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Nonviolence in Personal and Political Life

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Sometime in the early morning hours of September 11, 2001, Mohammed Atta and 18 of his colleagues rose from their beds. They began their day as I did, and as did many of you, with prayer. They asked God for strength. They asked that God would bless the day's activities, and they believed that what they were about to do was God's will.

Yesterday, our President launched an attack on Afghanistan. We are at war, and, with grim determination, the President assured us that justice will be done. He has prayed about this. He has asked God for strength. He has asked God to bless his activities, and he believes that what he is doing is God's will.

Somebody's not listening.

I believe, and perhaps you agree, that neither Mohammed Atta nor George Bush is in the will of God. For Mohammed and his friends, it's too late. Whatever is amiss in their relationship with God will be sorted out in words that we cannot hear, and within a Mercy that is too deep for us to fathom. For our President, and for our country, it is not too late, and it will never be too late as long as our country stands and as long as we are citizens. Whatever our President does, he does in our name. Whatever the CIA does, it does in our name. Whatever elite, Delta Force Commandos do in the hills of Afghanistan, they do in our name. It is our responsibility as citizens of this nation to bring our influence to bear on these decisions.

But how do we do that? When we pray for strength, for God's blessing; when we seek to be in God's will, how do we know that we aren't the ones who aren't listening. By what means, by what wisdom, by what path, can we come into a Presence, a Life, and a Power, that truly takes away the occasion for all war? What I wish to offer to you this evening is a simple model, a perspective, that I believe will help us in our discernment in the aftermath, not only of September 11th, but now also in the aftermath of the current attack on Afghanistan.

This perspective, as I'm sure you have already anticipated from the title of this talk, is nonviolence. Many of you here this evening are already familiar with its methods; many of us are Quakers, an historic peace church with a powerful Peace Testimony. Yet in spite of this there persists among many of us some profound misunderstandings about nonviolence. We assume, for example, that the continuum that runs from violence to nonviolence merely parallels that which runs from conflict to peace. To be violent is to be in conflict. To be nonviolent is to be at peace.

A truer picture, is one that understands nonviolence to be an extraordinarily effective means of waging conflict, and violence to be an extraordinarily ineffective means of establishing peace. Strategic nonviolent direct action disturbs the peace that is established through the forces of violence, because it understands that such peace is built on the backs of oppressed people, it understands that such a peace consists merely in the absence of overt conflict, and that it is sustained by weaving the forces of fear and repression into the very structures of the social order. Nonviolence seeks to bring to light the systemic violence that has driven all the wounding and bleeding, all the rage and fear into repression. Nonviolence disturbs this peace because it understands that such a peace really is no peace. It seeks to open a wound that has been covered over so that it can finally be healed.

So the model that I would propose is one that places the continuum that runs from conflict to peace perpendicular to the one that runs from violence to nonviolence, rather than parallel to it. This then produces

four quadrants that represent four perspectives. Along the top we see two opposing methods of waging conflict, which we will label “violent conflict” and “nonviolent conflict.” Along the bottom we see two opposing views of what constitutes peace, which we will label “violent peace” and “nonviolent peace.”

Each of these perspectives has its central insight, and a set of beliefs and experiences that supports its ideology. Each one has a political philosophy, a theology, and even a psychological theory to support it. And, each one has its gods and its devotional practices, in other words, a spirituality.

So, for example, if we begin in the upper left quadrant, the perspective that supports violent conflict, we find a central insight and body of experience that knows that, indeed, violence is effective. It is possible to control the behavior of others through fear and intimidation. And it is possible simply to kill those who are not intimidated. No one argues the point that yesterday’s missiles were effective in destroying their targets and, no doubt killing a number of Afghans in the process. Of course, Osama bin Laden and the Taliban live by the same philosophy. They know that it is effective to bring terrorism to U.S. cities. They have bombed our cities. We have bombed theirs. We have launched our war; they have declared Jihad. President Bush declares, “we will not falter, we will not waver, we will not fail.” Osama bin Laden declares, “the U.S. will not live in peace before peace reigns in Palestine. We’ve barely even begun our grieving, and already they must begin theirs.

Taken to its logical conclusion, this perspective devolves into a kind of fundamentalism that shuts out all other perspectives in the pursuit of its goals. George Kennan, a former Ambassador to the Soviet Union, reflects this kind of thinking in a statement written over 50 years ago, in which he says that “We have about 50% of the world’s wealth, but only 6.3% of its population.... In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity without positive detriment to our national security. To do so, we will have to dispense with all sentimentality and daydreaming.... We should cease to talk about vague... objectives such as human rights, the raising of living standards, and democratization. The day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts.” This is a chilling statement, and there is ample evidence that this kind of thinking has guided our foreign policy on up to the present. The disparity in population and wealth is now, of course, much greater. Clearly, this policy has been effective.

Violent conflict deals in war, torture, assassination, and “collateral damage,” a combination of words that I consider to be an insult to language. It is the perspective of those in our government who urge us to understand that the CIA must do its work with less cloak and more dagger. “We are dealing with dirty people,” Vice President Cheney recently stated, “We have to be prepared to get dirty ourselves.”

From this perspective, there is a disregard of nonviolence based in the misperception that nonviolence is non-action. There is also a disregard of spiritualities of love, mercy, and forgiveness based in the misperception that these things represent a kind of doormat spirituality. This was reflected in a sentiment expressed by Senator McCain just a few days after the September 11th attack who said “May God have mercy on your souls, the United States will have none.”

The spirituality of this perspective is based in its theology that centers in the worship of overt, coercive power. Christians who adopt this perspective make use of those passages from scripture such as Paul’s counsel to be obedient to government, or Matthew’s account of Jesus telling his followers to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s. Nevermind that these are lifted out as prooftexts, and that the worship of overt power is not at all what either Paul or Jesus intended, the point is that the state theologians take a prior commitment to the power of what Walter Wink has called the domination system, and interpret both God and scripture in its terms.

The psychological theory that belongs to this quadrant is one that imagines psychological processes to be strictly functions of chemistry where every depression is treated with Prozac. We find this view

growing in a culture where TV ads promote chemical solutions for everything from sleeplessness to sexual dysfunction. If we have any kind of psychological or emotional disturbance we should consult our doctor, not our politics. Pushed to its limits, this is a view that finds the ground of the Psyche to be purely physiological. The Chemical Psyche is all brain and no mind.

Of course, in instances of debilitating psychological disturbance, the chemical view can be life saving. But what if I belong to a group of people who are systematically shut out of access to the power and privilege that state religion seeks to maintain? Or, what happens if I do have access to that power and privilege but have begun a process of radicalization, so that I am beginning to awaken to an awareness of the evil that my government systematically visits upon whole populations of people? Perhaps then a depression might be more a matter of a very understandable and overwhelming sadness, or a helpless rage, or of what Joanna Macy has called “psychic numbing.” I may still need my Prozac, but what I need even more is support for the radicalization of consciousness.

In gaining empathy for oppressed people and in learning to become aware of privileges that I formerly took for granted simply because they were normative, I begin to move into an awareness of the perspective of this lower left quadrant, the one I have labeled “violent peace.” I become aware of a violence that was always there but that my privilege allowed me to ignore. The radicalization of those who enjoy access to privilege can come through love – expressed in the direct but caring confrontation by those whom we have shut out. Or, it can come through hate – such as that which we have just recently experienced at the hands of terrorists. Either way, if our social location is one of privilege, which is in varying degrees the case for everyone who enjoys the benefits of U.S. citizenship, then our journey will inevitably be one of being rudely awakened to realities that oppressed people have known all their lives. If there is any good news in the events of September 11th, it is that such an event is an invitation to freedom. It was brutal and harsh, but it was a call to open our eyes to wounds we would not see and to open our ears to cries we would not hear. We have been seduced by privilege and silenced by comfort. The cries of the oppressed are a call to break out of a prison that many of us didn’t know we were in.

That there is no prison more confining than the one we don’t know we’re in is, of course, a psychological insight as well as a political one. And the psychological theory that belongs to this perspective is one that uses political dynamics as a psychological metaphor. In my studies in psychology, one of the things that struck me powerfully, over and over again, was that I began to hear language that was very similar to the language that I heard in my study of the politics of nonviolence. It was a language of “conflict” and “repression.” I learned about “structures” and “systems,” I learned that there is a community within that parallels the community without, that the Psyche consists in the internalization of the relational structures that we’re born in to. It is made up of a constellation of figures, some of whom are oppressors, some oppressed, and that we must learn to differentiate ourselves from these influences in order to claim our freedom. The therapy of the Political Psyche calls for an awareness that violence is a systemic condition that, once internalized, is forced into the unconscious, where it causes immeasurable suffering. The Political Psyche simply mirrors the political reality. What is oppression in the political world becomes depression in the psychological world.

Both politically and psychologically the central insight that informs the perspective in this lower left quadrant is that the systems of oppression have become embedded in the very structures of the social order, and that the social order has become embedded in the Psyche. What I have called here “a violent peace” is, indeed, outwardly peaceful, for overt physical violence is no longer necessary when the same objective can be accomplished through structures of domination that are built into economic, educational, even religious institutions. The psychological parallel is seen in the depressed person who is outwardly peaceful. Then when they suddenly commit suicide, or take a gun to school and start shooting their classmates, all the neighbors comment on what a quiet kid he was and how he didn’t seem to have any problems. All the violence was inside.

The therapeutic treatment of the Political Psyche parallels the revolutionary upheaval that must sooner or later occur within the outward political system that also forces all the violence into repression through systems of domination. The theology that supports this revolution is Liberation Theology, many versions of which have been written from African-American, feminist, Latin, Asian, Gay-Lesbian, and many other perspectives. The key feature which unites the many varieties of Liberation Theology is a commitment to the “epistemological privilege of the oppressed,” a phrase which means that there is a perspective that belongs to a condition of oppression that is closer to the truth, than that perspective that belongs to those who benefit from a system of domination. The psychological parallel lies in a therapy that accords an epistemological privilege to that part of the self that lies buried under the structures of internalized oppression. It is often a painful and slow process of excavating that creative, authentic being whose joy and empowerment is crushed under the burdens of so much psychological weight. And when that authentic self does finally emerge, it is very often accompanied by a flood of rage and a passion for justice, energies that, once released, can fuel a life of creativity on many fronts, including advocacy for those who still suffer under oppression, whether they be racial minorities, women, gays and lesbians, or the earth itself.

Left under repression, however, this energy becomes destructive. Both politically and psychologically, it is the structures of domination that create the context for terrorism. If we want to understand the psychology of the terrorist, we must understand the psychology of oppression. For it is oppression that takes anger and boils it down into rage. It is oppression that takes rage and boils it down into hate. And it is oppression that takes hate, and under the right conditions, turns it into evil. Out of the many whose cries have been ignored too long, there will always rise up those few who would rather die in a single glorious moment of taking the oppressors’ boot off their neck than endure another minute of humiliation and defeat.

This is the kind of desperation that is behind a statement by Abu Shadouf, a Palestinian interviewed in the Christian Science Monitor, whose son was killed when he detonated a bomb at a bus stop killing two Israelis and wounding seven others. Asked about his loss, Mr. Shadouf said, “That is what is left to us. We have no tanks, no Apache helicopters. . . . The Jihad is the only way to achieve our freedom. Although it is tough and we pay with the blood of our children. . . . I am willing to sacrifice my seven sons so that one day justice can be achieved.”

Is God’s voice to be heard in these things? Does God ordain, inspire, and bless these acts? Many who view the world out of the experience of oppression are very clear that they are acting in the will of God, and they are well supported in scripture. Just a few days after the events of the 11th, I reached for my Bible looking for words of comfort. Instead, my eyes fell on the 28th chapter of Ezekiel:

Because your heart is proud, and you have said, “I am a god,” . . . [Because] you have gotten wealth for yourself, and have gathered gold and silver into your treasuries; by your great wisdom in trade you have increased your wealth, and your heart has become proud in your wealth – therefore, thus says the Lord God: Because you consider yourself as wise as a god, behold, I will bring strangers upon you, the most terrible of nations; and they shall draw their swords against the beauty of your wisdom and defile your splendor. They shall thrust you down into the Pit, and you shall die the death of the slain.

It is a very disturbing thought that it is God who sends these strangers to us, but the scripture plainly says that it is. Those that take this scripture at its word know that some hearts are too hard to be softened by love; they must be broken on the rock of suffering. Those of us who have been seduced by privilege and silenced by comfort have domesticated love into a blissful scene of forgiveness and harmony. Such a picture only deepens the wrath of the oppressed who know that the beloved community lies buried in the rubble of Afghanistan, that it is starved in the bellies of Iraqi children, and that it is blighted on the streets of Chester. Arnold Mindell, in a book called Sitting in the Fire, writes, “Privileged people say that community is created through loving one another. . . . For the disenfranchised, community begins with bathing the world in hatred.”

Those of us who would embrace an ethic of nonviolence must understand that its power is born in the fire of oppression not in the calm and reasonable philosophies of privilege. We cannot go from privilege to nonviolence without passing through the fire of rage. The attempt to do so yields a timid, hand-wringing pacifism that kills with sweet poison and suffocates the soul's passion for justice. In Frederick Douglass' words, "Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its waters."

But of course plowing up ground does prepare the soil, the colors are sharper after the lightening clears the air, and the ocean does return to its calm after a storm. Those who have found their rage and allowed it to have its voice are actually those who are most able to transform its enormous energy into a profoundly healing force. It is the rage that must be suppressed, that can't be allowed, that must be enacted. It is often the very people who imagine themselves the most peaceful who are the most violent.

I have been in correspondence with some people who have responded to a letter that I wrote to the President advocating nonviolence that was posted on the internet. Some of it has been supportive and some of it hostile. One woman wrote, "Doing away with the enemy is one sure way to feel secure in our USA. I am not a violent person, but sometimes eradication is the best answer." Obviously, she is a violent person. Unfortunately, she has "eradicated" this part of herself, robbing herself of any opportunity to reclaim the lost energy of her violence and to turn it into a passion for truth. Instead the "eradication" goes on, if not within, then without. Violence begets violence and the cycle grinds on.

But somewhere on the other side of rage there is a quietness that is deeper than silence. When Elijah stood upon the mount before God, the scripture says that "a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice (I Ki 19: 11-12)."

Martin Luther King was a man who walked through the fires of rage, fear, and hate and came out the other side. He struggled enormously with his rage and his fear. But out of the crucible of this struggle, he came to know the stillness on the other side of fire. And it was out of this stillness that he wrote,

The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate.... Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: Only love can do that.

Like Gandhi before him, King was not only a deeply spiritual man; he was also a shrewd strategist. He knew and taught the fundamental insight of nonviolence which is that all power, even of the most repressive regime, arises from the consent of the people. No regime can hold onto its repressive power without this consent. Listen again, to the words of Frederick Douglass: "Find out just what people will submit to and you have found out the exact amount of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them. . . . The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress."

All of the insights and aims of the violent revolutionaries are shared by nonviolent revolutionaries. Only the means have shifted not the ends. Conflict is waged by and on behalf of the oppressed. Nonviolent strategists make the same kinds of calculations that advocates of violence make, they merely judge nonviolence to be more effective.

Important as strategy is, however, there is danger in adopting this perspective exclusively. Gene Sharp, one of the more influential scholars of nonviolence, has pointed out that nonviolent campaigns succeed or fail based on strategic considerations, not on whether the participants share a particular political philosophy or even a commitment to pacifism. Others have followed this line of reasoning and have written histories of various nonviolent campaigns that deconstruct them into strategic analyses. This strategic focus of Sharp and others tends to dismiss the supporting theologies and psychologies as irrelevant. Christians who follow this position tend to see Jesus as one who teaches us more about politics than spirituality. Theology then becomes simply an exhortation to do what the strategists tell us to do.

Walter Wink is probably the most important current theologian writing about nonviolence who avoids this trap. However, he adopts a psychology that falls into a different one. Drawing upon Jung and his followers, Wink follows a line of psychological thought that leads to the Archetypal Psyche. While he understands that the forces that live inside the psyche are more than just an internalized social structure, indeed, that they are woven into the collective psyche, in his uncritical acceptance of the Jungian view, he makes the mistake of according too much power to the archetypes of domination. Indeed there are principalities and powers, if we understand these terms archetypally, but they are not the final ground of the Psyche. In that, those of us who draw strength from Christian scripture have reassurance from St. Paul whose eighth chapter of Romans assures us that “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

When we make the mistake of understanding psychology in purely archetypal terms, it becomes easy to insist that the forces of good and evil are woven into the collective in such a way that suggests that we are all subject to them in more or less determined ways. Jung even went so far as to suggest that both good and evil were to be found in the nature of God. Taken uncritically, this can lead to a spirituality that has no good news for the poor and no liberation for the captives.

When the theological, psychological, and strategic points of view come together in support of nonviolent direct action, if they become overly focused on being effective, they can lose sight of the fact that we are also called to be faithful. Either way, an exclusive focus on strategy, or an exclusive focus on faith, the danger becomes that those who want to be effective are not faithful, and those who want to be faithful are not effective. Put more bluntly, those who act don't pray, and those who pray don't act.

Holding these two together, however, allows us to make the shift to the lower right quadrant where the central insight is that, while nonviolence is certainly a means of waging conflict, it is also a means of building peace. It is in this quadrant that the focus shifts to nonviolence as the process by which God works through us toward the building of the Beloved Community. Because nonviolence is a dynamic process, it becomes clear that God's Beloved Community does not consist merely in the quiet picture of the lion lying down with the lamb. Rather its dynamism suggests that it is a creative community that thrives on the tensions of diversity where all voices are authentic expressions, and all voices participate in the emergence of a deep democracy in which even the trees clap their hands in the sheer joy of being themselves.

The theology of this position is apophatic, that is, it must be a theology of unknowing, a theology that recognizes that all naming of God both reveals and obscures, and that every attempt to use words is, in T.S. Eliot's phrase, “a raid on the inarticulate.”

The psychology of this position is a spiritual psychology for it recognizes that the final ground of the Psyche is not the physiology of brain, nor the internalization of social structures, not even the collective unconscious. Rather, a spiritual psychology understands that Psyche rises up out of the ground of God and that our every attempt to plumb its depths only leads us deeper into mystery. Here God's Dominion leads not to domination, but to domicile. “God is Home, we are in the far country,” as Meister Eckhart once wrote. Psychology and theology become the servants of spirituality, not its masters.

The politics of this position is a nonviolence that is both strategic and spiritually discerned, one of the best examples of which is Gandhi's march to the sea. For days his advisors were urging him to begin his march while he sat waiting. The strategists all assumed he had a grand plan in mind but when they asked him about it he merely said he was waiting to hear the voice of the Inward Teacher.

What we see in Gandhi and in Martin Luther King is a weaving together of theology, psychology, politics, and prayer. These things become indistinguishable in both their writing and their lives. And so must they be in ours. When we pray for strength, for God's blessing; when we seek to be in God's will, perhaps we should consider the possibility that nonviolent engagement is also God's mode of being in relationship to us, that it is God who disturbs our comfort, and upsets our settled convictions, that it is God who preaches good news to the poor and announces liberation to the captives both within us and around us. We pray for our enemies, not because we are righteous, but because they are our brothers and sisters, because they are mirrors of the poor and broken parts of ourselves, and because we know that if we want to rest with God we must also rest with them. For God has already set up camp with the dispossessed and we come Home to God only when we come home to them as well. God's house is not divided.

So let us fully claim and live into our solidarity with all those around the world who are not yet free. Let us bear witness not only against the terrorism of Osama bin Laden but also against the terrorism of George Bush, that they too might be awakened from the nightmares they help to create. For those of us who are Christian, we know that when Jesus said, "seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added," the promise was not only that food, clothing, and shelter would be among the added things, but also justice and mercy, and forgiveness 70 times 7. No one is free until we are all free, and Home is the place where we all gather around the hearth and tell the stories of our freedom. It is in the company of strangers that we step into that Presence, Life, and Power, that takes away the occasion for all war.