

BOOK REVIEW

Courage, Truth, and Love: Building Blocks of Nonviolence. A Review of the Following: *Exploring the Power of Nonviolence: Peace, Politics, and Practice*

Randall Amster and Elavie Ndura-Ouédraogo (Editors)
Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2013.

320 pp. ISBN 9780815633440, 9780815633402, and 9780815652533. \$29.95.

Violence and Nonviolence: An Introduction

Barry L. Gan

Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013.

125 pp. ISBN 9781442217591 and 9781442217607. \$57

The Nonviolence Handbook: A Guide for Practical Action

Michael N. Nagler

San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2014.

84 pp. ISBN 9781626561458. \$12

Reviewed by Miki Kashtan

During the days of the Occupy movement, heated discussions were taking place in Oakland about whether or not to adopt an official commitment to nonviolence. One dimension of the debate was the question of whether nonviolence was more or less effective than other approaches to engaging with the structures of power in society. The other dimension was whether nonviolence was morally superior to a policy of “diversity of tactics,” or was it the case that a commitment to nonviolence ultimately supports the hidden structural violence that affects millions of people’s lives? At just about the same time, a book came out that, to my mind, puts to rest the

effectiveness question. [Chenoweth and Stephan’s \(2012\) *Why Civil Resistance Works*](#), a landmark empirical study, concluded, having examined more than 300 attempts to create significant political change (regime change, secession, or independence from occupation), that nonviolent movements are twice as successful as violent movements at reaching their goals, and lead to more democratic outcomes than violent movements do.

One of the questions that this book mostly leaves unanswered is the relationship between the choice to employ nonviolence purely as a method, what is commonly known as “strategic” nonviolence, and the choice to embrace nonviolence as a way of life, what is commonly known as “principled” or “comprehensive” nonviolence. Three new books examine this relationship in some detail and reach similar conclusions. First, that principled nonviolence, which has the potential to transform us at a deep psychological level, can at the same time make our strategic use of nonviolence more powerful. Second, that the results of movements or campaigns that are fully committed to nonviolence on the principled level can be far more trans-

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formative for all, because the absence of any intent to harm or shame is less likely to leave a residue of mistrust in former oppressors.

Principled nonviolence starts with personal practice. For Gandhi, the father of the modern approaches to nonviolence, this practice was what he called “experiments in truth,” to which he applied himself all the way to the very moment of his death. As deep as this practice might be, embracing nonviolence doesn’t end with “being the change we want to see”; it includes in it a call to engage with the world at large, individually and collectively. Still, from a peace psychology perspective, and as a practitioner of and writer about nonviolence, the question that guided me in looking at these books is one that has haunted me for years. Embracing nonviolence in a world that operates with violence as one of its norms requires an enormous individual willingness to face potentially devastating consequences. What then are the changes that would need to take place within us for that willingness to be possible?

The scope of *Exploring the Power of Nonviolence* is breathtaking. The collected essays move from theory to history, case studies, and practices, and include an entire section on pedagogy. The editors suggest, following Gandhi and King, that nonviolence employs “love force” in service of and prefiguring a future that is free of oppression. The essays focus on teasing apart what this force is, how it’s been employed around the world (with a refreshing focus on the global South), and what can be done to enhance and deepen its application, especially in the Western, industrialized world of today.

A core insight woven through the articles is that an internal change of values can create a hunger for creating change in the world. In this review I focus on those essays that speak to the inner dimension of nonviolence, what makes it both recognizable and most effective.

In “Apathy, Aggression, Assertion, and Action” Tom Hastings analyzes with a thoroughness and attention to specifics what makes nonviolence “work.” A major part of the efficacy of nonviolence has to do with the perceptions that it generates. A “unilateral refrain from violence,” for example, reduces fear for both parties. Indeed, nonviolence requires stepping outside the habits of seeing life as a zero-sum game and into the willingness to uphold the humanity

of those with whom we disagree, aiming for solutions that truly work for all. Hastings insists on finding and staying close to a line that separates assertion from aggression, thereby preventing an “oppressor” from either dismissing those who stand up (not enough assertion), or repressing them because they have crossed over into aggression. When the person or group being challenged (such as the British in India) can be confident that their humanity and ultimate well-being are cared for, that, in itself, increases the chances of an effective outcome.

Through focusing on water Randall Amster (“From the Headwaters to the Grassroots”) demonstrates how a different way of managing a scarce and often-fought-over resource can be its own path to peace. He makes his point clear and compelling: nonviolence is about a way of being more than about specific types of action. It is the quality of their relationships that enables the people who manage the acequias, a centuries-old irrigation system held as a commons in the Southwestern part of the United States, to minimize the incidence of their conflicts and manage better those that occur. Amster synthesizes five tenets of nonviolence from various formulations: “universal respect [for self and others, including adversaries], the unity of means and ends, manifesting truth [without denigration of others], fostering cooperation [toward mutually beneficial outcomes], and recognizing interconnectedness.”

Veteran activist George Lakey unpacks and analyzes the “conflict-friendly pedagogy” he utilizes in his trainings for nonviolent action (in “Direct Education”). Because deep nonviolence is so unfamiliar, participants must be allowed to step safely into a journey that opens them up to experiencing rather than only hearing about the power of nonviolent action. Because nonviolence is an expression of the courage to risk losing, sometimes everything, much preparation and strong support from trainers is necessary, or else fear will reign. He describes training experiences that are on a par with the kind of action people might engage in, even though the environment and content are entirely different. The similarity is precisely about overcoming fear and stepping into conflict and discomfort rather than away from them. Training in nonviolence is training in courage and truth-telling.

In “Fostering a Culture of Nonviolence through Multicultural Education,” Elavie Ndura

invites us to break apart the essential core of violence through humanizing people we have been taught to dehumanize. Learning to take responsibility and ownership of our group's identity and actions without blame or guilt is a tall order, which Ndura envisions as a form of building "bridges of caring consciousness." I found her invitation enticing, because she paints a picture of multicultural education as based in curiosity and empathy. Ndura emphasizes that "critical multicultural education can enhance our capacity to love and care about ourselves and each other." In this way, we reclaim the fullness of our humanity in a way that enhances our capacity for nonviolence.

Finally, in "Toward a Moral Psychology of Nonviolence" Nancy E. Snow provides a sweeping overview of what "The Gandhian Paradigm" (her subtitle) means in terms of the critical moral choices we make as human beings, whether engaged in nonviolent action or in daily living. For her, Satyagraha, Gandhi's quintessential method, goes far beyond being just a method, and is, rather, a way of living and being that invites us to recover from "the devastating psychological effects of oppression," to which I would add: whether done to us or those we have done to others. The Gandhian approach, as Snow reminds us, requires us to love others, including oppressors. That is no small feat.

In my own workshops I often describe nonviolence as "the courage to speak truth with love." In fact, I now believe that love is what makes the courage to speak truth possible. Love is woven through Satyagraha, a core moral force that is, to return to Hastings' theme, the basis of what makes it "work." By speaking to the heart and presumed inherent goodness of the oppressor, entirely unexpected outcomes become possible, both within and without. Indeed, King recognized repeatedly that nonviolence changes the person who uses it even before changing others or creating an outcome in the world. In that sense, nonviolence relies on individual moral authority to a degree unparalleled by other methods of attending to conflict.

In *Violence and Nonviolence: An Introduction*, Barry L. Gan embarks on a simple and ambitious task: to examine and understand the ways in which violence is deeply woven into the fabric of our various cultures through a core set of myths, so as to show how nonviolence can

break apart those myths and contribute to creating a different kind of world. I found the myths and their unpacking to be significantly less satisfying than the second part of the book, where Gan's careful exposition of what nonviolence truly entails became progressively more engaging and intricate. This personal preference is likely rooted in the extent to which I have already journeyed away from the myths that Gan exposes. After reading the entire book, however, I am more intrigued and appreciative of Gan's intention: he is aiming to reach people who have not been "converted"; to speak to the extraordinary tenacity with which these myths remain anchored and are fortified through exposure to the media, even within those of us who consciously and explicitly aim to transcend them. The myths he names, succinctly put, are five: (a) violence is only physical; (b) some people are essentially good and others are essentially evil; (c) violence may be necessary to prevent violence; (d) those who are wrongdoers must suffer and be punished; (e) nonviolence is either cowardly or ineffective.

In each chapter of the first part of the book Gan questions the first four of these assumptions. He argues, against the myth of violence being only physical, that significant harm can be done to others without ever touching their bodies, both through emotional violence and through structural violence. Regarding the myth that some people are evil and others good, he reminds us that although only an "infinitesimally small percentage of any population" could "be classified as inherently evil," untold numbers of people have been willing to believe that others are evil based on what leaders tell them, leading them to willingness to engage in violence toward them. His conclusion regarding this myth is that all of us are capable of both good and bad actions. As to the myth of necessary violence, his starkest statement is that "*Violence that hasn't yet occurred is . . . used as a justification for violence itself*" (emphasis in the original). Regarding the myth of the effectiveness of punishment, Gan brings in both argument and evidence to the effect that punishment is, itself, a form of violence that doesn't actually work to deter others from violence, to satisfy those who seek revenge, or as a form of justice for victims. Instead, it regularly causes new harm and often creates new victims, perpetuating rather than ending the cycle of violence.

One need only consider the effectiveness of the War on Terror to recognize the deep flaws in the punitive paradigm.

In the second part, Gan begins from the observation that, although most of us, most of the time, would like to live without violence, only few of us are willing to commit to nonviolence in a world that continues to operate within the paradigm of violence. This, to me, is the deep reason why nonviolence requires so much personal practice to embrace. It's clear to me that if and when we ever reach a state in which nonviolence becomes the normative means of responding to challenges and conflict, from the most personal to the most global, nonviolence would then continue to perpetuate itself with far less effort. This would happen in the same ways that violence is perpetuated nowadays: through the normal course of functioning in a society, through education and socialization, and through the ways in which nonviolence would be embedded in social structures and systems.

Because we don't yet live in that world, Gan joins with the general thrust of Amster and Ndura's collection in recognizing that nonviolence requires a deep integration of core values in its practitioners, deeper than can be achieved by adopting nonviolence for purely pragmatic reasons. Gan distinguishes this deeper form of nonviolence as "comprehensive" and distinguishes between the two: "without being coupled with nonviolence as a way of life, [strategic nonviolence] is in the final analysis a war by other means."

Why is this distinction important? Gan claims that even though strategic nonviolence is far superior to violence, it doesn't, by itself, change the culture through creating outcomes that work for all. It is only the depth of "comprehensive" nonviolence that ensures that we are truly speaking to the humanity of the oppressors. This is why love is so essential to nonviolence as Gandhi, King, and others have understood it: without it, we can still end up causing psychological harm to the opponents, even if we physically do no harm. This point loops back to Gan's initial expansion of the definition of violence well beyond the physical realm.

I see his description of comprehensive nonviolence as his biggest contribution to the field. In a beautiful passage he describes nonviolence as the inversion of the logic of violence. Instead

of the familiar "do as I wish or I will hurt you," which is the essential dynamic of violence, nonviolence sends a remarkable message: "do as I wish or make me suffer." The invincible action that Gandhi took, for example, was to "put the British in a position of having to react to him" while at the same time "he did no harm to them." All this without any intent to shame or embarrass them, something Gandhi insisted on maintaining as one of his core aims.

What is it that would make someone able to sustain such deep courage alongside the commitment to decency and care for the opponents? At bottom, what is required is to overcome "the tendency to want to punish" and replace it with a willingness to suffer and risk losses in order to transform the fundamental logic of violence. At one point Gan pushes the point to its extreme when he says that "if it's about winning, it's not nonviolence." This is a difficult concept, one I have often found challenging to engage with others about. I find some solace in Gan's words, toward the end of his book: "without the willing sacrifice of people committed to a better world, the cycle of violence will simply be perpetuated."

In the end, it is a small book that provides some key answers to the core questions of what it takes to find that willingness. In *The Nonviolence Handbook: A Guide for Practical Action*, Michael Nagler (a close associate of mine) reminds us that nonviolence starts with a shift in our view of human nature. That shift may be key to the entire project of peace psychology. Like Gan, Nagler recognizes that "our present worldview and the institutions based on that worldview take violence as a norm." The essential shift is recognizing that fight and flight (or even freeze) are not the only options available to us in response to an attack. It is, indeed, in response to an attack that we are tested, because it's entirely easy to be nonviolent when everyone does exactly what we want. Instead of anger or fear, nonviolence as a form of response to an attack is a state of "resisting in love."

In that sense, then, nonviolence is a fundamental break away from instinctual responses. "It calls for constant effort and becomes a life-long challenge." The practice rests on an intention to wish for the well being of everyone and on the commitment to employ means that are aligned with our ends. Simple as this sounds, the actual application is exacting and unending.

As someone who has been studying, and teaching, nonviolence for years, I am humbly aware of how far I am from being where I want to be; how often I still find myself collapsing into helplessness without finding a way to respond with love.

The nonviolent way rests, at bottom, on the unwavering faith that the person we are trying to reach is human, that we have the necessary inner resources, and “that every problem can be solved without essential harm to anyone.” In that sense, it clearly benefits its adherent by creating a high degree of inner freedom.

Part of what I appreciate about Nagler’s book is that it is, true to its subtitle, extraordinarily practical. Nagler provides specific practices for enhancing one’s ability to live with a nonviolent intention, ranging from being on an ongoing media fast to changing one’s relationships with everyone and becoming active in a project.

In terms of means, Nagler provides a clear map of the means available within the paradigm of nonviolence, where escalation of the intensity of nonviolence needs to be congruent with the degree of dehumanization that’s already happened: the more dehumanization, the more intensive a resort to nonviolence is required to transform the conflict. The lowest level is conflict resolution. The next is basic Satyagraha, which Nagler describes as “being willing to take on some suffering instead of dishing it out to others,” echoing Gan’s understanding. The most escalated form of nonviolence is the more extreme, life and death version of Satyagraha, which, in Gandhi’s case, took the form of fast unto death. Nagler reminds us that “far fewer people have been killed in the practice of active nonviolence than have been killed in armed struggle” and yet he doesn’t shy away from recognizing that the risk of death is sometimes real.

Much of the discussion of means that Nagler offers is on outward actions rather than the inward transformations I am focusing on in this essay. Still, and fundamentally, the choice of means rests on the inner intention to reach solutions and build new structures whereby no one is harmed, creating a world that benefits all, including former oppressors. One of the goals,

as Nagler says, is “to leave the least possible legacy of bitterness.”

Once again, the core lesson of nonviolence shines through Nagler’s prose as he describes the impeccable “commitment to bear witness to the truth of our interconnectedness, even when our opponent is doing violence to that truth or to our persons.” This is the core challenge that faces anyone who aims to embrace nonviolence in its fullness.

The authors of the books I am reviewing come from a wide range of disciplines, and only one essay in the edited collection was written by a psychologist. Yet, if one of the aims of peace psychology is to understand the psychological roots of violence and nonviolence, then these books all offer us a related answer. The psychology of violence emerges from dehumanizing others, whereas nonviolence rests on a radical, and ultimately positive, view of our fellow humans, even those who act in harmful ways. The psychology of violence stems from separation, whereas nonviolence is rooted in an uncompromising awareness of our interconnectedness, which leads us to a profound and unwavering commitment to resist injustice without harming anyone. Courage and truth on their own are entirely consistent with violence. It is, ultimately, bringing in love in addition to (though not instead of) courage and truth that creates the powerful combination that allows for transformation to happen on all levels, from the most personal to the global.

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