetto uprisings, student unrest,

street thievery, and trashing, and have been unwilling to direct our attention to the more pathological types of violence that are acceptable – the types that daily crush the humanity and life from untold millions of brothers and sisters.

In the sixties we spoke with alarm of the “increase of violence” in our society, which may have been a half-truth; violence became more democratic in the decade of the sixties. Instead of resting exclusively with those who construct and maintain ghettos, keep food from the mouths of children, and coerce the young through educational programming and into war, violence became the tool of a widely divergent group seeking equality, power and redress.

Under the umbrella of violence there reside two distinctively different phenomena. First, there is the violence of men and women who act out of frustration, hopelessness and anger in an attempted grasp at life – the act of the slave breaking the chains, which is understandable and inevitable as long as some humans are in bondage. The other type of violence is the violence of the respectable, the violence of the powerful that seeks personal gain and privilege by maintaining inhuman conditions. It is the violence of the board rooms, legislators and jurists – the white collar violence that puts surplus milk down sewers, robs workers of their wages, maintains prisons of infamy, lies to children, discards the weak and old, and insist that some should half-live while others rape and ravage the earth. This latter type of violence is what we must become aware of and actively dismantle if the future is to hold any possibilities for peace and a world where all men and women have a right

to live and develop and participate by reason of their humanity, not by reason of their class, productive ability or shrewdness.

Nonviolence

Nonviolence cannot then be understood as passivity or indifference to the dynamic of life (i.e., communication between men). It is not the posture of removing oneself from conflict that marks the truly nonviolent man, but, quite on the contrary, it is placing oneself at the heart of that dynamic. Nonviolence means taking the responsibility for aiding the direction of human communication and brotherhood. Nonviolence means an active opposition to those acts and attitudes that demean and brutalize another and it means an active support of those values and expressions that foster human solidarity. Nonviolence, in essence, means taking a stand in favor of life and refusing to delegate individual moral responsibility to another person or group; it means taking control of one’s life and aiding others in doing likewise. Nonviolence is an attempt to find truth and love even in the midst of hatred, destruction and pride.

As the means cannot be separated from the desired ends, nonviolence cannot be separated from peace, for it is the value system and dynamic that makes peace possible.

The Times

The past has not been given to us; it is not ours to breathe or exhale. We live with the smallest perimeter, which we call today, and into this brief moment, into this small space we beckon and command the future.

These are not good times, but good times do not mold great people. The sins of our excesses and arrogance can destroy us, or these failings can humble us to sainthood. Such are the times.

If the great virtues and teachings of the martyrs, resisters, and saints are relegated to a utopian or future-oriented condition, then indeed, they have little value for us at all. But the great heritage that this “community of liberation” has left us is not some unreal, impossible dream. It is this: Love can, and must, be lived today, despite the pain and difficulty of such life. Tomorrow will carry the tenderness and peace which we live now. Do not compromise today. It is all, dear brothers and sisters, that we have. This assembled community of peacemakers has paid dearly for their belief in such words and their lives form a chronicle of inspiration. They have been demeaned and laughed at; they have been dragged through jails and courtrooms and prisons; a few have paid the price of peace with their lives.

The Themes and People

The first signs of a violent society appear in its basic inability to communicate. Words lose their meaning and become hollow. They are twisted and deformed as tools of manipulation and servitude. Noble words such as truth, goodness, and love may come to mean despotism, obedience and death. Peace becomes another name for multiheaded war missiles, and nonviolence is wrenched to mean silence, or lack of

opposition, to thievery, privilege and the status quo.

The Spiritual

A line from a contemporary song pleads” “Help me make it through the night.” We find our existence framed in terms of aloneness rather than solidarity, struggles rather than consummations; departures rather than arrivals, questions rather than answers, and most importantly, night rather than daylight.

We cry out for fear the night will absorb us, yet we are unsure of any presence; we sing so as not to be crushed, yet the tones reflect the endless chant of the nightingales; we dance so as not to fall prey to these awesome interludes of emptiness; and most of all we pray so as not to lie. And these are the words we may use: “Help us make it through the night.” Yet in the aloneness and struggle, in the departures and questions, in the cries and songs, in the dances and prayers there are imprints of heroic men and women, there are weavings of beauty, there are caresses of God. Traced through the faces of the old are messages of dignity and tenderness. The wail of the newborn is proof of silent breaths conspiring together. Each “forgive me” and “I love you” is prefaced by the warm tides of grace. Saints are born in Harlem in precise rhythm. Young people hurdle concrete mazes to touch and remember. Children weep for lost birds. Monks and mystics pray the sun up in the morning and call the evening dew. There are still wonderment, wishes and dreams.

You must never forget that you are the brother or the sister of a carpenter and the child of a king. You must remember that all life is unfulfilled without you. You must

learn that life is mysterious and sacred and that you must never, never destroy it. And if you listen well you will hear the chanting of others, and they are singing to you: “Help us make it through the night.”

Nonviolent Response to Assault

By Gerard A. Vanderhaar

I've never been mugged – at least not yet. I have often thought, though, about what I would do if someone jumped out of the shadows with a knife and demanded my wallet. Or if that pair of teenagers on the isolated New York subway platform swaggered over and asked for twenty dollars. Or when I was stalled on an empty freeway a car suddenly pulled in front of me and the driver stepped out pointing a gun.

I don't know what I would do, and I'll never know until something like that happens. But right now, when I can think about it coherently, I know what I would like to do: remain calm. I would like to save my life, of course, and avoid whatever would trigger violence in my assailants. I would want to do whatever would diffuse the confrontation and turn it around.

Like automobile accidents, fires, tornados, and earthquakes, the possibility of personal assault is a fact of life today. We are all potential victims of a sudden attack on our persons, our possessions, our life. Everyone should be prepared to face it.

Conventional wisdom says that if we can't get away, we should either submit or fight back strongly. "Save your skin." Self-preservation is nature's first law, we're told. Get by with the least damage to ourselves. An empty wallet is better than a slit throat. Losing one's virtue is better than losing one's life.

Or we are advised to use force if possible. A Memphis police lieutenant who runs clinics on how to cope with rape gives this advice: "First, try to escape or scare away the assailant by wrenching free

or yelling. If the criminal doesn't let go, then you either have to give in, or hurt him in the most effective and efficient manner possible." This means gouge out an eye. Kick hard at the groin. Shoot, if you have a gun, and shoot to kill. His advice has a point for people not sensitive to nonviolence or not practiced in its ways. Essentially he offers the two traditional modes of survival in time of danger: flight or fight.

If we really believe, however, that active nonviolence is an effective alternative to flight or fight in other areas of life, we need to explore how we can respond nonviolently when an assault occurs. Here are some true stories about people who were not experienced in nonviolence, not committed to ahimsa, but who did just the right nonviolent thing at the right time.

Three events

A woman with two children in a disabled car late one night on the New Jersey Turnpike looked up to see a man pointing a gun through her window. He ordered her to let him into the car. Instead of panicking, she looked him in the eye and, like an angry mother, commanded, "You put that gun away and get in your car and push me to the service area. And I mean right now!" He looked startled, put the gun away, went back to his car, and did as ordered, pushed her car to the service area.

A colleague of mine walking late one winter afternoon was jumped by two

young men hiding in the bushes under a viaduct. They demanded money. He said he didn't have any. They began punching him, repeating their demand for money. He felt helpless and didn't know what to do. Then it flashed into his mind to call for the only assistance he could think of. He rolled his eyes and started shouting, "Jesus help me. Jesus help me!" And they stopped hitting him and looked at him as if he were crazy. And they ran away.

A lady drove into the parking garage of Memphis' largest hospital one afternoon to visit a friend. As she eased her car into a space she noticed a strange-looking man lurking nearby. No one else was in sight. She usually kept a gun in her glove compartment, she said later, but that afternoon she had left home without it. She had to think fast. She got out of the car, and as the man came over, she looked squarely at him and said in as firm a voice as she could muster, "I'm so glad there's a man around. Could you walk me to the elevator?" He replied meekly, "Yes, ma'am." She thanked him, got on the elevator alone - and practically collapsed out of fear and relief.

Although none of the three people were committed to nonviolence, they had improvised what we recognize as a true nonviolent response. They did not act like victims. They engaged the potential assailants as human beings, and in two of the incidents managed to evoke a sense of decency that resulted in their being helped rather than hurt.

Since we are faced with the possibility of being subject to assault - I prefer to say "subject to" assault rather than "victim of" - there is much we can

do nonviolently to keep ourselves from becoming victims.

Prevention

It is very nonviolent, not to mention practical, to do everything we reasonably can to avoid being attacked in the first place. This includes locking doors, walking with others rather than alone, avoiding high risk areas, and being alert to potential danger wherever we are.

For a person tuned to nonviolence, prevention is not being cowardly, but realistic/ We are not helping ourselves or any potential assailants in the vicinity by naively thinking that everything will be all right all the time. Out of ahimsa, the desire for non-harm, we need to avoid making ourselves easy objects for attack. We should not tempt others to attack us.

If we see an attack coming, we should avoid it or seek cover. A woman in Hungerford, England, who was at the scene when a gunman began firing his rifle at marketplace strollers, killing sixteen people said she survived because she "dove for cover."

Our safety precautions send a strong signal to anyone who would do us harm. It is not that we are scared, but that we are alert and prepared to take care of ourselves. Two strange men entered an aerobics class in which my wife was participating and began talking loudly, distracting the exercisers. No one knew what they wanted, but they seemed capable of creating mischief. One of the exercisers went over to speak to them. He told them quietly how serious the class was, and that anyone who wanted to take part had to sign a waiver form and pay a fee. They were

welcome to join if they wanted. He didn't accuse or threaten; he just spoke straightforwardly, matter-of-factly. They listened, saw his seriousness, then turned away and left the room. No trouble. That was an exercise in prevention.

Restraint

If we are against an attacker who is crazed by drug or drink, or who is schizophrenic, or temporarily insane, nonviolent human interaction is nearly impossible. If we have the opportunity, restraint may be our only recourse.

One man told me about his wife who had been mentally ill. "I looked into her eyes, and she seemed like she wasn't there," he said. She would scream and curse and throw things and was incapable of listening to anyone. She refused to see a doctor or do anything to help herself. Then one night, in one of her fits, she took a knife from the kitchen and started towards their child's bedroom. "That was the end of the line," he said. "I had to stop her." He bounded across the room and, as gently as possible but as firmly as necessary, he wrapped one arm around her from behind, grabbed the wrist of the hand that held the knife and squeezed until she dropped it. Then, still holding her, he dialed the emergency telephone number and waited for the ambulance to take her to the hospital. He said it was the hardest thing he ever had to do in his life.

When I think of restraining somebody, nonviolently, I would like to do it as strongly and effectively - and as lovingly - as that man did his wife.

Self-Possession

As a remote preparation, long before any attack occurs, we can sharpen our ability for an effective nonviolent response by increasing the power of our personhood. We believe that we are important, we are valuable, and we want others to believe it about themselves. We are not victims; we are not cowering and cringing before life's challenges, fearfully looking over our shoulder to see what might be pursuing us. We stand straight, eyes calm, alert, moving ahead. We walk confidently, not with cockiness, which is a way of compensating for insecurity, but in a straightforward and open manner. We are not rash or brash; we don't take unnecessary risks, blind to danger. We are who we are, and we present ourselves to the world that way.

The caricature of the swaggering sheriff with a pistol strapped on one side, a heavy flashlight on the other, a Billy club dangling from his belt, so loaded down that he walks with his elbows pointed outward, is the image of a fearful man, so lacking in self-confidence that he needs all this hardware to protect himself.

If we are so dominated by fear that we arm ourselves to hurt those who would attack us, we have sunk to the level of the assaulter. We have become like the enemy in our desperation to overcome the enemy.

In principle, people committed to nonviolence don't carry weapons. It is because we believe in ahimsa, but

it is also because we believe that in a crisis our personal ability is more effective than a gun. Truth, righteousness, and readiness are powerful nonviolent weapons. Armed with these, our personal power increases.

These weapons, more than guns and knives, have a deterrent effect on a would-be attacker. Think of a robber lurking in a doorway late at night watching potential marks approaching down the street. The robber will want to pick out those who look like easy victims: timid, uncertain, fearful, unprotected. Someone who appears in command, confident, will not be as appealing a target. If I am this person, I'm likely to be passed over in favor of an easier target (and I'll probably never know how close I came to being attacked.)

A large-statured friend of mine, a long-time peace activist, wasn't passed over once. In a small town in South Dakota, on a sidewalk in full daylight he was suddenly faced with a much smaller man flashing a knife and demanding money. My friend, who has very little money anyway, said that the first thing he thought of was the incongruity of their sizes. "All I could do was laugh," he said. He didn't feel any fear, although later he said he was surprised he hadn't. His self-confidence was deep. The assailant glanced up at him, looked puzzled, then turned and ran away.

If an attack does occur, this kind of self-possession, this awareness of our personal power, this confidence in our nonviolent armor is the foundation of defense. But it's only the foundation. An understanding of what is likely to happen and some practice in nonviolent techniques can give us a truly effective defense against personal assault.

Human Nature Isn't Inherently Violent

By Alfie Kohn

Peace activists can tell when it's coming. Tipped off by a helpless shrug or a patronizing smile, they brace themselves to hear the phrase once again. "Sure, I'm in favor of stopping the arms race. But aren't you being idealistic? After all, aggression is just" – here it comes – "part of human nature."

Like the animals, ~ "red in tooth and claw," as Tennyson put it – human beings are thought to be unavoidably violent creatures. Surveys of adults, undergraduates, and high school students have found that about 60 percent agree with this statement. "Human nature being what it is, there will always be war." It may be part of our society's folk wisdom, but it sets most of the expert's heads to shaking. Take the belief, popularized by Sigmund Freud and animal researcher Konrad Lorenz, that we have within us, naturally and spontaneously, a reservoir of aggressive energy. This force, which builds by itself, must be periodically drained off – by participating in competitive sports, for instance – lest we explode into violence.

It is an appealing model because it is easy to visualize. It is also false. John Paul Scott, professor emeritus at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio, has written: "All of our present data indicate that fighting behavior among higher mammals, including man, originates in external stimulation and that there is no evidence of spontaneous internal stimulation."

Clearly, many individuals – and whole cultures – manage quite well without

behaving aggressively, and there is no evidence of the inexorable buildup of pressure this "hydraulic" model would predict.

The theory also predicts that venting aggressive energy should make us less aggressive – an effect known as "catharsis," which follows Aristotle's idea that we can be purged of unpleasant emotions by watching tragic dramas. But one study after another has shown that we are likely to become more violent after watching or participating in such pastimes.

Although the hydraulic model has been discredited, the more general belief in an innate human propensity for violence has not been so easily shaken. Among the arguments one hears is these: Animals are aggressive and we cannot escape the legacy of our evolutionary ancestors; human history is dominated by tales of war and cruelty, and certain areas of the brain and particular hormones are linked to aggression, proving a biological basis for such behavior.

First, we should be cautious in drawing lessons from other species to explain our own behavior, given the mediating force of culture and our capacity for reflection.

But even animals are not as aggressive as some people think – unless the term "aggression" includes killing to eat. Organized group aggression is rare in other species, and the aggression that does exist is typically a function of the environment in which animals find themselves.

Scientists have discovered that

altering animals' environment, or the way they are reared, can have a profound impact on the level of aggression found in virtually all species. Furthermore, animals cooperate both within and among species far more than many of us may assume on the basis of watching nature documentaries.

When we turn to human history, we find an alarming number of aggressive behaviors, but we do not find reason to believe the problem is innate. Here are some of the points made by critics of biological determinism:

- Even if a given behavior is universal, we cannot automatically conclude that it is part of our biological nature. All known cultures may produce pottery, but that does not mean that there is a gene for pottery-making.

- Aggression is no where near universal. Many hunter-gatherer societies in particular are entirely peaceful. And the cultures that are “closer to nature” would be expected to be the most warlike if the proclivity for war were really part of that nature. Just the reverse seems to be true.

- While it is indisputable that wars have been fought, the fact that they seem to dominate our history may say more about how history is presented than about what actually happened.

- Many people have claimed that human nature is aggressive after having lumped together a wide range of emotions and behavior under the label of aggression. While cannibalism, for example, is sometimes perceived as aggression, it might represent a religious ritual rather than an expression of hostility.

It is true that the presence of some hormones or the stimulation of

certain sections of the brain has been experimentally linked with aggression. But after describing these mechanisms in some detail, K.E. Moyer, a physiologist at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh, emphasizes that “aggressive behavior is stimulus-bound. That is, even though the neural system specific to a particular kind of aggression is well activated, the behavior does not occur unless an appropriate target is available (and even then) it can be inhibited.”

Regardless of the evolutionary or neurological factors said to underlie aggression, “biological” simply does not mean “unavoidable.” The fact that people voluntarily fast or remain celibate shows that even hunger and sex drives can be overridden.

All this concerns the matter of aggressiveness in general. The idea that war in particular is biologically determined is even more far-fetched.

To begin with, we tend to make generalizations about the whole species on the basis of our own experience. “People in a highly warlike society are likely to overestimate the propensity toward war in human nature,” says Donald Greenberg, a sociologist at the University of Missouri.

The historical record, according to the Congressional Research Service, shows the United States is one of the most warlike societies on the planet, having intervened militarily around the world more than 150 times since 1850. Within such a society, not surprisingly, the intellectual traditions supporting the view that aggression is more a function of nature than nurture have found a ready audience. The mass media also play a significant role in perpetuating

outdated views on violence, according to Jeffrey Goldstein, a psychologist at Temple University.

Because it is relatively easy to describe and makes for a snappier news story, reporters seem to prefer explanations of aggression that invoke biological necessity, he says. An international conference of experts concluded in 1986 that war is not an inevitable part of human nature. When one member tried to convince reporters that this finding was newsworthy, few news organizations in the United States were interested. One reporter told him, "Call us back when you find a gene for war."

Leonard Eron, a psychologist at the University of Illinois in Chicago, observes, "TV teaches people that aggressive behavior is normative, that the world around you is a jungle when it is actually not so." In fact, research at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communications has shown that the more television an individual watches, the more likely he or she is to believe that "most people would take advantage of you if they got the chance."

The belief that violence is unavoidable, while disturbing at first glance, actually holds a curious attraction for some people. It also allows individuals to excuse their own acts of aggression by suggesting that they have little choice.

"In order to justify, accept, and live with war, we have created a psychology that makes it inevitable," says Dr. Bernard Lown, co-chairman of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, which received the Nobel peace Prize in 1985. "It is a rationalization for accepting war as a

system of resolving human conflict."

To understand these explanations for the war-is-inevitable belief is to realize its consequences. Treating any behavior as inevitable sets up a self-fulfilling prophecy: By assuming we are bound to be aggressive, we are more likely to act that way and provide evidence for the assumption. People who believe that humans are naturally aggressive may also be unlikely to oppose particular wars.

The evidence suggests, then, that humans do have a choice with respect to aggression and war. To an extent, such destructiveness is due to the mistaken assumption that we are helpless to control an essentially violent nature.

"We live in a time," says Lown, "when accepting this as inevitable is no longer possible without courting extinction."

From: Detroit Free Press, August 21, 1988

Axioms of Nonviolence

By Lanzo del Vasto

“Peace” is a strong word. It has the same root as “pact” and presupposes agreement confirmed by sworn faith and the law. It has the same root as “pay” (pacare means to “appease”) and so implies measured compensation. It is an act, an act that costs an effort. It belongs to the same family as “compact” and implies solidity and coherence.

This simple consideration of the meaning of words reveals the oneness of peace with justice which is stability, balance, and the law.

Everyone knows that injustice makes peace impossible, for injustice is a state of violence and disorder which cannot and must not be maintained. It asserts itself through violence, holds sway through violence, and leads to the violence of revolt, which shows that if justice is the reason for peace, it is at the same time the cause of revolution and war, acts that always draw their justification from the defense or conquest of rights and the abolition of injustice.

But we started off from justice as the foundation of peace, and here we come to justice as the cause of all conflict. Are there two justices then?

Yes, the true and the false.

The true, which is one as truth is one. True justice is at one with truth. It is above everything, in everything, inscribed in the order of things, exists by itself and is God.

False justice is double and contradictory and, like mental aberration,

engenders illusion and idols. But men cling to these phantoms more tenaciously than to reality, and so are tormented and torn asunder and hurled against each other in the perpetual war called history.

Let no one say of justice what is commonly said of truth: that it is inaccessible. Say rather that it is inevitable, obvious as light to the eye, and all error claims its support.

How does true justice lapse into false? By means of these three arguments:

1. That we have the right to render evil for evil and to call the evil rendered true and just.
2. That the end justifies the means and good ends justify bad means.
3. That reason, agreement, and consent do not suffice to maintain justice and that it is just to have recourse to fear, compulsion, and force, not only in exceptional cases, but by means of permanent institutions.

These three arguments are tenets of faith for the common man, for the good as for the wicked. They are never called into doubt, never discussed, and on them people base their civil law and rules of behavior.

It has seldom been noticed that they are self-contradictory and can only lead to endless conflict.

Therefore justice and truth require us to disentangle ourselves from these arguments and their consequences. We must free ourselves from them under penalty of death. For the fact is that if today we cannot find other means of solving

human conflict, we are all condemned to die.

The good news that must be announced in our time is that these means have been found. They are the arms of justice, or active revolutionary nonviolence.

The nonviolent can be distinguished by their refusal of the three arguments everyone repeats in order to justify violence. Nonviolence says:

1. No, evil is not corrected or arrested by an equal evil, but doubled, and to have recourse to it is to become a link in the chain of evil.

2. No, the end does not justify the means. Evil means spoil the best causes. If the end is just, the means must be so too.

3. No, fear, compulsion, and force can never establish justice, any more than they can teach us truth. They can only twist conscience. Now, the righting of conscience is what is called justice.

The nonviolent directly adhere to and act from the justice that is one, universal, and as simple as two-and-two-make-four. Hunger and thirst for justice are what make them act. They are servants of justice and do not make justice their servant so as to justify acts dictated by the motives mentioned earlier or reactions dictated by the adversary's attitude.

That is why Gandhi names direct nonviolent action "satyagraha," that is to say, an act of fidelity to truth. The victory the nonviolent seek is to convince the enemy and bring about a change of heart, to convert him by fighting him and, in the end, to make a friend of him.

Is the thing possible? How can it be done? Who has ever done it? In what circumstances, and with what results? I shall

not answer here. Whole books have been written on the subject.

The first thing to learn and understand what it is; the second, to try it out for oneself. But it cannot be learned like arithmetic or grammar. Learning and understanding nonviolence are done from within. So the first steps are self-recollection, reflection on the principles, and conversion, that is to say, turning back against the common current.

For if the purpose of your action is to make the adversary change his mind without forcing him to, how can you do so unless you yourself are converted? If the purpose is to wrest the enemy from his hatred and his evil by touching his conscience, how can you do so if you have not freed yourself from hatred, evil, and lack of conscience? You want to bring peace into the world, which is very generous of you; peace to the uttermost ends of the earth, for you are great-hearted, but do you know how to bring peace into your own house? Is there peace in your heart? Can one give what one does not possess?

As for justice, can you establish it between yourself and others, even those who are strangers and hostile to you, if you cannot succeed with your nearest and dearest? And what is more, if you cannot establish it between you and yourself?

But do not jump to the discouraging conclusion that in order to enter nonviolent combat one must be a saint, or a wise man, or perfect. This form of combat is for one and for all, and we can enter it as we are, with our indignities (and all the better if we are fully conscious of them.) But we should know that in principle, if not in fact, we must prepare ourselves as for all struggle.

Here, however, preparation must be inward.

On the other hand, the struggle itself and the tribulations it involves are exercises that will help our transformation, and self-mastery is a pledge of victory over evil.

Peace and justice are harmonious adjustment which does not come about by itself but is the fruit of effort and work upon oneself, before and during confrontation. That is why Vinoba says, "The training ground for nonviolence is a man's heart."

But drill is not enough, nor courage, nor reason. There must also be music and a sense of harmony.

Let us proceed to the other tenets of every man's faith:

4. All violence, including murder, becomes lawful in the case of self-defense. Another argument that no one call in doubt. Do you? Yes. Because self-defense is legitimate, a right, and a duty, but murder, which is offense, not defense, is not.

Therefore, one should not speak of legitimate defense, but of justified offense, which is self-contradictory.

I have no more right to take someone's life in order to defend mine than I have to take his wife in order to ensure my own happiness.

Let it be called "natural" or "animal" defense. It is of capital importance not to drag the law into this matter.

For if we consider legitimate the exceptional case where one can see no other means of staving off aggression than killing, we shall build upon it a whole system of legislation and institutions whose sole office will be to prepare and perpetuate murder.

And that is what we have done. The army, the police, and criminal law are that and nothing else.

Defense will no longer be natural and for that reason excusable; it will be premeditated and systematic crime, and there will no longer be any moral restraint or limit to killing and cruelty.

5. Murder is not only permissible, but a duty when common welfare requires it. Now the "common welfare" in question is not the welfare of all. It is the welfare of a limited group, even if it includes millions of people (the number involved makes no difference.) Common welfare cannot be achieved at anyone's expense. Common welfare is justice and charity toward every human being.

6. Technology, economy. And politics are morally neutral. They obey their own natural laws. Here is how men build the gigantic machinery in which they are caught and crushed. That efficiency is good and always necessary for doing something goes without saying, but it is senseless to attribute value to it in itself. If efficiency lies in doing evil, then the better it is, the worse it is.

7. Justice is established order. This seventh argument, unlike those that have gone before, is not accepted by everyone. There is no regime which does not have its rebels. But the conviction of the greater number is sure that the ordinary citizen is ready to kill and die through obedience to law and power.

Now the law fixes morals. Morals are the effect of a certain balance of force between tribes and classes, hard-won pacts

which make possible civil life and work in common.

By the standards of absolute justice, the law always has lamentable shortcomings, in addition to which holders of power commit errors and abuses, all of which is coated over by habit and ignorance. But should the balance of power shift, conscience awake, and there ensues revolt, which results in the creation of other states of injustice.

There must therefore always be a law to correct the law, and the law is constantly having to be amended and adjusted, as in liberal regimes.

But liberal regimes are unstable and continually shaken by rivalry, so that governments have more to do to stay in power than to govern. Nevertheless, they still have enough strength to abuse their power, and the people, enough passion and blindness to abuse their right of opposition. The liberal regime is no doubt more humane than others, but criticism by the opposition is less pure because it requires less courage. Legal and licit means exist of denouncing injustice in the press and raising questions in parliament, but the rich, the powerful, and the intriguers remain masters of the game.

That is why one must have no fear of resorting to direct nonviolent action if necessary, of breaking the law openly, of seeking legal punishment and undertaking fasts and other sacrifices, so that justice which is above all law may dawn in men's consciences.

This does not mean that direct nonviolent action is impossible in nonliberal regimes. To be sure, it is more difficult and victory less certain.

But whoever does not attempt it at a relatively easy stage deserves to fall into bondage and undergo dictatorship.

The fact is that in order to do, one must first be, and that has been our endeavor. We do not regard spiritual preparation as a means, but as something intrinsically more important than our outer demonstration or victory. Bringing man face to face with God, and face to face with himself is what matters and is desirable for its own sake. When the tree of life has been found again, our acts will fall from it like ripe fruit full of savor.

Much more than going into the street, distributing tracts, speaking to crowds, knocking on doors, leading walks and campaigns, invading bomb factories, undertaking public fasts, braving the police, being beaten and jailed (all of which is good on occasion and which we gladly do), the most efficient action and the most significant testimony in favor of nonviolence and truth is living: living a life that is one, where everything goes in the same sense, from prayer and meditation to laboring for our daily bread, from the teaching of the doctrine to the making of manure, from cooking to singing and dancing around the fire; living a life in which there is no violence or unfairness, nor illegal unfairness. What matters is to show that such a life is possible and even not more difficult than a life of gain, nor more unpleasant than a life of pleasure, nor less natural than an "ordinary" life. What matters is to find the nonviolent answer to all the questions man is faced with today, as at all epochs, to formulate the answer clearly and to do our utmost to carry it into effect. What matters is to discover whether there

is such a thing as a nonviolent economy,
free of all forms of pressure and closed to all
forms of unfairness; whether there is such a
thing as nonviolent authority, independent
of force and carrying no privileges;
whether there is such a thing as nonviolent
justice, justice without punishment,
and punishment without violence; such
things as nonviolent farming, nonviolent
medicine, nonviolent psychiatry, nonviolent
diet.

And to begin with, what matters is to make
sure that all violence, even of speech, even
of thought, even hidden and disguised, has
been weeded out of our religious life.

From: Warriors of Peace on the Techniques of
Nonviolence, Knopf, New York, 1974

Students Astutely Aware

By Colman McCarthy

Teaching has its heartfelt and resounding moments, and for me one of them came on the morning of January 17 when I was leaving Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School. Some students from my daily 7:40-8:30 a.m. class were taking control of their lives. Independent control.

I had just finished meeting with my class, 40 juniors and seniors in a class called "Alternatives to Violence." On the eastern edge of the school's front lawn about 150 students had gathered around a wide stump of an oak tree. Atop it was a young woman giving a speech. When I moved closer, I recognized her as a student from my class. She was speaking to a rapt audience about the war in the Gulf and the need to give nonviolent sanctions a chance.

The evening before, as U.S. bomber pilots began attacking Iraq, George Bush had announced that the world could "wait no longer." He was wrong. This part of the world could wait, as small and peripheral as it seemed on the lawn fronting the school. All semester, while reading and discussing essays on pacifism by Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, Tolstoy, and a long list of other practitioners of nonviolence, the Pentagon's preparation for war hovered over the collective consciousness of the class.

Now that the bombing and killing had begun, as more than three-fourths of the class had predicted it would by a show of hands one morning in October, the time had come for action. I looked among the students at the rally. I knew about 20. Some I would have figured to be there, because

I had listened to their anti-war views throughout the semester. Others surprised me – reserved ones who had not said much in class one way or the other about the Gulf.

The senior girl who had been speaking when I came over was in the group. I listened in amazement. Where did all that passion come from? And what inner fires had been burning in the next speaker, a senior boy who spoke knowledgeably about draft resistance. Be aware of your rights, he said, and went on to tell about the national groups that provide counseling on conscientious objection.

When the rally dispersed, four students took a large sign – "Honk for Peace" and stood behind it on the highway in front of the school. A clamor of honks began. The group, joined by others, decided to cut classes and go be educated in democracy by visiting the anti-war protest in front of the White House.

They learned there that they were not alone, that resistance to the Gulf war was spreading daily in their country and in Europe. Mr. Bush has vowed that "this will not be another Vietnam." Wrong again. It took less than a week for America's streets, from San Diego to Boston, to be filled with citizens expressing their opposition and contempt for the same kind of war ethic that dragged the United States into Vietnam.

It is common of late for Vietnam veterans to return to Southeast Asia, in exercises of catharsis and reconciliation, and in many cases to ask forgiveness of the

villagers who were bombed and sprayed by American soldiers. In 20 years, it could happen that today's U.S. bomber pilots will be returning to Iraq seeking reconciliation and peace. The anti-war demonstrators are saying rightly: Let's seek it now.

Up against the might of a war-approving Congress and the domination of the media by the Pentagon's version of events, plus television's one-sided reliance on ex-generals turned "military analysts" (why no peace analysts on these programs?), a few high school kids making speeches on a stump and holding peace signs is indeed small. Gandhi, as usual, had a thought: "Nonviolence is the finest quality of the soul, but it is developed by practice. Almost everything you do will seem insignificant but it is important that you do it."

Three of my students, articulate and spunky even at 7:40 a.m., were consistently skeptical about nonviolence, but they were willing to push themselves and the rest of us to think freshly about old problems. Moving beyond patented or conventional boundaries, and seeing life differently and acting in the riskiness of that new vision, is a breakthrough to be celebrated, not minimized. Wherever the newness leads, the students will go into adulthood as discoverers, not imitators and least of all followers.

From the Washington Post, January 24, 1991