

Holding Fast to Truth and Nonviolence

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I recently returned from a place saturated by the U.S. military, and by militarism. It is a place where camo fatigues are run of the mill, where black-clad security forces with firearms hang out at the mall, where coiled barbed wire runs for acres around fallow agricultural land, where a lack of economic opportunities means that you cannot find a family without a son or sister or cousin or in-law fighting in this war our nation is waging, and where people are afraid to speak about things like indigenous rights and self-determination, because their family's livelihood depends on the Air Force or Navy. This place is the U.S. Territory of Guam. It is our most militarized colony.

Some visitors to Guam might return and have very different impressions. Guam is not, on the surface, a violent place. People live their lives, vote in municipal elections, barbecue on the weekends. But my job there, as a documentary filmmaker, is to deeply listen. Two years ago, when I was there, I heard that nuclear submarines were soon to arrive at Apra Harbor, and that people accepted this as their only economic hope in the face of depression. One year ago, the B-52s arrived at Andersen Air Force Base. Now they take off and land every day, though no one can quite tell me what they are doing. The base is cloaked in secrecy. This year, one of the film's main characters, and a close friend of ours, decided he could not participate - because he could not speak openly about his political hopes and indigenous pride without jeopardizing his job on base, where he refuels American fighter planes. His words: "I'm so scared, Amy." When you start to listen, violence is everywhere on Guam - in everyone's lives, in the sky over their heads, in the water that they drink, in the land under their feet, in the futures that they can perceive. For the force, the threat, and the fear of militarism in a place like Guam is an unavoidable truth, a fact of life.

This makes Guam a difficult place to be, for someone like me, someone who has been known to call herself a pacifist. As a filmmaker, I listen to people's stories, I reserve judgment, I try to fit the pieces of people's lives together in a way that makes some larger sense. I don't do most of the talking. But always, always, in the back of my mind, and in the depths of my soul, I was thinking - I am a pacifist. What am I doing here? What small gift of peace can I offer to this place, a place that has been haunted

by war from the moment Ferdinand Magellan set foot on its shores, 500 years ago? There must be a reason. But in mulling over and writing and rewriting this sermon, I realized it is Guam that has given a gift to me – my experiences there were an unplanned, difficult, but fitting end to a year in which I delved as deeply as I could into theories of nonviolence, in the Peace and Nonviolence Study Circle. My time on Guam - confronting the fear and power that stand behind our nation’s massive military, confronting the truth that America *is* an empire, and experiencing the warmth, graciousness, and strength of the Chamorro people, who live with the physical and emotional violence of militarism and political injustice every single day - forced me back, again and again, to one truth about America, and two truths about myself:

The truth about America is something I feel to be a universal truth, and it was expressed, of course, by Gandhi: he believed that democracy is not possible *except* in a nonviolent society.

The truths about myself:

1) I come from a place – a social, economic, ethnic, and emotional place – where it has been easy to look away from the hard truths about militarism and violence in our society; and

2) I have a fierce, stubborn conviction that militarism and violence cannot, must not reign over the future of our nation and our globe, and that there *just have to be* people in the world who will stand up for another way of being.

Arun Gandhi, 5th grandson of Mahatma Gandhi (whom I had the privilege of hearing at Stanford last night), has said that his mother gave him wonderful advice when he was young and grappling with the legacy that his grandfather had left to him. “She said, ‘It’s up to you. If you consider this a burden, you will have to carry it all your life. If you consider this to be a light, then it will shine and make it easier for you to pursue your goals.’” I think of this when I am grappling with the fact that I am drawn, magnetically, sometimes seemingly against my will, towards my own conviction.

You may be surprised to know that the word “pacifism” does not come easily to me. Whenever I say the words, “I am a pacifist,” I feel a struggle inside myself, an internal argument that will perhaps never be won. I immediately feel overwhelmed and humbled by the enormity of the statement, by all

that it entails and requires. I immediately anticipate all the counter-arguments and rebuttals, the ‘realism’ that so often doubles for commonsense in our society.

In the Peace and Nonviolence Study Circle, we continuously argued with this word – pacifism. We tugged at it, tried it on, pulled it apart, tossed it around between us. Across the board we seemed to agree that the term “pacifism” holds a connotation of – well – passivity, weakness, shame and even cowardice. But as we read more and more of the great nonviolent thinkers of the past century (Tolstoy, Thoreau, Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Thomas Merton, Daniel Berrigan, Joan Baez), we made a discovery. What we thought was pacifism – wasn’t. We realized that those individuals who have found it possible to maintain their hold on peace in this world, have done so from a place not of passivity, but of action and struggle; not of weakness, but of incredible strength; not of fear, but of love. We learned to reclaim “realism” as a way to describe *their* fierce devotion to truth. We also learned that there are other words besides pacifism for what they accomplished and believed, other frames of reference in which to ground our own yearnings for a just and peaceful world. One of these words is *satyagraha*, a term invented by Gandhi to describe a path through the world grounded in truth and nonviolence. There is no word in English to describe Gandhi’s philosophy. The term can only loosely be translated as *love-force*, *truth-force*, or *holding fast to truth*.

It is *satyagraha* - an alternative, extremely powerful, way of thinking about pacifism - that has become a centering framework for me, a call to ground my own life in truth and nonviolence. At the same time, *satyagraha* has led me to deeply examine my own relationship to, and understanding of, Unitarian Universalism.

My three years working on a documentary film about Guam have paralleled almost exactly my time as a Unitarian Universalist. During this time I have been struggling with the emotions aroused by the ageless debates over violence and nonviolence, war and peace – emotions that in these troubling times I cannot seem to keep in check. And I have considered Unitarian Universalism my safe harbor, the cradle of my quest to come to some understanding of the role and promise of nonviolence in our world.

But what exactly does Unitarian Universalism say about nonviolence? What guidance do the seven principles - that UUs have covenanted to affirm and promote - offer to someone who is wrestling with

this issue? Since there is no scriptural imperative in UUism, and since the seven principles do not explicitly call for an adherence to pacifism or nonviolence, it makes sense that my own yearnings and sentiments will not necessarily be shared by someone sitting next to me in worship. This openness, this multiplicity, is what drew me to Unitarian Universalism in the first place. But now I am faced with the question – how does that make me feel? From where can I draw the strength to claim nonviolence as my own path in this often inhospitable world?

First, in its commitment to a diversity of beliefs and opinions, and to the democratic process, we should remember that UUs have integrated nonviolent communication into the structure and meaning of the religion itself. This means, fundamentally, that Unitarian Universalism provided a safe physical and emotional space in which several of us could explore our questions about war, peace, violence, and pacifism. This is not to be underestimated. It also means that, in the spirit of what Gandhi termed “the constructive program,” UUs are engaged in building up compassionate, respectful communities that can stand as an alternative to the structures that seem to dominate our lives. This generation of counterstructures is an integral aspect of *satyagraha*, that sometimes gets lost in the focus on noncooperation and civil disobedience. As Jonathan Schell explains in his book “The Unconquerable World,” “Whereas noncooperation drained power away from the oppressors, the constructive program generated it in the hands of the resisters.”

UUs also affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every human being, and this principle surely leads some to the conclusion that every human being possesses a worthy life that cannot be violated, for any reason, in any way. But this conclusion is not inherent in the statement itself. Yes, Gandhi believed that we are all God, and that we all hold a portion of the truth and share in the divine. Thus, to destroy any one of us is to destroy a portion of the truth, a sliver of the divine, and also of ourselves. But Gandhi was not a UU, and many UUs are secular humanists, or spiritualists who are uncomfortable with the language of divinity, and would not take the 1st principle so far.

UUs affirm and promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. From a Buddhist perspective, compassion entails nonviolence, but not all UUs are Buddhists. And the enactment of justice, some may argue, can entail coercion. Law can be interpreted as the reasoned integration of natural violence into the fabric of society.

UUs also affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of which we are all a part. Such a conviction seems to require an understanding that what we do to others, we also do to ourselves. But sometimes it feels that that web has been irreparably torn asunder by others, by forces so dark they must be called evil, by the violence and alienation of the society of which we are a part. At times like this, many may argue, things can only be put right, peace may only be able to be achieved, through violent means.

This brings us to the heart of the UU dilemma with nonviolence, I believe, which is embedded in the 6th principle: the *goal* of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. This is the only explicit mention of *peace* anywhere in the seven principles, and note – it is a goal, not a means. This, I think, brings the seven UU principles into conflict with *satyagraha*, and it is, quite honestly, the place where I am stuck.

“War is peace.” This is the infamous phrase from Orwell’s *1984* - the inversion of language, the draining of words of their authentic meaning, that comes to represent the essence of totalitarianism itself. But I posit to you that this inversion, this perversion, would not be possible *if the goal did not precede the means*. Can you think of a single instance in which war has *not* been justified by a future goal of peace, liberty, and/or justice for all, or at least a privileged few? When violence is advocated it is always judged on the basis of its goals, and its ability to realize them. The ultimate value of mass coercion is always dependent on the social purpose for which it is enlisted. Violence for some may be an ideology, but for others it is rationalized as a technique, albeit a dangerous one. And often, our acceptance of violence in pursuit of a social goal is enabled by the fact that we *turn our faces away* from the truth of the means. In our own society, a perfect example of this turning away is the remote incarceration and dehumanized extermination of prisoners.

Satyagraha, on the other hand, looks truth stubbornly in the face, and refuses to let it go. And *satyagraha* maintains that any goal – however peaceful, noble, or good in origin or intent – will not only be shaped by the means we choose to achieve it, but will be *of the same substance* as the means itself. Violence breeds violence; peace births peace. *Satyagraha* takes this seriously.

As UUs, I feel we must not only pursue a worthy goal – world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. We must also look at the *truth of the means* in our society. We must look militarism and violence – in all its forms - in the face. And then we must change the means - reclaim not only our history, as Karen said, but also our present and our future. We must be the change we wish to see. For otherwise the violence will, undeniably, change us.

Our nation currently has over 700 foreign military bases around the globe, and this number does not include the bases on Guam. Our military trains, and sells arms to, the militaries of 133, or 70%, of the world's nations. Many of these nations – like Indonesia, Uzbekistan, and Egypt – are on our own State Department's list of human rights abusers. U.S. weapons sales in the 1997-2001 period totaled \$44.82 billion. The Pentagon's budget for 2003 was roughly twenty times that of the State Department – think about that; our society values institutionalized violence as a tool of foreign policy twenty times more highly than diplomacy. The military is in our schools, our media, our minds. As Michael Nagler, founder of the Peace and Conflict Studies Program at UC Berkeley, said yesterday, “War is the continuation of American culture by other means.” And I repeat to you what I said at the beginning: Gandhi believed that democracy was not possible *except* in a nonviolent society.

I am not suggesting that we all immediately become military abolitionists, although some of us may find that to be our calling, our song in the world. As Heather said, Gandhi believed that cowardice was a worse sin than violence itself, and I believe that a world without suffering and danger – a utopian world - would be a world in which we never learned or grew. But I am asking that we look beyond this awful present war, and that we witness the deeper culture of violence in which we are immersed, which has been building for a very long time. And then, that we act.

Arun Gandhi closed with a story last night that I would like to borrow, and I hope he doesn't mind! He told the story of a man in India who very early every morning, before the sun rose, took a walk on the beach. One morning, he came across another man, who was methodically walking along the tideline, picking up one starfish after another and throwing them as far as he could into the sea. The first man approached this starfish thrower, and asked, “What are you doing?!” The second man replied, “Well, the tide came up and left all these starfish stranded, and I am throwing them back into the sea before the sun comes up and dries them out and kills them.” The first man looked at him, and then looked

down the immense stretch of beach, and saw that there were starfish all the way to the horizon. “But this is crazy!” he said. “There are thousands of starfish here. You will never save them all. What difference does it make?” The second man paused, and then looked at the starfish in his hand, and replied: “Well, it makes a hell of a difference to this guy here.”

To be able to see the line of stranded starfish does not mean that we cannot also see the starfish in front of our face. To see the truth of the means in our society – the fact that war and violence are perceived and used as acceptable tools to achieve both individual and social goals – does not mean that we cannot also look around us, and start where we are. UUs possess integrity, compassion, strength, and the experience of building alternative communities. I dream of UUs using these skills and emotions to embrace *satyagraha* – a nonviolent, truly democratic, way of life.

Sources included:

- Louis Fischer, ed., *The Essential Gandhi: An Anthology of Writings on His Life, Work, and Ideas* (NY: Vintage, 1962).
- Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (NY: Metropolitan Books, 2004).
- Mark Juergensmeyer, *Gandhi's Way: A Handbook for Conflict Resolution* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1984).
- Colman McCarthy, ed., *Solutions to Violence* (Washington, DC: Center for Teaching Peace, 1999).
- Bhikhu Parekh, “Gandhi meets Bin Laden.” *Ode*, July/August 2004, 26-31.
- Jonathan Schell, *The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People* (NY: Metropolitan Books, 2003).

The following speakers at *Waging Peace: Practical Alternatives to a Violent World*, Aurora Forum Summer Symposium, Stanford University, August 14, 2004:

- James Gilligan, “Preconditions for a Peaceful World.”
- Michael Nagler, “Saving the World, One Thought at a Time.”
- Frances Moore Lappé, “Choosing Courage in a Culture of Fear.”
- Arun Gandhi, “My Education in the Path of Nonviolence.”