

Nonviolence in a Violent World

by Dario Ergas

This is a difficult subject. I ask within me for inspiration – for my words and our understanding to be wrapped in inspiration.

Let's consider the problem. If they attack me, if they criticize me, if I am the victim of all kinds of aggression, how can I defend myself without using violence? How can I hold their violence in check if I do not oppose it with a similar force? If someone powerful wants to squash me or my group, and on top of that they're slandering me in the mass media, what else can I do but somehow try to stop the violence? What can the weak do against the violence of the strong?

Nobody wants violence, but since violence is imposed on us, a violent response is always justified. Violence that is used to restrain violence has the taste of legitimacy. We hear people say, "Nonviolence is fine among civilized people, but when it's a question of dealing with a bunch of thugs, you nonviolent types better get out of the way and let us set things straight." I believe this is more or less the issue in question: How to be nonviolent in the middle of a violent world?

Violence is not simply one more aspect of our lifestyle that we can let go of just like that. It's a form of social action that comes from way back in human history; it's a reaction to fear – a very natural, animal reaction. Violence is deeply rooted in us, and it's not a matter of eradicating it by decree. The entire organization of society is based on violence - violence that is monopolized by the state, and ultimately by the army. When societies panic, armies react. When a person is gripped by fear, they're also gripped by violence. We can claim to be good, peaceful people, but if something suddenly puts what is mine in danger, threatens what gives me stability, sneaks up on me to snatch what is mine, violence emerges from the tectonic layers of my consciousness and a violent simian takes possession of my body and rushes to react. If what attacks me is very powerful, then I restrain my violence, transforming it into hatred and vengeance, and I seek revenge. Ensnared within our culture, revenge waits to satisfy itself at every opportunity.

Or are there some among us - immersed in this violent society - who can say they are free of violence? Who do not practice violence?

When nonviolence first originated, a certain Mr. Mahavira, a contemporary of Buddha, decided to take it to its ultimate extreme. And so he was unable to walk, for fear of stepping on any ants that might get underfoot. In this way, hardly feeding himself and barely moving for 30 years, he reached illumination. Even today some Jains, heirs to the teachings of Mahavira, sweep the floor in front of them before stepping on it.

If we really wished to avoid exercising violence while living in a violent system, we would be unable to pay wages or get paid, we would have to live outside all state regulation, we would have to refuse to pay taxes because taxes are how they arm themselves to the teeth, etc. We would have to completely isolate ourselves from society and undoubtedly instead of calling us mystics they would lock us up in their insane asylums.

Violence is everywhere. Exploitation, manipulation, and discrimination are also forms of violence – violence that accumulates inside its victims until it physically explodes. The interest rates for health insurance, education and housing are also a form of violence. When there are riots in the soccer stadiums, among religious ethnic groups in China, or in the Peruvian Amazon, we are surprised, because we don't see the accumulation of these other forms of violence to which whole peoples are subjected. The opposite side is always the violent one, while your own side is the just one that was driven to violence as a last resort.

It's not easy to change this, it's a belief that is very deeply rooted. We intuit that violence is not part of what it truly means to be human, but we suspect we have dragged it with us since the time of our hominid ancestors, and we don't see how we can let go of it and leave it behind. Besides, what reason would we have to do so? Like it or not, humanity has come this far and it hasn't had to get rid of violence. It's been possible to control it, to channel our violent impulses. We've established a justice system that lets us use violence with a certain rationality. Sometimes people die when violence gets out of control, but we will all die someday, for one reason or another. We would have to have a very powerful reason to change the violent direction of our consciousness.

From time to time this shroud of suffering and pain that covers our life is pierced by rays that illumine spaces of freedom, of love, of friendship, of solidarity – of connection with you, you who are so important, sometimes much more than important. Sometimes a new world appears before my eyes, and I hardly recognize myself. It seems like I'm not myself, but happiness overwhelms me and that makes me think that not everything is fear, not everything is suffering, not everything is violence. If only that ray that once in a while pierces me might widen the gap in the shroud that traps me and traps us all, if only that were possible, everything would be very different. If only that were possible, life would have a meaning worth living for.

We are talking about the fundamental themes of human life. Reflecting on violence makes us confront the non-meaning of life, and if my life has no meaning and if everything ends with death, I won't have enough energy to attempt this leap for humanity.

Silo, who has taken a central role in the contemporary formulation of this problem, began his message in 1969 explaining that a mantle of violence had been spread over all humanity and that there was no way to get out from under it. He said that violence is in our own consciousness, that its root is suffering, and that we suffer out of fear of loneliness, fear of illness, and fear of death. That we try to deal with our fears by focusing on our desires, our illusions and our hopes, and that the more disproportionate our desires are, the greater our suffering and our violence. That is how Silo began his teaching, and then he brought in the parable of the cart of desire, whose wheels were called Pain and Pleasure, and the horse called Necessity, who became exhausted when the cart of desire was overloaded. Over the years, these phrases were developed broadly into a philosophy, a psychology, and a spiritual current.

Fear, nothingness, and death are the substance of violence, they are what violence is made of. But being human is not based on fear. What gives meaning to the human being is not death, but the need for immortality and transcendence. If the spark of immortality were kept in the

human heart, like a dormant coal that needed a breath of air to rekindle it, and if this breath suddenly brought it to life, and it wished to emerge from its deep world to touch the human world... If it really mattered what one did, because certain actions kindle the inner flame and others put it out... If the human being were the tinder in which the divine spark nests and human action were the stone that ignites it, if this inner fire could become so intense that it illuminated the whole world I see... If everything were bathed in an essential fire of meaning that filled me from head to toe, I would never want to extinguish it. An act becomes moral when it kindles the divine spark deep within the human being.

Nonviolence is a way of life, a search for the sacred, a manifestation of what is truly human. It is not simply a political act – it is above all a moral act, the search for a new human being, the presence of the future, an encounter with a being who does not yet exist. Nonviolence is the force that will transform the world, because it has transformed me so that I do not become what I am fighting against.

It keeps getting harder for me to talk about this issue, what can I say that will be sincere? I can't give a lecture about it, I don't know how I would act if I were put in a situation of violence. Nor are we talking about dogma, I can't demand that others act the way I want them to, according to my way of acting. Every day I feel pressured and obligated to take sides, to take positions I don't like; every decision, every act is a reference, a model, for someone who is close to me, and for those who are observing me, my decision is important. I'm no judge of what others should do, I'm not at all sure I am right, and I don't know what is best for others and for society.

I'm looking for something else. There is something else, and I want that something else to be expressed through my actions. I don't want to exercise violence, I don't want to be part of any group that exercises it, and I'm trying to find my way, even though I often find myself trapped in a faction. I want something new to come through my actions, something different, the best of feelings. I don't want to cooperate with any knowledge that leads to destruction. I want to leap over my resentment and I want it to be the most beautiful feelings that are expressed when I am with others. I don't want to impose my own truths, but I want to feel free to act in accordance with them. In the midst of the pressures of daily life, I want to find the inner freedom to act as a human being, to recognize the human in others, and to call forth the human, to summon it up, through my actions. And if it's not possible to make it appear in the present moment, I want my action to leave a track that can be recognized in the future, an action that says it is possible to express the human.

But I cannot choose for you, just as you cannot choose for me. Just as I cannot choose for you, neither can I judge you – but if you ask me to accompany you, do not ask me to endorse what you do. I will choose for myself and I will make a void to power, I will improve myself so that I am no longer interested in power, I will overcome my desire for power, I will learn to retreat and I will try to have my actions demonstrate something that does not yet exist, but that will exist in the future. My actions will announce the world to come, the human being of the future.

I can hardly hear the steps of the World March for Peace and Nonviolence – they are soft, they do not resound like the drums of war. These are soldiers who are not going to conquer

anyone. But in their steps I recognize the echo of what we are searching for, what we long for, something that makes life worth living.

Thank you my friends.

This talk was given at the Goethe Institute in Santiago, Chile, July 18, 2009 on the 17th Anniversary of the Laura Rodriguez Foundation. In 1989, Laura Rodriguez was the first congresswoman of the Humanist Party to be elected in Chile and the first Humanist Party parliamentarian to be elected worldwide. She was recognized for her relentless work in favor of human rights, especially the rights of women and the original peoples. Rodriguez died of a brain tumor in 1991, and the Laura Rodriguez Foundation was founded the next year to carry out projects in the fields of psychology and education that fight against discrimination through nonviolence.

[Translated from the Spanish by Kurt Heyl and Trudi Richards.]