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Nonviolence, like lightning east to west

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Mahatma Gandhi proclaimed a half-century ago: "Nonviolence is the greatest and most active force in the world." It's a proposition that stirs me whenever I return to it. Because with Gandhi there is no shadow of doubt. His words bear authority, they carry weight.

"One person who can express nonviolence in life exercises a force superior to all the forces of brutality," he wrote. "My optimism rests on my belief in the infinite possibilities of the individual to develop nonviolence. The more you develop it in your own being, the more infectious it becomes till it overwhelms your surroundings and by and by might oversweep the world."

I used his words during my dharma talk last week to a hushed crowd at the Upaya Zen Monastery. It's the home of my friend Roshi Joan Halifax and Buddhist community. It was a beautiful spring evening on the edge of Santa Fe, at the foot of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. And the magnificent dharma hall, paneled in dark gleaming wood, was filled with meditators seated on cushions. Before the talk we sat in mindful silence. As we prepared to leave, we chanted blessings of compassion and peace on all beings.

I thought of Gandhi on the drive home. And it occurred to me how relatively recently he graced the earth -- just two generations ago -- and how young the peace movement is. We're just beginning. Creative nonviolence has a long way to go.

Like Edison and his experiments with electricity, we've just tapped into the power of nonviolence, Gandhi said. There's still so much we can do with it. As I drove I reminded myself to view matters from a historical-biblical perch. Nonviolence has triumphed; it will triumph again. I came home consoled.

Another consolation comes from my friend Richard Deats, long time peacemaker and staff member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation until he retired in 2005. He has been teaching nonviolence all over the

world -- Burma, Haiti, Colombia, Russia, the Philippines, Japan, South Africa, Bangladesh, Israel and Palestine -- and, like St. Paul himself, spreading the Gospel of nonviolence.

He recently published a booklet called *Active Nonviolence Across the World* (\$3 each, available at bookstore@forusa.org, a booklet suitable for church and peace groups and high school and college students). It's a fine summary of the grass-roots movements over the last four decades that have brought a measure of justice to the world.

These are the movements you don't hear of on the evening news, whose anchors of course serve corporate interests that prefer matters just as they are. And yet, as Deats outlines, there have been millions, perhaps billions, that since the late 1960s have struggled for justice and peace.

He begins with the Philippines, where the "People Power" movement, involving three million Filipinos, overthrew the Marcos dictatorship in the span of four days. And from there to the rest of Asia, walking us through Tiananmen Square in China, the Dalai Lama's movement for a free Tibet, Aung San Suu Kyi's campaign for justice in Burma.

Plus, Thich Nhat Hanh's engaged Buddhism in Vietnam, Maha Ghosananda's peace walks in Cambodia, Sulak Sivaraksa's nonviolent struggles in Thailand, pro-democracy movements in Taiwan and South Korea. And the relentless campaigns in East Timor and Indonesia.

Next he takes us to the Middle East, where we see the Palestinian struggle -- a struggle, by and large, nonviolent -- to end Israeli apartheid. And then to Africa, where nonviolent campaigns overthrew the dictator of Madagascar and, in Liberia, murderous Charles Taylor. Preceding these, of course, was South Africa's long struggle to end apartheid.

Deats doesn't fail to include the peaceful uprisings in Europe -- in Lech Walesa's Poland, Northern Ireland, Portugal, and Spain.

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And East Germany. There the people met in small groups for prayer, preparing the ground. And with Gorbachev's call for *perestroika* the movement took root, inspiring some 300,000 to march for their liberty. Ten days later, November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. And, improbably, without bloodshed.

The mood was infectious. Deats takes us from there to the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, where on the 50th anniversary of the Soviet occupation, millions joined hands over a span of some 430 miles. Hands linking cities, hands crossing borders. The largest demonstration for peace in history, up until that day.

Deats puts the question: "What if, in 1980, someone would have predicted that unarmed Filipinos would overthrow the Marcos dictatorship in a four day uprising?"

That military regimes across Latin America would be toppled by the relentless persistence of their unarmed opponents? That apartheid would end peacefully and that in a massive and peaceful plebiscite all races of South Africa would elect Nelson Mandela to the presidency? That the Berlin Wall would be nonviolently brought down? Such a person would probably have been thought ridiculously naïve and dismissed out of hand. And yet these things happened!

I find his booklet a strong antidote to the despair that pervades of our warlike culture. It pounds in our skulls, as do all such cultures, that change isn't possible, that good lies in the hands of the powerful -- and especially that nonviolence is illusory.

But Deats's booklet proves otherwise. It proves that Gandhi was right: creative nonviolence is the most powerful force in the world. Already it has inspired a catalog of revolutions, long as a grocery list. Already it has reined in the rank injustice in dozens of nations. In the last four decades -- while we are yet novices.

Gandhi said, "We are constantly being astonished these days at the amazing discoveries in the field of violence, but I maintain that far more undreamt of and seemingly impossible discoveries will be made in the field of nonviolence."

With such hope, I take heart once more.

Some of us will gather to reflect on similar issues at the "Network for Spiritual Progressives" Conference, sponsored by Rabbi Michael Lerner and Tikkun magazine, in Washington, June 11-14 (see: www.spiritualprogressives.org). I'll join Joan Chittister, Bill McKibben, Riane Eisler, Brian McLaren, Keith Ellison, John Nichols, Medea Benjamin, Marianne Williamson, Robert Thurman, Dennis Kucinich, and many others, to reenergize our efforts for a world without war, poverty, starvation, racism, sexism, nuclear weapons or catastrophic climate change. Together we'll try to catch the electricity of creative nonviolence to disarm our hearts and our world, reclaim our humanity, and create justice for the poor.

To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. John will speak on "Gandhi, King and Day," at Loyola in Chicago, June 25-26 in Chicago (see: www.asrenewal.org), and teach a weeklong course, "Gandhi, King, Day and Merton," Aug. 2-6, at Ghost Ranch Center, Abiquiu, NM, see www.ghostranch.org. John's latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), along with other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. For further information, or to schedule a lecture, go to www.johndear.org.

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