

Nonviolence Is Taking Responsibility for the Whole

by MIKI KASHTAN

Many years ago, just as I was beginning to explore nonviolence, the prime minister of the country I am originally from, Yitzhak Rabin, was assassinated by an ultra-right wing young man, Yigal Amir. Within hours, while talking with a supportive friend, I experienced the most unexpected feeling I could imagine: I felt compassion for God, in whose existence I don't even believe! It was visceral and simple: a wave of tenderness washed over me when I recognized that in that moment God had the excruciating task of loving Yigal Amir, the assassin.

The task of opening our hearts to everyone, including those whose actions we see as dangerous and harmful, is at the root of embracing nonviolence. Oftentimes, it's far easier to embrace nonviolence in action—doing no harm on the material plane—than it is to embrace nonviolence in word. It is, again, easier to embrace nonviolence in word than in thought. Yet, as Gandhi showed us, nonviolence reaches its fullest expression when it's practiced at all three levels: thought, word, and action.

Similarly, many of us who choose nonviolence as a path of activism find it easier to practice nonviolence on the streets, in campaigns, and in other dramatic settings rather than to embrace nonviolence as a way of life that guides our every move. This aspect of nonviolence happens far away from the limelight, and rarely leads to any substantive changes on the larger, systemic level. I see this kind of nonviolent living as a

form of constructive program available to any of us, always. There's no setting in which we can't practice it, no matter how extreme, because we always have the internal sphere in which we can begin our practice.

At all levels, this path spells a commitment to leadership, regardless of circumstances: the willingness to unilaterally assume interdependent responsibility for the whole. It's unilateral willingness, because we are called to commit to the path regardless of what others do. If kindness is part of my set of values, for example, it means I commit to kindness towards others regardless of whether or not they are kind to me. It's interdependent responsibility, because leadership always involves collaboration with others. Day by day, on an endless journey, we can then learn better how to put all the pieces together and forge a path that has integrity, that is aligned with our vision for the world, and that is within our own human limits.

In this way, nonviolence and widespread leadership are the most direct antidotes to thousands of years of patriarchy and its offspring, now most acutely global capitalism and white supremacy. Nonviolence directly counters and transcends the pillars of patriarchy—separation, scarcity, and powerlessness—that have become the soundtrack of modern living. Nonviolent leadership connects us with ourselves, other individuals and communities, nature, and life as a whole. Nonviolent leadership emerges organically from the longing for a world that works for all. Nonviolent

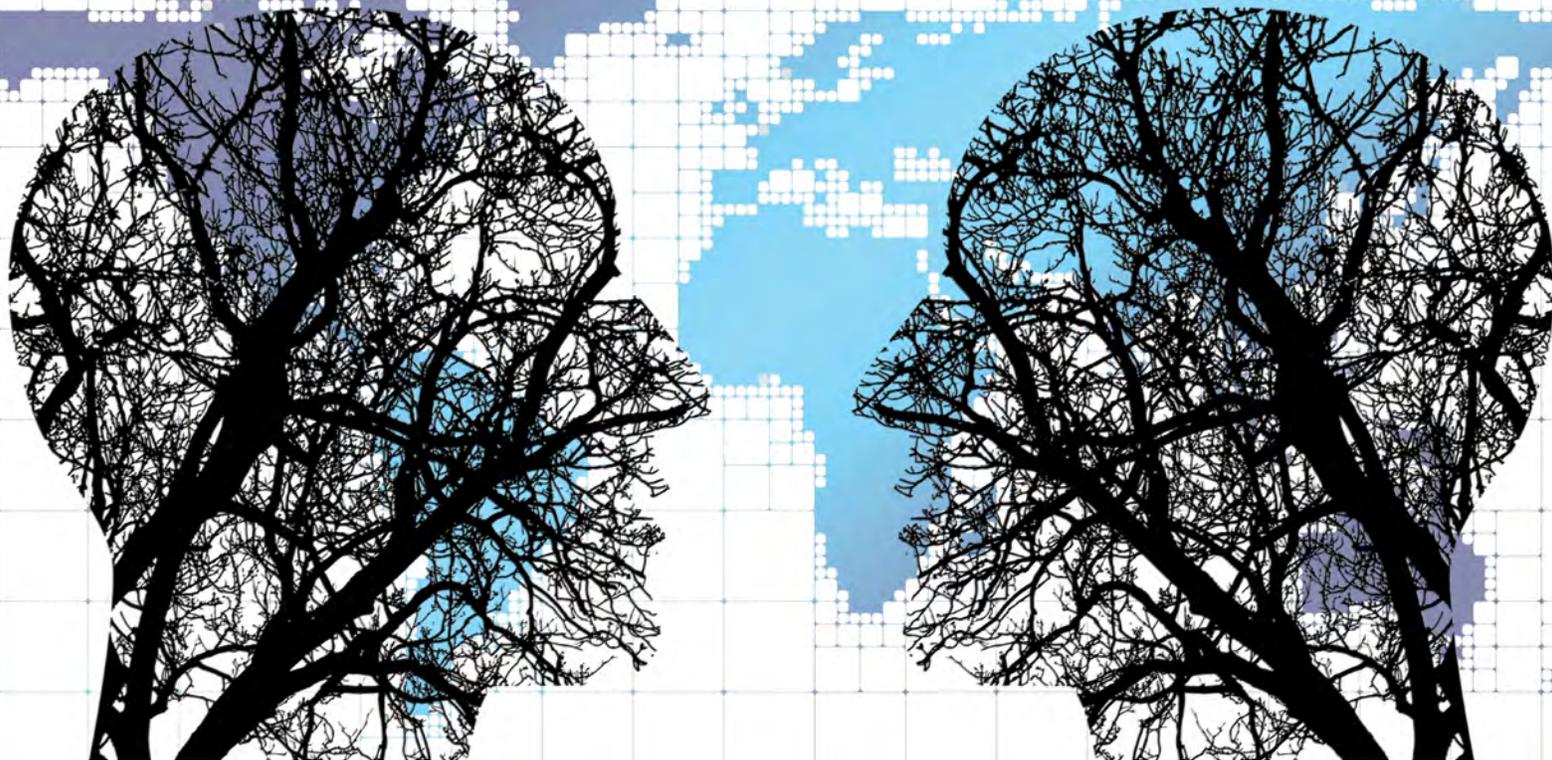


Illustration via Pixabay

leadership is an invitation to reclaiming the full power of choice that we can access as humans, and to then collaborate with others for the benefit of all.

What does it look like when we do it?

Fundamentally, for me, it takes the form of stepping outside of the patriarchal norms within which we have become accustomed to live and which we use to evaluate everything, including our actions to transform patriarchy itself.

Internally: Since patriarchy rests on an incessant drive to control that of which we are afraid, one clear step forward is to shift from control to humility; from fear and protection to opening our hearts to the humanity of everyone; and from an exterior of strength to tenderness and vulnerability. This is the kind of practice that allowed a number of Civil Rights activists in the '60s to express forgiveness to their killers as they were dying. This is what caring for the whole ultimately means.

The reward for this exacting practice is an immense expansion of freedom and choice. This is how the practice of vulnerability has made me so much stronger rather than weaker, as common norms would assume. The whole also includes us. Part of the practice is to increase our capacity for self-warmth and acceptance. No longer are we reactive, ruled by habitual fight/flight/freeze responses. We develop, instead, the capacity to choose how we respond based on what I have come to call non-reactive discernment.

Interpersonally: One of the ways that I understand nonviolence is as the courage to speak truth with love. Sometimes, this means being empathic even when we are hurting, continuing to see and reflect to the other their own humanity and suffering even when they cannot hear us. One of my favorite examples of this is the work of Edwin Rutch, who has brought his [Empathy Tent](#) to rallies and events of both the right and the left, always inviting people to be listened to or to listen to each other.

Sometimes, interpersonal nonviolence means speaking up and asking the other to hear us first, allowing our hearts to break and showing the truth of what we say. Tenderness, towards self and other, allows us to metabolize our own and others' failures to live up to our values and to recognize our embeddedness within systems that dramatically constrain our options and capacity for choice. Vulnerability breaks down the cycle of escalation that responds to harshness with erecting protection and distancing. Sharing our vulnerability in the face of distance and judgment breaks down barriers and allows the magic of connection to surface again.

In the world: Life in our modern world is defined by norms that go against our evolutionary makeup. We are implicitly instructed to treat each other with perpetual low-grade mistrust; to anticipate transactional relationships based on exchange rather than care and generosity; and to prioritize the smooth functioning of the status quo rather than truth, integrity, or purpose.



“

Nonviolent leadership connects us with ourselves, other individuals and communities, nature, and life as a whole.

Instead, we can choose to embody, moment by moment, what nonviolent leadership entails, regardless of where we are. It means remembering our largest vision for the world; reflecting on our values; assessing the possibilities of the moment, including the risks we incur by acting outside the norms; and choosing what is ours to do given our own gifts, challenges, limitations, and deepest priorities. Sometimes, the difference would hardly be perceptible; maybe a smile to someone who's been shunned by others. Sometimes, the difference would be heroic acts. An unknown African-American cashier received money from a man who had a swastika tattooed between his thumb and forefinger. Without losing a beat, she looked him in the eye and said something like: “Why are you doing this to yourself? You are better than that.” A year later, this man began a process that changed the course of his life, and he credits that one minute encounter as the watershed event that started him on his inner journey.

The times we live in are not “normal.” When I imagine more of us embracing the soft qualities of tenderness and subverting the hard-edged qualities of our times, even while stepping into more courage and truth, I have much more faith in the chances of surviving these times and finding again our place within the web of life that sustains us all. ■

Miki Kashtan co-founded Bay Area Nonviolent Communication, consults at the Center for Efficient Collaboration, and blogs at thefearlessheart.org. Her latest book is *Reweaving Our Human Fabric: Working Together to Create a Nonviolent Future* (Fearless Heart Publications, 2015).