

PHILOSOPHY OF THE MOVEMENT: NONVIOLENCE

INTERVIEW THREAD ONE: PHILOSOPHY OF THE MOVEMENT: NONVIOLENCE

DIANE NASH

"I grew up in this violent society. And I stayed with those nonviolent workshops in Nashville for one reason, and that was, it was the only game in town. There was no other organization trying to eliminate segregation. I really doubted that nonviolence would work. But I also could not just do nothing about segregation. I found it so humiliating. Blacks could not use public libraries, swimming pools, hotels, motels, restaurants. It was possible for blacks to buy food at downtown restaurants, but you couldn't sit down and eat, you had to take it on a carryout basis. So, if you went to downtown Nashville during the lunch hour, the blacks that worked in the downtown area would be sitting along the curbs, along the alleys eating their lunch that they had either brought from home or purchased on a takeout basis from a local restaurant. When I obeyed segregation rules, I felt awful. I felt like I was agreeing that I was too inferior to use the accommodations that the general public used.

"So, my commitment was to eliminate the segregation. The nonviolent workshops were the only organization that I could find that -- the only people trying to do something about eliminating segregation. So, we had the success of the first couple of years, the lunch counters, and restaurants, and freedom rides. And then the violent poetry was surfacing and people who did not believe in nonviolence. And at a certain point I thought, "'Well, of course violence is more powerful than nonviolence.' And I decided I wouldn't be nonviolent. Well, about a year passed. The only thing that I had done was read a lot of poetry, have a lot of conversation about how blood had to flow in the street. And I had not been to the rifle range. I had not learned to make a bomb or let alone use one. I had come to the conclusion that you'd have to be kind of stupid to do illegal things with people that you did not know well. Therefore, it was not possible to build a mass-based movement using violence.

"And when I looked back on that year, I decided that I personally was more powerful using nonviolence. So, I came full circle, and moved from using it as a tactic to using it as a way of life. Because it makes sense in so many ways. Usually when people carry out violent movements, they're really trying to achieve something good, achieve a better world. And you don't do that by harming people. If you kill somebody's friend, or brother, or child, or mother, or father, it's not going to create good feelings and brotherhood and sisterhood and harmony like people would prefer. Very often when there's violence the press will cover the violence and ignore the issue. They will cover the violence in great detail. You know, I remember the convention, the Democratic convention in Chicago. If you read the accounts, they'll say on this corner, this violence was happening, and meanwhile across the street in Grant Park, and they'll describe some violence there. And then they'll go on. The whole article will be violence and the issues will be absolutely ignored.

"So, I took note of a number of things such as that and decided that nonviolence is a more powerful way of making change because often with violence you attack individuals and you leave the system or the real problem untouched. With the amount and the different kinds of violence that have been used over the centuries, if violence improved things, and made a better world, we'd be in Utopia by now. So, clearly, it doesn't bring a better world."

C.T. VIVIAN

". . . is that we really didn't know the difference between Martin teaching us nonviolence and India teaching us nonviolence. Now Martin, from the very beginning, he had about six or eight books by Martin and the others that were involved in nonviolence in India, right, so -- because he knew that they had won against the same problems that we had to win. That was what Martin wanted to have happen, right? Remember, his house had just been bombed. He was -- there were a number of things that was happening at that time that was going to decide. And in fact, my wife and Coretta were very good friends. And she talked about how they were concerned for what to do, how to deal with the ministers, right? And Coretta was herself already concerned about nonviolence before they came to the church

and that sort of thing. She was concerned about winning the victories that would be necessary to be a leader in Black America, that she and people like her, my wife, were concerned. And it was quite wonderful to have come to a city that wanted that kind of ministry. In fact, the -- that church was particularly concerned about, it was the church of those that were better educated than most, right?"

BERNARD LAFAYETTE, JR

"Well, the whole issue of nonviolence is, is it varies, and that's important for people to understand, that there's non-violence with the hyphen, which is really an adjective: "non-violence," that is without violence, the absence of violence. Okay? And that is a way that people might interpret nonviolence. And the whole concept with Martin Luther King was advocating was the same as Mahatma Gandhi, and that was a noun, that nonviolence is a name of a philosophy or a system of thought and also a way of life. So, Martin Luther King embodied nonviolence in his approach to dealing with issues. And one of the things that he realized in his goal, was to bring about a peaceful reconciliation and not just resolution. Sometimes we talk about peaceful resolutions, or nonviolent resolution, which means that you separate the conflicted parties and then you don't have that conflict between the parties. But the conflict is not going away if it's still embedded in each of the parties; they're not just engaged with each other. So, reconciliation is the goal rather than just simply having resolution.

"The concept that we advocate with Kingian nonviolence is one that Martin Luther King arrived at from many different sources. Gandhi was one source, but Thoreau¹ was another source, and even Hegel², and that's one of the things that Martin Luther King embraced as he searched for himself -- the meaning of truth, what is truth. So, from a theological point of view, Martin Luther King wanted to -- for himself, continue to strive towards an ideal society and for Martin Luther King it was the Beloved Community. Every great philosopher has what we call a Utopia and Plato's, you know, Utopia was the Republic, for example, and others were the Kingdom of God. So, for Martin Luther King, it was the Beloved Community and that's [what] he strived towards."

1. Henry David Thoreau was a 19th-century American philosopher and essayist and early opponent of slavery. He is best known for advocating peaceful civil disobedience as a means to change society.

2. Georg Hegel was an 18th century German philosopher. He is regarded as an idealist and a believer in a collective consciousness.