

# The PEACE CHRONICLE

The Newsletter of the Peace and Justice Studies Association



## PEACE IS THE WORD

### REFLECTIONS ON LANGUAGE AND TERMINOLOGY

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## “About the Words Peace and Nonviolence...”



The Peace and Justice Studies Association discussion about words was practical as well as philosophical for me. As an anthropologist starting a peace or nonviolence program -- in a university and

community dead set against change -- I noticed every time I used the word "peace," somebody wanted to pick a fight.

Officials fretted their association with either word would offend area soldiers, conservative alumni, and others we depend upon for support. I had to apply nonviolence strategies just to break through the wall of resistance enough to function. In the end, I designed an accessible, replicable program that I think of as "Holistic Problem Solving for Beginners."

Semantics actually became a helpful conversation starter about how to conceptualize conflict: as systems or events for example; or as welcoming ambiguity, insisting on absolutes, or finding a "third way." With regard to the word peace, in addition to causing arguments based on an either/or problem-solving model, peace just sounds like an end-state: *If we are just strong enough or right enough or maybe holy enough we can win the war (on all conflict?), achieve nirvana, and be done with it.* This, rather than what peace really is: a possibility within the process of living in ways that can make and maintain healthier, living systems.

I decided to use *nonviolence* because, as much as I love the word peace, it sent people reflexively into the polarizing framework we need to transcend. (This also was true of loaded words like justice and rights, by the way.) Additionally, even though in English it appears to mean simply "not" violence, its advantages are many. One, it can encompass any kind of local as well as global conflict. Two, systems-based nonviolence allows lessons learned close to home to produce insights across all levels of interaction. For example, students easily recognize trying to resolve global conflict with war is parallel to trying to resolve marital conflict with domestic

violence -- when they recognize that within living systems imbalance is imbalance. Whether committed in a bedroom, boardroom, or presidential palace -- a bully is a bully. And, three, and no one knew what nonviolence meant!

Carefully introduced, I found the logic of nonviolence could be heard by defensive people as well as by all of us weary of moralism, extremes and absolutes. Within a decade, with participation growing to the thousands, and without so much confrontation we were implored to stop -- we began to 'make violence visible' by addressing it head-on. A small cadre of kindred spirits began to build awareness of the preventative advantage of systems-based nonviolence, create an expectation for fair relationships, and move the community toward greater balance -- based on the logic of system sustainability.

Modernizing the way we framed problems, *from* a traditional, dualistic model that expects violence, organizes only for violence (police, therapists, clean-up), waits for it, reacts after the fact, and shuts its eyes until the next event -- *to* a holistic approach that has potential to get ahead of some of the violence by changing conditions that lead to it -- became my overarching motivation and method. The positive nature of the projects and programs we created gave us the time and cover we needed to begin moving the status quo toward more fair relationships in systemic ways. Recognizing "truth trickles up," we actually managed to underlay the resistant hierarchy with an ever-widening, horizontal configuration of regular folk from assorted sub-groups who wanted to move from a community that dismisses and hides violence to one that will step up to correct course.

In my setting, where we faced daily violence, another challenge was to devise a practical, immediate method that could be a helpful experience for people who had no interest in it. And, we needed a model that could address all levels of conflict: one mind or body, a family, a classroom, the community, the whole environment. To make a long story short, in the end I assembled programs and classes around a demystified, systems-based, anthropological version of nonviolence I called *every day nonviolence*.

### Every Day Nonviolence

In a nutshell, every day nonviolence examines relationships as living **systems** with organic, dynamic balance as the prerequisite of for sustainability. **Violence** is identified as unhealthy **imbalance** in relationships -- between individuals, among groups or nations; between humans and our environment; even within one body or mind and between an individual and the whole universe. Violence can be individual, institutional, personal or political. It is a misuse or abuse of power that might be visible as silence or withholding, bullying, harassment, physical assault, suicide; domination or dominion-over others and nature, oppression, exploitation, war...

**Nonviolence** in this context means those actions we take with intent to move toward healthy, living **balance** -- visible as fairness, justice, health, or peace. When we practice nonviolence daily, as we would tend a garden, we give ourselves the time and emotional distance we need to devise creative, integrative interventions that can move the system toward health -- ideally, before a crisis occurs; but with conflict resolution, direct action and other nonviolent methods, afterwards.



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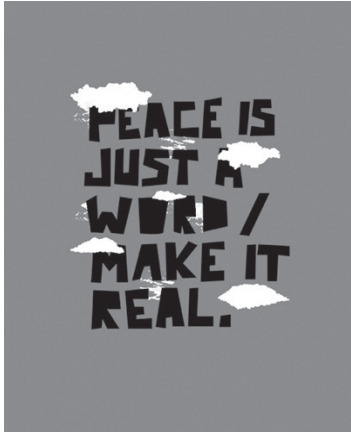
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I welcomed questions about the meaning of nonviolence because it provided an opportunity to demonstrate situation-specific *ways* that nonviolence is active. In fact, I ask people to think about nonviolence as a noun filled with lots of action verbs.

Nonviolence might mean taking a yoga class to create a better balanced self; learning nonviolent communication strategies to safeguard a marriage; baby-sitting for a frantic friend to help preempt family problems; cleaning litter from a highway to reconnect with the earth. It might mean organizing to address unfair tax or other policies. It might mean addressing an issue *you* care about, with positive actions designed to mitigate an imbalance and move an interaction toward wholeness.



This systems-based definition recognizes nonviolence as the overarching motivation and method common to all (seemingly single-

issue) nonviolent change movements. In my opinion it can become a shared language to help people understand what all of us can do to engender wholeness -- not for sentiment but for sustainability.

The beauty of a holistic worldview and the problem solving model it permits is it reveals the 360-degree rainbow of alternatives that actually exist within a whole system instead of the traditional two-degrees of either black or white that serves only to limit us and lead to extremes. A memory aide students like is: No matter what problem we are facing, pause, breathe, "It's never either/or, it's more."

The urgency of teaching nonviolence is that no matter how passionately we want a peaceful world, safer homes or healthier selves, human beings will not be able to change from violent to nonviolent problem solving until we pause, right here in mid-evolution, to update our worldview -- reboot the Human Operating System.

It is amazing to realize that throughout the long development of our species, human beings have not significantly changed the way we structure our problem solving! "Either I eat the saber tooth tiger or it eats me" has simply become "my way or the highway."

The good news is today we have invented all kinds of "trees to climb" to gain a more holistic and, therefore, realistic perspective of our interconnected "forests." We know that if you sneeze today, I get a cold tomorrow; that a butterfly can flap her wings in South America and we get rain in Kansas; and we know that if someone blows up a building anywhere, everyone feels the impact.

This is good news for our species if the objective is to adapt and survive. For the first time in history -- I would say since 1968 when we saw the Earth from space for the first time --

humans have had access to the prerequisite information and insights to resolve our inevitable problems nonviolently.

We're certainly not there yet, but when people begin where they are to become agents for positive change -- even in the smallest of ways -- it is infectious; we join the "force more powerful" or the "blessed unrest." I tell students the legend of the 100th Monkey and remind them we never know when we may be that person who is the last teenage smoker, the inventor of Doppler radar or seat belts; the Tweeter who brings down a dictator; the woman or man who helps humanity reach the necessary critical mass to become nonviolent problem solvers.

As noted physicist David Bohm and numerous others explain it, when our worldview leads us to perceive in fragments we live in a fragmented world; but, when we begin to think in whole systems and behave as though the whole system matters, "from this will flow an orderly action within the whole."

In the context of every day nonviolence, this means when we make a conscious effort to perceive of our own interactions as systems we can *reframe* rather than *react*: *Step back* to conceptualize whole systems and then *step up*, with the confidence of a valid and reliable model, to move them toward health.

The global nonviolence axiom, "If you want peace, work for justice" is actually an equation: Want healthy schools, families, and communities? Work for fairness. Want sustainable systems? Work for organic balance. How? As Gandhi noted, the means will equal the ends so, although violence has proven useful for (temporarily) enforcing system *imbalance*, only nonviolent actions can generate sustainable outcomes.

When I showed the every day nonviolence model to economist Elinor Ostrom, she observed that our projects helped people learn to "achieve collective goals using nonviolence." Exactly! Small and then overlapping "nonviolent communities" formed around projects -- like yoga and nonviolence studies classes, Safezone, and the social justice film series, which meant hundreds of people who now knew the word nonviolence. I think this kind of participation can move the larger community and economy toward projects, policies and jobs designed to get ahead of the violence.

Every day nonviolence provides a demystified, non-moralistic way to apply the logic of system sustainability to immediate needs by examining and managing interactions without so much drama -- as we care for our body or approach a public health issue.

A systems model empowers us to become activists in our own lives by showing us how the choices we make matter within the context of the systems within systems in which we are embedded; in fact, that making nonviolent choices is what Thich Nhat Hanh calls "being peace."

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