

## Kazu Haga: The Creation of Our Beloved Community by Bela Shah

The following piece is based on an August 2nd, 2014 Awakin Call interview with Kazu Haga. You can listen to the full recording of the interview [here](#).

Kazu Haga's dream is that one day, children in every school in the United States will not only learn traditional subjects like math and history but also how to practice nonviolence. As they grow up in our society and confront conflicts that will inevitably arise, they will know how to relate to each other as human beings instead of enemies.

Kazu is the founder of the East Point Peace Academy, an organization that is dedicated to bringing about a culture of peace. Just close your eyes for 20 seconds and imagine what a culture of peace would look like in our shared world. Perhaps more importantly, how do we get there as a collective species?

After listening to Saturday's Global Awakin Call, I was struck by Kazu's incredible commitment to nonviolence, peace, and justice. With great humility, he shared that achieving nonviolence in our world is not something that will happen in his generation or even the generation after that. But if we each do our part and sow the seeds, peace and real justice are possible to manifest.

### Sowing the Seeds

Before he became the founder of the East Point Peace Academy, Kazu dropped out of high school at the age of fifteen. By the age of seventeen, he decided on a whim to join a Buddhist peace pilgrimage and walked for a year and a half from his hometown in Massachusetts all the way to New Orleans. His intention was only to check it out and walk for three days until he reached Boston but by day three, he knew he was where he needed to be. One intention naturally unfolded into another and by the end of the pilgrimage, a nun from the Buddhist Order took Kazu under her wing and invited him to spend a year overseas in Nepal, India, and Sri Lanka studying in their temples. Kazu's transformation had begun.

However, it wasn't until 2008 and the occurrence of two life changing events that Kazu's path started to point in the direction of nonviolence. That fall he took his first workshop in Kingian nonviolence, a philosophy of nonviolent conflict reconciliation in the tradition of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the organizing strategies of the Civil Rights Movement. Through this workshop, Kazu began to reflect on a different way of viewing and practicing nonviolence. Under the Kingian philosophy, nonviolence is not only a refusal to shoot your opponent, but also a refusal to hate your opponent. Holding hate in your heart against even the "worst" opponent is an act of internal, emotional and spiritual violence you commit to yourself.

"I have chosen to stick with love. Hate is too heavy a burden to bear." - Dr. King

Three months later in Oakland, CA, a twenty-two year old man named Oscar Grant was shot in the back by the transit police. Kazu ended up on the steering committee of the coalition that organized in the weeks and months following this tragic event. The more involved he became, the more he realized that the movement was so grounded in anger, that he and other organizers had started to internalize that anger, argue with each other, and destroy the movement from the inside out.

“Through my experience in that movement I found that often times in our movements that are trying to create peace and justice, we can perpetuate systems that are creating violence and oppression. Nonviolence calls on us to not give up faith in the humanity of any human being, no matter how much harm they have committed.”

### The Real Meaning of Peace and Justice

Kazu shared a powerful story that changed his own perspective on how he viewed peace. During the Civil Rights Movement, there was a young woman named Autherine Lucy, and she was the first black student to enroll at the University of Alabama. Imagine the environment at that time and what it must have been like for the first black student to walk around on campus. People were throwing stones, breaking windows, and burning crosses. The University responded to the hatred and violence by kicking her out of the school. They expelled her on the grounds that her presence was causing a threat to the security of the school and that they couldn't guarantee her safety or the safety of the rest of the campus. After the rioting died down since she was no longer there, a local newspaper ran an article with a headline that read, “Autherine Lucy now expelled. There is now peace on the campus of Tescalusa.” In response to that incident, Dr. King gave a sermon called “When Peace Becomes Obnoxious”. In that sermon Dr. King talked about how that was a false peace, which is the absence of violence created through a layer of injustice. Since that so-called peace came at the expense of justice for Autherine Lucy, it was not a real peace, but instead, it was what he called negative peace. Dr. King described how real peace is not the absence of a negative force like tension or violence or fear but it's really the presence of a positive force like justice, love, compassion, and understanding.

“It's this understanding that the absence of peace is simply the absence of violence that allows us to justify going to war to create peace. In Oakland, California I always say that if we lock of every single young person, we will have a lot more peace. But this is different than trying to create a culture of peace.”

Kazu explained that when we talk about creating a culture of peace, we really have to look at what it means to have justice for all the communities and parties that are involved. Through the lens of Kingian nonviolence conflict is viewed as completely neutral but it's how one responds to that conflict that gives it a good or bad outcome. Violence is what happens when one mismanages a conflict, but there is a way to respond to conflict situations using nonviolence that results in the strengthening of relationships.

### The Movement of Peace Warriors

Through a gift economy model, Kazu chooses to work directly within the underbelly of the system. He and his team conduct workshops for incarcerated men and women that focus on conflict reconciliation. As you might imagine, the initial response by inmates is not always positive. Kazu shared one story of a two-day workshop that they conducted in a women's jail in San Francisco.

The workshop was being held in a very small space within the jail and some of the women

didn't know until ten minutes before it began that they were required to attend. One woman that reluctantly attended later told Kazu that when she first walked into the room, she saw another woman from a rival gang. The two women had been involved in a conflict that was escalating over the last several days prior to the workshop. The moment the woman walked in and saw the rival gang member, she didn't know if she could make it without getting into a fight. However, the conversations about conflict reconciliation that Kazu and his team facilitated during the first day were so inspiring for her that when everyone left that tiny room on day one, she reached out to the rival gang member in an effort of reconciliation. On day two of the workshop during the closing circle, she stood up and shared that story with everyone and the two women hugged each other at the end.

"One of the reasons I love working within incarcerated communities is that no one understands better the impact that violence has had on our community than the men and women in our prison system. We think that since they're prisoners they don't care but that has not been my experience. As human beings, I believe that nobody wants violence. We all have an inherent desire for peace. I think when you go into these communities and offer an alternative way to handle conflict, it's something they have never even thought about and they grab onto it quicker than most people in the community do. To change the cultural violence that exists in low income urban communities, I think it's the people that have been impacted by it that have to be the leaders in creating that change. I'm going to keep going into these communities because I think those are the best places to recruit peace warriors."

In addition to the workshops, the East Point Peace Academy also teaches that nonviolence is about learning to let go of the internal violence that we carry within our own hearts. Practices such as meditation, writing poetry, and singing songs together, those are part of the strategies that are encouraged to learn nonviolence. The power of these alternative strategies is that when we're in conflict situations and we're trying to create peace externally, we are able to step into it from a place where we're creating peace internally as well.

### The 250 Year Plan

But how can someone really change through a short, two-day workshop? When you study the Civil Rights Movement or India's independence movement, for instance, you learn that the leaders of the Nashville Lunch Counter Sit-Ins trained for a full year before engaging in direct action, and that Gandhi and his 78 followers went through a 15-year process of training and self purification before embarking on the Salt March.

Kazu and others started the East Point Peace Academy because they realized that changing cultures of violence is not an easy task and it takes significant training.

"Just as the military trains many of its leaders at West Point, the idea of East Point is that we're investing heavily in training leaders of the peace movement."

The two-day workshops are really just an introduction to a philosophy and the real training begins at the end of the workshop. The East Point Peace Academy is driven by the vision of a 250-year plan as illustrated through the story of the "Living Bridge". In this story, an elder man in Meghalaya, India teaches his young niece how to tend to a living bridge that is slowly and patiently made through the roots of a tree. He explains to his niece, "The bridge will grow for 500 years. Your children will use it. And your children's children will use it."

Similarly, Kazu describes the work of the East Point Academy as sowing the seeds of a

living movement, one that we will eventually pass on to the next generation so that they can take it one step further.

“We operate on faith that as we keep tending to our portion of the living bridge, at some point future generations will be able to reach the other bank of the river: our Beloved Community. Poverty, racism, patriarchy, religious conflicts and other forms of violence have been around for thousands of years. Even if we are successful in building a powerful movement that fundamentally changes our institutions and policies tomorrow, violence and oppression will not end. Those are multi-generational struggles. We need to build strategies that span generations, not election cycles.”

### Channeling Our Anger

Can this approach really work? As you read this, you might be thinking about the current situation with Israel and Palestine, or violence against women and children that is committed in multiple, horrific forms around the world, or a number of other acts of violence in your own community. How does one actually channel their anger in order to have the capacity to respond to conflict in a productive way? When we're clearer about who is the oppressor and who is the oppressed, how does one help both and what side do we take in way that acknowledges the suffering that is created?

Anger is such a tricky thing. Kazu explains that we must honor our righteous indignation and that we must be angry about unjust situations but we need to learn how to channel that anger so that it doesn't burn us out. We need to be intentional about being angry at the injustice and not the individuals that are caught up in the injustice.

One of the principles of nonviolence is to attack forces of evil and not persons committing the evil. Kingian nonviolence acknowledges the forces behind any one individual; it acknowledges how much humanity one has to lose within his or her self in order to harm another person. The more people that someone is able to harm, this is only possible because that person has lost touch with his or her own sense of humanity. We must have compassion for that. However, Kazu explains that attacking forces of evil and not persons doing evil is not the same as not holding individuals accountable.

“Part of justice is holding people accountable for the harm they have committed but I think the question becomes what does it mean to really hold someone accountable. Does incarceration and punishment and treating someone like an animal, does that really hold that person accountable? I would argue that it's actually the opposite of accountability. I don't think accountability is really something that you can force on somebody so I think it's important that we're attacking systems and behaviors and cultures and we're not attacking individual people. It's critical to find way to hold people accountable in a way that still embraces them in our community.”

Kazu shared a concrete example of oppressors that were transformed and the key ingredients that allowed that to happen. The restorative justice, which mostly comes from the Maori people of New Zealand. Unlike the criminal justice system in which both the perpetrators and the victims are mainly bystanders without a voice, in a restorative justice system, the perpetrator and the victim are the key voices. In the latter, all of the people that have been impacted are brought into a room together so that they can determine how to best move forward. Part of what that allows for is both honoring the pain of the perpetrator and the victim and for the perpetrator to hear directly from the people that they have impacted. Kazu explained that you can only hold yourself accountable if you can own the actions that you took and the impact that your actions had in the community. In a criminal system, the perpetrators are in a position where they are

usually fighting for their freedom and they don't want to go to prison so it's really hard for them to own their actions.

But when does acceptance become fertile ground for reconciliation and understanding to create a greater peace and when does it sometimes lead to passivity or indifference and allow a system of injustice to remain unchanged?

Dr. King was critical of a lot of pacifist movements. He believed that many pacifists falsely understand passivism as non-resistance to evil whereas true passivism is about nonviolent resistance to evil. Those are very different things.

"When it comes to situations of injustice and violence and oppression, to be passive and not resist doesn't help change anything. I think nonviolence is about learning to resist but learning to resist through love. We have to understand the power of love to transform ourselves and others."

### The Power of Personal Practices

Personal practices are essential for channeling and transforming anger. Before the Awakin call, Kazu had just returned from ten days of a Vipassana meditation course. In fact, Dr. King would take "personal prayer retreats" and shut himself in a hotel room or pastor's study to pray, meditate and plan his next sermon or civil rights activities. The East Point Peace Academy acknowledges the connection between nonviolence and mindfulness and is working to design a workshop in collaboration with one of its core partners, the East Bay Meditation Center.

"Meditation helps me to release the internal pressures that we build up in our lives but it also helps me to become disciplined and stay committed to my focus and my path despite all of the distractions in my life."

In the prisons, the East Point Academy talks with the prisoners about this and explains that whether they're in the prisons or in their communities, there will be constant distractions around them. But if their path is to create peace or to have a healthy family life, then they will need to have helpful practices and one of them can be meditation or it could be singing or writing. Different things work for different people.

### Internationalizing and Institutionalizing Nonviolence

One of the last things that Martin Luther King said is that he wanted to internationalize and institutionalize nonviolence. What actions can we take in our lives that would make that dream a reality?

Kazu explained that the idea of institutionalizing and internationalizing nonviolence, which came out of a conversation that Dr. King had just five hours before he was shot, is that the practice of nonviolence isn't just about how we protest but its how we relate to each other in our own lives and in our own communities and how we can take these principles and embed them as part of the day to day practice in the institutions around the country and around the world.

"Part of my dream, part of our dream, is to embed the practices of nonviolence and conflict reconciliation into the core curriculum in every school across America so that as we're teaching children math and science and the arts, we're also teaching them how to relate to each other as human beings. If we can all work to embed these practices into our day to day lives so that it's a part of our culture, that's how we can internationalize and institutionalize nonviolence."

Indeed, as Kazu shared, creating a culture of nonviolence is the work of many generations. In our history, there have been many points of light and hope. If each of us can keep practicing nonviolence in our small ways, and sometimes, in large ways, then real peace and justice is possible in our world.