

Chapter 5 – Thoughts on Nonviolence

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Thoughts on Nonviolence

by Karl H. Meyer

What is nonviolence? It is a way of life based on these human beliefs: Human conflicts can be resolved without violence or force; organized social aggression can be faced and turned back effectively without war and without killing anybody; most crime problems can be addressed more effectively without the use of violent methods or punishment or restraint; people well-educated in the use of nonviolent methods will almost always be more effective in human relations than those who use physical threats and weapons.

Commitment to nonviolence requires us to find solutions that address the needs and feelings of all parties. Resorting to violence means that one party will lose and be forced to give up when the other party wins. Nonviolence begins with respect for the needs and feelings of others, and a serious attempt to appreciate their point of view. The methods of nonviolence are communication, negotiation, mediation, arbitration and nonviolent forms of protest and resistance, when other forms of communication fail to resolve a conflict. When these methods are used with skill and persistence, most conflicts can be resolved without any party feeling the need to resort to violence. Organized, persistent nonviolent action can overcome oppression and resist aggression more effectively than violent means.

The fact is that all of us use nonviolent methods in most of our human relationships, most of the time. It would be a sorry world if we didn't. What would it be like if we used violence instead of negotiation every time that someone else had something that we wanted? What would it be like if we used violent retaliation every time that someone else did something that obstructed us or angered us? We use nonviolent methods in most of our family disputes. We use it in our schools, our work relationships and our commercial trading transactions. We use it in almost all relationships between communities within the established borders of nations, and in most relations between nations.

Many of us never resort to the explicit use of violence at all. Most others resort to it only in occasional situations.

We carry on most of our activities within a structure of law and customary principles of nonviolent relationship. It may seem that this structure is only held together by the ultimate threat of police force; but, in fact, the fabric of social relationships in families, in groups and in larger communities has always been held together primarily by voluntary

assent to common principles of social organization.

Throughout history it has been common to resolve conflicts between nations by warfare and the use of force. Yet even here the majority of relationships have been governed by negotiated agreements, treaties, laws and customs.

Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. did not invent nonviolence. Their instinctive contribution was to show how organized nonviolent action could solve intractable situations of longstanding oppression and conflict. Before them, others believed that these problems could not be solved, or could be solved only by violent revolt.

Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. King showed how we can take the nonviolent methods that we use most of the time in everyday relationships, and develop them as powerful tools to solve the most difficult problems of entrenched oppression and institutional violence.

We are all believers and practitioners of nonviolence in human relationships. The challenge is to extend our belief and our practical skills to more difficult and remote situations of human conflict. Those who really commit themselves to these principles find that they work. Many lives are saved. Destruction is avoided, and everyone benefits as the process develops.

Our politicians often tell us that it is impossible to resolve conflicts without war. The fact is that they don't try hard enough, because it is our lives and our well being that they put on the line when they decide that violence is necessary.

Copyright © 1992 Karl H. Meyer. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission. Karl H. Meyer is a pacifist, nonviolent activist, and ringleader of war tax refusal for more than fifty years. He practices urban agriculture, simple living and right livelihood at the Nashville Greenlands community. He's affiliated with the Catholic Worker movement and the War Resisters League. He agrees with Tom Paine that "My country is the world, and my religion is to do good."

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