

A Way Out – Victory Without Violence

Written by Carl Watner for The Voluntaryist, June 1989.

Marshall Fritz of the Advocates for Self-Government recently loaned me a copy of John Yoder's book, titled *What Would You Do: If a Violent Person Threatened to Harm a Loved One...* At dinner one evening, we were discussing the question of what I would do if an armed maniac came barging in and threatened to kill my son or wife. How consistently would I practice my philosophy of nonviolence? Would I view it as a departure from my principles to use violence in self-defense?

To answer the latter question first: Yes, I do believe violent self-defense is a departure from the principle of nonviolence, but I also view self-defense as a natural right. While I view self-protection as being within the moral jurisdiction of each and every person, I believe we would have a less violent and more peaceful, harmonious, and abundant world if people refrained from using violence, or its threat regardless of the situation. I would not criticize others who use violence, in self-defense, but I would not choose this method to defend my loved ones. The interconnection of means and ends makes me desirous of avoiding violence in either a personal confrontation, or in supporting it in the broader social context of the State.

Now to answer the first question. My choice is not simply between acting cowardly or acting violently. I would make every attempt to react nonviolently to an attack against a loved one. Whether I could maintain the strength of will and presence of mind to do this will only be determined in an actual situation, but I would strive to achieve this. The type of nonviolence I am talking about is the nonviolence of the brave. It requires consistency and adherence in the most dangerous situations. It requires resourcefulness, the use of intellect, and creativity. This type of nonviolence comes from strength not weakness, and depends on the inner spirit and will. As Gandhi put it, nonviolence does not mean meek submission to the will or intention of the evildoer.

Just because I say, beforehand, that I would not use violence to defend my family from an attacker does not mean or imply that I would not actively and nonviolently protect them. As the LeFevre adage puts it, an ounce of protection is worth a pound of defense in an actual encounter. If my protection (security alarms, adequate lighting, dead bolts and secure doors) fails, the very last thing I would do is offer myself as a shield between the invader and the invaded. Under no circumstances could I envisage myself calling the police.

One of the main themes of the Yoder book is that there are numerous nonviolent ways of disarming the assailant: seeming to go berserk (as LeFevre once did), trying to distract the

attacker with talk, offering the attacker money or sanctuary, making the attacker feel at home, disarming the attacker emotionally, etc. The violent person expects to be violently resisted, and is usually scared himself. When he does not encounter this reaction in his victims, or their defenders, his equilibrium is thrown off balance, and the initiative is placed in the hands of the nonviolent person. *What Would You Do* includes several true-to-life stories of missionaries and pacifists, who behaved nonviolently and successfully warded off personal danger, when faced with violent situations.

However, even if my nonviolent resistance to violence failed, it would not be a defeat for nonviolence. For there is no guarantee that violence would be successful in preserving the lives of my family. A person of integrity is more concerned with the means than the ends. Such a person would rather give up his own life, than take the life of another. As the ancient Stoics put it, we must all die some time. It is more important how we live and deport ourselves, than whether we preserve our existence temporarily. The Biblical commandment did not say, "Thou shall not kill, except in self-defense of the family or for the common good." A person simply has to have faith that "if one takes care of the means, the end will take care of itself," and then let the chips fall where they may.