

Non-Violence in Everyday Life  
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In December of 1974, I was studying to become a Unitarian Universalist minister in Berkeley, California. I was living with two other students in Richmond, California eight miles north of Berkeley. We got the house rent free from the owner. In exchange in our free time, we were fixing the house up, so the owner could put it on the market to sell.

One afternoon after class in Berkeley, I took the Bay Area Rapid Transit train north to my stop, and started walking from the train station to the house. About half way there, I passed a group of young men. One of them separated from the rest came up to me and said, "White people are not allowed in Richmond."

"Actually," I said defiantly, "I live in Richmond." This was not the right thing to say. The young man hit me in the side of the head with his fist.

On TV and in movies actors often hit each other several times, yet they keep on functioning as if nothing has happened. This was not my experience. Besides the considerable pain, the fist to the head disrupted my vision. I was seeing double. I found this disorienting.

My mother grew up a pacifist Mennonite and my Southern Baptist father was a conscientious objector during the Second World War. I had read books about nonviolence. However, none of this felt very useful that afternoon as I stood on a sidewalk seeing double. I could think of only one simple, honest thing to say. I said, "I do not want to fight you."

He tried to hit me again. This time I stepped back, into the street, where cars were passing. I hoped that some stranger might stop, let me get in their car and take me away from this young man. The cars honked and drove on.

I said a second time, "I do not want to fight you." He tried to hit me again. I stepped back again and he missed a second time. I said a third time "I do not want to fight you."

The young man looked at me and asked, "Why not?"

Again, I could think of only one simple, honest thing to say. "Because I do not want to get hurt." He said, "That's cool." He put down his fists and put his hand out. We shook. He walked away, and I walked onto the house.

Often in the face of everyday aspects of life, our ideals fade into the background. My childhood Unitarian Universalist minister came from a Quaker background. He taught me that human life was perhaps the most sacred entity on Earth. No person had a right to take the life of another human being. To take another human life was the ultimate in human degradation. My childhood

minister taught me that human beings are divine. Each of us has the spark of divinity in our soul, which if properly nurtured, can help us develop into sensitive compassionate persons. Through kindness, understanding, and a willingness to become involved, people can change. We can reach their better, kinder more compassionate side.

I heard these words during my teenage years at the critical time when I was forming my values. They became part of who I am. Still, when the young man hit me in the head I did not think, "This person has a spark of divinity in their soul." Instead, I had selfish thoughts. I said, "I do not want to fight you. I do not want to get hurt." In that moment at least, I discovered that through simple, short, honest I-statements, I could reach the kinder side of a violent young man. In my sixty-three years on earth I have learned that even those of us raised by pacifist parents and a pacifist minister, are born with the potential for violence. When I feel threatened, adrenaline surges through my body. The part of my brain that deals with emotion tells me to fight, to defend myself.

Back in 1919 in trying to convince people to support the League of Nations, Woodrow Wilson would tell this story,

I had a couple of friends who were in the habit of losing their tempers, and when they lost their tempers, they used unparliamentarily language. Some of their friends induced them to promise that they would never swear inside the town limits. When the impulse next came on them, they took a streetcar to go out of town to swear. By the time they got out of town, they did not want to swear. They came back convinced that they were just what they were--a couple of unspeakable fools.

This approach can also be found in the marriage research of John Gottman. Gottman paid couples to spend a weekend in an apartment with video cameras, microphones, and portable heart rate monitors strapped to their chest, from nine a.m. to nine p.m. He asked them to talk about an issue in their lives. He discovered that when we get angry it takes a twenty-minute time out for the adrenaline to disappear from our blood stream.

When I feel that adrenaline surge through my body, I try to remember Woodrow Wilson's story and John Gottman's twenty-minute rule. I also try to remember a story about the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist, Thich Nhat Hanh. In 1968, he was on a speaking tour of the United States, arguing for the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam. One evening he was talking in the auditorium of a wealthy Christian church in a St. Louis suburb. As always, he emphasized the need for Americans to stop their bombing and killings in Vietnam. During the time for questions, a large man stood up and spoke with contempt about the supposed compassion of this Mr. Hanh.

He said, "If you care so much about your people, why are you here? If you care so much for the wounded people in Vietnam, why don't you spend your time with them?"

The man went on expressing hostility and contempt toward this Zen Buddhist priest. When he finally finished his verbal attack, Thich Nhat Hanh said, "If you want a tree to grow it won't help to water the leaves. You have to water the roots. Many roots of the war are here, in the United States. To help the people whom America is bombing, to try to protect them from suffering, I have to come here."

After this response, Hanh left the room. A friend followed him out. The friend reported that Hanh stood on the sidewalk beside the church parking lot. The Buddhist was struggling for air – like someone who had been deeply underwater and had barely managed to swim to the surface before gasping for breath. Hanh explained that the man's comments had been terribly upsetting. He had wanted to respond to him with anger. Therefore, he had made himself breathe deeply and very slowly to find a way to respond with common understanding.

The American friend said, "Why not be angry with him? Even a pacifist has the right to be angry."

Hanh replied, "If it were just myself, yes. However, I am here to speak for the Vietnamese peasants. I have to show them what we can be at our best."

When he was under attack, the adrenaline surged through the body of the Zen Buddhist pacifist. Evolution has programmed us to defend ourselves when someone attacks us. In such situations, I try to remember this story and to pay attention to my breathing. The way I breathe and the ways I respond when I feel under attack are connected. Breathing in and out I calm my body.

Humans have evolved a tendency to feel anger and violence. We feel this anger not only with strangers, but also with the people we love.

Gandhi was married when he was thirteen. In his autobiography he described the first years of his marriage. He wrote:

If I should be pledged to be faithful to my wife, she also should be pledged to be faithful to me, I said to myself. The thought made me a jealous husband. . . . I had absolutely no reason to suspect my wife's fidelity, but jealousy does not wait for reasons. I [was] forever on the lookout regarding her movements, and therefore she could not go anywhere without my permission. This sowed the seeds of a bitter quarrel between us. The restraint was virtually a sort of imprisonment. And my wife was not the girl to brook any such thing. She made it a point to go out whenever and wherever she liked. More restraint on my part resulted in more liberty being taken by her, and in my getting more and more cross. Refusal to speak to one another thus became the order of the day with us, my severities were all based on love. I wanted to make my wife an ideal wife.

Gandhi wrote these words when he was fifty-eight years old and he was deeply ashamed of the way he had treated his wife as a teenager and young man. I chose the video from the movie

Gandhi and this passage from his autobiography to illustrate that the potential for domestic conflict is possible even with the greatest teachers of nonviolence.

Many years ago I was serving as the minister in my first church. One Sunday morning after the service a man who worked during the week as a social worker pulled me aside. He named a woman who was a member of the church and he said to me,

I want you to know what is going on. When she came into the building this morning, she had a black eye and bruises on her arm. After she dropped off her kids in the church school, I approached her and insisted that we talk. I took her into your office. At first she insisted that nothing was wrong. I kept asking questions. Finally, she admitted that her husband had beaten her. I called the battered women's shelter and reached the counselor on call. The two of them are still on the phone talking in your office. Roger, we need to encourage her and her kids not to go back home. We need to encourage her to go with her children from the church to the shelter.

I did my part, and with the help of a church member she left the church and went with her children to the shelter.

"Now Roger," said my social worker friend. "Your next job is to drive to her husband's house and tell him that his wife and his children will not be coming home."

I knew this man and I was not afraid of him. So that afternoon I visited the husband, a tenured professor at a local university and a former board member of the church. We sat and talked. He cried. He talked about the problems in their marriage. At least according to him, his wife had played a part in creating them. I said, "Nothing gives you the right to beat her." She never moved back in. They divorced several months later.

It is important to note that the church community was effective that day, not because I, the minister, intervened, nor because the women of the church took action. It was the sharp eye of a man, trained as a social worker, who saw the bruising, to ask the hard questions, put the abused woman in contact by phone with a woman who understood the issue, and to encourage the woman to seek safety for herself and her children.

Former President Jimmy Carter has just published a book in which he argues that the most serious and unaddressed worldwide challenge is the violent abuse of women and girls. In the spring of 2001 a group of women in the Unitarian Universalist congregation I was serving in Bethesda, Maryland began to talk about the treatment of women in Afghanistan by the Taliban. They invited representatives from the political opposition group called the Northern Alliance. An eye doctor named Dr. Abdullah came to speak about what we could do to help women in Afghanistan. After the American invasion and occupation, these women organized fundraisers to support a girls' school. Today Dr. Abdullah is a candidate for President of Afghanistan. The

progressive women in that country hope that he will be elected and that this will lead eventually to less violence against women.

What is everyday nonviolence? I have not given a systematic or comprehensive answer to this question. Instead I have shared several stories.

First, I told the story of the man on the street who hit me. In that moment at least, I found that through simple, short, honest I-statements I could reach the kinder side of a violent young man.

Second, I told Woodrow Wilson's story about the angry men who took the streetcar to the edge of the city. By the time they got there they had calmed down. One researcher says to avoid violence, take a twenty-minute time out.

Third, I told the story of the Zen Buddhist priest who could control his anger by paying attention to his breathing. Meditative breathing can help us be calm when we feel under attack.

Fourth, I told the story of an intervention. Sometimes I-statements, time outs, and breathing are not enough. Everyday nonviolence sometimes requires getting away from a violent person, getting to a safe place. Others need to see the problem and help.

Fifth, I told the story of an international intervention. If we are fortunate to live lives that are almost completely free of violence, we can contribute in our own small ways to helping others. This is also everyday nonviolence.

We are potentially violent creatures, you and I. Under the right circumstances I can physically harm others to defend myself, my family, my friends, even my congregation. It is part of our biological inheritance.

Nevertheless I have faith that over the generations our culture will change. I do not envision a time without any violence. Still I believe each generation can improve from the past, creating healthier human relationships, affirming the inherent worth, and dignity of every person.