

Talk on non-violence

Bolivia, May 2002

A few years ago, a war broke out between Peru and Ecuador. They were fighting for some border territories where multinationals were into oil exploitation. My friend José, an anthropologist, who knew the area and the Quechua culture, decided to oppose the war. While the society became crazier and the nation called its sons to go and fight, José raised his voice to call for peace, to call for non-violence, to reject the government that was calling for war. My friend was accused by many of betraying the nation. In Lima, my friend Madelein, a great woman with whom I've shared my search since we were very young, in the moment at which the war started, printed a newspaper in which she denounced that this was not a war between Peruvians and Ecuadoreans, but rather a war between multinationals to see who got to keep control of the oil. Madelein also called for a stop to the aggression against Ecuador. When the wave of violence erupted, two of my best friends were accused of betrayal to the Nation.

A few years before this happened, my friend Tomy and I published a pamphlet whose first line read: "We reject the military dictatorship, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the dictatorship of capital." It was a pretty daring pamphlet to publish, considering that we were in the full Pinochet dictatorship at the time, and the soviet union was still the Soviet Union. Of course it meant jail by the military, being treated as CIA agents by the Communist Party and accused of being leftists by big capital. Years passed, the military dictatorship fell, the dictatorship of the proletariat was but an anecdote that only a few remember and the dictatorship of capital today has families, companies and countries asphyxiated, paying debts and interests that will never end.

The crisis that we are living is not one more crisis like so many that have occurred before. It's a highly dangerous crisis for human life, in which all the beliefs with which we have built our world are falling. The ideologies have fallen, the nation state has been privatized, the politicians have lost all credibility, as have the religious institutions, and the newspapers publish "unbelievable" news. Everything that we believed to be natural truths, to last forever more, is being swept away by the hurricane of history. Ideologies and beliefs are fatally wounded or they are carried along to that sickness called fanaticism and fundamentalism. The religion of money is still standing, with its banks, the real temples of decadence, but that one, the last of the dictatorships, suffered a severe blow in Argentina when just recently the banks themselves stole the people's last dollars in savings.

Crisis is not something negative. Crises are those moments in which those things that are stable and fixed become destabilized in order to pass to a new state, to change stage. We are in a big crisis, and it is for that reason a great opportunity to find a response that transforms the human being and society. Crises are moments of growth, and if individuals or organizations find the right responses, if they adapt to the environment, they re-establish the balance and continue their evolutionary path. Of course, if they do not do this they run the risk of disappearing.

In all this crisis, there is a belief that is still standing and that is the belief in violence. There is faith in violence. It's believed that the only way to respond to violence is with more violence. We are destroying ourselves and this belief remains standing. Perhaps the time has come to lose faith in violence and to build a new society. Violence has accompanied us since ancient times. I think that these 10,000 years in which we've been circulating around the planet still correspond to prehistory.

Since the times of the Paleolithic hunter and gatherer, to the Neolithic agrarian who domesticated plants and animals, to the modern human being who built complex societies in different civilizations, violence has been the principal characteristic of this whole stage. Leaving prehistory doesn't mean to destroy people with missiles instead of with sticks and stones; leaving prehistory doesn't mean to exploit people with debts and misery instead of with whips and slavery. To finish with prehistory means to leave behind violence and the domination of one human being over another. It has to do with a jump in consciousness, a change of mentality and a change as well in the system of relations and in social organization. We are talking about a simultaneous personal and social transformation. In order to leave prehistory we need not only a society of greater justice and liberty, we also need an internal change, an awakening in the consciousness to a state of greater lucidity and amplitude. Non-violence is usually considered a naïve position. Today, when there is no way of stopping the spiral of violence, when soon we will have world dictatorships trying to establish order and peace, when terrorism will have nuclear and chemical capability, when common delinquency takes on mass characteristics. Today, after the failure of 20 civilizations and the failure of the West in which neither Napoleon, Stalin, Truman, Franco, Pinochet, Castro or Che, and so many others who believed and believe that through violence a better society can be achieved, I say that violence corresponds to a very infantile and primary stage of humanity and that we had better grow up before it's too late. A system in which 80% of humanity, 4 billion people, suffer through lack of health, education, food, and shelter – I think it's a lot of people, too many people for somebody to raise their hand and give us some kind of lecture. This society, based on power and violence, is producing a lot of pain, and because of that it does not work, and we should organize and change it.

Violence is the response that we give when fear invades the soul. Violence is the response to the fear that is in our own consciousness.

The greater my fear, the more violent my behaviour.

The more insecure the society, the more violent will be its organization.

At the root of suffering is fear. At the root of depression, anxiety, meaninglessness, at the root of egoism, at the root of my desires, there is fear. Fear of sickness, fear of loneliness, fear of poverty, fear of death.

Accompany me in a brief exercise.

Observe within yourselves situations in which you might be suffering.

In the family, at work, or with the couple. Ask yourselves now what is the fear that is at the root of that suffering. Very well. Consciousness tries to distance itself from suffering and tries to escape from fear. If there is something intolerable it's to experience fear. Consciousness seeks to negate it, forget it, it flees from that lived experience. When consciousness touches fear, violence overtakes it. Like this, consciousness flees, we flee from that existential experience. Fleeing from one's fear has become our daily life. Forgetting one's own life, forgetting the meaninglessness in which I live, forgetting it in television, in celebrity gossip, in the soap opera, forgetting it in the feeling of power I get when one soccer team beats another soccer team.

Forgetting life with drugs and alcohol. The more we try to forget fear, the more vigorously it grows, and in our consciousness along with it grows violence.

How can we overcome fear, how do we liberate ourselves from the violence in our own consciousness and how do we humanize the society in which we live? It's not possible to root out violence as if it were a cancer. Neither is it possible to eliminate it with greater violence. We've done that for thousands of years. Violence is a special kind of creature – all action that is done to it with its own substance makes it grow. Violence grows by destroying and reaches its greatest development when it has destroyed everything.

So, what do we do?

Imagine that to one side of a monstrous and violent system, I create something else, something very small, but based on another system of relations and values, something completely different, based on the human, on non-violence, freedom of beliefs and solidarity. For the monstrous system it would be very difficult to detect something that functions outside its scheme; something that does not function based on power, violence and money.

In reality, it would appear to it as a picturesque community and it would not register any kind of danger there. Now imagine that that little model of society went on growing and expanding right within that monstrosity. Imagine that that creation grew within the monstrous system despite the fact that the system continued increasing the violence and destroying itself at the same time. Were this possible, we would create a movement within this violent society that develops at a relatively great speed, since it grows in the measure that the system becomes destabilized.

Now, to end personal violence it is necessary to make internal faith within oneself grow. That faith, that force is within the human being, inside you and inside me. Within each one of us there is something very great that does not show itself, because it is covered by fear and suffering. When we decide to change our lives and take the path of non-violence, we will make contact with that great thing that lives within the human being.

That internal faith which at first we experience tenuously, grows little by little and makes violence recede. And so, in order to make violence recede we have to make an element grow within the human being and within society that is capable of diluting and reorienting the massive wave of violence that erupted at the beginning of time.

We have to make grow, in the interior of society, a non-violent social movement and we have to make faith grow in the interior of the human being.

How do we do this?

The first step is personal and each person has to take it. The first step is a decision that each person does intimately.

Accompany me in the following meditation. To meditate, launch the sentences that I will read to the depths of your mind and heart.

"Do I want to overcome the violence that is within me?"

If this is so, affirm silently: "Yes, I want to overcome my internal violence."

"Do I want to help others overcome suffering?"

If this is so, affirm silently: "Yes, I want to help others leave their suffering."

"Do I believe it is possible for me and my people to act without violence?"

Try to affirm in your heart: "Yes, it is possible to act without violence."

Now to end this reflection, take contact with your force and your internal faith and feel their expansion.

Well friends, these were the sentiments I wanted to transmit to you. Everything is in crisis, but violence as a way of solving problems is also in crisis. This crisis opens the possibility to leave prehistory and begin to build a warm human history. Violence is a response to the fear in a person and in society. It is possible to make violence recede by making faith grow within the human being and by making a social movement of solidarity and non-violence grow within this society. Finally we have to make the first step, and that is a personal decision to overcome the violence in one's own consciousness and to help others overcome it as well.

Thank you very much, and for everyone, peace, force and joy.

Dario Ergas

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R. Verdecchia, Council 12.*