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Nonviolent theory meets nonviolent practice

by Mary Ann McGivern

NCR Today

At the 35th anniversary of the St. Louis Catholic Worker in September, one of our former workers, Patrick Coy, led a roundtable on nonviolent resistance. Pat is a conflict resolution professor at Kent State now, and he gave us thoughts to chew on.

"Us" was about 40 current and former workers plus extended community and volunteers. We met outside in a big circle in beautiful weather.

First, Pat reminded us that for leaders like Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and Dorothy Day, nonviolence was a commitment to a life direction, not a shirt you can take off and put on again. But Gene Sharp, a Korean War conscientious objector who served time in prison and published a three-volume analysis of nonviolent resistance, concluded it's a shirt to be worn some days and hung in the closet on other days.

This caused a stir among us. Pat divided us into groups to define nonviolence. That was hard work. But it was so engaging. I could feel my mental muscles expanding and contracting. My group was four women, all of us old friends, catching up, telling each other about anger and dismay over family issues, feeling more tired and reluctant to stand on picket lines, understanding more now about how our efforts to do good sometimes cause harm. We didn't exactly gain a definition.

When we came back together, Pat told us that right now, scholarship is expanding to include a new form of nonviolence: civil resistance.

He gave us thumbnail reviews of a list of new books that are looking at resistance to state violence. That list is below for your perusal.

But I have one more small reflection to include. Slate, the online magazine, ran predictions of Nobel Prize

winners.

Will Dobson, Slate's politics and foreign affairs editor, wrote:

So, if the committee wants to be guided to where it could actually do some good, it should consider someone whose ideas or actions are actually bringing change. Near the top of that list should be Gene Sharp, the once obscure Harvard researcher whose lifelong study of dictatorship and strategic nonviolence has infected thousands across the globe. I can personally attest to the reach of Sharp's research. In one authoritarian capital after another, I saw dog-eared copies of Sharp's work on the bookshelves of dissidents and human rights defenders. Modern authoritarians from Burma, Venezuela, Russia, Iran, and elsewhere denounce his work -- because they fear it. His thin volume, *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, is considered required reading for those who are trying to upend tyranny, and it is getting read. The Nobel committee champions the notion of expanding peace. Who better than the man whose ideas have helped inspire peaceful democratic change in so many countries? That is, of course, if they want to hand out one of the good ones this year.

And finally, here's Pat Coy's list of current scholarly thought on nonviolent resistance.

1. *People Power: Unarmed Resistance and Global Solidarity*, Howard Clark, editor, Pluto Press 2009.
2. *Civil Resistance and Power Politics: The Experience of Non-violent Action from Gandhi to the Present*, Adam Roberts and Timothy Garton Ash, editors, Oxford University Press, 2009.
3. *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, Columbia University Press, 2011.
4. *Nonviolent Revolutions: Civil Resistance in the Late 20th Century*, Sharon Erickson Nepstad, Oxford University Press, 2011.
5. *Nonviolent Conflict and Civil Resistance*, Volume 34 of *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, Sharon Erickson Nepstad and Lester R. Kurtz, editors, 2012.
6. *Recovering Nonviolent History: Civil Resistance in Liberation Struggles*, Maciej J. Bartkowski, editor, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012 (forthcoming).
7. *The Paradox of Repression*, Lester R. Kurtz and Lee A. Smithey, editors, Lynne Rienner Publishers, forthcoming in 2013.
8. *Nonviolent Civil Resistance: Theories, Strategies, and Dynamics*, Sharon Erickson Nepstad, Oxford University Press, forthcoming in 2014.
9. *Doing Time for Peace: Resistance, Family and Community*, Rosalie Riegle, Vanderbilt University Press, 2012.

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