

LIBERATING THE OPPRESSOR



Sami Awad on the Power of Nonviolence

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Nonviolence is empowerment. It allows individuals to recognize that they have choices, that they have the ability to deal with any issues of injustice they face individually or as a community.

Empowerment helps people decide to change the reality that they face, or the injustice that they face, in a way that will put a stop to the use of violence from the other side. It might not mean an immediate halt to the violence, but the longer you engage in nonviolence, the weaker the other side becomes.

Three essential factors help make the practice of nonviolence successful. First, people need to get to the point where they no longer accept to remain in the status quo. They need to recognize that they are living in an unjust situation. This isn't limited to the political level—it could also be at a social level, within a neighborhood or family, for example. But the first step is to acknowledge that something is wrong and to refuse to accept the situation any longer.

Second, people must understand that engaging in nonviolence requires a willingness to sacrifice. The practice of nonviolence involves a high level of commitment and dedication. When we talk about sacrifice in a political situation, for example, the community must be prepared to offer the highest sacrifice, namely itself, and in individual cases, people must be prepared to sacrifice

their own lives in a nonviolent struggle.

Third, people must realize that engaging in nonviolent resistance or activism doesn't necessarily mean that you will achieve your goal. Of course, that is true of violence as well: Violence doesn't guarantee success. Nonviolence is no magic formula, but it is a form of empowerment that enables individuals and communities to say that they have given their best without falling into the trap of escalating violence on either side of the conflict.

LONG-TERM INVESTMENT

Nonviolence addresses issues in a deeper and more real way than violence does. Violence doesn't resolve conflicts, although it does show immediate results. That's why so many people engage in violence, because they can see something concrete happening—somebody is being killed or the enemy is being destroyed, for example. But these are very short-term results.

Although nonviolence can in many cases also produce immediate results—though not as dramatic and therefore not as satisfying to the media, which prefer to cover violent acts rather than nonviolent activism—in the long term nonviolence supports the establishment of a continuous relationship—a more



Above: Palestinian men try to dialogue with Israeli soldiers at a nonviolent protest against road blocks near the West Bank village of Mazra'a al Sharqiya. Photo by: Oren Ziv/Activestills.org

Preceding page: Israeli soldiers use force against activists demonstrating nonviolently against the apartheid wall in Al-Ma'sara village. Photo by: Anne Paq/Activestills.org

positive and better relationship—among the factions that are engaged in the conflict. Violence can put an end to a certain stage of the conflict because of the misbalance of power, but it does not address the key issues of why the conflict has taken place or what can be done to build a stronger relationship for the future.

The power of nonviolence is that it exposes the injustice of the other. When you are empowered and you engage in nonviolence, you expose injustice not only to the world but also to the “enemy,” who in many cases do not grasp the injustice that they are engaging in because the structures that the “enemy” created to engage in violence are structures that become justified within the rationale of that community. Let’s take the Israeli occupation, for example: The building of the wall or the occupation of another people or the building of settlements is justified within the mindset of the Israeli public. But these are structures, not individuals.

The success of nonviolence is in how it addresses the humanity of each individual. For example, on a Friday demonstration against the wall that took place in Al Ma’sara, a village in the southern area of Bethlehem, a volunteer from Brazil approached an Israeli soldier who was, together with other soldiers, blocking the way of the demonstrators. The Brazilian asked him, “What is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict all about? The soldier said he couldn’t explain it. The volunteer then asked, “Can you recommend a book that would help me understand the conflict?” The soldier replied, “No one can understand the conflict in this area, even if you read many books.” The volunteer pushed further: “Why do you prevent people from resisting if you do not understand the conflict?” The soldier answered, “I am in the compulsory military service; if I refused to do it, I’d be in jail!”

Nonviolence breaks down structures of violence that support conflict. Nonviolence exposes the humanity in each individual, enabling the other side to see that something is wrong and that they also need to do something about it. Layers of mistrust, misperception, and fear have been laid over our shared humanity. As nonviolent activists, we have to dig into and expose those layers.

GROWING DEMAND

Since 2002 the Palestinian community has grown increasingly aware that armed resistance and violence have achieved nothing, and they are looking for alternatives. Even in times of deep hopelessness and despair in the Palestinian community they have not surrendered but are looking for real options to deal with the situation. The demand for our training and discussion groups has increased to the point where we have more demand than we are able to meet, so in 2006 we trained 27 nonviolence trainers to help us meet this demand by the Palestinian people for nonviolence. And we only train where we’re invited.



Palestinian, Israeli, and international activists remove concrete blocks that obstruct the entrance to the West Bank village of Al Ma’sara

Photo by: Oren Ziv/Activestills.org

But in spite of this growing interest, nonviolence is still at the very early stages in Palestine. Most of those who engage in nonviolence are in the villages, where they are directly affected by the wall or the expansion of settlements; there is very little nonviolent activism in Palestinian cities.

And at this point it is largely a reactionary movement. We are reacting to whatever the Israeli military or the settlers do to us, so if they are building a section of the wall we go and resist it; if they have a checkpoint we go and try to remove it; if the settlers have taken over land we go and try to maintain a presence on the land. But for nonviolence to be successful, it has to transform itself into a pro-active movement. That means we must decide which activities should happen and engage in them, and then we wait for the occupiers to react to us. Before they react we must engage in more activities, or a different set of strategies, or new approaches to nonviolence. This is what is missing, in my opinion, in the Palestinian context at this time.

WEAKENING STRUCTURES OF VIOLENCE

Nonviolence is more difficult to develop as a strategy than violence is, but once it is developed and practiced it results, in my opinion, in greater success. The teachings of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. demonstrate the need to develop creative ways of dealing with conflict, and they distinguish between humans and structures; while humans might support structures that promote violence, these structures can and should ultimately be broken. In the Palestinian context, if we engage in violence against the occupation, we only end up strengthening its structures of violence and justifying their continued existence. This is part of the analysis that Gandhi was able to work on in India and Martin Luther King, Jr. in the United States. King said, for example, that there is racism in the United States, but that racism is not innate, it is taught. It is structures that teach

racism to individuals and it is structures that we need to fight.

Nonviolence does not just liberate the oppressed, it also liberates the oppressor from the structures of violence that they have created, by making the oppressor aware of the injustice, by exposing the injustice, and, more importantly, by providing alternatives to structures of violence. You can't just destroy something without offering something better for the future. Nonviolence does that.

Last fall I traveled to Colombia for the first time and went on a pilgrimage with a strong and committed group from the Tamera Peace Community, who stand in solidarity with the San Jose de Apartado community of about 1,500 individuals who, 12 years ago, declared themselves a peace community and continue to refuse to align with any violent groups or militias, neither governmental nor guerrilla.

The pilgrimage was an incredible experience for me and helped me realize that we are connected to each other globally as one family. I realize now more than ever that violence somewhere affects all of us. Even if the tools, mechanisms, and strategies of violence in Colombia are different from those in Palestine, the underlying causes and eventual outcomes are the same, and they destroy (directly or indirectly, intentionally or not) the physical and moral integrity of God's creation.

As Dr. King said, "Where there is an injustice somewhere ... there is an injustice everywhere." No matter where you live, you are affected by the violence that the smallest and most isolated villages in Colombia, Palestine, Zimbabwe, or Indonesia experience. But it is also true that healing violence and injustice somewhere will also result in helping to heal violence and injustice everywhere. When we begin to see violence and greed as a global epidemic that needs global healing, we will then begin to develop the tools, models, and mechanisms that will aid in real healing.

But the first step must be taken on the local scale. Individuals, communities, and even nations that face daily violence and oppression must begin to free themselves from the bonds of victimization, narratives that lead to dead ends, and internal actions of self-destruction. This will create the opportunity for real healing to begin. We can no longer ask, beg, or even assume others will save us if we are not ready to risk everything to save ourselves. We cannot make others responsible should we choose not to be responsible ourselves. ■

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