

Defining Nonviolence as a Language and Strategy

Susan L. Allen

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—physicist David Bohm (1980, 172)

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With communication and transportation technologies allowing us to communicate and collaborate nearly instantly with the entire “global village,” and with greater sophistication about so many things—the fragility of our shared planet, the certainty of complexity and interconnectedness, the requirements for sustainability—I’d like to suggest that progressive activists around the globe do something unheard of in these high-speed times: pause. Suspend the action long enough to consider what is the smartest action for creating healthy change.

The standard *modus operandi* of today’s social activists still seems to be reacting to what keepers of the status quo throw before us. If the problem is war, we protest. If the problem is rape, we call the police and maybe a therapist. If the problem is pollution, we organize a cleanup and a protest. If the problem is economic injustice, we boycott. If we are unhealthy, we call a medical professional. In general, we wait for the crisis and try our best to clean up the mess and/or we react to one extreme with a swing to the other extreme.

Regardless of the issue, the crisis nature of our problem-solving paradigm has caused most of us to feel so powerless we fall into despair and/or deny problems

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as long as possible and then call 911. We leave the precursors to problems that will lead to violence unattended and when a crisis finally occurs, we say, "What's a person to do?" or "That's just the way the world is," and close our eyes until next time. In some parts of the world, we turn the iPod or television louder and listen to leaders who say, "It isn't your problem—go shopping." In other parts of the world, we are forced to obey leaders who treat us like children and say, "Let Father handle it." For generations of reasons, we have become conditioned to leave our future to the established power holders. Inevitably, conflict resulting from imbalance in systems large and small turns to violence, which is met with more violence, and the cycle continues.

Activists, by definition, have moved beyond denying problems, blindly trusting or acquiescing to professionals and authority figures. We know we need to participate and we are willing to take the risk of going against custom to do it. However, too many of us remain locked in a problem-solving *modus operandi* designed only to react and clean up the mess after the fact.

If I could say only one thing to progressive activists today, it would be, "Reframe, don't react." If we who would like to change the status quo agree *only* to react to the win-lose, game theory-based pattern set before us, we allow established power holders to set the terms of the debate, and they'll "win" every time because they own the game. When we react, we also sacrifice the advantage that comes from the worth of our ideas before the debate (*debate*, rarely *dialogue*) begins because we never really learn to articulate the value of our ideas to a wide audience. And, importantly, we are never in a position to get ahead of problems or change the organizational structure that allows them to occur in the first place.

The fact is, reducing things to win-or-lose and black-or-white extremes rather than taking into account the richer complexity and "color wheel" of alternatives that make up our reality leads us to the absolutist positions so rampant in our world today, no matter who is doing it.

I propose activists pause to reframe social issues and problems. I propose we update our thinking from a mechanistic, dualistic organizing principle to an organic, holistic organizing principle. We need to update from cultures held hostage to the extremes of an either-or world to cultures that recognize the interconnectedness of whole systems and the enormous number of options that exist between and beyond extremes. We need to update from a system of privilege where a few apply power over the many to a system of (at least more) equal opportunity where we retain some power within ourselves and power with our compatriots. We need to update from a people that addresses change and conflict violently to a people that organizes its action around the concepts of nonviolence.

WHY NONVIOLENCE?

When I began to study nonviolence near the turn of the millennium, I realized the nonviolence axiom "If you want peace, work for justice" translated at the local level as "If we want safe homes, schools, and communities, we need to

work for fair relationships at all levels." I came to see the tactics, tools, and strategies of nonviolence as the ideal ways to turn ideas about reframing the debate into pragmatic action.

In my opinion, in order to be smarter about how we deal with conflict and perhaps grow beyond our animal instinct to meet violence with more violence, we first need a framework, an organizing principle, that can help us see beyond extremes—a tree to climb from which we can see more of the forest.

Based on the work of nonviolence scholars who came before me and the organizing principle of healthy systems (which nature repeats over and over for her poor human students), I came to see nonviolence as a practical and adaptive set of ways to create and maintain healthy, organic balance in systems, including relationship systems. Thus defined, nonviolent actions become ways to intervene in a dysfunctional system, hopefully before inevitable conflicts become so out of balance the system fails.

I came to define violence/nonviolence within a holistic, interlocking web of problems and outcomes, not as black-or-white polarities:

Violence is individual and institutional, personal and political. It might be silence, bullying, harassment, physical assault, suicide; oppression, exploitation, war. ... Violence is injustice that results in dysfunctional, imbalanced relationships—among people, groups, nations, people and our environment, even within one body or mind. Nonviolence in this context means moving toward dynamic balance—justice, health, peace—by devising creative interventions into the dysfunctional systems—ideally, before a crisis occurs; but with conflict resolution, direct action, and other creative, nonviolent methods, afterwards. Nonviolent action generates win-win outcomes for inevitable conflict and change; it moves toward better balance in relationships with the goals of wholeness, fairness, and sustainability. (Allen 2005, 292)

This definition helps us "look upstream" so we can identify connections and patterns and thus give ourselves both time to plan ahead and more options for action.

ADDING CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE TO INFORMATION AND PROBLEM SOLVING

One of my favorite ideas from the excellent resources available from the nonviolence movement is about complexity:

What has drawn me most strongly to nonviolence is its capacity for encompassing a complexity necessarily denied by violent strategies. By complexity I mean the sort faced by feminists who rail against the system of male supremacy but at the same time, love their fathers, sons, husbands, brothers, and male friends.

I mean the complexity that requires us to name an underpaid working man who beats his wife both as someone who is oppressed and as an oppressor. Violent tactics and strategies rely on polarization and dualistic thinking and require us to divide ourselves into the good and bad [and] assume neat, rigid little categories easily answered from the barrel of a gun. ... Nonviolence allows for the complexity inherent in our struggles and requires a reasonable acceptance of diversity and an appreciation for our common ground." (McAllister 1988, 5-6)

Even if religious and political leaders try to tell us absolute answers are necessary, the reality of complexity tells us we need to find the patience to examine issues and problems from the perspective of whole systems. What options and alternatives exist within the interacting variables surrounding an extreme? Where might we intervene before the crisis?

In my opinion, the best way to change our organizational paradigm from one in which we react to violence (which locks us in the violence framework) to one in which we can get ahead of the violence is to adopt nonviolence as an overarching organizational structure for action. Nonviolence can provide social action groups, no matter their specific focus, with a gender-neutral, non-moralistic, powerful language with which to articulate the common threads running through all groups. It also brings us an organizational principle and practice that avoids needless confrontation and that people even outside the progressive community can recognize and support, which, of course, is a prerequisite for real communication and lasting change anyway.

In fact, the principal thread or value common to all social-change groups is the insight that we humans need to consciously change from a culture and world organized around violence (which came to us by way of the theory of survival of the fittest) to a species that has learned enough about sustainability to begin organizing ourselves around nonviolence.

Nonviolence theory and practice can help us move from an organizing principle whereby we ignore the little and big injustices and abuses of power and other precursors of violence to one whereby we organize around principles of getting ahead of the violence—whereby we “go upstream” and attend to imbalances in the system that lead to violence so we can learn to prevent it.

Most past attempts to change our national and global culture of violence—like protesting, resisting, and establishing organizations to clean up the mess of violence—continue to retain violence as the organizing principle because we are reacting to the established setup rather than insisting we pay attention to the surrounding field of interacting variables, some of which we can impact for the better.

EVERYDAY NONVIOLENCE

Nonviolence, by the anthropological definition of the term as I use it, is meant to be practiced every day. We don't need to be Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther

King, Jr., and we don't need to live in unusual circumstances to practice nonviolence. Its teachings and techniques can be applied to all conflict on any level, from our own minds to our relationships and communities to the biosphere, because it is based on systems. At the group level, this everyday nonviolence is an adaptive set of tactics and tools used by people who band together to counter a strong adversary without resorting to violence themselves. It requires solidarity and it becomes a force more powerful even than tyranny and tanks when applied with courage and resolve and with as much honesty and visibility as possible about our common goals. Nonviolence is far from passive, as those who faced the tanks at Tiananmen Square and the dogs in Selma can attest; but its practitioners are realistic folk who have observed that, throughout all of human history, violence has led only to more violence and eventually to system failure.

The late Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., made this point best during the U.S. civil-rights movement of the 1960s when he emphasized the transformative power of love and nonviolence. Advocates of nonviolence recognize the civil-rights movement's methods not as idealistic but as logical ways to update the way we attend to change and to the inevitable problems and conflicts that accompany it.

A Media Example

There's no better reflection of the reactionary way human beings traditionally attend to problems than in the worldwide news media. When I began studying journalism after many years in anthropology, it occurred to me that by adding one more *W* to the traditional “who, what, when, where, and why” reporting structure of American journalism, we could help bring the holistic perspective I associated with anthropology (and thereby necessary context and perspective) to the global citizenry. Neither the established media nor the frustratingly conservative academy took this notion seriously because, as I learned subsequently, most people in positions of power don't want to change the status quo, even for the better.

However, I continue to encourage the idea because systematically adding a *W* for “the whole system” to many or most news stories would bring us the alternative points of view citizens need for decision making in a complex world.

By modernizing that one method, appropriately trained communicators could help uncover the field of relationships surrounding a seemingly isolated event or problem and help the rest of us identify always present but rarely reported connections and patterns—some of which will have been precursors to the event being covered. Becoming aware of this more contextual framework would, in time, help us do at least two things better: persuade our myopic societies (not to mention our own brains) to plan ahead instead of waiting for the crisis before correcting inevitable imbalances and allow us to act to improve the situation at more manageable stages. In this instance “adding the *W*” is nonviolent action.

Examples from Activism

An example of the need to reframe problems with more context and perspective is also reflected in the name of the social-change-funding organization Resist. The homepage of the Web site for Resist, Inc. says the group strives to "work against; fight off; withstand." I don't want to pick on Resist because resistance still is necessary; but my point is we can't stop there. I would encourage social-change-funding organizations to get beyond funding only projects that work against injustice (hiring police or even supplying various kinds of aid to victims) and, instead or in addition, support nonviolent projects designed to get ahead of the violence and strive for the creation of opportunities for balance, justice, and wholeness. Unless we do that, we will never change the system that engendered the problems in the first place. Progressives need to articulate plans and carry out projects that go beyond resisting—as important as that mission is—and begin to change the organizational principle and the worldview that locks us into the either/or framework and keeps us in a reactive mode behind the violence.

I noticed another example of the reactive mental construct many of us carry in our minds when two of my best Nonviolence Studies students attended a peace-maker-training workshop. These students had learned to think about social disease within the context of system sustainability, using a kind of public social-health model instead of the old-fashioned medical model that waits for the blood. They had also adopted the logic of the nonviolence movement that says both the oppressed and the oppressor need to be liberated if a fair relationship is to be established; thus, a win-win approach is not weak—rather, it is the only way to break the cycle of imbalance and achieve sustainability. When their facilitator began reacting (they said "ranting") instead of reframing issues so alternative solutions to their example problems could be identified and lasting health and sustainability could be achieved, these (very bright, very liberal) students were so put off by the left-wing extremism of their facilitator they could barely concentrate on peacemaking. They wanted to reframe the debate because, for them, peacemaking means creating better balance in a dysfunctional system and not simply countering one extreme with another.

In these instances, simply acknowledging, modeling, and supporting system balance is nonviolent action.

The Historical and Comparative Example of U.S. Democracy

American democracy is a good example of a large, nonviolence-based system. Our founders boldly proposed that real people, common people, could rule themselves. They thought better than to place important decisions about leadership in the hands of an elite hierarchy based on the pattern of an all-knowing father figure, whether church or state. "We the people" could vote and decide without violence the direction of our common futures. We use the words *majority rule*, but our system continues, against all odds, to guard against the tyranny of groupthink.

Just as fish probably do not see the water they live in, it was not until I lived outside the United States, in Japan, that I began to see U.S. democracy and, importantly, to appreciate the uniqueness of the Bill of Rights. I naively thought a democracy was a democracy, but that is surely not the case.

I would like to preface this example by saying that I am a shameless Japanophile. I love Japan; but, speaking now as an artistic, lesbian, Western woman and a *gaijin* or outsider even among most Americans, the consensus-based nature of Japan's democracy became something of a cautionary tale for me. However, and this is the point, experiencing Japan's consensus-based brand of democracy helped me see the beauty and increasing fragility of American democracy. As we consider turning ideas about development into action, I hope we American progressives will be constantly vigilant about protecting our greatest asset and that is our own civil liberty.

"If the nail protrudes, hammer it down" is the most telling proverb in Japanese life. Don't stick out. Conform. I went to work in Japan a few years ago knowing its government was technically democratic, but it took looking at home from there to realize American democracy is unique. I am not an expert on political systems but this was my impression.

The feudal concept of *ie* is the single most characteristic aspect of Japanese society. An *ie* is a social group—in the old days a village and today usually a school or work group. The result is that people have one relationship with others in a vertical, hierarchical line from top to bottom—similar to our military but with bows instead of salutes.

However, and this is fundamental: everyone strives toward one standard pattern established at the head of the line. This explains why everything from flower arrangements to blue-suited salary-men to Japanese beliefs and values look alike. This contrasts to a horizontal (imperfect) social structure in the United States.

In the United States, individuals may be associated with many groups and individuals—and their accompanying beliefs—in a voluntary way. In fact, the United States itself is a voluntary association, more belief than bloodline. We belong to families, professions, political parties, and interest groups—and feel some loyalty and responsibility to all of them. For instance, your employee may head your church board; your boss may sit beside you at football games; our children mingle in public schools.

The traditional individual in Japan feels responsibility toward only one group. To imagine a vertical social system, think of a bucket brigade, each individual responsible to the person on either side and dedicated to saving the burning building (in this case, to making Japan strong). This system makes a strong community; the whole of Japan is ultimately linked.

But minorities and individuals (essentially minorities of one) suffer there under this tyranny of the majority. Differences are subsumed under one majority way. You are either in it or you are *gaijin* and on your own.

As an anthropologist who sees diversity as a core value (not to mention as a survival requirement for all systems in the long term), I found it frightening to look back at the United States—particularly since the Reagan era—and think of

how many literal-minded Americans seemed to think they wanted literal majority rule, whereby we would all live in a society in which fitting in were the highest value.

It struck me from afar that the single most characteristic aspect of U.S. democracy at its fundamental best—so unlike the Japanese *ie*—is that in the United States, a minority of seven or eight people can share an idea; a minority of several million can believe something else; a single individual can believe something else entirely—and all of us get to remain in the society of “Americans.”

I realized to my surprise that the values I was claiming for the first time came from the interface of ideals from the U.S. Constitution, particularly the Bill of Rights, and from that piece of Christianity that values individual worth. Yes, Americans’ democracy and Jesus’s Christianity are both unrealized, and Americans seem increasingly happy to become even more hierarchical, patriarchal, elitist, and in many other ways inequitable. But the structure for “equality and justice for all” exists.

The frightening thing to me is that in poor trade for an individual bank account, a Humvee, blind assurance from an authority figure, or membership in the proper group, so many who call themselves patriots and Christians seem willing to risk the very aspect of America that made it great: a dogged insistence on individual worth, which comes directly from Christianity and a Bill of Rights that is the legal arm of that belief.

Perhaps we risk our freedoms because, on the downside, that combination of values has also engendered our over-the-top individualism, our feelings of isolation, and our lack of community, as well as our most extremist sentiments. But it also generates our most noble traits—our love for the underdog, our determination that any poor schmuck can succeed, our compassion and openness. These things exist only because individual liberty has been guaranteed. If we do not protect individual liberty and its counterpart in groups larger than one—minority rights—our U.S. brand of democracy cannot exist.

A U.S. Historical Example of Nonviolent Democracy

It was from the indigenous democracy of the Six Nation Iroquois Confederacy that some of the best ideas of U.S. democracy were inspired. The Great Law of Peace, created by the Iroquois Nations more than 1,000 years ago, is among the most ancient continuously operating governments.

According to oral tradition, Dekanawidah, known as The Peacemaker, gave The Great Law of Peace to the peoples of the Six Nations. Its goal was disarmament, reconciliation, and the establishment of indigenous democracy—transforming warring clans into “one united, extended Longhouse in which each nation had its own hearth.”

Through an act of creative political imagination and the ongoing nonviolent acts of citizen will, over many centuries these diverse peoples were “able to institutionalize a balance between individual, cultural, and tribal expressions and needs

and a transcendent, global method of government that benefited the well-being of the whole.”

Those interested may read more about The Great Law of Peace in “Indigenous Democracy” by Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb (2006). The reason I mention it in this chapter about nonviolence is that The Great Law of Peace is a model for achieving nonviolent balance in a political system at the national and international levels.

U.S. democracy began with the advantage of having this model to replicate (at its best). Whether or not modern U.S. citizens allow it to fade away along with the idea of Camelot and other utopian dreams will be decided in the next few years, maybe even with the next few selections for the U.S. Supreme Court. If we want a system of federalism that balances the needs of the whole with individual and minority rights, we need both progress and preservation. Will we elect leadership interested in short-term gain for the top tier of the top-tiered country and world? Or will we find ways to reignite our trust in real people to build peaceful coexistence among people and nations? Can nonviolence teachings help us recognize the survival necessity of balancing individual needs and the common good?

In this instance, there are several levels of nonviolence examples: Nonviolent actions include educating oneself to be a responsible member of the larger system, voting, and speaking out, on the personal level. On the community and group level, nonviolent actions include insisting on policy making that supports the democratic inclusion of all citizens. Nationally, nonviolent actions include demanding and working to maintain trustworthy ways to choose leaders who represent our ideals. Internationally, nonviolent actions include gathering alternative problem-solving methods from other cultures and, indeed, coming to recognize who in this shrinking world of ours are “all” the people.

NONVIOLENCE AS PRAXIS

I am interested in nonviolence as a praxis, meaning a combination of theory and action or practice; as an ongoing way of seeing relationships as systems and adapting to inevitable change and conflict within them without resorting to extremism and violence; and, finally, as a social movement to make that happen.

Several years ago, I broadened my own focus from media anthropology to include nonviolence education, because nonviolence adds action and people-power to problem solving and, thus, it is a layer closer to direct action than is reporting about it (although arguably they go hand in hand). It was an epiphany when I realized the arguments I had long made for creating better journalism also applied to creating nonviolent problem solving in general. Underlying both is a need to understand systems, build holistic perspectives, and update the ways we manage conflict (whether it is in a news story or in life).

My goal for the holistic journalism we called media anthropology was to create more avenues for contextual, perspective-building news and information that would help people transcend the structures that led them to extremes. With nonviolence, the goal is to view problems with more context and perspective, so we

can begin to anticipate, organize, and prevent crises that will likely become the news story. Both depend on renovating our worldview.

The fact is, when most of us confront a problem or conflict, we follow the custom of waiting for the crisis before we act. How could it be otherwise? We wait because the mental blueprint we learn from journalism and all other forms of cultural information adheres to a limited and limiting world of polarities. When we see conflict, what we need to do is reframe the conflict within the context of the whole system so we can begin to recognize more alternatives sooner; thus the sixth *W*.

In my work today, I try to illustrate how we might apply an anthropological definition of nonviolence that gives all of us the permission (and the skills) to be the change. It encourages us not to form posses and attack one problem with another but to bring better balance to critical precursors (we hope) before the crisis. The tactics, tools, and strategies we develop to correct a systemic imbalance (which we usually see as abuse of power and other kinds of poor system health) without resorting to extremism and violence ourselves constitute my definition of nonviolence.

Being Activists Together

In short, when circumstances allow (i.e., when the system is not already crashing or we are not already "bleeding"), I encourage people in the peace and justice movements to move from a react-resist paradigm to a reframe-rebalance paradigm; and I think the language of nonviolence can help do that.

Individual social-justice groups formed to address specific forms of injustice do in fact share the overarching goal of building healthier, better-balanced systems. Working together from a shared language for some purposes could help us plan better strategies and act earlier. Nonviolence gives us the added advantage of a nonthreatening way to articulate a clear mission that creates allies among a broader public, regardless of the specific issue: environmental degradation, child abuse, women's rights, human rights, economic injustice, war, or any of the many other categories of unfairness and abuse of power that are precursors to physical violence.

Separate issue groups are individually valuable, of course. Not all goals can be met as a coalition. But if our mutual aim is to move from a fragmented, violence-based world to an organic, nonviolence-based world (and I think it is, for most of us outside a tiny tier of greedy exploiters), the language of nonviolence can help tie our concerns to shared themes, create allies, and build a force more powerful than even tanks. It offers us a way to speak in a gender-neutral, nonmoralistic, unemotional way about the shared values and themes of just, healthy cultures where relationships are fair and institutions are organized around equal opportunities instead of privilege and oppression.

Today, many people think progressives are valueless or that we only oppose things. That is not because we have no values or goals but because we ourselves

have not learned to articulate the admittedly abstract ways we are connected so that we can organize around them and tell others what we are doing and why.

For many reasons, abused people usually wait until circumstances are desperate before, with nothing left to lose, they act. Therefore, I think it is incumbent on those of us in free and democratic societies, particularly the rich ones, to be the first to step up to "be the change," as our most famous peacemaker, Mahatma Gandhi, urged. By that, I mean we need to become conscious of the survival requirement for balance in our global system. We need to create ways to keep ourselves and our societies on course every day not only by yelling "Fire!" as loudly as necessary about the domination of others for short-term gain but by proclaiming our nonviolent intent and acting on nonviolence principles in our own relationships. Whether we are talking about a dictator, a greedy company, a cruel religion, an abusive husband, or a domineering mother or friend—a bully is a bully—the structures of abuse will be parallel. When we learn to recognize the patterns of abuse, we can set about the systematic, daily work of creating nonviolent ways to bring health to a system in dis-ease and do it much sooner in the process when more options for action exist. And we can apply nonviolence methods with the confidence that comes from having a logical, encompassing paradigm and allies who recognize a shared purpose.

No small group of citizens, no matter how thoughtful, will change the status quo for the better if we continue to trade one extreme for another, respond to problems only after the fact, or disregard interconnected issues. "Saving the turtles" is worthwhile in itself, but it won't help much if we're losing the oceans," nonviolence scholar Michael Nagler has said (2004). Progressive activists need to show people who are not familiar with systems and dynamic, organic balance that we are not randomly or sentimentally saving turtles or doing anything else short of bringing better balance to systems so that they will be sustainable for all of us.

I believe holistic perspectives and nonviolence methodologies can give us an encompassing organizational principle and an overarching language for articulating a shared vision for problem solving. As people attune to the principles of wholeness and nonviolence—and begin to share the goal of moving from a fragmented to a more holistic manner of problem solving—if someone, even in leadership, says to us, "It is either my way or the highway," we can rise together and say, "Nonsense! Give us more alternatives or get out of the way."

Although nonviolence seeks to create allies and build alliances to avoid a fight it should not be mistaken for passivity or compliance. In its quiet way, it is subversive. When a critical mass of us change our minds about how we attend to conflict it will change the power structure. By bringing balance to out-of-balance (unfair, unjust) relationships, we will change the power relationship from one based on privilege and power over one another to one based on equal opportunity and power with one another. This is true whether the relationship involves a marriage, a community, or the nations of the world. It also is the only way to sustain these relationships for the long haul.

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