

“Nonviolence in Oklahoma: Uncovering Spiritual ‘Roots’ and ‘Shoots’”
REA/APPRRE

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Abstract:

Nonviolence is a challenging perspective and practice to maintain, especially when a nonviolent activist lives out this commitment in a context which may not be especially supportive. Activists in Oklahoma offer an interesting example of people who live out their commitments in the midst of a public opinion which is religiously and politically conservative. Using the organic image of “roots”—those spiritual and religious influences that help shape a nonviolent perspective and way of life—and “shoots”—the tendrils that provide ongoing nourishment and support for nonviolence—this project uses a narrative research method. Interviews with nonviolent activists uncover the factors that shape and sustain their nonviolent perspective and practices.

In a time when religious and spiritual rhetoric are being used to justify our nation’s participation in violent conflict in the name of patriotism and protection, I am inspired by the witness of individuals and groups who offer a message of nonviolence, often going against the strong tide of public opinion. For instance, in Oklahoma, where I live and teach, the social and political climate is overwhelmingly pro-military and clearly supportive of the war in Iraq. For those who embrace nonviolence in Oklahoma, where do their nonviolent perspectives come from? How are they formed? How are they sustained? These are the challenging questions that inform this research project.

The image that comes to mind is an organic one—a plant settled deep in the soil, not unlike the persons profiled here who found themselves “planted” in the red soil of Oklahoma. A person grows from the “roots” planted for them by family and friends in the local community. These roots provide social location, nourishment, and stability as the young person explores their place in the world. In the case of nonviolent activists, these roots are the people, communities, and ideas that helped form their perspectives and taught them the practices of nonviolence. Growing from roots, however, is just the beginning. Plants, like people, also need “shoots” which reach out along the ground, making connections, offering support, sending out seeds to multiply the movement. Without the shoots, one person’s nonviolent activism could be a lonely endeavor, resulting in frustration and burnout. My hope is that the following interviews will illumine some of those roots and shoots.

I write as a Protestant religious educator teaching in an ecumenical, mainline seminary in the United States’ southern Midwest. I also write as one deeply invested in the spiritual life, in making the theory and practice of spirituality accessible to people in the church and the academy. I find it impossible to talk about religious education without also talking about spirituality and vice versa. I am not a nonviolent activist myself, but I deeply appreciate the nonviolent

perspective and truly admire people who follow this way of life. I begin this paper with an exploration of nonviolence, its perspectives and practices, and its relationship to spirituality. After setting the Oklahoma context and discussing research methodology, I offer the stories of Oklahoma activists by highlighting the spiritual roots and shoots of their nonviolence. Finally, I consider what this project offers those of us who teach and study in the fields of education and spirituality and who are interested in encouraging formation in nonviolent perspective. While we might not all agree with a nonviolent perspective, we could still come to understand what factors may lead one to embrace such a perspective. By situating these activists firmly within their Oklahoma context, members of church and academy might be challenged to make connections between their own contexts and possibilities for nonviolent change.

Nonviolence and spirituality

Looking at some Christian definitions of nonviolence, certain common characteristics come into view. Gerard Vanderhaar says simply that nonviolence is "positive action for true human good, using only means that help and do not harm." (1990, 9) Activist John Dear writes that "[N]onviolence is a way of active peacemaking that both resists evil without doing evil and insists on truth and justice through love." (1994, 9) Furthermore, he says, the stance of nonviolence affirms that violence only begets more violence, and that the only way to stop the proliferation is for one or many to refuse to use violence themselves. (10) One more perspective is provided by Daniel Smith-Christopher: "Nonviolence includes not only a refusal to engage in lethal activities but it also presumes a commitment to striving for conditions of fairness, justice, and respect in human relations. . . . Nonviolence implies an active commitment to social change that would ultimately result in a fair distribution of world resources, a more creative and democratic cooperation between peoples, and a common pursuit of those social, scientific, medical and political achievements that serve to enhance the human enterprise and prevent war." (2000, 10) Three characteristics readily stand out. First, nonviolence has as its aim the improvement of human life, especially where any issue of peace and justice is at stake. Second, nonviolence is active in its focus and commitments and not merely a philosophy or intellectual pursuit. The third characteristic is implicit in the definitions, namely, that any denial of peace and justice is an act of violence. In this way, nonviolence is not directed solely toward issues of war, but embraces any situation where "fairness, justice and respect" is demanded.

Activist and author Gene Sharp reminds us that nonviolence takes various forms and is called by many names, such as "people power, political defiance, nonviolence action, non-cooperation or civil resistance." (1996, 234) Nonviolent action as a technique uses psychological, political, economic and religious "weapons" in this struggle. These actions fall into three broad categories. First, nonviolent protest includes actions like standing in vigil outside a prison to protest the death penalty or marching in support of workers' rights. Second, non-cooperation includes actions like boycotting companies, refusing to register for the military draft, and participating in labor strikes. Third, nonviolent intervention is seen in the lunch counter sit-ins of the 1960s and numerous hunger strikes carried out by activists in various venues throughout the world. (235)

Concerning nonviolence and Christian spirituality, Dear points out that the Christian spiritual life must be nonviolent because the one who taught and modeled this lifestyle is Jesus, "the greatest practitioner of nonviolence." (1994, 166) To speak of Christian spirituality is to describe a nonviolent lifestyle "rooted in God, rooted in love, rooted in resistance to evil and

rooted in compassion for humanity, especially those who suffer." (167) Three things contribute to growth in spirituality and, therefore, growth in the nonviolent way of life. The first is daily contemplation, a practice whereby one looks to God, the author of peace, for transformation in spirit and mind. The second is letting go of the results of one's actions, recognizing that in our limited view people cannot see the wider purpose or end of the actions they take. Only God can own the results. The third is to be rooted in community, a place of support and encouragement where spiritual activists can share this work with one another through prayer, study and reflection. (170-73) James Hanigan adds that nonviolence as a spirituality should not be seen as an end in itself, but rather as a means to an end. For Christians, that end is a particular goal variously described as union with God, putting on the mind of Christ, or being led in the Spirit. In this way, nonviolence as spirituality is not so much an ethical stance or moral theology as it is a journey toward God. (1982, 13-14) Two things characterize a nonviolent spirituality—an attitude of love toward others, particularly one's adversary, and a passion for truth, especially truth that is found through orthopraxis, rather than orthodoxy. (18-19)

Writers on nonviolence and spirituality agree that the term "nonviolence" arose in the twentieth century in conjunction with the efforts of Mahatma Gandhi in the nonviolent struggle for Indian independence. Gandhi acquainted the world with the Sanskrit word *ahimsa*, usually translated as "non-harm." A better understanding of *ahimsa*, however, points to the deeply spiritual roots of nonviolence. Hindu writers Sunanda Shastri and Yajneswar Shastri explain that *ahimsa* is a profound philosophical and ethical concept in Hinduism that cannot be simply equated with pacifism, conscientious objection or civil disobedience. (2000, 67) As the negation of *himsa*, violence, *ahimsa* is more than just "non-harm"; *ahimsa* is the "positive doctrine of love, friendship and equality among all living beings in the universe." (68) To embrace this positive doctrine leads one on the road to compassion for and a sense of oneness with all beings. (68) In fact, this connection is so large that Hindus describe even the earth as a divine living presence, and many devout Hindus pray daily to Mother Earth asking forgiveness that their feet continually touch her. (77) The Shastris relate *ahimsa* to the Hindu concept of *shanti*, or peace. To attain peace is the highest goal of Hinduism, and peace has two aims--the spiritual peace one attains for oneself and a social peace that one pursues in society and nature. The greatest impediment to peace is dualism, seeing oneself as separate from other living beings. Peace, whether on the personal or social level, can only be achieved by "giving up a sense of separateness and plurality and identifying one's own self with all other beings in the universe." (79)

This Hindu perspective on nonviolence adds at least two essential components not found in the Christian definitions above. The first is widening the circle of nonviolence to include more than just human relationships. The tendency to forget that peace and justice are also needed in human dealings with animals, the earth, and the whole universe has been a blind spot in Christian understandings of nonviolence. The Hindu writers also make explicit a notion only implicit in Christian nonviolence—striving to identify with and empathize with the other. The Christian writers do not deny that this identification takes place, but they most often speak of oneness as a by-product of nonviolence or as a spiritual practice that supports nonviolence. Christian activists would surely benefit from moving the issue of non-duality to the center of conversations on nonviolence.

The Oklahoma context

When Oklahoma is called the buckle of the Bible belt it lives up to its name. A recent call for a large display on Creationism at the Tulsa Zoo won easy approval from the parks and recreation board with the full backing of the city's mayor. The decision was later reversed when more than a thousand signatures were collected from citizens opposed to the display. Tulsa is the center of Pentecostal/charismatic religion for the U.S. as Oral Roberts University and Rhema Bible Institute graduate hundreds of students each year. In this state, an evangelical religious perspective melds easily with a conservative political perspective. Exit polls for the 2004 presidential election show 87% of Oklahomans define themselves as "moderate" or "conservative" politically. 65% of those polled approved of how George W. Bush was handling his job as President, and 64% said that compared to four years earlier the country was safer from terrorism in November 2004. While the poll did not ask voters to reveal their choice for President, 57% chose Bush and 19% chose John Kerry when asked "Who would you trust to handle terrorism?" (MSNBC 2005)

A pattern of conservatism also shows up in attitudes toward the death penalty. According to the Death Penalty Institute of Oklahoma, in 2001 this state ranked third behind Nevada and Alabama in death row population per capita. (Death Penalty Institute of Oklahoma 2005) That same year, the *Tulsa World* completed a poll in which 63% of those surveyed said they somewhat or strongly agreed that the death penalty is a deterrent to criminals not on death row while 33% somewhat or strongly disagreed. (Tulsa World 2001) More recently, the Death Penalty Information Center reported that Oklahoma is one of only four states (including Texas, Virginia and Missouri) that have averaged two or more executions per year since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976. This in light of the fact that 29 states do not have a death penalty or have rarely used it in 30 years. (Death Penalty Information Center 2005)

This same conservative outlook results in a strong pro-military stance in Oklahoma. In the recent decision of the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) commission, over 10,000 military and over 18,000 civilian jobs will be cut nationwide, but Oklahoma's loss will only be about 200 jobs. In reality, however, Oklahoma will see at least a temporary increase of jobs as a result of the realignment because each of its military installations will undergo expansion and/or renovation, bringing \$354 million of construction money into the state. Current installations include Army, Air Force, and National Guard bases as well as an ammunition plant. Overall they account for more than 55,000 jobs in the state and contribute \$4.8 billion to the state's economy. (Tulsa World 2005a and 2005b) Only five states (Florida, Georgia, California, Arizona and Virginia) have a larger military payroll or contracts with the Department of Defense. (Oklahoma State Senate 2003) Of special interest is the McAlester Army Ammunition Plant. Many of the bombs, artillery and tank shells used in Iraq are manufactured here. When running at full capacity, the facility is able to turn out 276 million pounds of munitions in a month. Plant spokesperson Mark Hughes boasts, "We are the premier bomb maker for the Department of Defense. We are the also the nation's largest ammunition storage facility." (Bryan 2005)

While there are notable exceptions, the prevailing public opinion among Oklahomans is decidedly religiously and politically conservative, pro-death penalty and pro-military. Recent national polls have shown support for the President and the war in Iraq slipping sharply, with 56% of Americans agreeing that the war is not worth it. Among Oklahomans, however, 57% say the U.S. did not make a mistake sending troops to Iraq, while 38% say the U.S. did make a mistake. Similarly, in July 2005 national polls show the President's job approval rate at 47%

positive, 49% negative. In Oklahoma, a 60% majority approved of the President's job performance, and only 35% did not. (Tulsa World 2005c)

In the midst of this social situation I held conversations with three nonviolent social activists. I wondered how they came to embrace nonviolence as a philosophy and way of life, that is, the spiritual and religious "roots" of their nonviolence. And I wondered how they maintain their commitment to nonviolence in a setting that is not always kind to a nonviolent perspective; I call these the "shoots" that support, encourage, strengthen and nourish nonviolence.

Research methodology

I chose to use narrative inquiry so that I could learn from the experiences of nonviolent activists. The focus of narrative inquiry is understanding rather than explanation. It is both a process (the storyteller speaks while the researcher asks appropriate questions and listens) and a product (the story itself). (Kramp 2004, 104) I find narrative inquiry to be especially empowering for the storyteller, because listening to a person's story affirms and validates their story. I chose the activists based on my research goal of uncovering the spiritual and religious aspects that shape and sustain nonviolence. Therefore, I looked specifically for people who express religious or spiritual values as they engage in their activism. I decided that three interviews were all I could manage during the summer break, and hoped to find a variety of voices: male and female, gay and straight, clergy and lay, Christian and non-Christian, white and persons of color. I soon discovered, however, that my limited sample and people's busy schedules would make it difficult for me to create the diversity I wanted. I compiled a list of 15 potential interviewees, many of whom I hope to interview in the future.

Following Atkinson's model (1998, 26), I followed the three steps of conducting interviews: First, I planned the interviews. When talking to the prospective interviewees I explained my research project and how the interviews would be used. I developed a release form that I brought with me to the interview for our mutual signatures. (28) I asked them to choose a setting for the interview that would be most comfortable for them. (30) I also developed some simple, open-ended questions that addressed the issues in my research following de Marrais' suggestion to say "Tell me about ____." and "Think of a time when you ____ and tell me about it." (2004, 62) I tried to allow the storyteller to speak as long as she/he needed to without interruption. I sought the deeper meaning of the stories by following up with "reason-why" questions, such as "What did that mean to you?" and "How did that make you feel?" (Atkinson 1998, 31) Second, I conducted the interviews. I met with each storyteller in a place of their choosing for approximately two hours. Two chose to meet in their home and the third met with me at an office in the seminary where I teach. Each interview was tape-recorded. Third, I transcribed the interviews and gave the transcribed interview to each storyteller so they had the option of correcting, adding or deleting what was contained there. The changes they made became the primary document, and the original taped interview was the rough draft. (57)

I learned that narrative research is a skill that takes patience and practice. My sample of three people who are quite similar theologically and politically, the same racial background, and similar socio-economic position created conclusions that were almost too neat. I hope to broaden the sample soon. A second or third interview with each person would have uncovered more information and deeper reflection as trust was engendered and more experiences were remembered. One of the interviewees sent me extensive written reflections that came to her after

our interview. These writings became part of her primary document. Finally, in the interviews themselves, I had to remind myself not to respond out loud to what the interviewee said. When I did repeat back what I heard, I often used different words than they did, so I am concerned in retrospect that I may have chosen words for them or distracted their train of thought. In trying to make good use of their time I may have inadvertently closed down the silence—essential for personal reflection—more quickly than I should have.

Three nonviolent activists tell their stories

Mary McAnally

Mary exudes energy and enthusiasm as we meet one afternoon in her home in Tulsa. She grew up in Oklahoma and has lived most of her life here. She is very involved in local social action. In her 60s, Mary is retired Presbyterian clergy. She says, "Nonviolence is a basic lifestyle that one would hope the whole world might some day be able to live out because it affects every area of life, every type of relationship between people, between people and animals, between people and nature. Violence affects the world in a bad way, in a damaging, destructive way. . . . The whole life struggle is—for me and for a lot of other people—trying to find and create peace." Her earliest thoughts about violence/nonviolence came as a child when her father returned home as a veteran of World War II. Her family, like many others of the time, faced interpersonal problems as a result of the war and its aftermath. She calls her mother her "first mentor," a woman who supported the war effort as an original "Rosy the Riveter," and who taught Mary that an open and inquiring mind would lead to all kinds of growth and development. For instance, she encouraged her to read widely in literary classics, poetry and religious mythologies.

She was also fortunate to meet, study with and read many of the "greatest minds of the time." Immanuel Wallerstein and Margaret Mead were professors at Columbia University when she was a graduate student there. In her days of activism in New York City in the 1960s she got to know Daniel and Philip Berrigan and Thich Nhat Hanh. As a seminary student at Princeton Theological Seminary, she was one of four women in the ministry program. She was influenced by Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, Richard Shaw and Charles West, and she read widely in liberation and feminist theologies counting Sallie McFague and Rosemary Radford Ruether among her favorites. She met Mary Daly and was a close friend of Audre Lord. She especially remembers the 1959-60 winter break from the University of Tulsa when she traveled to Ohio to hear Martin Luther King, Jr. speak. The following spring break, she organized a "freedom bus" that traveled from Oklahoma to Montgomery, Alabama in response to King's invitation for students to participate in voter registration and lunch counter sit-ins. Her first arrest for non-violent protest was in Montgomery that spring.

Throughout her life, Mary has regularly participated in social movements. A hippy in the 1960s, she was active in peace vigils and protests in New York City, remembering the time she was arrested with the Berrigans for throwing chicken blood on draft files. She seems most proud, however, of her peace work in Africa. Her doctorate at Columbia was in African Studies, affording her the opportunity to work in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. When she was kicked out the country, she went to Mozambique and Tanzania and was invited to teach for a while in the Mozambique freedom school. The end of apartheid in South Africa brought her much personal satisfaction. She says with a laugh, "When [Nelson] Mandela got out of prison and was later elected President I said, 'I'm ready to go to die, God. I've been there, done it.' That

feeling of victory and success and understanding and resurrection was very real." Mary feels strongly that international experiences are crucial in forming the wider view needed for effective peace and justice work.

Mary's views have also been informed by an ongoing critique of religion, especially the realization that religions can so easily foster violence as nonviolence. She notes how the Christian tradition has fostered violence against women, gays and lesbians and others by refusing them full participation in the life of the church. Christians have also fostered violence against Jews and members of other religious traditions by not respecting their traditions and insisting they be converted to Christianity. She continues to be inspired by the motto of her reformed tradition, *reformata semper reformanda*, "reformed, always reforming." "Critical review of institutional religions is essential," she declares. Without it, religions promote their own agendas to the detriment of others.

Throughout her life, Mary has relied on a holistic sense of the spiritual life to nurture and support her nonviolent activism. She has strong connections to the reformed Presbyterian tradition, the non-creedal Unitarian Universalist Association, the contemplative life of a Benedictine oblate, and the spiritual practices of Zen Buddhism. Her appreciation for the world religions runs very deep, and she talks passionately of the many people from various religious traditions who have been Christ-like, Buddha-like, Mohammed-like, and Confucius-like. She sees them as her spiritual brothers and sisters. She feels the strongest connection to people of any spiritual tradition who are able to bring together their orthodoxy and their orthopraxy, their being and their doing. "The creative tension of those two things is what fuels all of us in our spiritual search and in our desire and longing to be active and effective and involved and related and caring and compassionate and successful in a wider vision." She notes her recent participation in protesting the creationism exhibit at the Tulsa zoo. Among the protesters were people from every religious tradition in Tulsa—Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus—all united against an action they believed to be unjust. Her inclusive spirituality incorporates all of nature too. "Every animal, every flower, every tree, every brick has religious significance of some kind. Even the air we breathe and the water we drink. . . . Anything that has life has spiritual significance." For this reason, her contemporary commitments are diverse, including animal rights, environmental rights, gay rights and women's rights.

Another experience that contributed to her nonviolent views is Clinical Pastoral Education and her work as a chaplain. In that setting she learned a lot about listening to others. "Chaplains aren't there to convert. They're not even there to teach. They're just there to listen and to love." Listening to the sick or the prisoner is one thing; listening to those "people who express their religion in ways that are hateful and divisive and violent" is something else altogether. She struggles with her own anger, judgmentalism and arrogance when dealing with people who do not share her commitment to nonviolence. She sees the need in herself and in the church to redouble efforts to listen and understand one another. This is the only way that problems can be confronted and solutions enacted. For now, her self challenge is "to curb and creatively transform my anger, arrogance, and impatience."

Mary's efforts to express her views have come not only through her activism, but through her poetry. Several books of her poetry have been published over the years. They express her "need to speak my truth as I see it, with honesty and integrity. I grew to understand the voice of the poet as the voice underneath *all* sacred writ, the metaphorical, allegorical, creative voice of prophecy, wisdom, and jubilee." In a recent poem entitled "A Disabled Retiree's Morning

Ritual," she writes how she fills the birdfeeder each morning and waits, cup of coffee in hand, to observe the arrival of the birds: "The cardinal is the first to arrive at the feeder/jazzy red docent of God. He calls to his mate/she responds. Others descend in droves/and my prayers are once again answered." As her day progresses, she describes the meetings, letter writing, sermon preparation and other activities that require her attention. Calling to mind the many people—living and dead—who have influence and inspire her, she notes the human "birds" who continue to gather: "Other birds arrive from their diverse nests/and we join in song and service, fighting as one/against the real Axis of Evil: capitalist greed/individualism, and silence. *Venceremos!* We will win!/It is good. Again prayers are answered." (McAnally 2003)

Mary's poem and experiences also point to the role of the community in working for peace and creating hope. "We *want* to do it all but we *can't* do it all," she affirms. There has to be a community of people who support one in their activism and who will be able to carry on the work when one can no longer continue. She calls this passing on "the firestick." While it is true that there are many problems to be addressed, it is also true no one person can solve all of them, so it is essential that many people engage the struggle and do what they each can to make a difference. It would be great if Christian communities would take the lead in this work, but Mary is happy to create community anywhere people are committed to peace and justice in the spirit of nonviolence.

Russell Bennett

Russ is an energetic, softspoken, man. For 36 years he was the pastor of a United Church of Christ congregation in Tulsa, a congregation known for its liberal stance and social activism. Now in his 60s, Russ retired last year from pastoral ministry, but has continued his involvement in local issues, most recently the creationism exhibit at the Tulsa zoo. His understanding of nonviolence has been shaped over many years of study and experience: "a deliberate way of life that seeks to enhance all living things and not hurt others, that in conflictual situations there are alternatives to overt violence, and that we human beings do have the power and the capacity within ourselves to choose other ways than destructive ways when dealing with difficult situations."

In reflecting on his early life, he credits the church—specifically the Sunday School and youth group of the Evangelical Reformed Church in which he grew up—with paving the way for his commitment to nonviolence. The church did not necessarily teach him the ways of nonviolence, but rather encouraged him to question culture. In his questioning it became clear to him that violence is not the way. As he began to learn more about the Christian faith, he also came to see that nonviolence is the way of Jesus. Another important influence came in the form of mentors, teachers and religious leaders who not only encouraged him to question culture, but offered alternative ways of living and believing. He talks of his professor Krister Stendahl who introduced him to supersessionism. He realized that there are assumptions in the Christian tradition that have to be recognized and addressed. Sadly, many of these assumptions, such as the myth of redemptive violence, foster violence rather than nonviolence. Such assumptions need to be surfaced and transformed. Other mentors include the writings and example of Gandhi and King. He notes that although both men used the negative terms nonviolence and *ahimsa* (non-harm), they described this way of life in very positive terms.

Another important aspect of Gandhi's and King's teachings is the notion that nonviolence transforms both the oppressor and the oppressed. He experienced this aspect most strongly when

he went to Jackson, Mississippi in 1964 in response to the National Council of Church's call for ministers who would serve as counselors for civil rights workers. Before being sent into rural sections of Mississippi, he and the other pastors were taught basic principles of nonviolence, including postures they could use to defend themselves if they came under physical attack. While he was there, he was attacked by a mob of 20 young men who pulled him out of a car and beat him badly. "Looking at these young men," he said, "I felt that they had some questions in their own minds, that they were very much afraid. And I felt that I was going to come out alright. They were very fearful themselves, but they were doing what they thought was right." He felt a connection to them that he could not explain at the time. But now he knows that we are always connected to our adversary and that, for that reason, we must decide how we will relate them.

At the center of violence, he notes, is a dualism that divides the world into us and them, right and wrong, powerful and weak. Nonviolence must overcome this dualism by recognizing that all people are made in the image of God and that no one is more favored by God than anyone else. This conviction provides the basis for his critique of American Christianity, a perspective that often associates American power and might with the favor of God. Likewise, American Christianity has been closely associated with American capitalism, another form of violence when it equates people's worth with what they own and when it is imposed on people throughout the world as the most desirable way of life. For this reason, he sees American culture as inherently violent, although there are many aspects of Christian teaching that can counteract that violence.

In his story, Russ suggested several ways in which he nurtures this commitment to a nonviolent way of being in the world. He talked about the quiet time he enjoys when he goes running. It is time to reflect and get away. Even more, he says with a laugh, "I think a nonviolent way of life is getting away and dealing with myself because that is where the primary battle is." His self-awareness has helped him to recognize his tendency to be self-righteous, to be angry at all the wrongs in the world, to claim that he has the answers to the problems he sees. A key component of self-awareness is the ability to let go and let God be God. Again he laughs, "There is a God and you're not it." He expresses awe at the mystery of the divine working in the world in ways we cannot see or fully appreciate. A tangible experience of this reality manifests itself in a friendship he shares with a local evangelical minister. For many years these two men stood on opposite sides of the theological spectrum, and in many ways they still do. But the evangelical minister embarked on a theological journey that brought him to a place where he and Russ can now work together in Tulsa. Russ freely admits that the change in the relationship had nothing to do with him, except perhaps that he kept the lines of communication open. "You never know what's going on with someone else. . . . You're not the only factor in the equation."

Another essential factor that sustains his commitments is the opportunity to share this journey with others. He marvels at the staying power of his congregation, how they were able to continue their work together for 36 years, a liberal congregation in a conservative area. He is appreciative of others in Tulsa and beyond who put their energies into forming communities and organizations who work for peace and justice. He believes that there are many people searching for a new way of life other than the commercialized, destructive path the U.S. is on right now. He points out that, for Christians, salvation is a social reality. "We get there not just as individuals, but as people who are linked together, because it is a social reality, the kingdom of God, where everything is reconciled." Russ does not seem too troubled that his is a minority voice in a culture that prefers materialism and power over relationships and peace. Jesus called

his followers to be salt and light. "Too much salt is not a good thing. But salt and light—the minority voice—sees things that the majority cannot see because once you have power it's a different world. . . . A nonviolent way of life is to try to see the world from the powerless position because it's a different way of seeing." Whether he is taking apart assumptions, seeing the world differently, or nurturing a relationship with an adversary, Russ finds himself strengthened and challenged by his journey of nonviolence.

Karen Weldin

Karen's home on the lake serves as both the activity center for her national work in nonviolence and her respite from the busy life she leads. She is in her early 50s and has within the past 10 years come out as a lesbian, although she knew this truth about herself much longer than that. For the past six years she has been active with Soulforce, an organization founded by minister Mel White which advocates for the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) folk. Built on the principles of nonviolence taught by Gandhi and King, Soulforce focuses especially on confronting and educating leaders and members of Christian denominations, a primary place of continued oppression for GLBT persons. Finding Soulforce in 1999 was Karen's first introduction to nonviolence as a way of life. Having recently come out of the closet and read White's book *Stranger at the Gate*, she learned everything she could about Soulforce, Gandhi, King and the civil rights movement. Viewing the video "Eyes on the Prize" and reading John Lewis' *Walking with the Wind* were also formative. She is inspired by the life of Bayard Rustin, the civil rights leader who introduced King to Gandhi's ideas and organized the 1963 March on Washington, and who himself was marginalized from the movement because he was a gay man.

More recently, Karen has been reading Walter Wink, whose work on Jesus' "third way" has been influential on the theology of Christian nonviolence. She says, "[Nonviolence] is a way of life. It's much more than the absence of violence. . . . It's a courageous way of life. I like what Walter Wink says—its' choosing a third way beyond fight or flight. It is not resisting evil with evil, but it is resisting evil with love. It's not passivity and it's not violence; it's a third way. It's embracing truth, and standing up for that truth, and being determined to live life by what you believe to be the truth, and to live seeking justice and what is fair for all people, and loving all people, including your adversary."

She sought out as many opportunities as possible to learn about nonviolence. Examples include the Pace e Bene workshop "From Violence to Wholeness" and the extensive training offered by the Midwest Academy of Social Change. In the beginning, she was "like a dry sponge," ready to soak up everything that came her way. She found those trainings to be so helpful that she not only spent most of her Soulforce years facilitating and coordinating nonviolence training events, but she insists that others who participate in nonviolent activism with her receive adequate training themselves so that they are familiar with and ready to enact the principles of nonviolence.

The roots of Karen's interest in nonviolence can be found in her family background. Her background is "very violent" and she recognized the need to find an alternative way to break the cycle of violence in which she was caught. Growing up Southern Baptist in Illinois, she had hoped to become a missionary. She attended a Baptist college in Oklahoma, majoring in religion, and applied to Southern Baptist seminary in 1975. She was rejected, however, not because of her sexual orientation, but because of her feminist beliefs. Instead, she went to the University of

Oklahoma and majored in human relations. She is a certified alcohol and drug counselor and a licensed marital and family therapist and was in private practice for 12 years. On this journey she worked through many of the issues related to her violent past, but her introduction to the expressly nonviolent Soulforce just at the time when she was embracing her identity as a lesbian was truly "the icing on the cake." She came to see that being in the closet as a GLBT person is another form of violence. As a result, her activism is directed toward using nonviolent means to end this violence toward GLBT persons.

Involvement with Soulforce has enabled Karen to be intentional and thoughtful in her critique of organized religion. She asserts that the rejection and marginalization of GLBT folk is a tangible way in which the Christian denominations foster violence; they do so through religious teaching, biblical interpretation, and enacting church laws that deny the full personhood of GLBT people and bar them from church activities. For this reason, Soulforce confronts religious teachings and policies and attempts to dialogue with religious leaders who spout anti-gay rhetoric.

Karen's work with Soulforce energizes her and sustains her commitment to nonviolence. Soulforce chooses to do its work primarily through direct actions, a diverse collection of nonviolent activities. Numerous televangelists and conservative religious leaders have been the recipients, as well as most Christian denominations. Members have conducted prayer vigils, blocked entrances, interrupted convention speakers, distributed leaflets, written letters, told their own stories, and corresponded with church leaders over a period of time. In each case, the choice of action is dependent upon the circumstances of the situation, whether members are gathering outside the headquarters of James Dobson or attending the recent annual meeting of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. This practice is consistent with the principles of nonviolence by letting the adversary guide what one's response will be.

As she prepares to leave her national work with Soulforce and concentrate more efforts in southeast Oklahoma, Karen continues to enact the principles of nonviolence. She recently wrote letters to 97 local churches seeking others who might be interested in working together to support GLBT persons in the local community. Only one congregation expressed interest, but that does not deter her. She is preparing to send more letters to these congregations offering to present free workshops on nonviolence. She also writes letters to the editor of the local paper, especially in response to editorials and letters written by citizens. She laughs as she explains, "Someone has asked the community to call for a day of prayer for Karen Weldin. I see that as a real compliment. . . . The editor called me and wanted to know what I think. I said, 'I think it's great if people want to pray for me.' And my response, my hope and prayer, is that maybe my voice gives hope to two or three who read the paper, compared to what they've been reading. Maybe it makes no difference, I don't know, but I hope it does."

Karen is honest about her own struggle with not meeting the high standard that nonviolence calls her to follow. She sees nonviolence as an "elusive star." "It's a goal that I hope I am always moving toward, but I also know that it is something I am not obtaining." Affirming that nonviolence is a way of life, she sees the danger of using it only as a tactic, as a way to push the movement forward. To embrace nonviolence as a way of life means to acknowledge the tension that exists between the status quo (from which many middle class people benefit) and a nonviolent value system. Choosing now to be an activist in Oklahoma raises new challenges for her, as she admits it is easier to leave town rather than face the members of her local community who will be angry at her for the things she says and does. She wonders if she is being judgmental

when she calls her neighbors "ignorant" because "they don't take time to research or learn. They just draw conclusions and state things as facts." Can she "soften these people up"?

There are many spiritual practices that keep her grounded. Chief among them are her friendships. Some are long-term friendships with people who have been part of her life for 25 years or more; others are more recent friendships with people in Soulforce and other communities who share her commitment to GLBT causes. These are not just business relationships, but opportunities to share thoughts and feelings with people who care and understand. Karen readily admits that she needs a lot of alone time, and finds herself most nurtured and soothed when she goes out on the lake. She finds similar encouragement when she walks the labyrinth, prays, writes, or listens to music. These reflective activities give her the space she needs to rest and regroup.

Karen's quest seems to be to create community, especially around issues of nonviolence and affirmation of GLBT persons. She plans to show videos about nonviolence in the local library and invite people to stay afterwards for a discussion. She dreams of buying 10 acres nearby and starting a new church with a labyrinth. This congregation would be inclusive of all and would offer opportunities for people to learn the principles of nonviolence and practice peace and justice. Her latest local endeavor is leadership of McPride, an organization in support of GLBT persons in McAlester, Oklahoma, home of the largest ammunition plant in the country. She says, smiling, "I told them that if you want me to be involved, then in our mission statement, our goal statement, we have to articulate principles of nonviolence. . . . That group of people looked at me like, 'What are you talking about?!' I said, 'Well, that means we need a workshop on nonviolence.'" And so the work continues.

Learning from the stories with implications for religious education

I begin with two reflections on nonviolence before turning to an analysis of the roots and shoots of nonviolence in the lives of these activists. The first reflection is on the all-encompassing nature of nonviolence as a perspective and way of life. When casually mentioning this project to others, I discovered that the overriding perception is that nonviolence is directed primarily toward issues of war and peace. Certainly, war and peace are of major concern to nonviolent activists, but they are not the only topics addressed. Clearly, nonviolence as a philosophy for living should affect every aspect of life—personal, interpersonal, communal and global. It ought to guide how one thinks about and relates to the Holy One. And, as our Hindu writers remind us, it calls one to widen the circle of care to include animals and the earth. Thus, nonviolence as a way of life creates interest in a wide variety of topics—how people can get along with each other, how the oppressed can be made free, how one responds to the adversary, and how humans relate to the natural world. Nonviolence is not a tactic, but a way to live one's life that must be renewed each day.

The second reflection is about the organic relationship between roots and shoots, between the factors that shape nonviolence and the factors that help maintain a commitment to nonviolence. Like the roots that anchor a plant and the shoots that connect plants to one another, the roots and shoots are part of the same plant and are therefore integrally related. As Karen participates in Soulforce's direct actions, she not only uncovers new aspects and understandings of nonviolence, but finds her commitments strengthened as well. Likewise, as Mary writes prophetic poetry she pays homage to those who walked before her on this journey, as well as those who walk beside her and will carry on the work when she no longer can. In essence, what I

am calling here roots and shoots form a matrix or web design that anchors and supports nonviolence in the lives of these three people.

Perhaps the most significant of all the influences that shape and guide these activists are the mentors, teachers, and guides who, by their words and example, inspired them through the years. In the area of nonviolence, the names Gandhi and King are often mentioned first. But there are many others who play a vital role in people's lives: parents, teachers, religious leaders, writers, and activists. Most interesting is that these influential people often did not explicitly teach about nonviolence, but caught an interviewee's attention because of the problems they were wrestling with or the questions they were asking. Russ described how Krister Stendahl raised the issue of supersessionism thereby encouraging him to question what he had assumed to be true about Christianity. Mary spoke of the impact World War II had on her parents, particularly the personal suffering of her father and the indomitable strength of her mother. At an early age, even without the language to describe it, she had to make meaning of these circumstances.

Further, those people who have been adversaries in the struggle for nonviolence have also played a vital role in shaping and nurturing nonviolent perspectives. Karen explains that Soulforce members take their cues from the adversary to decide what the next step should be. Doing so pushes them to think through their options constantly to make sure they are in line with the principles they espouse. Russ speaks poignantly of that moment when he identified with the fear of the young men who were beating him up in Jackson, Mississippi. He understood why he was not welcome there and could respect them at least for acting on the conviction of their beliefs even as he had to stand up for what he believed in. His story suggests what the Shastris call non-duality in Hindu teaching—a sense of oneness with all beings. The presence of both mentors and adversaries in their lives affirm for us as educators that introducing a wide range of ideas, examples and writings is still the best way form of intellectual and spiritual formation. The fact that adversaries are so influential too, should give us pause. Where is the fine line between situations that are obviously dangerous and those which create the tension necessary for both personal learning and social change?

Another important aspect of these interviewees' lives is the opportunities they have had to reflect on and make meaning from the past, particularly family background and early experiences. There was tremendous excitement in Mary's voice the day I invited her to participate in this project. "The bad thing about getting old is that you have so many stories to tell and no one wants to hear them." This project gave people space to tell their stories. Meaning is uncovered and new threads of understanding are revealed as the stories are told and re-told. Perhaps others who hear the stories will find meanings that the original storyteller did not see. Either way, the stories provide inspiration not only to those who tell them but to those who hear them. Other forms of meaning-making exist in these interviews too. Karen's friendships with those who listen to her ideas, validate her feelings, and support her on the journey help her to make sense of her life. Russ' time alone while running lets him clarify and interpret his most recent activities. Mary's poetry provides a forum for remembering and reflecting on her commitments and actions. Encouraging people to make meaning of their lives in ways that are appropriate and meaningful for them should be a special focus for educators. It would not be overstating it to say that meaning-making is especially crucial for people trying to maintain commitment to nonviolence as a way of life. It could mean the difference between finding energy for the struggle and succumbing to burnout.

All three activists demonstrate well-developed critical reflection skills, especially a

willingness to critique religion and culture. In the case of these three individuals, all are highly educated with at least a masters degree (two have doctorates) and all attended schools that highly prize critical reflection skills. Nevertheless, all three demonstrated an interest in social critique even before receiving higher education. As a young child, Mary questioned the effects of war on her family and society. Karen recognized the detrimental effects of violence in her family and knew she had to find a way to break the cycle. Russ learned to question culture in his church youth group. Is it possible that these early efforts at critique became the catalyst for further exploration as Mary, Karen and Russ matured? As educators we may ask ourselves at what point in a person's life it would be appropriate to introduce them to the principles of social critique that may lead them to challenge the status quo. At the center of nonviolent perspective is the affirmation that things do not have to continue the way they are; there are alternatives to the present situation. Considering the energy and creativity of childhood and youth, it is never too early to encourage the kind of questioning that will envision and enact a better world for all.

Observing the three interviewees within the Oklahoma situation offers an interesting opportunity to consider the role of context in nonviolent activism. All three express disappointment that Oklahomans overall do not appreciate nonviolence as a viable option. Sadness and even anger arise when they talk about people's unwillingness to even engage the issue as a topic of conversation. Russ attributes the closed-mindedness to the influence of fundamentalism. Mary notes that she is repeatedly told she is not a Christian because she does not believe in this fundamentalist way. Nevertheless, all three find ways to use this conservative context to expand the work of nonviolence. Russ points out that fundamentalists and progressives read the same Bible. Both Karen and Mary note that society's problems with violence toward women, children and animals affect all people, no matter what their theological stance. Understanding the context in which they live makes it possible for these activists to respond to the needs that are most pressing at the present time. Russ' career provides an interesting example as his primary areas of nonviolence shifted from civil rights in the 1960s to the ecumenical movement in the 1970s and 80s to interfaith work most recently. Karen came to the realization that her efforts need to be more concentrated in southeast Oklahoma after many years of national travel with Soulforce. Mary's activism reflects the myriad of concerns that have afflicted the world in the second half of the twentieth century—peace activism in the 1960s, anti-apartheid activism in the 1970s and 80s, and activism to end violence against women, children and the earth in recent years. All three show us that wise activism arises out of a deep appreciation for the context in which one lives. Certainly, knowing the local context almost goes without saying, but knowledge of the national and global contexts may be helpful in avoiding the individualism that shapes so much of personal spiritual life as well as the parochialism that so often creeps into communities of faith. Religious leaders of all types are well-placed to educate and enlighten people on these matters.

Although none of the three interviewees said much about this issue, I noticed that the physical body figures prominently in a spirituality of social activism. They each spoke about being arrested for their actions and beliefs; Russ even told of being physically beaten. The inherently physical nature of activism demonstrates that the body is an indispensable part of the spiritual life. Any attempts to teach about and for the spiritual life must take into account the physical dimensions, whether that be the body posture during prayer, awareness of the breath during meditation, or placing one's body in harm's way when taking a stand for justice and peace.

All three activists affirm the need for time apart from activity to create space for reflection. Russ goes running, Mary watches the birds, and Karen retreats to the lake. What they seek in those quiet moments varies—time to think about past actions, deciding what the next step will be, getting in touch with their own disappointments and failures, or listening for a word of encouragement from the Divine. These three have made a truly remarkable discovery, namely, that the down time is just as crucial as the time devoted to direct action, meetings, and protests. In fact, the reflection brings sharper focus to the action because it provides space for questioning, analysis and decision-making. Related to this need for time alone, of course, are the ways in which each of the interviewees also structures in time to reflect with others, through meetings, phone calls, visits, or, as Russ calls it, “linking with other people who are on this journey too.” Education for peace and justice ought to include ample opportunity for this particular type of reflection, both alone and in small groups. Much of it needs to be unstructured, and it should take the form that is most helpful to those taking part. Rather than always placing people in groups to talk about their experience, for instance, people should be encouraged to go for a walk, play basketball, knit, read a novel, or write in a journal.

All of this leads to a deep spiritual principle found in each activist’s story—learning to let go of the results of their actions. How challenging this practice must be for those who have dedicated so much to the cause of peace and justice. How does one keep from becoming discouraged when years of hard work yield very little tangible change? For each one the answer is “hope.” Mary reminds us “to be satisfied with small victories and small successes.” Karen’s tenacity is grounded in the hope that maybe two or three people will be changed. And Russ affirms that one can never know what is going on within another person and that the Divine is always at work in ways that we cannot see. A basic principle of nonviolence is the impetus to seek alternatives to violence. The interviewees’ ability to hope in human imagination and Divine presence gives energy to this principle in their lives. Cultivating the kind of hopeful yearning that motivates people both to become nonviolent activists and to do so without inordinately clinging to the results of their activism is a skill that takes wisdom and spiritual enlightenment. We as educators would do well to look to spiritual activists, like Mary, Karen, Russ, Mahatma Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Thich Nhat Hanh, Martin Luther King, Jr. and others for guidance and inspiration in walking this middle way between sustained effort and letting go.

Last, but by no means least, of the lessons derived from these stories is the importance of community in encouraging, nurturing and sustaining nonviolence as a way of life. All three stories are replete with examples of finding others of like mind, building community where it did not exist before, and creating opportunities for people to participate together in social action. Of all the things educators do, building community is one of the things we do best. We often find ourselves in teaching situations where people do not know each other well, and we show them how to “break the ice.” We put people to work on tasks they may be hesitant to undertake, but we show them through our enthusiasm that the effort is worthwhile. We enable people to make connections with one another and with available resources, and we do so in the hope that these relationships will make a difference in individual lives as well as in the world we all share. In the end, perhaps the greatest lesson Karen, Russ and Mary have to teach us is that none of us is in this world alone, and that the spiritual life—in both its contemplative and active forms—is lived in partnership with others and the Divine. These partnerships both shape and sustain our spiritual commitments, providing both the “roots” and the “shoots” planted in the soil of our beautiful earth.

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