



### Active Nonviolence

*Notes on one person's understanding of nonviolence, based on the thoughts, writings and experiences of many – especially the work of Jean and Hildegard Goss-Mayr.*

Violence takes many forms: psychological, verbal, social, political, physical and economic. A situation may be extremely violent - oppressive, cruel - without there being any apparent conflict. When oppressed people are too hopeless or unaware or fatalistic to struggle, they submit silently. When something happens to end their submission, the conflict begins. This conflict needs to be engaged in, in order for the violence of injustice to be removed and for a better situation to be achieved. To remain passive in the face of violence is to collude with it, while counter-violence perpetuates the violent dynamic.

Nonviolence is the approach of those committed to changing a violent situation by nonviolent means, respecting and caring for their opponents, working for a solution which respects the needs of all protagonists. It can be defined as a philosophy, an approach to life, and to personal, social and international relationships. It also describes the actions or behaviour based on this approach.

Nonviolence is active, not passive, seeing individuals as responsible for themselves and for each other. Commitment to nonviolence presupposes a belief - not necessarily religious - in the positive potential of the human condition, and of human beings individually and collectively: a belief that each contains the potential for good and has a

conscience which can be touched; that the humanity of each demands respect, even when their behaviour does not; that respect, for self and others, holds the greatest power for positive change, whereas violence, in any form, leads to destruction and more violence.

The philosophy of nonviolence is based on the understanding that the outcome of an action will reflect the nature of that action; that in fact the action is itself an outcome. When we act, or react, violently, we perpetuate violence and violate ourselves as well as the other. When we behave nonviolently, our actions already constitute, in however small a part, the makings of a new relationship or direction. Respect, therefore, should govern both our goals and the processes by which we aim to achieve them.

To struggle to overcome violence is to risk harm. While in violent combat the harm is inflicted on the adversary, in nonviolence it is accepted, if necessary, by the nonviolent actors as a consequence of their commitment, in order to break the cycle of violence. The aim of nonviolent struggle is to overcome violence and injustice rather than to win victory over an adversary, and to achieve an outcome which meets the fundamental needs of all concerned, so opening the way for longterm reconciliation.

### Methods of nonviolent action

Dialogue, sincere communication, should be the first approach and a constant intention for those seeking change through nonviolence. Even at times when dialogue seems a distant possibility, it should remain the aim of all action taken.

Public action is needed when those in power are unready to enter into dialogue, in order to raise public awareness of the nature of the injustice and to build support for the campaign. Marches, street theatre, leafletting, vigils, fasts; sit-ins or blockades, or other actions which have a direct effect on what is being done, or symbolic actions against some specific manifestation of the injustice. These actions sometimes entail civil

disobedience or the deliberate contravention of laws related to the injustice. Noncooperation with the unjust policy can also be a powerful form of resistance - for instance if seamen refuse to carry nuclear waste and dump it at sea, or if consumers decide to boycott certain goods. Different lists have been made of categories of nonviolent action, but whatever the action, the following points will be relevant:

- Actions should be based on sound analysis and strategy, with careful estimation of their likely effect.
- Imagination can be a powerful aid to communication; it is not enough to be rational: people need to be awakened if they are to be changed.
- If actions are intended to attract media attention, careful thought needs to be given to how they may be interpreted and presented. Who are the intended recipients of the message and what will be the likely effect on them?
- The quality of detailed preparation for the action will be a major factor in determining its likely outcome.
- The inner preparation of participants as individuals, and the unity of their purposes and actions as a group will be vital.
- Participants need to have calculated the likely and possible costs of their action and to be prepared for them, both morally and practically. Launching an action plan: whom to approach Once the goals of an action plan are clear, the next thing to decide is who needs to be approached, how, and in what order:

1. To join in the core group;
2. for support;
3. to reach out to;
4. to inform (let them know what you are doing - transparency);
5. for publicity (if and when wanted);
6. to help with practical needs, such as a venue, transport of materials.

### **Common fears and risks in nonviolent action for change:**

1. Not getting the hoped for response: e.g. goodwill and positive aims misunderstood as disloyalty; negative response or lack of co-operation from potential partners on the other side.
2. Potential hostility within own community: e.g. disapproval, isolation and loss of friends, name-calling and abuse, physical threat and danger; fear of these things, and self-doubt.
3. Wider security situation: e.g. restricted movement and the absence of the rule of law and or physical protection. It is important that these fears and risks should be acknowledged and ideas developed for addressing and minimising them, at both practical and psychological levels (see separate handout on 'civil courage').

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