

## Why the Moral Argument for Non-Violence Matters by Kazu Haga

“Bernard? Oh yeah, he’s great. He was always the principles guy.”

That was what an old Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC, organizer told me when I mentioned that I had been trained by Bernard Lafayette, co-author of the Kingian Nonviolence curriculum and a legend of the civil rights era.

“I was always a strategies guy,” this elder went on to tell me. “I believed in nonviolence as an effective strategy, but Bernard was always talking about nonviolence as a principle.”

I let out a little laugh. In that moment, I was proud to have been trained by “the principles guy.”

When people talk about nonviolence in the context of social change, they’re typically talking about nonviolent organizing, nonviolent direct action, nonviolent civil resistance; arenas where the word “nonviolence” is only an adjective describing the absence of physical violence within a set of tactics and strategies. The philosophy of nonviolence and the moral question of violence are often considered too messy or complicated, even by those who do believe it to be a principle.

The civil rights movement was led largely by leaders who believed in nonviolence as a moral imperative. It was not only the most effective thing, but also the right thing. While Martin Luther King Jr. and his closest allies held to this belief, some other movement leaders — as well as the vast majority of people who mobilized for the movement — only understood nonviolence as a strategy.

Most of the movements I have participated in, even those that had a strict policy of nonviolence, tend to shy away from the moral question — possibly for fear of turning away potential participants.

And I get that. Making the argument that nonviolence should be seen as a way of life is a much harder sell than convincing people that it is the most effective strategy to accomplish a goal. Convincing people to remain nonviolent during a demonstration is a lot easier than convincing people to look at how to practice nonviolence in all areas of our life.

We find ourselves in an urgent moment in history. From climate change to the Trump agenda, we do not have the luxury to wait until tomorrow. We need a movement today. So maybe trying to make the moral argument is not the most strategic thing.

But King taught us that it is never the wrong time to do the right thing. And so, I believe the time is right to make the argument that violence itself is our biggest enemy.

### Honoring violence

Making the moral argument for nonviolence does not mean placing a moral judgment on those who use or advocate for violence, especially as a means for self-defense.

As an advocate for nonviolence, I have learned a great deal from the likes of the Black Panther Party, the Zapatistas, the Deacons for Defense and the anarchists in the Spanish Civil War, among others. Their struggles and sacrifices should never be discounted, nor should we ignore the many lessons from their movements.

We should also never judge those who have used violence for self-defense in interpersonal relationships — abusive relationships, robberies, assaults, etc. If people felt like that was their only means of protecting themselves, I only pray that they were okay.

Finally, we need to acknowledge the extreme levels of violence that many people are born into because of systemic injustice. We put people into generations of poverty and invest in a culture of violence, then judge them for reacting with violence? As inarticulate as it may be, even riots are typically a cry for peace from a people who have never had it.

So violence can be an effective tool to protect yourself and others against a threat, and it can be used to express outrage about injustice. There is great value in both.

Yet violence is also limited in one very important way, and that is that violence can never create relationships.

Violence can never get you closer to reconciliation, closer to King's "beloved community," the reconciled world with justice for all people. And that is perhaps the most significant difference between a principled nonviolent approach and an approach using violence or nonviolence that is strictly strategic. The goals are different.

### Resolution vs. reconciliation

In movements that are violent or simply use nonviolent tactics, the goal is victory, where victory is defined as "your" people beating "those" people to win your demands. The victory is over your opponents. But in a principled approach, there is no victory until you've won your opponents over.

In a principled nonviolent approach, the goal is always reconciliation and steps toward beloved community. The goal is always to build and strengthen relationships and to bring people and communities together, not separate them. If we are not able to find ways to bring communities together, we will always have separation, violence and injustice.

Even if you are able to achieve short-term gains, if relationships between people were harmed in the conflict and you are further away from each other as a result, then it is not a victory at all. If only your tactics are nonviolent and not your worldview, whatever issue you're working on may get resolved, but the relationships don't get repaired.

It was a team of incarcerated Kingian Nonviolence trainers in Soledad Prison that taught me this during a conversation we were having about the difference between conflict

resolution and conflict reconciliation.

Conflict resolution is about fixing issues. Conflict reconciliation is about repairing relationships. Resolving an issue is about the mind. It's about policies, structures, laws — the causes of violence. Reconciling a relationship is about the heart. It's about the people, the stories, the history — the human impact of violence.

The levels of violence today are so heightened that there will be times when movements will need to use assertive and militant nonviolent tactics to stop the immediate harm and demand change.

As Marshall Rosenberg, the founder of nonviolent communication, says, we need to, “use the minimum amount of force necessary to stop the immediate harm.” And we never think about what the “minimum amount” looks like.

That is the realm of nonviolent strategies and tactics like noncooperation and civil disobedience. Tactics that could stop the construction of a pipeline, pass voter protection laws or even lead to a political revolution.

But if we stop there, the relationships between the communities are still divided, and there could still be fear, mistrust and resentment. If the human relationships are not healed, the conflict will resurface again on some other issue. Any peace gained through political revolution but not a revolution of relationships is short-lived.

Reconciliation is what a principled nonviolent approach demands.

The need for healing

The very nature of violence is unjust. As Rev. James Lawson, one of the lead trainers for the civil rights movement, has said, “Violence has a very simple dynamic. I make you suffer more than I suffer. I make you suffer until you cry uncle.” It is the very idea that we can use force, fear and intimidation to get what we want that is our enemy.

Because violence hurts. Period.

We all know that. We've all experienced it — physical, emotional and spiritual. It hurts to get punched, but it hurts more to feel abandoned, alone, ashamed, hopeless, desperate, unworthy, afraid, used. And too often, we are made to feel those things by people in our own families, in our own movements, in our own communities.

Being committed to a principled approach to nonviolence requires us to look at the pain that we carry ourselves, and the pain that we inflict on each other within our communities. It is easy to point the finger and say that the violence is “over there.”

I have talked to too many people who shared that the traumas they carry were only re-triggered and made worse by the violence they witnessed within movements. When we say that we are committed to nonviolence, we are not only saying that we want to stop the violence “over there” that “those people” are committing. We also try to work on the ways we ourselves perpetuate harm as a result of our own unhealed traumas. We are working to heal our own selves as much as anyone we perceive as our enemies. We are working to change how we relate to each other in our own communities as much as we are working to change any policy.

Whether you live in an impoverished community or work in law enforcement where your job is to dehumanize people all day, we are not a healthy society. It hurts to witness violence, it hurts to experience violence, and it hurts to inflict violence. Each causes trauma.

Yes, we need to fight. But only so that we can create spaces to heal and to build.

### Beloved community

“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny,” King wrote in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail. “Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

This universal truth comes out in many cultures and traditions throughout the world. The aboriginal peoples in Australia teach us, “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

That is the vision of beloved community. A world where we acknowledge our interdependence — our “inter-being,” as Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh says.

My liberation is bound up in yours. That is a beautiful concept, and a popular quote in many progressive circles. But to what extent do we really believe it? Is our liberation bound up with the liberation of some and not others? How about people who voted for Donald Trump or people who have hurt us personally? Who draws that line? Do some people fall out of the “network of mutuality” that King talked about?

What does it look like to work together to “liberate” those who commit harm? What does it mean to acknowledge that being oppressed hurts, but being an oppressor also destroys your soul? The privileges of being an oppressor doesn’t take away the violence that gets internalized when you hurt someone.

Beloved community is not about loving the people who are easy to love. It is about cultivating “agape” — a Greek word for unconditional love for all of humanity, including those who are difficult to love.

King said that the civil rights movement was a movement for the bodies of black folks and the souls of white folks. He acknowledged that being a white supremacist destroys your soul. To have so much judgment and hatred in your heart is an act of violence you do to yourself, and part of the goal of the movement was to help them. To bring them back into the network of mutuality and to remind them that they are part of beloved community.

Because our liberation depends on it.

### Faith in people

The core of the theory of nonviolence for me has become an unwavering faith in the nature of humanity. That at our core, we are a species that wants to live in peace and wants to be in service and relationship; that we have the resiliency to heal no matter how hurt we are, and we have the ability to transform no matter how much harm we’ve caused.

We get asked all the time in our workshops, “Well, isn’t violence just part of human

nature?" And I used to struggle responding to it, because it was hard to argue. It has always been part of our history.

Then several years ago, I met Paul Chappell, a graduate of West Point turned peace activist. During his presentation at a conference, he said that every study that has ever been conducted shows that violence is traumatic. It can cause PTSD, depression, anxiety and permanent damage to our brain. And yet not a single person has ever been traumatized by an act of love.

He then asked, "If violence is part of our nature, then why does it short-circuit our brain?" Shouldn't we be able to engage in it and not have it cause permanent damage?

That to him was evidence that violence isn't in our nature, that at the core of human nature are the things that fulfill us: love, joy, community, peace.

And that is what we need today: a determined and dogged belief in the goodness of people. We need the fierce tactics of nonviolence to stop the immediate harm, and the principles of nonviolence to transform the pain. Without one or the other, we are always going to be spinning our wheels, fighting the next injustice or addressing the next hurt.

I've been very privileged in my life. I've gotten to see so many people transformed from the most violent circumstances, that it might be easier for me to have faith in people. It is the greatest honor being able to work with incarcerated communities. Everyday, I get to learn from people who have survived so much violence and in many cases have inflicted so much harm, yet have transformed to become some of the greatest peacemakers I've ever met. It gives me faith in the resiliency of people and in the core of human nature.

And if I can have faith in their core and their ability to transform, why not the prison guards? Why not the politician who passed the laws that filled the prison? Or the corporate lobbyist who pushed for that legislation? Or the conservative voter who put those lawmakers into office?

It may take seven generations, but if we are not working for a world that works for all of us, then what exactly are we working for? If we are working to change laws and policies, but the hearts and minds of the people are still corrupt and we still see each other as exactly that — "others" — will we ever know peace?

We are in need of a truly nonviolent revolution, not just of systems and policies, but also of worldviews and relationships. We need to understand that people are never the enemy, that violence and injustice itself is what we need to defeat, and that the goal of every conflict must be reconciliation.

Each conflict we face has to be seen as an opportunity to strengthen understanding between members of a human family that have grown so far apart that we have forgotten our dependence on each other.

That is why we need a principled nonviolent approach to society's ills. Because it is not just laws and systems that have poisoned us. It is a worldview that has made us forget that our liberation is bound up in the liberation of all people.

And only a holistic nonviolent approach — one that involves both strategies and principles — can muster the force to stop injustice in its tracks while bringing communities towards reconciliation.