“Fannie Lou’s Shotguns: Is King’s Nonviolence Still Relevant”

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Tomorrow, we will see the presidential inauguration of a man who is, without hyperbole or metaphor, a convicted felon. We will see the formal installation of a government that takes as its leader a man who has said about protestors: “Knock the crap out of them” and “Can’t you just shoot them?” Who has called those who oppose him “vermin” and “thugs.” Who has said about immigrants: “Getting them out will be a bloody story.”

Tomorrow will be, in many ways, a cold day in the history of our country. But tomorrow is also Martin Luther King Day. A day when we celebrate the legacy of a man who preached equity and love; who gave his life to the calling of justice; who, above all else, and to the very end, believed in the power of nonviolence.

And here is the grace that we find in this moment. The example of that second man is the antidote to the first. In King’s vision of a beloved community, we find the very tools we need to dismantle the prisons of minds and bodies being built, even now, by greedy oligarchs.

But on this eve of what is to come, I have doubts. It was one thing for King and other Civil Rights activists to apply techniques of nonviolent resistance when shame was still an effective weapon against the forces of ignorance and greed. But is nonviolence still relevant when those in power seem incapable of feeling regret or remorse, beyond caring about shame, beyond any accountability?

Well, I can tell you that I am committed to the belief that nonviolent resistance is still relevant and that it is still our best hope for transformative change in hearts and minds.

By nonviolence, I don’t mean the simple lack of violence. I do not mean inaction. In 1967, King wrote,

“Structures of evil do not crumble by passive waiting. If history teaches anything, it is that evil is recalcitrant and determined, and never voluntarily relinquishes its hold short of an almost fanatical resistance. Evil must be attacked by a counteracting persistence, by the day-to-day assault of the battering rams of justice.”

Some might believe that simply by not being violent, they are doing good. I know I’ve heard some progressive friends talking about disengaging with politics or social activism for a while. Just hunkering down and “waiting out” the next four years. For some with marginalized identities who are the targets of violence, that might be the best choice.

But that isn’t nonviolent resistance. Because nonviolence is never passive. It isn’t “nice.” Nonviolence is the active negation of normalized violence. It disturbs the peace – the very crime for which King was arrested dozens of times – but the peace it disturbs is an artificial one. The peace of complicity.

Having said all that, I need to go back to that question I asked before: does nonviolent resistance still work in our current reality in which our elected (and non-elected) leaders literally seem to have no shame? Again, I say yes. But I also acknowledge some degree of complexity. Because even among nonviolent leaders and activists there is and has been disagreement: is nonviolence a technique or a principle, a product of the head or of the heart and spirit?

As much as King is painted as a saint-like figure today, having somehow emerged from the womb with the principle of nonviolence inscribed upon his soul, nonviolence as a life philosophy and theology, as a way of being, was something he developed over time.

In his rise to moral leadership, in the early days of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1956, King had armed bodyguards and kept guns in his house. One organizer described King's house as an "arsenal." At one point, a visiting journalist almost accidentally sat on a pistol.

After his home was bombed, his first impulse was to apply for a concealed weapon license (which was rejected). After that same bombing, an angry crowd of his supporters showed up fully armed, ready to fight. And that's when a Civil Rights group in New York City sent Bayard Rustin in to help with the situation. Rustin asked King if having guns was consistent with the philosophy of nonviolence and King answered that he believed it was, if the guns were used in self-defense. Rustin then pointed out to King that he had to understand that as a symbol of a movement based in nonviolence, he would need to move beyond thinking of nonviolence as just a strategy and accept it as a way of life. This was an important turning point for King, who would embrace nonviolence as a core principle and grow even stronger in that belief, up until his own violent death.

King and other Civil Rights leaders were incredibly effective in using nonviolent tactics as a means of social change. For 381 days, the Black community of Montgomery Alabama refused to ride segregated buses. And laws were changed. Leaders of the movement wore their best suits and bravely turned themselves in instead of being humiliated by being dragged off to jail. And many - including many White folks - were moved by their courage. When the KKK decided to do an intimidation caravan through a Black neighborhood, the residents sat on their porches drinking lemonade, as though they were watching a parade going by. The Klansmen gave up and left. Clearly, nonviolence was working. And it would continue to work all over the country, in sit-ins, boycotts, and peaceful demonstrations.

It must be said that many, maybe most, of the activists who participated in these actions saw nonviolence as a tool for change but not necessarily as a core way of being. Even the great Fannie Lou Hamer, a leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and a role model for many in the Civil Rights movement, kept loaded guns under her bed during the Freedom Summer of 1964 and, when asked how she had survived white supremacist threats responded that she kept a shotgun in every corner of her bedroom and any White man who even thought about throwing dynamite on her porch wouldn't ever "write his mama again."

King never condemned those who thought they needed to resort to violence to defend themselves in their own homes, but he also understood that it was better – much better – not to bring weapons to an organized protest. He understood that, practically speaking, no matter how well-

armed protestors might be, violence escalates, and any victory would be short-lived. But more than this, King understood that nonviolent direct action required vulnerability and the willingness to walk into harm's way, with courage and with love. More than thinking about all this strategically, he took it to heart.

In 1962, King was delivering a report at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference Convention in Birmingham Alabama. By that time, his house had been bombed, he'd been stabbed and shot at, been arrested many times, and had received death threats directed at him and his family. In the audience that day, sat an angry young White man named Roy James. James was violently opposed to integration and Black rights and a few years earlier he'd become a member of the American Nazi movement. As King wrapped up his report, James – a big man at 6'2" and over 200 pounds – jumped up onto the stage and slammed his fist into King's jaw. King fell back and James kept slugging him hard, in the neck and back. Despite being injured and bloodied, King did not fight back and at one point, this seemed to take James by surprise. For a moment, he dropped his hands and seemed to say, "I'm sorry." Several of King's associates tackled James and there were calls from the crowd to do him harm, but King said no. They had to pray for him instead. King then had a ten-minute conversation with the young man asking him why he'd wanted to hurt him. When King returned to the podium, he announced to the crowd that "The system we live under creates people like this. We're working for the day when never again will a person become as twisted as this one is."

Now, it would be wonderful if this story ended like this: James apologized to King. He repented for what he'd done, and his heart truly changed that day. But that's not what happened. James went back to his Nazi group and was awarded the Order of Adolf Hitler silver medal for attacking King. For all we know, James died a bitter, racist, and hate-filled man. King's nonviolence made no discernible difference in Roy James's life. But for the people in the audience that day, they saw a man who had so internalized the value of nonviolence that not even the instinct for self-preservation could overwhelm it. Rosa Parks was there to witness what happened and she was deeply moved, saying later "His restraint was more powerful than one hundred fists."

So again, I ask – is nonviolence still relevant, can nonviolent direct action still make a difference in our world? I believe it is, and it can. King's nonviolence might not have changed one angry man in Birmingham, but it changed other hearts all over the country and even the world. For the Civil Rights movement, nonviolence worked. And it has continued to work. In the Baltic countries where people joined their voices to sing beloved folk songs, gaining their freedom from Soviet oppressors. In East Germany, where organizers grew a weekly prayer for peace into protests of over a million people, who eventually took their sledgehammers and broke down the Berlin Wall. And most recently, in South Korea, where tens of thousands of people – from grandparents to young adults, families with young children and people with their dogs – flooded out into the streets and refused to stand for their president's declaration of martial law.

Nonviolent action does work. Not always. And not without setbacks and reversals. Not without pain. And yet, for myself, while I am determined to fight, I choose nonviolence as a practice for my heart. Because violence will never build bridges between hurting people. It cannot heal

deeply damaged relationships. It cannot undo the toxic symptoms of generational trauma that we find around us today, in wounded people who seek significance by striving to hurt others.

Tomorrow and in the days after, over all the bluster and the hate-filled noise, there remains an echo that cannot be silenced: King's voice and his prophetic words: "darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that."