

## *Nonviolence, The Hope of the Future*

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In a world of war and injustice, any real spirituality has to engage the struggle for peace and justice. In a culture of violence like ours, what we need from people of faith and conscience are active spiritualities of nonviolence. Now more than ever, we need the faith-based nonviolence practiced by Abraham Heschel, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mohandas Gandhi.

Currently, over 40,000 people, mostly children, die every day of starvation (at least 20 million a year), while over 30 wars are being waged and over 20,000 nuclear weapons are still maintained. From starvation to ethnic hatred to war and the ongoing threat of global destruction, the spectrum of violence overshadows us all.

In a world of suffering and systemic injustice, our faith must address these realities, seek peace, and offer the alternative vision of nonviolence, or it loses its authenticity, as the prophets insist.

We can no longer claim a private, spiritualized religion when our own country leads the way in this addiction to violence and thus violates every spiritual and moral value. Dr. King called America “the greatest purveyor of violence on earth.” Today, our faith challenges us to make it the greatest purveyor of peace.

Last summer, the United States bombed Sudan and Afghanistan, killing at least 30 people, in response to terrorist bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, which had killed 263 people and injured more than 5,500.

In December, we watched in horror as the US bombed Iraq, killing at least 65 people; injuring scores more; destroying schools and hospitals; and knocking out water supplies in Baghdad

for over 300,000 people.

Retaliatory violence, bombing raids, and war never solve anything. State-sanctioned murder not only violates international law, it inflames existing hatred and leads to further terrorist attacks and even more distrust, death and destruction.

Killing people only increases the hostility, hatred and spirit of vengeance. Armed military terror, initiated by the US and aimed at Africa or Asia, escalates the spiral of violence in regions already drenched in blood and despair.

Our warmaking economy thrives on the death of others, and so we keep on bombing and preparing for war, even though we have no enemies. We cut funding for jobs, healthcare, education and food for the hungry, but increase our military spending another \$100 billion. The bombmakers and military “defense” contractors grow rich on the suffering of the world’s children. In the process, we lose any trace of authentic religious belief.

Look at the situation in Iraq. By bombing Iraq, we killed Iraqi people to send a message to Saddam that he should not kill Iraqi people or threaten other nations. There is no logic to such madness, yet we repeat this failed policy time and time again. An economy based on war needs to wage war to continue, and so the wars continue.

But the children and people of Iraq are not our enemies. They have suffered too much already. They should not suffer anymore--whether from the Iraqi government or the US government. Already, according to the United Nations, more than 1 million Iraqi civilians have died as a result of the economic sanctions. Yet we keep making the situation worse.

We should stop all our plans to bomb Iraq, and immediately lift the economic sanctions, while continuing an embargo of arms transfers and sales to Iraq and all other nations of the Middle East. That would be a big step toward creating a region free of all weapons of mass destruction.

Meanwhile, we should dismantle our own stockpile of nuclear weapons, something the end of the Cold War called for years ago. Then, we might lift the pall of fear that covers the human race and learn new nonviolent, non-military ways to resolve our conflicts.

But as we reverse our policies toward Iraq and the world, we as a people need to pursue a deep, spiritual change.

As people of faith, we not only need to demand that our country disarm its weapons and seek justice and peace with all, we need to live out a new spirituality based on active nonviolence.

Nonviolence is a way of life which holds that every human being is equal, a child of God, a sister or brother. Given this basic faith principle, we should not hurt or kill anyone, much less look the other way in the face of pain and suffering. A spirituality of nonviolence pushes us to speak the truth publicly in a spirit of love and compassion. It recognizes that in a world like ours, silence is complicit with the crime of violence. We have to condemn violence wherever we see it, to resist systemic injustice and to speak out for peace.

Second, a spirituality of nonviolence challenges us to seek justice, to dismantle underlying economic and political systems that crush hundreds of millions into destitution and death. That means working to end hunger and poverty, including the hunger and poverty caused by economic sanctions on Iraq.

Third, a spirituality of nonviolence calls us to pursue nuclear disarmament and the abolition of war, to hasten Isaiah's vision of that day when we shall "beat swords into plowshares and study war no more."

Finally, a spirituality of nonviolence introduces us to the God of peace. "Great is peace," the ancients wrote in the classical rabbinic period, "for God's name is peace." As we begin to worship the God of nonviolence, our hearts are disarmed and we become people of nonviolence.

Why practice nonviolence? Because when we bomb people who bomb, we become bombers. When we kill people who kill, we become killers. When we execute people who shoot people, we become executioners and murderers. When we incinerate people through our weapons of mass destruction to show that they should not incinerate people..., we become the problem.

Indeed, our intention to use such weapons shows that, despite our high professions of morality and democracy, we already are the number one source of the world's problems.

The spiritual wisdom of nonviolence teaches us we can do better. Nonviolence offers us a way out of the world's madness. When we practice nonviolence, we become the people our God created us to be. We live up to our fullest, spiritual potential. We enter into the vision of God's peace, and discover that peace is at the heart of God. Then, we learn the meaning of our faith.

Faith in the God of peace demands that we embark on an entirely new way of life towards a new kind of culture, rooted in peace and justice for all.

If we have the courage, as people of faith, to sow seeds of nonviolence, we ensure that succeeding generations will live in a new world without war, injustice or violence.

Here at the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the largest, oldest interfaith organization in the US, we know that nonviolence lies at the heart of every religion, indeed of every person. We have been created to practice nonviolence. Though our culture socializes us to respond violently at every turn, it is never too late to learn the ancient wisdom of nonviolence.

Martin Luther King, Jr. summed up the situation the night before he was killed: "The choice before us is no longer between violence or nonviolence. It's either nonviolence or nonexistence."

As we stand at the door of a new millennium, the times push us to educate ourselves in the way of nonviolence, and to place it at the center of our faith lives. Otherwise, we are doomed to an endless downward spiral of violence.

Last November, the United Nations declared the first decade of the new millennium a “Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World.” People around the world are preparing for that decade.

Never was there a better time to implement the spiritual wisdom of nonviolence than right now. If we do, we will discover the real meaning of spirituality.

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