

# KAREN RIDD'S NONVIOLENT MIRACLE

## *Peacemaker looks death in the eye and sees a friend*

Lani Lee

In an address to the International Peace Bureau conference, Karen Ridd states that to resist is “not to oppose, to reject, to refuse, but to take a stand. We often think, incorrectly, of resistance as being simply opposition. And that is only half the truth. For to take a stand is to be grounded in vision in a new way.”

Grounded in her belief of nonviolence, Ridd's resistance to the Guatemalan military illustrates the power of human compassion at its highest.

While volunteering for Peace Brigades International (PBI) in 1989, Ridd and her friend Marcella Rodriguez were suddenly arrested by the Guatemalan military. On suspicion of affiliation with the guerrilla group FMLN, the soldiers tied the women up and loaded them on a truck to a prison in El Salvador.

At the prison, Ridd and Rodriguez were interrogated for hours by the soldiers. Tortured and blindfolded, the women prepared for death. Together they listened to the screams and cries of other prisoners detained indefinitely on unknown charges.

PBI alerted the Canadian embassy and sent an official to rescue Ridd. The soldiers removed Ridd's blindfold. Opening her eyes, Ridd saw Rodriguez for the first time inside the prison. This image of her friend sitting helpless against the wall moved her. As she was led out of the barracks and released to the Canadian Embassy official, Ridd was relieved to be alive and free, however, she knew she could not leave her friend.

Turning back, not knowing exactly what would happen, Ridd returned to Rodriguez. The soldiers were shocked. Handcuffing her they laughed and asked if she had come back for more. Ridd then tried to explain why she had returned: “You know what it's like to be separated from a compañero.”

This got to them. The soldiers, so moved by Ridd's words, released Ridd and Rodriguez.

Ridd's experience is an important example of nonviolent power.

Using words that the soldiers could relate to, Ridd used the power of compassion to make the soldiers see the situation from her point of view. Moreover, Ridd's words had a

psychological effect on the soldiers that transformed their way of thinking and moved them closer to her in spirit.

Beyond all hatred and darkness, beyond the torture and pain, Ridd looked at her attackers as people.

After all, what is so different between the oppressor and the victim?

As Ridd demonstrates, the key to power is finding commonalities between individuals, such as the human need for acceptance, love, and community, and to use this power as a persuasive force of the heart.

So often, power is used in a negative way to satisfy a desire or harm someone, such as the power used by the soldiers.

Those that utilize power as a threat or exchange to get what they want, justify their actions by emphasizing the ideology that “there is no other way” and that things are normal.

They claim that it is normal and necessary to have power or superiority over a group in order to take control of a situation and establish or maintain order. However, this is a top down approach to power instead of a

circular integrative approach.

In other words, what is known as “threat power” is a type of force that devalues one individual and increases the value of the other. The “superior” uses this kind of power selfishly to get what he or she desires. Similarly, “exchange power” works as a type of trade between individuals, a barter or bribe for human life. This commoditization of human life creates a hierarchy of who is worth saving because an individual's life is being weighed against monetary worth.

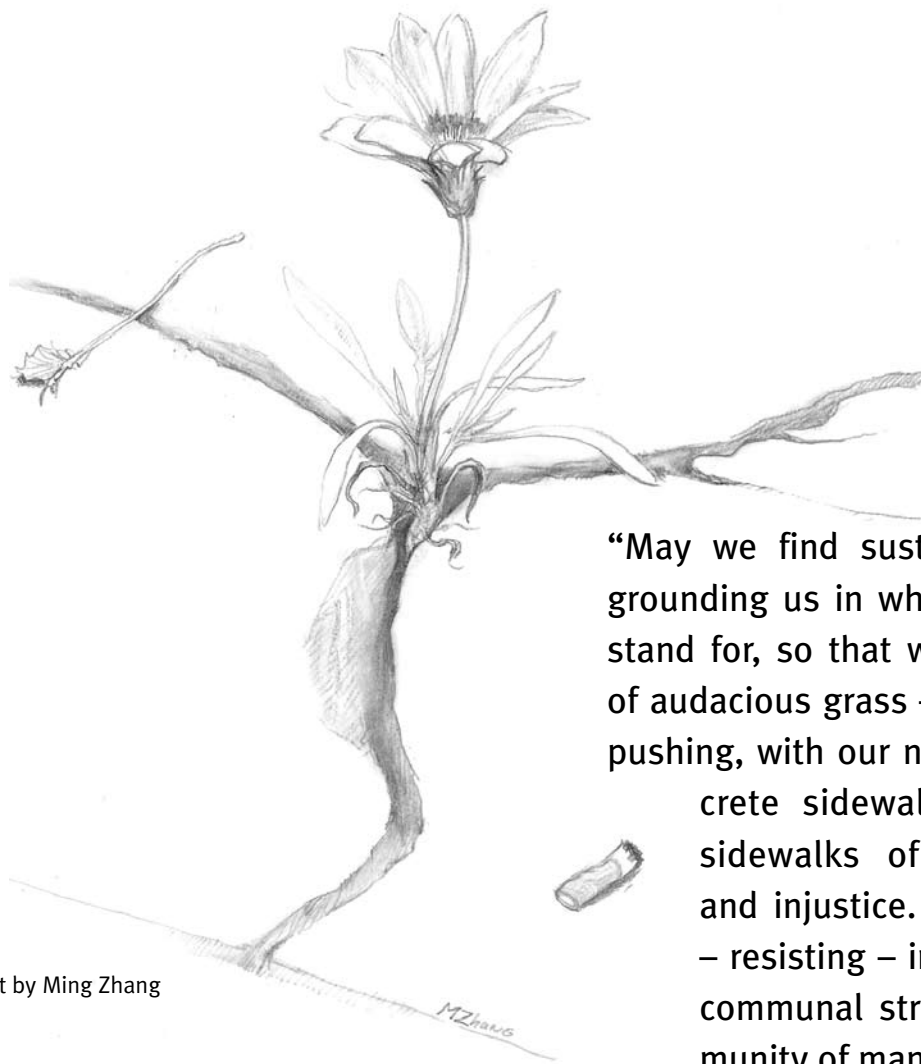
This negative power helps no one and in fact, only helps to create a greater thirst for power. Examples are apparent in states of exception in which times call for desperate measures that may go outside the boundaries of law, such as war and terrorism. In these states of crisis, for instance, a government official may make an exception of his power, expanding it to deal with the situation. In claims of protecting the country and its people, this government official uses threat power to fix the crisis, thus making violence acceptable.

In this approach, power is not distributed evenly amongst the masses, but rather amongst the few. However, as Ridd

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art by Ming Zhang

“May we find sustenance for our roots, grounding us in who we are and what we stand for, so that we can leave as blades of audacious grass – strengthened to keep pushing, with our new vision through concrete sidewalks of our world, the sidewalks of militarism, violence, and injustice. May we keep pushing – resisting – in the knowledge of the communal strength of a world community of many blades of grass.”

– Karen Ridd

illustrates, power is alive inside of every individual as it rests in each heart, soul, and spirit.

Ridd explains, “When we are grounded in who we are, when we are grounded in what we believe, when we are grounded in what we stand for, then we can truly resist. When we act, not out of opposition, but out of love, then we can most effect change.”

Grounded in her love of humanity, Ridd resisted the violence and threat of the soldiers. Empowered by this love, Ridd reached out to the soldiers, not in opposition, but rather standing with them as equals. Ridd’s story therefore echoes the power of compassion and confirms Gandhi’s beliefs that love for the oppressor is the foundation of nonviolent resistance.

Taking such a stand is not always easy. In times of overwhelming violence and prejudice, one person’s resistance may seem to have little effect. However, as Ridd puts it, one must be the grass that grows in the cracks of the sidewalk: “it’s like it sprouts up and people pull it out or try to mow it down. And then, irresistibly, it comes up again. Bit by bit it even forces cracks into the concrete, despite the

best efforts of the sidewalk –tender.”

In other words, the power to resist violence and transform negativity arises from inside oneself. As long as one is grounded in his or her beliefs, one’s resistance is unbreakable.

Currently, Ridd is an instructor in Conflict Resolution Studies at Menno Simons College. She also works as a professional clown, coordinates meditation training programs, and is a consultant for third party nonviolent intervention groups such as PBI.

PBI is a non-governmental organization (NGO) which sends teams of volunteers into areas of repression and conflict such as places in Columbia, Guatemala, Indonesia, and Mexico. The volunteers work to deter violence, protect human rights, and promote nonviolent transformation of conflicts.

#### Resources

Peace Brigades International: [www.pbi.org](http://www.pbi.org)

The Search for a Nonviolent Future by Michael N. Nagler