

The Philosophy of Nonviolence: Still Radical, Still Relevant

Martha Beale

2008 is an important year of remembrance for peace activists across the world. Marking the 60th anniversary of the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi and 40th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., 2008 presents an opportunity to look at the philosophy of nonviolence and the impact of arguably the most important tool the peace movement has ever benefitted from.

Philosophy of nonviolence

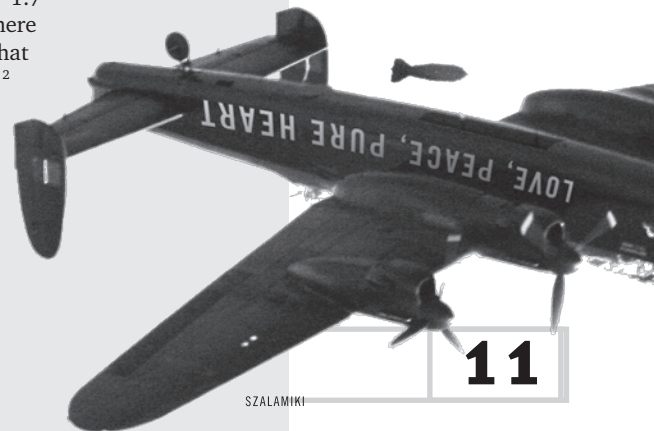
At its most basic, the philosophy of nonviolence is about recognising the worth of every person as a child of God. But at this most basic level, the philosophy is also its most challenging. Most people considering the philosophy struggle with loving thy enemy: truly recognising your opponent as an equal. Walter Wink, in his book *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*, reveals that this is difficult for us as it “means believing that anyone can be transformed regardless of the past.” He goes on to say that the real challenge is “trusting God for the miracle of divine forgiveness. If God can forgive, redeem, and transform me, I must also believe that God can work such wonders with anyone”.¹ The strength of character needed to value people who may have treated you with hatred and prejudice is no mean feat.

What is so difficult about the philosophy is

that it is not a methodology you sometimes use, but a way of life. Seeking to respect everyone you encounter, however rude, offensive or difficult they may be, is much easier said than done. But, this is also a source of strength: as only by striving towards perfection, can you ask others to do the same. And crucially, the philosophy of nonviolence is not something you pass or fail, but rather a journey you undertake which is never ending. For many, nonviolence appears to be a nice ideal but no use in real life. However, time and time again this has been proven to be untrue. Wink states, “In 1989-90 alone, fourteen nations underwent nonviolent revolutions, all of them successful except China, and all of them nonviolent, except Romania. These revolutions involved 1.7 billion people... And yet there are people who still insist that nonviolence doesn't work!”²



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What would you do if...?

There are always situations and scenarios involving Hitler, fascism, mass genocide and the lives of our loved ones being at risk, which sceptics of nonviolence use to 'disprove' its power. However, as Joan Baez in the article "*What Would You Do If...*" argues, "no one knows what they'll do in a moment of crisis. And [...] hypothetical questions get hypothetical answers."³ Many of these questions are based around the duty we all have to protect one another from harm. Proponents of nonviolence would agree with this, as they believe that everyone has a duty towards one another: to stand up to injustice, oppression and especially the violence they see in the world. Our difference would be, however, how we respond to that duty.

The reason why nonviolence works is that it breaks down power imbalances between people. This is done by loving your enemies and also by admitting that we ourselves contain some evil. Proponents of nonviolence are forced to recognise that they hold within them the capacity for violence and hatred and are challenged to transform that energy into a positive. As Wink says: "The hardest moment comes when our own internal oppressor meets the outside reality that it supports. It is not out there, but in me, that the oppressor must die."⁴

Challenged

Many people are challenged by proponents of non-violence who choose to accept suffering rather than inflict it. But this is a source of strength for the philosophy rather than weakness. By accepting suffering as a necessity,

nonviolent activists transform a situation and treat their opponents with the respect they hope to gain. Nonviolence promotes the rule of law by encouraging participants to willingly accept the consequences of their actions. They demonstrate that only by respecting the rule of law can we truly expect others to also uphold it.

People hesitate to use non violence for many reasons which are understandable and need to be worked through individually before the philosophy can be fully embraced. These include fear of physical harm; in some cases having a criminal record or conviction; and appearing to go against mainstream opinion, among others. However, the philosophy is radical in its confrontation of fear, asking proponents to overcome it for the greater good of society and themselves. The philosophy is a process in which proponents learn about themselves and test their beliefs and courage to the maximum. It is not something which can be undertaken lightly and it is important to recognise that it is natural to feel afraid.

Choose your battles

Unfortunately, applying the philosophy does not immediately lead to success in all situations. Two of the most important lessons the philosophy can teach us are recognising which battles are worth fighting and the importance of thorough and intense preparation as a route to success. Conflict is



complex and needs to be responded to creatively; our response cannot be broken down into a set of rules, as each situation is different. And that is why the philosophy of nonviolence is so revolutionary; it does not tell followers what actions to take, but rather the mindset which is needed for actions to succeed.

By using and developing the philosophy as Gandhi and King did, proponents of nonviolence are seeking to remember the lessons of the past as well as plan for the future. This is why the philosophy is still as relevant today as it ever was. The legacy which Gandhi and King revealed for us was that by doing the unexpected a small group of people truly can change the world.

Endnotes

- 1 Wink, Walter. *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*. Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2003, p.68.
- 2 Wink, p. 3.
- 3 Baez, Joan. "What Would You Do If...", *Peace is the Way: A Guide to Pacifist Views and Actions*. Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1990, p.21.
- 4 Wink, p. 81.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF NONVIOLENCE¹

1. All life is one.
2. We each have a piece of the truth and the un-truth.
3. People are more than the evil they sometimes commit. Evildoers are also victims of the system they maintain.
4. The means must be consistent with the ends. Nonviolence is active resistance to evil; it is assertive spiritually, mentally, and emotionally.
5. Voluntary suffering can educate and transform. Proponents of nonviolence willingly accept the consequences of their actions. Suffering can have the power to convert the enemy when reason fails.
6. We reaffirm our unity with others when we transform 'us' versus 'them' thinking and doing. Nonviolence works towards creating a beloved community.
7. Nonviolence chooses Agape (all-encompassing) love, instead of hate.
8. Nonviolence is a process of becoming increasingly free from fear. Proponents believe the universe is on the side of justice.

Resources on Nonviolence

- *Turning the Tide*, a programme of Quaker Peace and Social Witness, explores and promotes the understanding and use of active nonviolence for positive change. Offers resources and workshops. More details on www.turning-the-tide.org, by phoning: 0207 663 1064/ 1061 or emailing denised@quaker.org.uk or stevew@quaker.org.uk.
- *Peace School*, a year long programme exploring what it means to be a peacemaker in every area of life; local and global. Their website can be visited at <http://www.peaceschool.org.uk/> or they can be phoned on: 0113 257 4572.
- *Pace e Bene's From Violence to Wholeness* programme, examining the spirituality and practice of active nonviolence, or *Engage* programme, promoting learning, practicing, and experimenting with nonviolent options for our lives and for a sustainable, just, and peaceful world. Their website is: <http://paceebene.org/>.
- *A Force More Powerful* (DVD). A documentary series on how nonviolent power overcame oppression and authoritarian role in the 20th century. York Zimmerman Inc., 2000. www.yorkzim.com.
- Kurlansky, Mark. *Non-Violence: The History of a Dangerous Idea*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2006.
- Wink, Walter. *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*. Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2003.
- Wright, Cyril and Augarde, Tony (Ed.). *Peace Is the Way: A Guide to Pacifist Views and Actions*. Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1990.

¹ This is a summary of the combined Philosophies of Nonviolence as promoted by Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.