

Formation for Nonviolence

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The waiting room was beginning to fill up when the young mother came in. She had a baby in a carrier on one arm, a three-year-old girl by the hand, and a small boy close by her side. Initially, her distinctive dress—bonnet, shawl, long skirt—evoked some stares, but most people soon went back to paging through their magazines. I kept looking. What struck me about the woman was her air of quiet self-possession. When she sat down opposite me, I noticed that her children were equally quiet. The mother put the baby, in the carrier, down on the floor; the boy crouched next to the carrier and gently rocked it back and forth. The little girl climbed into a chair next to her mother and settled down contentedly. Nothing had been said, not even an injunction to “be good.” The young mother sat quiet, relaxed, and peaceful. The children did the same.

That picture stayed with me long after I left the doctor’s office, just because it offered such a marked contrast to the restless impatience of so many in that waiting room and in the world beyond it. We live in a culture where nervous energy spills over into agitation, agitation builds up into anger, and anger too often culminates in violence. Even if the latter is no more audible than a half-suppressed sigh of frustration, it contributes to the pollution of the environment in which we all live. Ours is a culture of violence

as pervasive as the air we breathe. That is how it is with culture: we take it in and give it out, advertent to it only when something goes wrong that makes us hold our breath or gasp for air.

The events of September 11, 2001, made us do both: we held our breath in sheer shock and then found ourselves gasping for some kind of security in a shattered world. At least that is how many of us felt as we tried to come to grips with a tragedy of that magnitude. This was violence larger than life, in Technicolor.

The destructive use of force in individual everyday life is just as real, though less large in size and so monochromatic that we can usually ignore it. Still, it is there. Perhaps one of the gifts of the World Trade Center tragedy is that it reveals our everyday violence for what it is: the violent disruption of so many lives by so few. Can the nonviolence of some begin to convert our culture of violence to the ways of peace? We have to start somewhere; the place of first response seems to me to be the heart of each one of us.

This is not to say that it ends there. Unless nonviolence is embodied, it is not human; unless it effects change in the world, it is not true love of neighbor. One of the graces of our times is the deepening realization not only that “neighbor” is all-inclusive but also that real love must bring about structural

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changes as well as convert hearts. Both are necessary and integral to a Christian response to violence. Where do we begin?

THE VIOLENT HEART

More and more, I am aware that what is outside of me has been taken in; that what is inside of me does contribute to the culture of violence around me. I am sorry about both. My repentance, like all true conversion, goes from inside out.

Recognition begins the process. I am a violent woman. No, I don't own a gun, have never fired one, and have no intention of learning how to do so. Long years of careful socialization usually control my actions, and my vocabulary of explosive terms is too limited to be very satisfying. I am too inhibited to push or shove, too polite to shout or scream. All of which proves nothing. Violence isn't always noisy, especially in its internal beginnings.

Relationships are a good place to start because they test the spirit and because we are always in relationship. How I respond to others, even to myself, reveals who and how I am. My morning might begin in violence as I smash the button of my ringing alarm clock, resentful of its shrill summons from still-needed sleep. Getting into the shower and realizing I have forgotten my towel, I berate myself for being so stupid. At breakfast I discover an almost-empty cereal box still on the shelf and express my frustration over someone's thoughtlessness by pulling angrily at the inner wax-paper wrapper of a fresh box. Even my hurried attempt at mouthing a Morning Offering can do violence to any real spirit of prayer. So begins my day.

And so it goes on. It is just an ordinary day, nothing noteworthy. You are probably recognizing that it is very much like your own. Little frustrations call forth impatient responses, making it difficult to adjust to still other stresses. Such low-level violence accompanies much of our living. It's like the background hum of a heater or air conditioner: we don't pay attention unless the disturbance reaches a certain threshold that sounds like trouble.

Violence ratcheted up a bit is usually interpersonal. Road rage doesn't infect drivers only. It can spill over onto anyone who gets in our way, literally or figuratively. The person who insists on carrying on an animated conversation at the serving table in the cafeteria or attempts to cut in ahead in the long line at the checkout counter makes me clear my throat as audibly as possible; I wish I had a car's horn to lean on. If another person's request requires me to change my carefully constructed plans. I am annoyed and all too often let others know it. Even if no one else hears my sigh of exasperation, it echoes in my heart. Resentment builds up inside and is released in ready response to the next frustration that comes my way. As the size of the annoyance needed to set me off decreases, the force of my reaction increases. With this rise in the level of my own frustration, there is greater likelihood that my violence will be met with violence in return, setting in motion a chain reaction.

Body language speaks even if nothing is said. An annoyed cough, a gesture of impatience, a reproving look, or even a too-carefully-controlled tone of voice betrays the anger I resist acknowledging. And that is another aspect of my personally violent world: I am often not aware of how much force I bring to bear in responding to the small vexations of ordinary days. Because nothing is said or done about my responses, I fail to see the tiny clouds that signal a storm building up. Me, angry? I protest innocence, even as I experience anger at being thought angry. Denying the obvious inflicts violence on the truth itself. My very defensiveness hints at how uneasy I am.

Why am I so violent? It is a question I often ask myself, especially when my response has been so explosive that I can no longer deny what is going on. All too often I mistakenly begin by replaying the originating incident. This risks entangling me in a web of what he or she said, did, or didn't do, with its counterpoint of what I said, did, or didn't do. As the original dialogue gets reviewed, I add commentary about the other's motivation. Heat is generated, but not much light.

More productively, I might focus on my own response, since I cannot answer the "why" of anyone else's. Granted, it is possible that I am outraged by some injustice done to self or other, and the violence

of my response may be proportionate to the seriousness of this assault on human dignity. How likely is this? Even raising the issue speeds recognition of the real source of my violence. Rarely do I experience justified anger protesting what is due another. Usually, the focus is on me: my perceived rights, needs, desires. My ego has been bruised, and it is this that I am protesting. Ninety-nine percent of the time, I eventually have to admit that I am reacting violently because I have fallen out of love.

Violence usually points back to the selfish self that is the still-to-grow-up child sitting at the center of an immature ego. This "I" sees everything primarily in relation to its effects on self; the other is at best an afterthought. Such a myopic focus so constricts my world that whatever happens looms larger than life. Loss of perspective magnifies slights into insults, disagreements into conflicts, another's simple oversight into deliberate aggression. What happened in the past continues to reverberate in the present and threatens the future. Forgiveness and fresh beginnings are unimaginable.

The selfish self is trapped. No wonder it reacts with violence; it perceives its very existence as threatened. The only viable response to such an attack is counterattack. When two entrapped egos bump against each other, a chain reaction begins and soon spills over to others. Noncombatants find themselves endangered and must choose, on the basis of their temperament, either to join the fight or to flee. Neither response promotes lasting peace.

MAKING PEACE

The hard work of growing into a less violent response begins not with the other but with the self, as only a secure self can risk this kind of relationship. How do we grow into such security? It is not a project but a gift—something that we receive from another whose love for us has been clearly evident, constant, and consistent. Ideally, this is the kind of love we received at the very beginning of our lives from our parents. When we were first able to focus on the face bending over us, we found reflected there all the tenderness of parental prejudice. We knew we were "precious" and a "joy" because they told us so.

That same parental love responded to our basic needs, accompanied us as we began to explore an ever-wider world, enjoyed our triumphs, and comforted us in our pain. Patiently, it gave us space and time to make the mistakes that are an inevitable part of growing into responsible personhood and faithfully welcomed us back after we had wandered away.

Unfortunately, most of us have not experienced such ideal parental love. What we have known has

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been more or less flawed and inadequate. Hopefully, that original lack has been supplemented by a lifetime of experiences of knowing that we are loved by others and thus lovable. Only to the extent that this gift has been received from many others and appropriated into our experience are we secure enough to begin the hard work of responding less violently to others. Only then can we get beyond self and focus on the other.

Such openness to reality outside of ourselves is never automatic and is especially difficult when we have been hurt; nothing concentrates attention on self as quickly as pain. My emotions tell me that my suffering deserves a response in kind, and so I am tempted to lash out through some form of violence. "Pushed" in one way or another, I push back. "Injury for injury" is the ethic of violence; generations of racial, tribal, and ethnic wars have been justified in this way. Brothers and sisters, neighborhoods and families still cover over violence with this same excuse.

All of this substantiates that violence rises out of an ego that has shrunken to the size of self-preoccupation. We use self-defense to justify responding to force with still more force. Culture reinforces this pattern until violence seems so natural that it is barely recognized for what it is. The rationale of childhood, "He/she hit me first," becomes accepted protocol among adults. An impoverished ego cannot afford to be generous.

Which brings us back to love—first of all, to the need for secure self-love. Reflected in the mirror of

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another's genuine love, we have come to accept ourselves as we really are. No longer expecting ourselves to be perfect, we are able to acknowledge our mistakes, accept our weaknesses, even forgive our most shameful sins. Faced with irrefutable evidence of our sinfulness, we can still believe we are lovable just because we are.

And so is the person who has hurt us. Self-forgetful love begins to convert our instinct for violence into openness, understanding, and concern for the other, even for our enemy—and anyone with whom we are in conflict becomes, at least in that situation, the enemy. Gospel love is tested, as we know, not by our response to those whom we find naturally attractive (the “pagans do as much” [Matt. 5:47]) but by our willingness to respond lovingly to those who oppose us. The latter include not only those who take positive action against us but also a long litany of others: those who are so different we find them impossible to understand, those whose lifestyle demands constant adjustment of our own, those whose values are antithetical to what we hold dear. The continuum runs from the individual who drowns us in angry words to the one who threatens our life.

Responding nonviolently to all enemies costs dearly because it goes beyond generous self-gift and into self-sacrifice. When we love those who love us, we give, but we also receive. We are built up in love by such relationships; in contrast, love of enemies seems, at first, to be self-defeating. If they win, we lose; such is the logic of violence. No wonder loving our enemies seems beyond us. It is; that is part of its redemptive power. We can't do it ourselves; we can only open our hearts to this grace. Do we want to receive it?

The desire to grow into nonviolence must go beyond a pious attitude; incarnation is necessary for redemption. This was true in the life of Jesus and is true in our own lives.

Because violence originates as a response to perceived opposition, growth in nonviolence must begin there. Recognizing the violence in our personal response and turning away from it is a lifelong discipline. I need to be aware of my tone of voice as I answer the persistently ringing phone that interrupts my train of thought; I need to notice how I tear open an envelope when I know that answering it will make demands on my precious time. My world has been broken into, and I resent the intrusion: this is my initial, almost instinctive reaction. What will be my response?

Of course, there may be no response; I may remain on the level of reaction. My emotions are real, manifested in my tightened gut, my clenched fist, or whatever is my own psychosomatic pattern of reaction to perceived opposition. But I don't have to remain there. While not denying what I feel, I do not allow it to dictate my choice of response. For response is just that: a personal, conscious choice. This ringing phone, this envelope in my mailbox, is part of my present reality. This is where my love is being challenged, where I am being called to conversion. Here grace is at work, empowering me to deny myself the satisfaction of escalating my initial reaction into a violent response.

When love informs my choice, I take a deep breath, unclench my fists, silence the quick retort, perhaps walk away. I do whatever I need to do to put some distance between the perceived opposition and myself. Notice: the situation remains; the only thing that has changed is myself. Maybe this is all that really has to change.

This distance between my offended self and the offender may be either geographic or temporal; what I do is give myself space and time. How? Different strategies work for different people. I may say “I can't talk now” and resolutely resist engaging in an argument, even if the other person demands that we “settle this right away.” As I walk away, I offer “We'll talk later,” and I mean just that.

A different distancing is called for when I find myself experiencing internal violence, even though I don't know its immediate source. I feel tense, angry, ready to lash out. Grace is at work, enabling me to acknowledge this and search for its cause. The temptation will be to justify myself by finding something or someone to blame. The very fact that I am inclined to do such a “search” could alert me to what

is going on. Something deeper is being touched. Rather than seeking distance, I need to focus on my experience, to stay with it and let it gradually reveal the deeper cause of my anger and violence. It is to that cause that I must direct my response.

If I stay with the experience and wait in prayerful patience, I may discover the specifics of that deeper woundedness which is occasioning my present difficulty. Perhaps I am upset because I am jealous, or I want to lash out at someone because I still grieve over a childish injustice, or my speech is harsh because I have been verbally abused myself. Here is the source of my violence; here is redemptive opportunity.

No matter what its source, violence does require some response. It cannot be safely ignored; energy has been aroused and must be released, though in ways appropriate to the source and the situation. I have found that brief physical expression can get rid of some of the tension in my body and free me to move on. For example, a letter that includes a verbal attack can be shredded into satisfyingly small bits and dropped into the nearest wastebasket. One caution, however: extensive physical expression may perpetuate rather than release pent-up emotion. Violence begets violence.

When the conflict centers on differing opinions, another response may be more appropriate. A deliberate effort to focus on what the other is saying or not saying stands in marked contrast to my more natural tendency to start formulating a rebuttal. Failure to listen—one of those everyday forms of assault so ordinary we hardly recognize it—is the kind of defensiveness that I communicate in body language even when I say nothing. My impatience shows and adds to the tense atmosphere.

In contrast, when people of different opinions dialogue with each other, one to one, in an atmosphere of mutual respect and sensitivity to the other's position, with patient listening and honest sharing, love grows—even if the positions remain diametrically opposed. Both parties will have come closer to the truth because each will have been exposed to a different point of view; both will have grown in trust because they have risked conflict and come through in peace. Such a climate of understanding and mutual respect builds community, even if it doesn't solve the problems that occasioned the original disagreement.

"But," you say, "this describes the ideal. My attempts at dialogue don't usually go so smoothly." Mine don't either. So, what are some nonviolent ways to respond when, no matter how attentive our listening, we can't seem to hear each other—when past unresolved issues lie between us like a solid wall of misunderstanding, when our insecurities and emo-

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tional woundedness are so deep that rational discourse seems hopeless? (I am sure you can add your own list of difficulties to those I have just suggested.)

One starting place is to make sure that the issue is worth the conflict. Perhaps when I come right down to it, our disagreement is over matters of taste, over preferences rather than values, over timing more than substance. In such cases, I may decide to let the issue drop, at least for the present. I "give in"—not out of indifference, and surely not out of fear, but out of a real love that chooses what the other wants rather than what I want.

This is quite different from compromising on principles. In the latter case, we remain firm but, again, in love. We confront the other with the truth; we take our stand and remain there, even in the face of a violent reaction. That is what Jesus did. The gospels depict him in conflict with some of the Pharisees, confronting them in extremely strong language. But this was only at the end. Initially, Jesus tried persuasion, responded to questions, offered his credentials. All the while, he continued on his way to Jerusalem, knowing what awaited him there.

NONVIOLENCE AND THE CROSS

On the cross, Jesus took in violence, transformed it, and returned only love. This is the ultimate form of nonviolent response. This is redemption. We make small beginnings on our journey to Jerusalem when we stop nursing the ego that has been wounded in some area of conflict, recognize and then resist the emotional satisfaction that comes from reviewing over and over the same stale list of grievances. We discipline ourselves to sit in silence before the Lord until some measure of peace is restored to our own soul and we can begin to respond in love. We keep our focus on God's mercy rather than on ourselves and our

own hurt and difficulty. Even when our peaceful overtures are rejected outright and we need to recognize this by shaking the dust off our feet, we remain confident that the peace we have extended to others will return to us (Mark 6:11). This begins the disciples' way of the cross—very costly, but ultimately the path to true life and peace.

In the face of conflict, our temptation is to respond in kind. Slowly and with the help of grace, we can begin to resist this natural reaction and to grow into self-sacrificing love. When others insist on their way, we let them have it. We choose to be inconvenienced ourselves rather than to have another suffer the same. We swallow the satisfying retort and move on in a silence that prevents the escalation of verbal violence. We reach out to those who hurt us, refusing to let their attitude determine our own. We consciously choose to forget when past hurts rise up in memory and intrude into present interpersonal space. We forgive without waiting to be asked—over and over again.

Such examples of self-sacrificing love are easily multiplied; living out their reality is painfully difficult because it cuts deep into the territory of the ego. It also requires careful discernment, so that the self is respected and real evil resisted. We are not doormats to be trampled on; allowing others repeatedly to impose on us is not true love either. Foundational to any true love of neighbor is love of self. Only when we are centered in the self that is beloved of God can we risk self-sacrifice.

But nonviolent response in love ultimately does involve sacrifice of self. It did for Jesus: "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (John 13:1). He gave himself up for all of us while we were still sinners, accepting death for our sakes—even the shameful death of the cross. Suffering love effected our redemption. It still does—the death of Jesus first and foremost, but also our own willingness to die now, in our specific life situations.

When our response rises from that center where the Spirit of Jesus directs and shapes our activities, we may be called to face with new awareness where our

own sinfulness has contributed to the difficulty and then to accept the need for personal conversion. Freed from the urgency to insist on our own way, we may discover opportunities to negotiate a compromise that will respect both of us. We may also be called to some form of active resistance that will take us out of the safety of our customary ways and require a more public stance. Moving beyond our fears, we may have to speak out the truth in which we believe, to take a stand and accept the risk that comes with doing so.

In this way, personal nonviolence begins to be embodied in our world. Action on the larger scale requires this rooting in immediate personal reality if it is to be sincere and to make a lasting difference. Mohandas Gandhi knew this when, to the bewilderment of his followers, he called off a scheduled mass demonstration because he believed that the protestors were not sufficiently pure in heart to carry it out in a truly nonviolent fashion.

Confronting nonviolence in the smaller space where we live our everyday lives also helps us avoid the discouragement that can defeat us in the face of the magnitude of the violence in our world. There is something we can do. We do make a difference.

Personal nonviolence and social nonviolence are both necessary. One without the other is incomplete. If the stress in this article has been on the former, it comes out of the conviction that this is where we must begin; otherwise, our efforts at peacemaking can easily end up only adding to the violence in our world. To be peacemakers, we must first be at peace ourselves. Then we will know the blessing of being children of one heavenly Father; brother and sister of each other, and be able to live in peace with each other.



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