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STORIES

SHORT STORIES

We Talked Until We Were No Longer Strangers

By Angie O'Gorman

I was awakened late one night by a man kicking open the door to her bedroom. The house was empty. The phone was downstairs. He was somewhat verbally abusive as he walked over to my bed. As I lay there feeling fear and vulnerability I had never before experienced, several thoughts ran through my head – all in a matter of seconds – the uselessness of screaming, of having a gun under my pillow. The third thought saved my life: either he and I made it through this situation safely together, or we would both be damaged. Our safety was connected. That thought disarmed me. It did not free me from feelings of fear but from fear's control over my ability to respond. I found myself acting out of concern for both our safety with surprisingly little hostility in my voice. I asked him what time it was. He answered. I commented that his watch and the clock on my night table had different times. I hoped his watch wasn't broken. He answered. I answered. When the atmosphere began to calm a little, I asked how he had gotten into the house. "Through breaking the glass in the back door." I told him this presented me with a problem as I did not have money to buy a new glass. We talked about financial difficulties of his own. We talked until we were no longer strangers and I felt it was safe to ask him to leave. He did not want to; said he had no place to go. As equal to equal I told him, respectfully, I would give him a clean set of sheets, but he would have to make his own bed downstairs. He went downstairs, and I sat up in bed, wide awake and shaking for the rest of the night. The next morning, we ate breakfast together, and he left.

One Question

By Christine Hibbard

The woman from the White House Commission (health worker) - asks an Albanian man how he, after all the horrors he has been through - killing, shooting, betrayals and loss - stays clear and centered. He answers that he came to the conclusion that it was part of the human condition. That deep acceptance allowed him to move to a place of strength that manifested in a state of fluidity, dialogue and negotiation that all could witness. Other people in the group could see it as well and contrasted it with the state they found themselves in; profound and heart-wrenching suffering.

"I asked him how he arrived at such an emotionally healthy place with all the horrible tragedy around him. He said, ‘I asked myself one question over and over again and one question only: How can I prevent this from happening to my own children?’ That's what did it. He realized that if he held on to the anger and bitterness and hate, it would only help repeat the same kind of trauma that he had experienced. He knew he had to let that go and start a new path.

By asking that question he was laying the foundation to build bridges between two ethnic cultures. When I visited later I got to witness his work in transforming ethnic conflict using many of the methods for processing trauma that we had taught him. Eventually he took the healing process all the way to organizing his old neighbourhood to once again incorporate both Albanians and Serbs”.

The Story of Roberto Morales
by Jhon Evaristo Flores

My friend Roberto, 15 years old, got killed by government officials in the streets of Ciudad Bolivar, a "zona roja"—red zone—a district known as the most violent in Bogotá (Colombia). Youth, in particular, were targeted and regarded as dangerous criminals, a "problem" the government had a policy to eliminate. More than 500 youth were killed by l992 and no one came forth to claim responsibility. Roberto had been simply playing ball with a stone in the street and became an innocent victim. The rock accidentally went through a military bus and a captain got off and without a word shot Roberto. Maria Morales, his mother, went to the authorities to demand answers but her pleadings were ignored. She came to me for help. Until this killing, no one had done anything. But the killing of Roberto mobilized us.
Me and my friends were sad and tired and could no longer bear to witness the killings. Sixty or seventy adolescents plus a few adults created the Nonviolent Action Group, which led to a creative demonstration we called "Carnival of Life". Dressed in black and white symbolizing death and life, we danced and played instruments and joined in games. Bystanders joined the carnival, and even some of the police started dancing with the protesters! This led to other groups—teachers, students, and parents—participating in public debates and the government eventually opening a human rights office for youth in Ciudad Bolivar, promising to invest in education, health, recreation and sport, culture and art, employment, and social security. Thanks to the daring of the participants in the carnival, hope and dreams returned to the mothers and children of Ciudad Bolivar.

To be Separated From a Compañero
Also known as The Story of Karen Ridd from The Search for a Nonviolent Future by Michael Nagler

In 1989 Karen Ridd and four other international volunteers were working with a group called Peace Brigades International (PBI) when they were suddenly arrested by the Salvadoran military. Three of the five were Spanish nationals, and they were promptly deported from El Salvador, leaving Karen, who was Canadian, and her friend Marcela Rodriguez, who was from Colombia, to face whatever was coming. Fortunately, Karen had had time to call the Canadian consul and alert another PBI volunteer who happened to call in at the right moment. This was some comfort, as was the civility – at first - of the soldiers. But no one from the team had had to face arrest before (to date, no international volunteer had been killed in Central America despite enormous violence all around them) and from another room Marcela heard the soldiers describing them as "terrorists from the Episcopal Church." Their spirits did not improve when the two women, along with other detainees, were loaded onto a truck, taken to an army barracks, blindfolded, and subjected to five hours' interrogation about their alleged connection with the guerrilla Frente Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) while sounds of torture and the sobbing of victims came from nearby rooms.
Karen knew that PBI would quickly alert their worldwide network about the arrests, but she also knew that time was short - there was no telling what would happen in that barracks if someone didn't get them out before nightfall. PBI had, in fact, activated its worldwide network, and before long hundreds of people were sending faxes to the Canadian and Colombian embassies, calling and sending e-mail messages to their representatives to urge Karen and Marcela's immediate release. All this got no response at all from the Colombian embassy, but Canada brought official pressure on the Salvadoran government, no doubt hinting that their extensive trade relations with El Salvador could be compromised if Karen were not released immediately.

Whatever it was that got through to whoever was in charge, Karen found herself walking across the barracks grounds toward a waiting embassy official a few hours later, a free woman. But when the

soldiers removed her blindfold inside the barracks, she had caught a glimpse of Marcela, face to the wall, "a perfect image of dehumanization." Glad as Karen was to be alive, something tugged at her. Feeling terrible, she made some excuses to the exasperated Canadian Embassy official who had come all the way from San Salvador to get her, turned and walked back into the barracks, not knowing what would happen to her in there, but knowing it could not be worse than walking out on a friend.
The soldiers were startled, and almost as exasperated. They handcuffed her again. In the next room, a soldier banged Marcela's head into the wall and said that some "white bitch" was stupid enough to walk back in there, and "Now you're going to see the treatment a terrorist deserves!" No more mister nice guy. But Karen's gesture was having a strange effect on the men. They talked to Karen despite themselves, and she tried to explain why she had returned. Pointedly she said: "You know what it's like to be separated from a compañero." That got to them. They released Karen and Marcela and the two women walked out together, hand in hand.

You can listen to the interview I did with Karen Ridd in 2023 here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUmwNVGDSZU&t=1530s

Know Your Nonviolent History – August 20, 2013, Antoinette Tuff Stopped a School Shooter with Nonviolence

by Rivera Sun August 18, 2016 / June 11, 2025

On August 20, 2013, Antoinette Tuff (right) nonviolently disarmed a school shooter, saving the lives of hundreds of school children. Antoinette was a bookkeeper. She wasn't supposed to be at the school that day. She was just filling in as a front desk receptionist as a favor to a friend. That morning, during her prayer time, she had read the Biblical line, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil." Little did she know that just a few hours later, twenty-year old Michael Brandon Hill walked onto the elementary school grounds in DeKalb County, Georgia, carrying an assault rifle and 500 rounds of ammunition.

The police had arrived, the school was on lockdown, Antoinette was alone in this part of the building. Michael Hill entered the room. Scared to her bones, she obeyed his initial commands, but then, for some reason, she asked, "May I go the bathroom?"

Those who have taken unarmed peacekeeping, peace team, or de-escalation training will recognize this phenomenon at once: she broke the script, changed the narrative, and distracted Michael Hill from continuing on a track of senseless rage and disconnect that frequently occurs with mass shooters. In this CNN interview about the events, Kris Wilder, a 30-year veteran of the martial arts and author of How to Win a Fight: A Guide to Avoiding and Surviving Violence, is quoted as saying that one way to stop a dangerous situation is to, "Change the channel with an out-of-the-blue question like, "What time is it?" or a nonsensical question like, "What was Gandhi's batting average?"

To Antoinette Tuff's surprise, it worked. Michael Hill agreed to let her go to the bathroom. She rose to leave, but suddenly realized that the shooter might follow her to where the children were hiding. She hesitated. Then the situation worsened. Hill propped open the front door of the school and began firing at the police outside.

Antoinette Tuff sprang into action. Gently, lovingly (and filled with a strange sense of calm) she said, "Sweetheart, come back in here. Bullets don't have no names. And those bullets gonna kill me and you. I need you to come back in here and it's gonna be you and me and we will work this thing out."

Michael Hill retreated from the door, and Antoinette continued to talk, telling him about her marital troubles and how she contemplated suicide four times. As she spoke, she found herself meeting his eyes and connecting to him as a human being. To her amazement, Michael began to express his concerns and fears. Eventually, through dialogue and listening, empathizing, and connecting, Antoinette convinced him to lay down his gun, and surrender to the police.

Antoinette Tuff's jaw-dropping story is an astounding example of engaged nonviolence in the height of a violent situation. It is interesting to note that Antoinette Tuff is a deeply spiritual person. She "meditated" for 15 minutes each day and connected with her spiritual practice each night. Regardless of whether you are Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, or some other faith, the practice of calming and centering the mind, grasping your inner strength, seeing with compassion, and rooting yourself in faith is an invaluable preparation for engaging active nonviolence in the world.

Mediating with a Muslim extremist: I don't know anything about you

Blindfolded, his arms tied tightly by his two armed captors, UN diplomat Giandomenica Picco was taken to a room where the leader of the kidnappers was waiting for him. It was 1991 and Picco had been sent by the UN Security Council to mediate for the release of hostages, in a secret location in Beirut, Lebanon. Although he had agreed in advance to be picked up in the middle of the night, by masked Islamic fighters, he was still terrified.

When they removed Picco's blindfold, he saw a strongly built, black-haired Arab man in his late 30s, with a ski mask over his face. Behind the narrow slit of the ski mask, Picco saw nothing but the dark, suspicious eyes of his kidnapper.

"Maybe you know something about me," Giandomenica Picco said, after a period of silence. "But I don't know anything about you."

"What do you want to know?" the masked leader asked.

Picco waited a moment before speaking again. He knew the words he would choose would determine his fate, and not just his own.Imagine for a moment that you are an official envoy. Entirely dependent on the mercy of your captor. You wonder if you will survive the night. You think of the people you love, afraid you will never see them again. What do you say, when words are all you have?

"Do you have children?" asked Picco.

"Yes," replied the man.

"Me too," replied Picco. "And are you doing this because you want to give your children a better world?"

"Of course."

"Well, so do I. So it turns out we are both fathers who want to give a better world to their children."

The man in the ski mask shifted silently. He leaned toward Picco and looked straight into his face.

"Where on Earth are you from?!" he asked with intense curiosity.

Years later, reflecting on this conversation of life and death, Picco told me that this first conversation "blew the man with the ski mask off his chair." Picco had chosen the right words at the right time, to build a relationship with his opponent. They had bonded with each other.

With exquisite skill, this UN envoy began to create a shared context. Beyond all their differences and conflicting political beliefs, Picco and the kidnapper had discovered at least one common identity: they were fathers who love their children. Even while it would be easier for both the "terrorist" and the "diplomat" to remain "walled in" to their one dimensional identities, they both stepped out of this narrow cage and found a place to stand side by side. Their conversation required courage from both men and eventually led to the release of both hostages.

"Why did you start the conversation this way?" I asked Picco during one of our conversations.

"Each of us has multiple identities," he explained. "Each of us is more than one thing. I knew that was true for myself, and for the man in the ski mask. I knew that finding an identity we had in common would build a bridge."

"Please say more about bridge-building. What exactly does it entail?" I asked.

"When they brought me to their hideout, it was clear they thought I was from another planet. I knew I had to overcome that idea or nothing would come of it. Finding out that we are both fathers who care about their children was the first step. It changed the dynamic between us. I believe this first exchange opened the door to successful negotiations."

Original title: Extremist Muslim encampment. By Mark Gerzon, published in American Citizens, Global Citizens (2010), Spirit Scope.

Picco led hostage negotiations including:

1989-1992: Release of 11 hostages during the Lebanon hostage crisis including Anglican pastor Terry Waite, AP bureau chief Terry A. Anderson, Edward Austin Tracy, and John McCarthy (journalist) of the Shi'ite militia Revolutionary Justice Organization.
1999: Release of 13 Jews who had been arrested in Shiraz, Iran, and charged with espionage. At the request of American Jewish leaders, Picco interceded with Iranian President Khatami and succeeded in obtaining the release of all the prisoners. (Among the hostages Picco was unable to rescue were U.S. soldiers William Francis Buckley and William R. Higgins.)
In 1992, Picco left the UN. In 1994, he formed the international business negotiation consulting firm GDP Associates, based in New York City. He also became president of the Peace Strategies Project, based in Geneva, Switzerland, and of US Equity Partners Holdings, LLC.
(See this page on Wikipedia.)

Love your enemy

In the booklet "The Two Hands of Yes and No" the Linn family (John, Sheila and their son Dennis) explain why they find these two hands so useful. The booklet describes the following anecdote:
A group of friends were celebrating together, with wine and cheese, on their patio, before dinner. Suddenly a man with a gun appeared. He held it to the head of one of the guests, and then to that of another guest. At first all the guests were paralyzed with fear. One woman refused to be intimidated and told the burglar, "We're celebrating here. Why don't you have a glass of wine and sit down for a while?"
What she did was she (figuratively) held up one hand and said: "No, I do not participate in fear and violence." And she used the other 'hand' to extend it to him with kindness.
Suddenly the expression on the man's face changed. He put the gun in his pocket, sat down and drank a glass of wine.
After a while he asked, "Can I get a hug?" One of the guests gave him a hug, and then someone else did. The man asked, "Can we do a group hug?" and so they all gathered around him and embraced him. The burglar apologized and left, taking the glass of wine.
The group of friends, still shocked but relieved, ate their dinner. When they opened the front door to leave, they saw the empty glass, unbroken, neatly placed on the edge of their alley's sidewalk.
The little book continues with another tale of the two hands, of the American Civil Rights Movement. A group of black students demonstrating peacefully in Montgomery were tricked by police into dispersing and then beaten. Police did not allow ambulances to reach the students for two hours. The driver of one of these ambulances drove to Selma and told the crowd of black and white activists (demonstrating there) what had just happened.
The crowd was seething with anger. Cries went up: "Let's run!" Behind them, on the other side of the street, stood rank after rank of Alabama state troops and local police forces led by Sheriff Jim Clark, "itching" for a fight. The situation was explosive. A young black pastor took the microphone and said, "it's time for us to sing a song." He opened with "Do you like Martin King?"
"Certainly, Lord," the crowd replied.
"Do you like Martin King?"
"Certainly, Lord!"
"Do you like Martin King?"
"Certainly, certainly, certainly, Lord!"
And then he sang, without warning:
"Do you like Jim Clark?"
"ce-certainly, Lord," came the surprised obstinate reply.
"Do you like Jim Clark?" the pastor asked again.
"Certainly, Lord!" it was stronger this time.
"Do you like Jim Clark?"
"Certainly, certainly, certainly, Lord!"
The Honorable Command took the microphone. We are not just here to fight for our rights, he explained, but for the good of the entire society.
"It's not enough to overcome Jim Clark, you hear me Jim? We want you converted. We cannot win by hating our oppressors. We must love them to change them."
James Bevel and the crowd were determined to resist Sheriff Jim Clark and his troops, but they were just as determined to reach out to them with love. James Bevel understood how to use the two hands to get the crowd to respond to their oppressor in this way. With one hand he told the sheriff, "No more hate." With the other hand he said, "We have the power of love and we love you too."

The Story of (musician) Vedran Smailović

By Robert Fulghum

It is the year 2050. In a large Eastern European city – one that has survived the vicissitudes of human activity for more than a thousand years – on an open square in the center is a rather strange monument. Not a soldier or a politician. No general on a horse or a king on a throne. Instead, the figure of a somewhat ordinary man, sitting on a chair, playing his cello. There are bouquets of flowers surrounding the pedestal on which the statue stands. If you count you will always find 22 flowers in each bouquet.
The cellist is a national hero. If you ask anyone about the story of this statue, you will hear about the time of civil war in this city. Demagogues lit bonfires of hatred between citizens who belonged to different religions and ethnic groups. Everyone became an enemy of somebody else. None was exempt or safe. Men, women and children, babies and grandparents – old and young, strong and weak, partisan and innocent – all were victims in the end. Many were maimed, many were killed. Those who did not die lived like animals in the ruins of the city.
Except for one man. A musician. A cellist. He went to a certain street corner every day. Dressed in formal black evening clothes, sitting in a fire-charred chair, he played his cello. Knowing he might be shot or beaten, still he played. Day after day he came to play the most beautiful music he knew. Every day again, for 22 days. His music was stronger than hate. His courage is stronger than fear.
Over time, other musicians were captivated by his performance and took their place next to him on the street. These acts of courage were contagious. Anyone who could play an instrument or sing found a spot at an intersection on the street somewhere in the city and made music.
In time the fighting stopped. The music and the city and the people lived on.
A beautiful fable. […] The real world doesn't work like that, we all know that. Cellists rarely become national heroes – music has no effect on war.
Vedran Smailović does not agree. His photo appeared in the July 1992 New York Times Magazine. Middle age, medium hair, big mustache. He is dressed in formal clothes. Sitting on a cafe chair in the middle of the road in front of a bakery, where a line of people was hit by mortar fire in late May, killing 22 people. He is playing his cello. As a member of the Sarajevo Opera Orchestra, there is little he can do about the hatred and war that has been going on in Sarajevo for centuries. Nevertheless, he braved snipers and artillery fire for 22 days to play Albinoni's Adagio in G minor. (Listen to the musicvideo here).
I wonder if he chose this piece knowing that it consisted of a fragment of a manuscript found in the ruins of Dresden after the Second World War. The music survived the bombings. Maybe that's why he played this in the damaged street of Sarajevo, where people died waiting in line for bread. Something must triumph over horror.
Is this man crazy? Maybe. Is his gesture in vain? In a conventional sense, yes, of course. But what can a cellist do? What madness to go out into the street alone and address the world with a wooden box and a bow strung with hair. What can a cellist do? All he knows how to do. Speaking softly with his cello, one note at the time. Like the Pied Piper of Hamelin, calling out the rats that infest the human spirit.
Vedran Smailović is a real person. What he did really happened. The line at the bakery, the grenade and the music are not fiction. Despite all the fairy tales, these acts do indeed take place in the world we live in. Sometimes history knocks on the most ordinary door to see if anyone is home.
Almost everyone in Sarajevo now knows what a cellist can do. The place where he played is an informal monument, a place of honor. Croats, Serbs, Muslims and Christians, they all know his name and face. They place flowers where he played. They commemorate the hope that must never cease to exist, that one day the worst of humanity will be overcome by the best, not by unexpected miracles, but by the actions of many.
[…] Now that you know the story, tell it to others. Keep it alive. […] Never regret or apologize for

believing that the world will stop for a moment to listen to a man or a woman who decides to take the risk to speak the truth.
[…] Who can say whether the monument will ever be built? […] The myth of the impossible dream is more powerful than all the facts of history.

A little shortened, by Nina Koevoets. Article taken from “Engage. Exploring Nonviolent Living,” which is from “Maybe (Maybe Not): Second Thoughts From a Secret Life,” (New York: Villard Books, 1993).
See another short description on *peace.museum*

A future that values everyone

Date: September 4, 2014

Press Clip Source: Common Wonders
Written By: Robert C Koehler
Date: September 4, 2014
Read Original Article: Here

"*I think if we had a gun we would have been shot immediately.*"

This is as good a place to start as any, at the logical limits of violent self-defense. The speaker is Andres Gutierrez of Nonviolent Peaceforce, a nonprofit organization that has engaged in peacekeeping work in troubled regions of the world for the last decade. Gutierrez, the organization's team leader in South Sudan, along with colleague Derek Oakley, got caught in the chaos last April when the city of Bor was attacked, with armed men overrunning the perimeter of a U.N. base where thousands of civilians had sought protection. The two took shelter inside a mud hut.

More than 60 people were killed in the ethnic massacre, but Gutierrez and Oakley, the unarmed peacekeepers, kept that total from being higher. Four women and nine children were inside the hut as well.

As noted on the Nonviolent Peaceforce website: "On three separate occasions men with guns came and ordered the peacekeepers out so they could kill the women and kids. The peacekeepers refused, holding up their (Nonviolent Peaceforce) IDs and saying they were unarmed, there to protect civilians and would not leave. After the third time the armed men left. The people were saved."

The armed men gave up; thirteen people, plus the two peacekeepers, are still alive. This calls for a moment of awe. This calls for reverence and, most of all, remembrance.

Mel Duncan, a cofounder of Nonviolent Peaceforce, brought the incident to my attention because I had lamented last week that "the popular imagination doesn't even entertain the possibility" that there are effective, nonlethal forms of keeping order in a community or on the planet. Safety, as proscribed by Hollywood and the media — the vast public-relations industry of the military-industrial complex — requires good guys with guns (and bombs) continually blowing evil to Kingdom Come. It doesn't matter that this is an obscene oversimplification of the real world, that violence generally expands the scope of human misery and comes back to haunt the perpetrator. We all harbor darkness in our souls, but we're socially addicted to violence.

So how did the two unarmed peacekeepers save the lives of thirteen women and children? Intense training in nonviolent methods and strategy helped them keep their cool in a dangerous situation. If they'd been armed, as Gutierrez said, the attackers would have killed them without further thought.

But being unarmed doesn't mean being disempowered. This is worth paying attention to. In South Sudan, unarmed, international peacekeepers have credibility. They stand above the local conflict, facilitating communication between the various sides but not taking sides themselves. In addition, Gutierrez and Oakley were in sync with one another and didn't panic.

"We also had a humanitarian mandate," Gutierrez said in an interview. Being unarmed "opens the doors to look for solutions. If we were armed peacekeepers, the solution is you shoot back. Because we were unarmed we could find other ways. (We knew) that the people who were attacking don't want the blood of ex-pat humanitarians on their hands."

They were, it seems to me, representatives of the collective human conscience, standing their ground

against men with the AK-47s. Without their presence, that conscience would have been absent and the civilians in the mud hut would have been slaughtered, along with the other civilians who were killed in the attack.

This is worth deep consideration as we think about the human future. Perhaps such a courageous, unarmed stance will not work in all circumstances, but it worked here — and not because the two were "lucky." It worked because brute, linear force and physical domination aren't the only factors involved in creating safety. Life is far more complex than that. So is "evil." Armed killers often have functioning consciences, which can be addressed.

Gutierrez and Oakley not only saved thirteen people's lives, they also saved the gunmen from further violation of their consciences. This could mean they will be less likely to kill again.

Building real peace requires such effort, over and over and over. The military definition of peace is that it's the uneasy lull between violence. Thus, only violence is inevitable. I don't believe this. I believe there is a better definition of peace: that it is the creation of healthy souls, put together slowly, one courageous and loving action at a time.

We need to embrace such effort, socially, politically, financially. I mean this column to be such an embrace. I also believe that peacebuilding efforts are far more prevalent than we realize — and more prevalent, certainly, than the mainstream media notice and acknowledge.

Another response I received from last week's column, which was about the Ferguson protests, the militarization of police departments nationwide and "the courage to disarm," was from Eli McCarthy, who told me about an organization called the DC Peace Team, an unarmed civilian peacekeeping effort in the nation's capital.

One of the team's projects involved identifying neighborhoods in the city where conflicts are likely to erupt. Their website describes the team's effort in Gallery Place, a booming downtown neighborhood full of stores, theaters and restaurants — and teenagers, whom the merchants see as a threat.

"Between the police, the security guards, and Metro transit police, the area bristles with uniforms," the website notes. "At least some of the time, young people respond to the defensiveness and occasional hostility they encounter by pushing the limits or applauding those who do. Violent incidents between youth and police have occurred, iPhone and wallet snatchings are not uncommon, even with the police presence, and violent incidents continue."

Peace Team members took it upon themselves to add a different sort of presence to the neighborhood: "We practiced proactive presence by talking with the merchants, guards, and police as well as young people, adult residents, and tourists. Our intention was to offer respect for our equal dignity, active compassionate listening, and conflict transformation skills to all the parties involved and to be seen as non-partisan with resources to provide."

Creating peace requires this kind of effort — and I will continue to explore these efforts of ordinary citizens representing not "the state" or the limited interests of those in power, but a future that values everyone.

Robert Koehler is an award-winning, Chicago-based journalist and nationally syndicated writer. His book, Courage Grows Strong at the Wound (Xenos Press), is still available. Contact him at koehlercw@gmail.com or visit his website at commonwonders.com.

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Peace huts in Liberia

Cynthia Jurs visited Liberia in 2009. Years before she had asked a Buddhist monk what she could do to heal and protect the Earth, and he told her that she should bury so-called 'Earth Treasure Vases' (ETV) in different places around the world. At that moment, she couldn't imagine what a clay vase filled with prayers and symbolic gifts could do. But along the way it became clear to her that a humble clay pot can inspire creative solutions to some of the world's most overwhelming problems. Despite its origins in Tibetan Buddhism, the ceremony is easily translated to any culture and tradition, according to Cynthia, because everyone recognizes that the earth is in danger, that the world is suffering and the vase provides a vehicle for all our prayers. When she visited Liberia to bury a vase participants wondered after the ceremony what to do next. The answer came from a former rebel.

When Cynthia first met Christian Bethelson he wanted to know more about meditation. He called her when she got back home to learn from her. She could hardly believe he meant it, but knowing how his life had already changed, she realized she had to work with him. Christian, like so many other former combatants when the war ended, was unemployed, ashamed, and alienated. He suffered from PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) and had nowhere to turn and no money to put food on the table. So he decided to offer his services as a mercenary to the rebels in neighboring Ivory Coast.

He was on his way there when his car got stuck in the mud, where he happened to meet the peace group 'the Everydaty Gandhis', whose vehicle was also stuck. After he introduced himself, they started talking and soon invited him to join their team. Instead of going to Ivory Coast, he turned around completely and started a whole new life.

Work mindfully
It was several years after that that she began working with Bethelson. Slowly, over the last five years, Bethelson learned the practice of mindfulness – listening to the sound of the bell that invites him to stop, return to the present moment, and simply breathe. From this basic act of conscious breathing, he has been able to begin the work of transformation and healing that he so desperately desired.

Bethelson understood that building a traditional Palava Peace Hut in the same village where the ETV was buried would be a good way to involve the elders in keeping their prayers for peace alive. Today there is a peace hut in the heart of that community where the community comes together for training in conflict resolution, mindfulness practice and women's empowerment.

Later, President Sirleaf's government recommended the "Palava Hut Peacebuilding Mechanism" as the way to "promote peace and dialogue and mend broken relations for national reconciliation and healing, starting at the grassroots."

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, was elected as Africa's first female president. She received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 together with the founder of the women's peace movement, Leymah Gbowee. It was the women's movement that played a crucial role in ending the civil war. Despite their religious differences, women took to the streets together to pray, fast and loudly demand the end of a 14-year civil war. Through their powerful nonviolent actions and sheer determination, they found the strength to stand up and change Liberia. (A movie that tells this story is "Pray the Devil Back to Hell").

Bethleson teaches youth in the Ganta Peacehut (image from Earth Treasure Vase)

Cynthia's organization, Alliance for the Earth, is working with several people to rebuild the traditional system of peacekeeping. Thanks to their work and commitment, there are now Palava Peace Huts in three provinces, and their vision is to build 15 more, one for each province.

Peace on the radio

In June 2014, the community of Christian was hit by a terrible flood due to unforeseen rainfall that destroyed everything. They were lucky to be alive. Less than two months later, the worst Ebola outbreak in world history has paralyzed Liberia, causing chaos and stoking new deadly fears among the population. Military bans and quarantines prevented Bethelson and his colleague from traveling domestically to meet their friends at the Peace Lodges. Instead, they started a national radio program to share their knowledge and invite listeners to join "Conversations Under the Peace Hut" – ringing the bell of mindfulness and sharing ways to respond to the crisis with clarity and calm with which they are confronted.

> ***"****If the women of Liberia can end a war and bring peace, so can we. If a former militant can become a peace worker, so can we****."***

Cynthia Jurs concludes her story this way: Like the women of Liberia who prayed to end the war and succeeded, the Peace Huts are a tangible manifestation of the power of prayer. And if the women of Liberia can end a war and bring peace, so can we. If a former militant can become a peace worker, so can we. Collectively, we remember how to care for the Earth, each other and our communities. We are all like sacred vessels, filled with treasures for this earth, treasures of peace, healing and courage. May what the Liberians have done be a model for every corner of the world where violence destroys life. Conflict and illness can cross boundaries. Peace and reconciliation too.

For the whole story, see this article: Planting Seeds of Peace in Liberia, Kosmos Journal, 2014

SESSION 5: READING 1

The Love Walks

by Ken Butigan

In the early 1990s in East Los Angeles, a group of women who are members of Dolores Mission Catholic Church were searching for a solution to the heavy toll that gang violence was taking in their neighborhood. Thirteen gangs were active in the parish, and gang killings and injuries were an almost daily occurrence. During a particularly violent period, the women were gathered in their prayer group, praying for a solution to this carnage.

That day, electrified with a sudden sense of discovery and consternation at the parallels of the Scripture reading of that day to their own predicament, one of the women felt that they were being called to stop huddling afraid behind their locked doors and drawn windows, fearful of their sons and neighbors, and to walk together in the midst of the war zone of the gangs.

Each night, the mothers walked and within a week there was a dramatic drop in gang-related violence.

After a long discussion, that night seventy women (and a few men) began a *peregrinacion* — a pilgrimage or procession — from one gang turf to the next throughout the barrio. When they encountered startled gang-members who were preparing for battle, the mothers invited them to pray with them. They offered them chips, salsa, and soda. A guitar was produced — they were asked to join in singing the ancient songs that had come with them from Michoacan and Jalisco and Chiapas. Throughout the night, in thirteen war zones, the conflict was bafflingly, disorientingly interrupted. People were baffled; the gang members were disoriented.

Each night, the mothers walked and within a week there was a dramatic drop in gang-related violence. The members of the newly formed *Comite pro Paz en el Barrio* had responded to the emergency of the violence being waged in their locality by "breaking the rules of war." By nonviolently intervening and intruding, they had challenged the old script of escalating violence and retaliation and created, for a time, a new and more creative script. Theirs had been more than a physical journey through their neighborhood. Most significantly, it had been the fundamental spiritual journey from the *war zone* to the *house of love*.

By entering this zone of danger, they had created a momentary space for peace. In that space, all the parties were able to glimpse their humanness. The gang-members were able to see, many for the first time, other human beings caring about them. At the same time, the women were able to let go of their paralyzing fear and anger long enough to see the human face of members of the gangs. It is no accident that the women christened their night-time journeys "Love Walks."

But this project did more than briefly interrupt the escalating cycles of violence.

By provoking a confrontation with their humanness, they unleashed a process of communication and transformation. Their activity changed the gang-members and themselves. The women listened to the deep anguish of the gang-members about the lack of jobs and about police brutality. This led them, in turn, to develop a tortilla factory, bakery, and child-care center, creating some jobs and giving the gang-members an opportunity to acquire job skills. It was also a space where conflict resolution techniques were learned, because people from different gangs worked together in these projects. The women then opened a school. And they shifted from a "Neighborhood Watch" mode —

where they were the eyes and ears of the police — to a group trained to monitor and report abusive police behavior, a development that has redefined the relationship between the Los Angeles Police Department and the *barrio*.

The people in this neighborhood are the first to say that they have not achieved a utopia. There is still poverty, racism, and violence. Nevertheless, they have taken an enormous step toward creating a much more human environment. They did this by risking being human together.

SESSION 5: READING 2

Communication: An Introduction to a Historical Model and to the New Powerful, Non-Defensive Communication Model

by Sharon Ellison

"For centuries, Aristotle's model for communication has been taught in Western culture as the art of winning arguments. Powerful Non-defensive Communication replaces this traditional model with one that gives each person the ability to communicate effectively without engaging in a power struggle."

DR. MARTIN JACOBI, CLEMSON UNIVERSITY

THE WAR MODEL

Defensive Self-Protection: The historical use of the *rules of war* as the basis for our verbal interactions currently affects our lives in all realms. Using the *war motto* "To be open is to be vulnerable, and to be vulnerable is to be weak," people automatically close down, become defensive, and react to others in an adversarial manner. Such defensiveness not only inhibits our ability to understand and learn, it literally creates and accelerates conflict. Rather than protecting us, defensiveness depletes our energy and prevents us from achieving our goals.

Types of Defensive Reactions: Our defensive strategies, often not conscious, typically fall into three basic categories: *surrender, withdrawal,* and *counterattack*. Each of these strategies includes one format designed primarily for protection and another to also *retaliate* against others. While a person might use any or all of six defensive reactions, most people have a habitual one; thus a common personality type can be associated with each type of defensive reaction.

Communication Tools Misused: Our three basic forms of communication—*questions, statements, and predictions*—are all misused when we are defensive—so dramatically that we might as well be trying to build a house by pounding nails with a saw. For example, when we ask a question, we often, through our tone, body language, and wording, convey an attitude of interrogation. People are often quite unconscious of the degree to which they do this. When we make a statement, we may state opinion as fact or convince others to agree with us. Or we may use a prediction to coax, punish or falsely threaten others.

Power Struggles: These defensive ways

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Joanna Macy On Staying Sane in a Toxic Culture

"All you can know is your allegiance to life and your intention to serve it in this moment that we are given." - Joanna Macy

By Dahr Jamail / truth-out.org

It was February 2005, and after several months of front-line reporting from Iraq, I'd returned to the US a human time bomb of rage, my temper ticking shorter each day.

Walking through morgues in Baghdad left scenes in my mind I remember even now. I can still smell the decaying bodies as I type this, nearly a decade later. Watching young Iraqi children bleed to death on operating tables after they had been shot by US military snipers has left an equally deep and lasting imprint.

My rage towards those responsible in the Bush administration bled outwards to engulf all of those participating in the military and anyone who supported the ongoing atrocity that was the US occupation of Iraq. My solution was to fantasize about hanging all of the aforementioned from the nearest group of light poles.

Consumed by post-traumatic stress disorder, I was unable to go any deeper emotionally than my rage and numbness. I stood precariously atop my self-righteous anger about what I was writing, for it was the cork in the bottle of my bottomless grief from what I'd witnessed. To release that meant risking engulfment in black despair that would surely erupt if I were to step aside, so I thought.

My dear friend Anita Barrows, a poet and writer, translated Rilke poetry with a woman named Joanna Macy whom I'd met once before, briefly. Anita, who is also a psychologist, had taken one look at me and shortly thereafter let me know Joanna wanted to have tea with me.

Shortly thereafter, I made my way over to Joanna's home in Berkeley, driving through the chilled, foggy morning, unaware of how much help I needed at the time. I remember seeing only fog, not the trees.

I knew Joanna was an eco-philosopher and a scholar of Buddhism, general systems theory and deep ecology. I knew she and her husband Fran had been anti-nuclear activists for longer than I'd been alive, and that she ran workshops for artists, writers and activists called the Work That Reconnects, of which Anita had spoken very highly.

Beyond that, I had no idea what I was about to get myself into.

Joanna invited me in, and we then went upstairs at her kitchen table while she prepared our tea.

After quietly pouring our mugs full, she looked me straight in the eyes and said, slowly, "You've seen so much." My own grief beginning to be witnessed, tears welled in my eyes immediately, as they did in hers.

Thus began my learning about what those of us on the front lines of the atrocities being carried out against the planet, and those living amidst what she calls "the industrial growth society" must do, if we are to sustain ourselves, both within and without, as the future rushes towards us with ever increasing

speed.

The Mortality of the Moment

"This is really happening. There's nothing to stop it now." These are the words of Thomas P. Wagner, who runs NASA's programs on polar ice and helped oversee some of the research for a recent report that showed the ongoing massive collapse of the Western Antarctic ice sheet that will raise global sea levels by at least 10 feet.

News like this finds us daily now, as the fire hose of information about the destruction the industrial growth society has brought to the planet gushes. It is an overwhelming amount of information. Being a mountaineer, every time I learn of the collapse of yet another massive glacial system, or the baring of a magnificent peak that was once gleaming in ice and snow, it feels like a punch in my stomach. Like I've lost a close relative, or a good friend. Again.

Macy, during the interview I did with her for this article, warned of the consequences of not allowing ourselves to access the feelings elicited by our witnessing.

"Refusing to feel pain, and becoming incapable of feeling the pain, which is actually the root meaning of apathy, refusal to suffer, that makes us stupid, and half alive," she said. "It causes us to become blind to see what is really out there. We have a sense of something being wrong, so we find another target and project our anxiety onto the nearest thing handy, whether it is Muslims, or gays, or Jews, or transsexuals, or on Edward Snowden, who is now being accused of being a Russian spy and behind the Ukraine conflict. See how stupid we can be?" She laughed.

After a pause, she added, "The closer we get to midnight, the more we lose intellectual capacity. So not feeling the pain is extremely costly."

As the root teacher of the Work That Reconnects, Macy has created what has been referred to as a "ground-breaking theoretical framework for personal and social change," as well as a powerful workshop methodology for its application, to which this writer can attest personally.

Six months after having tea with Macy, I found myself with her and a few dozen others in the redwoods of coastal California, where for 10 days we dove deeply into the violence that was happening to the planet, what it meant to humans and all other species, and how dire our situation really was. (Today, several years later, it is of course far, far worse.)

I allowed myself to plunge into my grief around all I'd witnessed in Iraq - watching school children being shot at by US soldiers, refugee tents filled with widows weeping for their disappeared husbands, myself being shot at by US troops, car bombs detonating near me and then witnessing the carnage on the streets in the aftermath. I began to weep and was unable to stop for two days.

During one of Macy's discussions, she said, "The most radical thing any of us can do at this time is to be fully present to what is happening in the world."

For me, the price of admission into that present was allowing my heart to break. But then I saw how despair transforms, in the face of overwhelming social and ecological crises, into clarity of vision, then into constructive, collaborative action.

"It brings a new way of seeing the world, as our larger living body, freeing us from the assumptions and attitudes that now threaten the continuity of life on earth," Macy said of this experience.

Her lifelong body of work encompasses the psychological and spiritual issues of living in the nuclear age and is grounded in a deepening of ecological awareness which has become all the more poignant as the inherently malefic industrial growth society of today's corporate capitalism continues on

its trajectory of annihilation.

"I look at the path we're on, to the future, as having a ditch on either side," she continued. "We have to hold onto each other, not to fall into the ditch on the right or left, which are, on one side panic and hysteria, and on the other side is paralysis and shutting down. You see this in the US in spades. There is more and more social hysteria, greatly aided by the corporate media and finger pointing, scapegoating, the panic. The mass shootings on the one hand, and on the other hand a death-like grip on closing down, keeping your eyes focused on a narrowed down life, to the pressures of the moment and what you need to do to put food on the table."

Macy believes that those who "are still on the path and not in one of the ditches" are seeing with clarity that it is "curtains for our way of life" because the prices being paid, or extorted, from the planet are too high.

She sees all the people, particularly younger people, who are emerging to form a growing resistance movement against the tar sands and fracking as evidence of a "conscious acceptance of the mortality of the moment, that we have a narrowing window of time, and maybe we're already into runaway climate change, but still we are doing what we can."

From Personal Pathology to Non-Separateness

Macy's own dark night of the soul occurred while she was involved in a lawsuit against a Virginia power company she was trying to stop from racking their nuclear fuel rods too close together. The company's actions were illegal, in addition to the fact that such actions could very well have caused their nuclear power plant to go into criticality.

"My job was to gather data on health statistics," she explained. "And even when there is no [nuclear] accident, the information I got was horrific in the extreme about how incidents of miscarriage and sterility and stillbirth and deformities rise the closer you get geographically to the nuclear installations."

She was thrilled to have found the scientific proof, and truly believed, as do so many journalists who come across a big story, that when people knew the information they would wake up and, as Macy put it, "stop this dangerous folly."

Hence, she saw firsthand that it appeared as though most people simply did not want to know the stark reality, even if it meant their willful ignorance was putting their and their families lives in grave danger.

"That was a turning point in my life, and that was the beginning of the Work That Reconnects," she said.

She began experimenting in ways that people could deal with the truth of what was happening in the world, and found, instead, "It wasn't that we didn't care or didn't know, but that we were afraid of getting forever stuck in despair, and immobilized."

She told of the formation process of the work that now spans the world:

"What people ached to do was to tell the truth of their own experience. Tell what they know and feel and see what is happening to our world. And then they found the feelings they feared, the feelings didn't last, and the feelings turned into relief and a sense of empowering solidarity with others, and they broke out of their self-imposed isolation into energizing collaboration."

This message was and is, in fact, subversive to the message that pervades the dominant society because the message most people in the Western world are raised with is that the grief, outrage and profound sadness we feel for the world are reducible to a message that there is something wrong with us. Our genuine feelings and natural human responses are thus pathologized.

"Given the hyper-individualism of our culture, this phenomenon has resulted [in] building a nation of

obedient people, isolated people," Macy said. "And they turn their grief for the world against themselves, to try to fix themselves, to build an identity out of a consumer self."

In one of her books, Macy addresses, precisely, how the corporate consumer culture we live in works to propagate the message that everything is fine: "Even if we have inklings of apocalypse, the American trance functions to discourage our feelings of despair and, if they persist, to reduce them to personal pathologies. Though we may respect our own cognitive reading of the signs, the spell we are under often leads us to imagine that it is we, not the society, who are going insane."

Macy believes that "despair work" involves nothing more mysterious than telling the truth about what we see, know and feel is happening to our world, which are things that should be as simple as telling someone the time of day, "if it were not for all that isolates us from each other and befuddles us with self-doubt."

"When corporate-controlled media keep the public in the dark, and power-holders manipulate events to create a climate of fear and obedience, truth-telling is like oxygen," she has written.

In fact, she believes it is not in the self-perceived interest of multinational corporations, or the government and the media that serve them, "for us to stop and become aware of our profound anguish with the way things are."

Macy went on to explain what her work really addresses, which is, in essence, the core of the human condition.

"We all ache to come home to a larger identity and belonging, and deep ecology as a movement has been very helpful in that regard, as has eco-psychology. But the practices in the Work That Reconnects fully validate what our true longing is. And it's not to be numb and separate, but it's to be together, even in pain. But then the pain gets transformed into passion for life and a bubbling up of compassion. Freeing yourself from that prison cell of the separate ego and the lonely cowboy ego."

Macy believes in each of us is "a longing for coming home to the sacredness of our belonging to the living body of earth and the joy of serving that at every step." (Photo: Dahr Jamail)

Macy does not believe that becoming engaged in work for the betterment of the planet involves arduous sacrifice, but rather to do what at our deepest level we crave most of all.

"It is a longing for coming home to the sacredness of our belonging to the living body of earth and the joy of serving that at every step," she said. "I make it sound easy but we can't do it alone. Just hearing the news of what is happening each day on the planet, I can't handle all of it alone. I'm not supposed to. Even looking at it requires we reach out to each other and take each other's arm and I can tell you how I feel, and you will listen. The very steps we need to take bring us the relief and reward of the whole point of it, which is our collective nature, our non-separateness, because this is the only thing that can save us."

The Loss of Certainty

Macy has been active in several large social movements throughout her lifetime, but it was her involvement in the anti-nuclear movement of the 1970s that acquainted her with the degree of danger, as she described it, "that truly seemed suicidal for our culture, and ecocidal for our planet."

Watching the generation of radioactive materials at great speed and volume, and the growing production of nuclear energy and weapons "turned my mind inside out," she explained, because she saw "that we were threatening the very basis of complex life forms" by "generating materials that will

literally last forever, without realizing that disease and genetic mutation will inevitably follow."

From that time on, she has felt we are all living on borrowed time, and that the present is now simultaneously "a scary moment and an absolutely necessary moment for us to wake up to certain realities."

By certain realities she does not mean only the colossal, mindless damage humans are causing, "but to certain realities that are the same as the spiritual truths of the great religions and the indigenous traditions . . . that our earth is alive. It is a sacred being of which we are a living part. That we belong to the earth, and to each other, and once we get that, everybody is capable of knowing that because it is our true nature, then we can walk away from our stupidity."

Nevertheless, she continues to believe it is going to take something earthshaking to liberate us in the Western world from our consumer culture and our "obedience to government industry and media, and especially to the power of money, which has tightened the corporate grip on the government, military and media."

Macy believes that the ongoing crisis of anthropogenic climate disruption (ACD), which is intensifying daily, now provides the possibility to snap out of our cultural amnesia, and what she describes as "the delusion that we're somehow separate from our planet that we can pollute and mine and destroy and contaminate. When we make that mental leap, which isn't very big, there is a whole shudder of glorious coming to of the psyche and the relationships upon which our culture is built."

Macy holds great concern and sadness about what her grandchildren, who are in their early teens, will face in the coming years as ACD progresses.

"Of course the sadness that I haven't been able stop it, is beyond words," she explained, beginning to weep. "It's a sadness that has to go unspoken in a way, because right at the moment I'm working on a chapter in a book about working with youth and children, and how to talk to young people about this. But it's the biggest challenge. And they are kept too busy, so glued to their electronic appliances, the whole culture is . . . you can't live in this culture without being semi-hypnotized."

Our situation so often feels hopeless. So much has spun out of control, and pathology surrounds us. At least one in five Americans are taking psychiatric medications, and the number of children taking adult psychiatric drugs is soaring.

From the perspective of Macy's teachings, it seems hard to argue that this isn't, at least in part, active denial of what is happening to the world and how challenging it is for both adults and children to deal with it emotionally, spiritually and psychologically.

These disturbing trends, which are increasing, are something she is very mindful of. As she wrote in *World as Lover, World as Self*, "The loss of certainty that there will be a future is, I believe, the pivotal psychological reality of our time."

The Razor's Edge

Macy, who is also an author of 12 books, is well known for having coined "The Great Unraveling," which references the collapsing of systems (both natural and human-made) under the weight of the failing industrial growth society that is literally consuming the planet. She is even better known for "The Great Turning," which she believes is what is happening simultaneous to the Great Unraveling.

"The Great Turning is a name for the essential adventure of our time," Macy said. "The shift from the industrial growth society to a life-sustaining civilization. The ecological and social crises we face are inflamed by an economic system dependent on accelerating growth. This self-destructing political economy sets its goals and measures its performance in terms of ever-increasing corporate profits. In

other words by how fast materials can be extracted from earth and turned into consumer products, weapons and waste."

She believes that a revolution is already well underway because people are realizing that our needs can be met without destroying the world.

"We have the technical knowledge, the communication tools and material resources to grow enough food, ensure clean air and water and meet rational energy needs," she explained. "Future generations, if there is a livable world for them, will look back at the epochal transition we are making to a life-sustaining society."

As in Buddhism, which urges practitioners to follow the "middle path" which Macy alluded to earlier, her Work That Reconnects calls on people to live with full awareness of both the Great Unraveling and Great Turning.

"Not closing our eyes but seeing clearly as we can the unraveling of the ecological and biological and cultural systems of our planet and of our minds," she said. "The growing prospect of losing all complex life forms, and at the same time seeing the Great Turning to a life-sustaining society and taking part in it."

Never before in history has humankind found itself amidst such a convergence of crises: runaway ACD, the global economy in chronic crisis, deepening militarism and surveillance, and a growing lack of food and water as the global population continues to explode.

While a great percentage of the population remains unaware that upward of 200 species are being made extinct each day, even greater numbers of people are ignorant to the very real possibility that humans may well be included in that number some day, whether it be from global thermonuclear war or runaway ACD.

Hence, Macy believes nothing short of a radical shift in consciousness is mandatory.

"What I'm witnessing is that this uncertainty is a great liberating gift to the psyche and the spirit," she said. "It's walking the razor's edge of the sacred moment where you don't know, you can't count on, and comfort yourself with any sure hope. All you can know is your allegiance to life and your intention to serve it in this moment that we are given. In that sense, this radical uncertainty liberates your creativity and courage."

Given that the planet has never been in such a state of chronic crisis, nor that humans have so starkly faced our own extinction, each of us must today find a way to cope, continue to function, and are called to evolve our ways of thinking and being.

Carl Jung warned that if humans didn't evolve into a new planetary consciousness, we would, as a species, go extinct.

My experience showed me that if I had not evolved beyond my own war trauma, I, too, could well have become a statistic of some negative type. If for me it was indeed evolve or die, how can it not be thus as a species when we fathom the true gravity of crisis we call modern life?

About Joanna Macy

Eco-philosopher Joanna Macy, PhD, is a scholar of Buddhism, general systems theory and deep ecology. A respected voice in the movements for peace, justice and ecology, she interweaves her scholarship with five decades of activism. As the root teacher of the Work That Reconnects, she has created a groundbreaking theoretical framework for personal and social change, as well as a powerful workshop methodology for its application.

Her wide-ranging work addresses psychological and spiritual issues of the nuclear age, the cultivation of ecological awareness, and the fruitful resonance between Buddhist thought and contemporary science. The many dimensions of this work are explored in her books.

Many thousands of people around the world have participated in Joanna's workshops and trainings. Her group methods, known as the Work That Reconnects, have been adopted and adapted yet more widely in classrooms, churches and grassroots organizing. Her work helps people transform despair and apathy, in the face of overwhelming social and ecological crises, into constructive, collaborative action. It brings a new way of seeing the world, as our larger living body, freeing us from the assumptions and attitudes that now threaten the continuity of life on earth. Joanna travels widely giving lectures, workshops, and trainings in the Americas, Europe, Asia and Australia. She lives in Berkeley, California, near her children and grandchildren.

Why nonviolence is about changing situations, not other people

Rivera Sun February 18, 2020 Waging Nonviolence

From Wet'suwet'en solidarity blockades to students boycotting school over segregation, movements are at their strongest when they disrupt the status quo.

In a recent newsletter, Metta Center Executive Director Stephanie Van Hook reminded me that nonviolence isn't about changing other people.

"Nonviolence can change other people," she wrote, "but if we think that is the goal of our efforts, we will not be effective. It's about changing a situation or creating a new situation, and letting the new environment, which includes people's attitudes and behaviors, change people."

In nonviolent struggle, we often think of our campaigns as "forcing" an oppressor to stop harming us. But, nonviolence is really about changing our own behaviors — and those of friends, coworkers, colleagues and community members — in ways that challenge other people to adapt, respond and change, too.

All too often, it is our silence, complicity and cooperation that allows injustice and destruction to proceed. When we stop playing along, others — oppressors, bystanders, passive allies — have to reassess their behaviors. As Dr. King said, "We must straighten our backs and work for our freedom. A man can't ride you unless your back is bent."

Nonviolent action isn't about forcing someone to get off your back. It's about standing up straight. When we change ourselves in this way, the people trying to oppress us soon find that it's not so easy — or so profitable.

With that in mind, let's look at this dynamic in some of the stories from this week's Nonviolence News.

Currently, the Wet'suwet'en First Nation is in conflict with the Canadian government and Coastal Link, a gas company trying to build a pipeline through the First Nation's unceded territory. Tribal members have refused their consent, setting up a series of road blockades in the path of the pipeline construction. This meant the Canadian government had to make a choice: Will they respect First Nation rights and treaty laws? Or will they back the pipeline?

They chose to back the pipeline and arrested the resisters. When that happened, over a hundred solidarity actions erupted across Canada, including rail blockades, port shut-downs, highway closures, office occupations, student walkouts and more. Each one raises the costs — and the stakes — on the Canadian government for its support the pipeline. The Mohawk Nation's rail blockades alone have disrupted over 200 trains. The solidarity actions are costing the Canadian economy billions. Canadians are faced with a choice: Is the disrespect of First Nation rights and a profitless, climate-destroying pipeline worth it? Many are saying, "no."

The Wet'suwet'en decision to uphold their treaty rights is "straightening their backs." They are showing that they will no longer allow colonizers to build destructive pipelines in their territory. Their choices are setting off a ripple — a tidal wave, really — of changing decisions throughout Canada.

Meanwhile, in the United States, New York City high school students are planning a district-wide boycott over segregation. The students say current admissions processes have created a segregated school system that divides rich and poor, brown/black and white, and college-prep and all others. For

months, school boycotts have rotated from one campus to the next. By walking out of class, the students are changing the game. They are taking back their power by non-cooperating with the unjust situation. With the students on rotating strike, city officials can no longer ignore the problems or continue implementing small, insufficient changes. They must make choices in response to the fact that their students refuse to attend these unjust schools. The students' boycotts have changed the situation in precisely the manner Stephanie Van Hook's quote describes.

Let's look at a third example: in Bristol, England, a city council planned to expand the local airport until climate protesters raised the stakes of that decision. More than 8,000 people objected to the expansion. Extinction Rebellion organized a three-day protest with dozens of activists symbolically burying their heads in the sand at a nearby beach. By refusing to stay silent on the issue, citizens helped their community reject the "business as usual" mentality. They gave the officials room to make decisions based on environmental and health impacts. Without public outcry, the airport expansion would have been perceived "sensible" or "wise." Instead, the expansion was viewed as throwing fuel on the fire of the global climate crisis.

If you look closely, you'll see this dynamic in every nonviolent struggle. People are showing that they're done cooperating with oppressors. The days of normalizing injustice are over. Those profiting from harm must calculate anew the risks and costs of continuing their destructive choices. And perhaps, they will realize that they might now benefit from changing, too.

Rather than "forcing" or "making" someone else change, movements organize everyday people to make the first change, setting off a chain reaction of shifts and new decisions. It's an empowering way to look at how change is made. It puts the power to transform our world squarely in our hands.

Why You Should Choose Nonviolent Methods To Change The World

By Nina Koevoets

Almost 12 years ago I was sharing an apartment in Ramallah, the West Bank, with a Palestinian and a Canadian guy. I was only 23 and decided to do an internship abroad after my studies in Conflict Resolution, with an organization called Middle East Nonviolence and Democracy. There were some Palestinians part of the network, but mostly I shared the office with a Japanese guy, who had recommended me to go to the weekly protests in Bil'in, a village that tried to get back its land that was stolen from them by what they called "the Apartheid Wall", and what Israel preferred to call "the Security Barrier".

I told my Palestinian flatmate, let's call him George, about my plans of going to Bil'in, as we sat in the kitchen. He was working with a Human Rights organization and said he didn't believe in "nonviolence". Nonviolent actions, he said, were symbolic and not effective. I had to agree that I wasn't sure either how effective they were, but argued that somehow the cycle of violence had to be broken.

George pondered for a few seconds and said: "Look, imagine tomorrow you wake up and you notice that soldiers have taken over this house. They didn't take your bedroom and this kitchen. Before you could of course freely walk from your bedroom to the kitchen, but now you have to ask their permission."
I nodded. The Gaza Strip and The West Bank were only 28% of what was Palestine before the Jews arrived in big numbers in the 19th and 20th centuries. The UN proposed a division of land where the two areas would be connected, but this never became reality.

"So, what will you do with nonviolence?" he asked, crossing his arms.
I didn't have an answer.
He got up, grabbed a knife and stood in the doorway. "Let's try it. I am guarding the door. You want to get back to your bedroom. What will you do?"
I got up, a bit reluctantly. We exchanged some words about the purpose of my crossing. I mentioned I had a permit. He didn't think it was valid and told me to come back tomorrow.
With hanging shoulders I sat back in my chair.
"Well, you could throw those strawberries at me," George suggested. "But you know... I have a knife."
I laughed. Of course he was referring to the stones that Palestinian kids throw at the soldiers.
"I think it may make some red stains in the kitchen..." I answered.
"See. So, I think I illustrated my point," George said with a satisfied smile on his face.



Photo: Organization in Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem shows the decline of land owned by Palestinians (2015).

An Eye-Opening Experience

I thought about this incident a few times as I started to learn more about nonviolence. As I returned home, I

tried processing my first visit to Palestine. It was tough. Coming from The Netherlands, where I grew up in quite a protective environment, the situation in The West Bank was shocking. Perhaps even somewhat traumatizing, I can say now. I cried my eyes out for months after I got home and in some moments despair grabbed my heart. I was trying to keep standing on my feet as I got my first full-time job, but I didn't enjoy the work and started to look for ways out. And then I found a Nonviolence training at the Metta Center. That sounded perfect! I applied, was interviewed and accepted, so I quit my job and went to California for the 10 week training.

That was an eye-opening experience. I felt almost betrayed by the education I had had. All the history classes about war. My studies that was called Conflict Resolution, without getting really practical tools to resolve conflict, except for some "negotiation techniques" in diplomacy. I wondered why I had not searched myself for the history of Gandhi or Martin Luther King before. "But, better late than never," I said! Those two historical figures mobilized millions of people nonviolently and achieved real change. And not only them: the Metta Center named a list of other examples like the Philippines, Chile, and Denmark[1], that we didn't learn about in so much detail, but it was enough to just know about them for the time being. And we did not only speak about the social movements that struggled against governments, also projects like a nonviolent group of villages in Colombia (San José de Apartado), the Land Gift movement of Gandhi's friend Vinoba Bhave, the work of Vandana Shiva inspired by Gandhi as well, and also the Peace Brigades International that may have come from Gandhi's idea of a peace 'army' or "Shanti Sena" (particularly taken up by Abdul Ghaffar Khan a colleague of Gandhi who started an organization he called "Servants of God" with hundreds of thousand members, which was more commonly known as the "Red Shirts") were mentioned as examples of living nonviolence.

For many reasons that training was a changing point in my life. I wanted more people to know about what I learned, but first I wanted to learn more myself and went to India, then back to Palestine, and then back to university. Five years later I decided I wanted to organize a similar training in The Netherlands. With the support of the Foundation for Active Nonviolence I was able to implement this. But as I started without any experience in organizing something like that, I realized that it wouldn't be possible to create a 10 week program. I did succeed to make a 2 week one. However, even two weeks was too intensive to train people continuously, so I shortened it to 8 days. (And now also give workshops that last only a few hours.) In October 2019 the Study Guide "Engaging Nonviolence" was published by Pace e Bene Press, that I wrote together with Veronica Pelicaric over the course of two years. This book will allow people to facilitate a Study Program in Nonviolence themselves. With this aim, we also offer an online course of the Study Guide. And as I was teaching the "misperceptions about nonviolence" I remembered again the incident with my Palestinian flatmate.

Somehow, after all these years, I had the urge to write him some kind of reply. To tell him, and everyone else, how effective nonviolent actions actually are, and how important it is that more people know that. Knowledge is (a form of) power.

Nonviolent Actions Are More Effective And Take Less Time

Quite common misperceptions are that nonviolence is passive, cowardly and that it is ineffective. Some people confuse the word "pacifism" with "nonviolence", while the latter is much more than only rejecting violence. It is not only without or against violence, but also action for justice and most of the time one needs to act in order to change something or at least make a conscious and collective choice for non-action/ non-cooperation. This also eliminated the misunderstanding that it is cowardly, because standing up for injustice, putting your life on the line, is rather courageous. It may in fact be considered completely reckless or even mad, if it was thought to be completely ineffective. But, as I said, Gandhi and King achieved great changes. And not only they did: the effectiveness of nonviolent action was illustrated by the statistic research "Why Civil Resistance Works" (2011) done by Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan. This was the first research that compared violent and nonviolent groups and thus meant a break-through. They examined 100 social movements or what they call "campaigns" (50/50) that wanted to change regimes. 23% of the violent campaigns achieved their goal, compared to 56% of the nonviolent campaigns. Moreover, when the nonviolent groups mobilized 3.5% of the population, non of them failed. These numbers may be important because a larger crowd is harder to suppress. A bigger group also has more potential to have connections in

1 See the Nonviolence Database of Swarthmore college for numerous examples.

the media, government or other key-institutions. (See also Erica Chenoweht's TEDtalk on the subject.)

People that say nonviolent action doesn't work probably lack information about the history of nonviolent action, or are equating the whole of nonviolent action with symbolic protests and petitions. That's indeed what George did. And it's definitely not uncommon, as most people could probably not give you so many examples of nonviolent action. Of course nonviolence is more than nonviolent action, and its personal benefits are also a motivation to walk this path, but that is the topic of another article. For now, let's dig deeper into political nonviolent action.

Gene Sharp has listed 198 methods of Nonviolent Action, which he also categorized into protest and persuasion, non-cooperation and intervention. Two well-know methods that fall into the non-cooperation category are strikes and boycotts. Others are removing/changing road signs and work slow-downs, like the Danes did during the German occupation of the 2nd World War (during which no war ship was ever finished). Intervention methods are teach-ins, sit-ins, defying blockades, creation of alternative communication systems or guerrilla gardening - a popular action during the Palestinian First *Intifada* (Uprising). Especially in an occupation where nearly all authority is in the hands of another group, activist "have to" work on independence. Guerrilla Gardening is one example, others are creating a local currency, a shadow government, and rain water harvesting practices as alternatives to pipelines controlled by the occupier. As you can see, there are quite a few options.

Options then are not the problem... education and training is. To be effective, one needs a strategic plan and mobilize people to implement this plan. And there are of course many practical as well as psychological obstacles to overcome. When I was in the West Bank, although I could feel a fighting spirit in some people, I also observed a lot of feelings of victimhood. Logically, when everything is decided by Israel, but changing reality is always proceeded by changing the way of thinking. Surveillance is another problem. Israel's Intelligence Service uses Facebook for example to monitor the Palestinians. Technically outwitting a very tech savvy country like Israel could thus prove to be challenging. And since movement is quite restricted in the West Bank (through moving check-points, roadblocks for example), online communication is important for activists to organize and exchange.

However, there is hope: when I was in Palestine again in 2015 I saw with my own eyes how the fences in Bil'in, the village that I visited in 2008 when I got into the argument with my flatmate, were taken down. The village had succeeded to get back 2/3 of their land. The village even became kind of famous with the documentary film "Five Broken Cameras" made by the local activists, that received an Emmy Award in 2013.



Photo: Freedom street in Bil'in

We can thus conclude that Nonviolent actions can be effective, but aren't easy. There is no recipe for activist to follow, but there is certainly a lot to learn from movements that have successfully created change. Few people know for example that Gandhi required people to follow training sessions before they could participate in his movement, and that King had the same requirement and learned many other things from his visit to Gandhi. The movement that ended the dictatorship in Serbia also learned from the American scholar Gene Sharp, as well as the protesters of the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt.

Nonviolent movements give us hope that we as citizens can shape our future, and we should firmly hold on to those examples, if we don't want to lose our voice, because that also happens in democracies and not only in dictatorships or occupied territories...!

Another misperception about nonviolence is that it takes longer. Also that was refuted by Chenoweth's and Stephan's statistical comparison: The average overall duration for nonviolent conflicts is about 2 years. For nonviolent anti-government campaigns the average duration is 16 months, while for nonviolent territorial

campaigns (expelling a foreign invasion or ending an occupation) it's 4.25 years. This compares with over 6 years for violent anti-government campaigns and about 8 years for violent territorial campaigns. The overall average for violent campaigns is about 7 years: Nonviolent struggles are thus more than *three times faster* than violent ones![2]

Another widely held belief I heard in Palestine was that violent actions were what actually made nonviolent movements successful. A remarkable belief, given that the First Intifada turned violent after a few years, when some leaders were effectively locked-up or banned from the territory (like Mubarak Awad, who now runs Nonviolence International in Washington DC and NYC) and although the Oslo Accords were signed after that, most Palestinians now think this agreement made things worse instead of better. Generally, in predominantly nonviolent struggles, organized violence lowers the likelihood of success, because it shifts the campaign to a battlefield on which the state (or sometimes companies) has much more competence and far more resources. It is sometimes argued that violence can bring more attention to the campaign, but often the violence makes the movement less legitimate and therefore loses support from the citizens that aren't involved directly. You could say that using nonviolent methods gives the movement a moral advantage in the struggle, by which it increases its influence. Gene Sharp called using such a moral advantage "political jiujitsu". A term that suggests that training is indeed needed. We can also see that the most successful movements all trained people to remain nonviolent. In fact, isn't it naive that we all agree that soldiers need training before they are send into a battle, but activists do not?

I would like to leave you with this thought.

And George, if you ever read this, I want to thank you for your questions back then. I can imagine it may not answer all of the questions you have right now, but I do hope that it gave you at least a few new ideas.

2 The figures regarding the length of campaigns are measured from the start to finish of contentious activity involving at least 1,000 participants and excludes the planning stages of either violent or nonviolent conflict.

What has to win is life

by Nina Koevoets

24 Apr, 2023

Peace Voice

“The choice today is no longer between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence.” – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Cold War seemed to be over, but it has ignited again, with a high risk of nuclear war. On top of that the climate is warming as a result of our consumerist and militarist lifestyle, making the planet less inhabitable and we only have limited time to change course.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. talked about ‘three evils’: militarism, poverty and racism. If he were alive today, he’d probably add ‘environmental destruction’ as a fourth evil. In countless ways, we can see these evils causing harm in our world. A place where I personally experienced that is the Occupied Palestinian Territory of the West Bank.

I lived in the West Bank for three months in 2008 and for nine months in 2010-11, and made some shorter visits. When I wanted to go from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, I had to cross the checkpoint, just like anybody else. But most Palestinians need permits to cross and I could come and go as I pleased with my European passport. One time it was very crowded. People were pushing each other now and then to get through the metal detectors and baggage scans. As I looked up, I saw a soldier above us on a metal structure about seven feet high. He had his gun pointed straight down at us. I felt panic arising in me. I took a deep breath and thought that probably something extreme needed to happen for the soldier to actually fire at the crowd. I shuffled forward, went through all the checks and came out the other way.

Checkpoints are sometimes permanent structures and sometimes temporary ones. The permanent ones are at the wall that is built around – and also deeply inside – the West Bank. The wall separates not just Israelis and Jewish settlers from Palestinians, but also Palestinians from each other, from their relatives and previous neighbors and their working place or places of religious worship. It takes land and water, and slowly breaks up the whole territory into small pieces. Temporary checkpoints are created on the roads that connect these pieces.

The wall is an intimidating 26-feet high. A few times, I stood in front of it, putting one hand to the cement and craning my head back on my neck, to see its length. I felt like the whole thing crashed down on me, so heavy the weight of its injustice. In many places paintings show different messages. One of these is etched in my heart. It showed two people hugging and the text: “These are the only arms we need.”

I’ve been part of demonstrations against this wall, in places where villagers lost land and houses. At the time, these protests sometimes felt like small rituals. Palestinians and international supporters marched to the wall or fence, said some things to the Israeli soldiers, and started running when the soldiers fired tear gas. There have been a few more creative approaches, but mostly, that was the procedure, in different villages. When I visited the area again after four years, I was relieved to see that one village, called Bil’in, got two thirds of their land back, as they documented in the film *Five Broken Cameras*.

Another text I saw on the wall was: “resistance or nonexistence.” Some Palestinians still are trying to resist nonviolently. But while there are many factors that make this conflict very hard to solve, I believe power imbalance is the main one. The USA is the main sponsor of the Israeli occupation; it sends around 3 billion USD per year of so-called ‘development’ aid to the Israeli army.

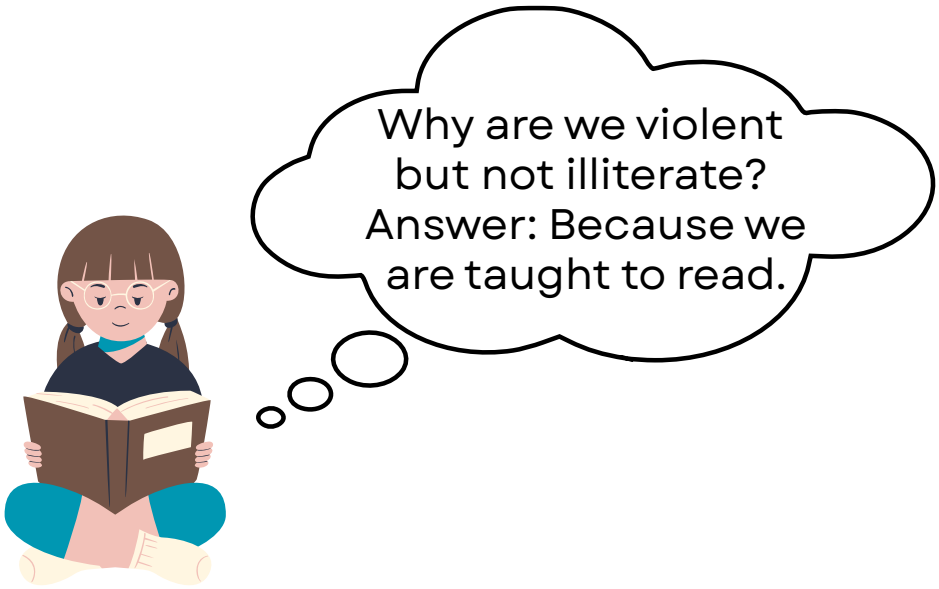
The USA has the biggest military budget of the entire world, with by far the biggest global presence at hundreds of bases on other peoples' lands, hundreds of warships on the seas, drones operating without permission in others' countries, and hundreds of military spacecraft in orbit. The US has established both a military and economic hegemony, contributing to the gap between rich and poor.

So how is nonviolence an answer? ??Militarism, poverty and racism are all features of a system of dominance or 'power-over'. It is the idea of "the survival of the fittest," the belief that we need to be stronger than others and overpower them. The zero-sum belief that we can only win if someone else loses creates the conditions for both war and crushing poverty.

Nonviolent power, on the other hand, is based on collective and collaborative power, or "power-with." It operates through skills (such as skills to organize, communicate etc.) rather than threats, compassion rather than aggression, as well as inner strength and courage. Nonviolent power creates a whole different system, a very different culture. And it can come to be, if more people learn about it. You can do so for example by reading "Engaging Nonviolence, Nonviolent Change for Our Lives and Our World", that I've co-authored or by playing the 'Peace Please' card game I've developed with others, if you're looking for something a bit more laid back.

By engaging in nonviolent forms of power and acting on nonviolent values we can reverse the four evils of our globalized world. Climate change puts extra pressure on the urgency to do so. To reverse the destruction of our planet, we need to leave the win-lose mentality behind, and open our eyes to the reality that we are on this planet together. We can only continue to exist if we cooperate and help each other. The well-being of one is dependent on the well-being of all. Or as Dr. King put it: "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

I hope we see the choice before us in time to prevent a catastrophe. We are at a crossroads; one way has a dead end that leads to nonexistence. The other is a sharp turn away from destruction, towards peace. This is the road of nonviolence. It is the only hope for our future. Just like there are no winners in war, there are no winners in global warming. What has to win is life.



This is a quote from a student of American Peace Educator Colman McCarthy that I think is very much to the point.

Gandhi's Relevance for Today

Gandhi is probably most known for the Salt March, an act of nonviolent civil disobedience in colonial India. Britain's Salt Acts prohibited Indians from collecting or selling salt, so citizens were forced to buy the vital mineral from the British. Gandhi mobilized people to join a 24-day march, from March 12, 1930 to April 6, 1930, across 240 miles, to defy British policy by making salt from seawater. All along the way, Gandhi addressed large crowds, and with each passing day an increasing number of people joined so that eventually there were thousands of people at the shore. It was a direct action campaign of tax resistance and nonviolent protest against the British salt monopoly. A nationwide movement started; marches were organized across India, resulting in a severe beating by the police at the Dharasana Salt Works, which gained worldwide attention and prompted an international outcry against British policy in India. The campaign involved both elements of non-cooperation (taking salt from the Indian shore and not using British salt) and constructive action (making salt).
Gandhi saw economic independence is closely related to political independence. He perceived the capitalist system as violent, since material wealth is gained by competition, which widens the gap between rich and poor.



Cooperation, not competition, should be stimulated to level out the gap. The whole society needs to work together to contribute to everyone's benefit. Moreover, democratic decision making, law implementation and civil administration together with a strong civil society that assures "people power" ought to be well developed in order to secure autonomy and independence.
Another campaign that Gandhi led was the so-called *swadeshi* campaign, encouraging people to spin their own clothes (as opposed to using cotton manufactured by the British). In the community that he established in Ahmedabad, people did many constructive actions such as building toilets, hospitals, and more. One could say his strategy was thus based on both non-cooperation with the colonial rule, and cooperation between people that supported independence for the common good (a key-value for Gandhi, called *sarvodaya* in Hindi). The campaign for independence, started with the "Quit India" speech in August 1942 instigated actions across the country. The British left India in 1947.

India was one of the few countries that had a mostly nonviolent process of decolonization. Although nearly all colonies have stopped existing, Western countries still hold economic power over many other countries, and the gap between rich and poor keeps growing, which makes Gandhi's ideas still relevant for our time.