

THE HEAD OF THE HAMMER

Personal Sacrifice in Campaigns of Active Nonviolence

Eugene Bahn

What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans, the wounded and homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under totalitarianism or the holy name of liberty or democracy?"

This is a paraphrase of a Gandhi quote. The only difference from the original, however, is that I added "the wounded." I first read this quote – and added the additional category of suffering – just before the March 2003 invasion of Iraq. As the world then contemplated the impending invasion, this quote caused me to contemplate, for the first time in my life, what nonviolence was all about.

I set out to learn all I could about nonviolence. At first I read only Gandhi's own words. Then I read what others had written about him. Then I read his autobiography. I followed up with Gene Sharp's multi-volume work on nonviolence; Eknath Easwaran's book on Badshah Khan; the *From Violence to Wholeness* program by Pace e Bene and their follow-up work, *Engage*. I also studied Bondurant's work on Gandhian philosophy, Nagler's writings on a nonviolent future, and much more. I read all I could get my hands on. From Gandhi, Jesus, Dr. King, Cesar Chavez and more, I learned much. Although each teacher was unique, and confronted a particular set of historical circumstances, I found in each of these exponents of nonviolence an understanding that self-sacrifice is key. Through their writings and the evidence of their lives, it is clear that each accomplished what they did because of their willingness to experience, and their actual experience of, personal suffering.

And so, this piece is about suffering.

The additional category of suffering, added to the Gandhi quote above, is especially important in light of the fact that nearly 90% of the victims of modern military action are civilians.⁽¹⁾ Reading Gandhi's quote on that cold day in March 2003, I felt for the first time the indiscriminate unfairness of armed conflict; learning the "90% statistic" catapulted that feeling of unfairness to the level of rank injustice. I realized that any change from violence to nonviolence on a societal level – whether it be stopping war or stopping segregation – must come from a willing-

ness in those who are most deeply affected by the injustice to suffer for justice's sake.

What place does suffering have in today's efforts for justice? Let me give just a few of my favorite examples.

Julia Butterfly Hill saved Luna, the 1000-year old redwood tree, by living in the tree for 738 days. She suffered greatly at the hands of those who wanted to cut both her and the tree down, as well as by exposure to the elements during her two years and eight days living 180 feet off the ground in the Headwaters Forest in Northern California.

The Indian Dalits (formerly called "Untouchables") compelled orthodox Hindus to change their prejudiced attitudes about them by standing peacefully at a blockade erected to prevent them from using both a temple and the road leading to it. During the rainy season they stood facing the blockade in water up to their shoulders while the police manned the blockade in boats. Even after the

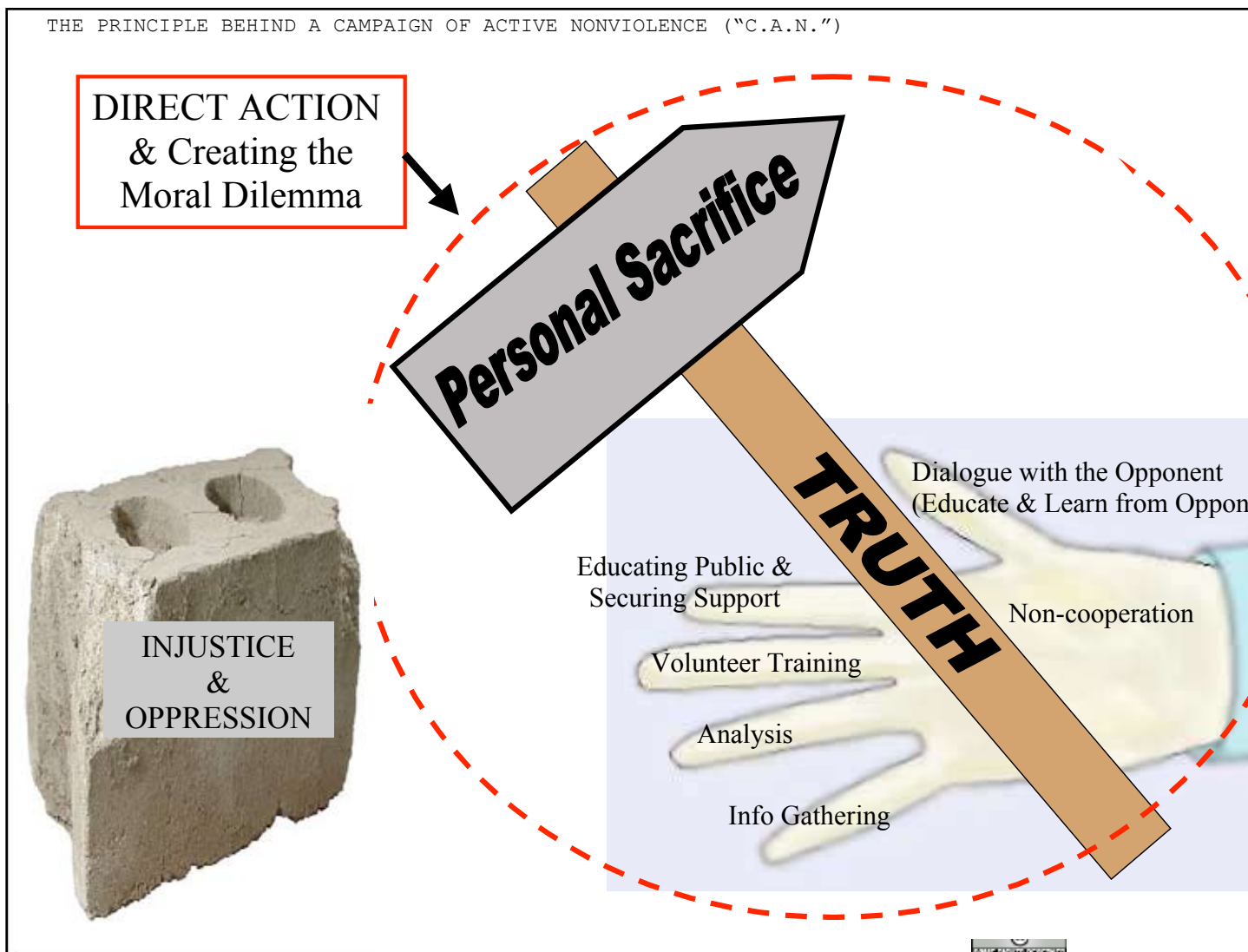
Hindus removed the barrier, allowing the Dalits to use the road and the temple, the Dalits continued to stand there until the orthodox Hindus changed their attitudes about them. Overall it took 16 months.

Nellie, Angelica, Aurora and Luzmila are four Bolivian women who worked to compel the oppressive regime to allow

their husbands to return to their jobs in the tin mine. They succeeded in their goal by fasting – for 23 days. At one point, inspired by their example, 1,380 people were fasting with them, including a former Bolivian president.

In these examples, ordinary people suffering for a just cause made significant change possible. Note that suffering is not merely discomfort or inconvenience. Suffering results from prolonged personal experience with something profoundly undesirable, like hunger, cold, beatings, emotional and/or psychological abuse. Change was not achieved in these examples because the individuals took part in a once-a-week vigil for peace or a large rally in Washington, D.C. Rather, when all other efforts failed to produce the change they demanded, they chose to do something seriously unpleasant and personally risky for a prolonged period. Protesting with banners and placards and bullhorns on the sidewalks outside the "whites-only" restaurants in the South might have brought publicity and raised some public dialogue, but the only way the lunch counters were desegregated was by people being willing to defy an unjust law and to do so day after day after day

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In order to help myself understand better what I had learned about suffering and about the workings of a campaign of active nonviolence (CAN), I developed a visual which I call the Hammer Schematic. Each phase of a campaign(4), each finger in the hand, is necessary in order to wield the hammer. When all phases are functioning well, we find that the operation of our fingers leads to rightful non-cooperation and to grasping ever more firmly the Truth of a situation. If change for justice has not yet occurred, then this grasping of Truth permits us to take the most important step of all, which is Personal Sacrifice. This whole process, when combined, constitutes Direct Action. Through correct direct action, the head of the hammer does its work of breaking down injustice and oppression.

despite being taunted, jeered, spit at, hit, burned by cigarettes and worse.

These examples show us that suffering is effective because it “demonstrates sincerity and cuts through the rationalized defenses of the opponent.”(2) Gandhi spoke of “suffering without retaliation.” In other words, personal sacrifice brings about the “moral dilemma.” Suffering shows that you are serious about your cause, and when undergone with right motives and as a natural, necessary next step in a series of campaign phases—not merely as an empty tactic – its power is unmatched. The examples also

make clear that suffering is effective in practice only when it is undergone for as long as it takes to produce change.

So where is the true suffering in today’s peace movement in the United States? Can the peace movement even offer long-term campaigns with possibilities for suffering similar to those of Gandhi or King or Khan? I do not know. But I believe our efforts for peace are hampered both by the indirect nature of the injustices we battle and by the lack of mass willingness to suffer. Many of the injustices the U.S. peace movement fights today are indirect com-

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THE HEAD OF THE HAMMER (CONTINUED)

pared to those of other times and places. For example, the existence of the U.S. stockpile of nuclear weapons – while a grave injustice – does not exert the same direct injustice in our daily lives as “colored only” drinking fountains did. Globalization – while operating a serious injustice on the people and the planet – does not directly affect us here in the same way as having a foreign government run our lives and treat us as third class citizens. In addition, there have not been enough people willing to suffer for the same cause at the same time. For example, thousands go to the School of the Americas (SOA) each year to protest, but only a very small number of those cross the line and get arrested. Thousands march on Washington – for a week-end – and then return home to take care of what really matters to them. We have not yet reached a point where enough people are fed up enough to say “Enough!” to the government/corporations/media complex, and to risk health, limb and life in saying it. Imagine if those tens of thousands in Washington refused to go home, for as long as it took!

To use the nuclear weapons issue to further this point, imagine the U.S. government passes a law requiring each person to store and protect a nuclear missile in their home. In such a scenario, we would have the classic “unjust law,”⁽³⁾ and an unjust law is the classic opportunity for a campaign of active nonviolence (what the Complete Coverage Campaign, see footnote 1, refers to as a “C.A.N.”). Enormous numbers of people would oppose this law. A large number of people would be willing to disobey the law. Maybe a large enough number of people would be willing to risk imprisonment, beatings and even death rather than store a nuclear device, to bring about the “moral dilemma.” The law would then most likely be repealed. But nuclear weapons do not affect us

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR (CONT. FROM P. 2)

Dialogue with religious perspectives

I was reading over the letter from Rev. Roger VanDerWerken and the response to Roger in our last issue (Winter 2006). I really like some of the dialogue and think it's really healthy. I will briefly sum up the relevant parts before proceeding with my response. Roger's original letter discussed his perception of the “reality” of evil in the world, the Christian scriptural passage about obeying political authority (1 Ptr. 5.13-14), and the hope that we punish those doing evil while we commend those who do well. Two of our editors responded to his letter by highlighting a common concern for security and peace, but draw attention to the “conditions” of our situation, while suggesting an alternative paradigm and set of methods. In response to the scriptural reference by Roger, they quote Prof. Michael Nagler to argue that Jesus' submission was “intensely subversive,” but also that Peter's letter itself was “extreme and arguably counter-Christian.”

this way, and the SOA does not bother enough of us quite that much, and our military budget has not made enough people decide to stop paying taxes.

So we are left with the realization that “indirect injustice” often fails to inspire mass sacrifice. We must help each other move past our point of tolerance for cooperation with such injustice. We must search for ways to help each other see that we are living in the midst of grave injustice, that the injustice creates real danger for us personally, and that personal risk is potentially the only way to bring about a more just condition.

Three thoughts help me in this endeavor. One is the smug statement of former Secretary of State Alexander Haig, quoted on the War Resisters League poster about war tax resistance: “Let them march all they want, just so long as they continue to pay their taxes.” The second is knowing that Julia Butterfly Hill was not directly affected by the clear cutting of old growth trees, at least not until she decided to climb up one and stay there for the duration. The third is the concept of the frog in the pot of water. Put a frog in a pot of water on the stove. Increase the heat a few degrees at a time. The increase in heat is so gradual that the frog cooks to death before it is even aware that it should jump out. We are all frogs in the pot.

REFERENCES

1. UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children*, 1996. This statistic has been a key component to the efforts of The Complete Coverage Campaign (www.CompleteCoverageCampaign.org). The CCC seeks to compel the mainstream/corporate media to present comprehensive coverage of the civilian situation in Iraq in the same way they cover any other humanitarian crisis.
2. Bondurant, Joan V., *Conquest of Violence, The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict*, Princeton University Press, 1988, pg. 228.
3. Note that the modern U.S. nonviolence movement spends much time and energy disobeying “just laws,” e.g. laws prohibiting trespass, which are usually applied in a fair manner, i.e. not with discriminatory effect.
4. I adapted the phrases from the *Pace e Bene From Violence to Wholeness* materials, adding “Volunteer Training” and “Educating & Learning from the Opponent” because of our experience with the Complete Coverage Campaign. This piece is licensed under a Creative Commons License <http://creativecommons.org/learn/licenses/>

I wanted to add some thoughts about how to possibly respond to Rev. VanDerWerken's use of scripture without implying that Peter's letter itself may be “counter-Christian.” The verse he quotes needs to be taken within the context of the letter it's from as well as the context of the wider Christian scriptures. The letter itself is focused on encouraging Christians to remain faithful even in light of the real possibility of suffering in a hostile environment. The particular section referred to in 1 Peter (5.13-14) refers to Paul's earlier writing in Romans 13 about obeying authorities. Yet, that context is about the new life in Christ that prepares for nonconformity and never to avenge one's self (Rom. 12). Paul calls us to respect these authorities for their role but with a posture of detachment, which at that time meant not participating in their ‘worldly powers’ or values of war. The new form of life is based on love, Rom. 13.8. In Acts, which is the story of the early Christian communities, it clearly states for us to obey God rather than humans, Acts 5.29. So the interpretation of 1 Peter and Romans 13 gets specified as enduring civil authorities as far as they don't call us to disobey God; and further, these authorities must be legiti-

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