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How to Live Nonviolently

To create peace in our lives--and our world--we need to be able to sit with frustration and hold the tension of opposite views. By Parker J. Palmer

Violence of every shape and form has its roots in the divided life, in that fault line within us that cracks open and becomes a divide between us. But violence is often more than intra- and interpersonal. Just as the physical violence called war requires massive institutional support, so most forms of non-physical violence are backed by institutional arrangements that allow it and even encourage it.

From colleges that treat win-lose competition as the best way to make students learn, to medical schools that turn suffering patients into abstract "objects" of study, to religious institutions built on the idea that they alone know the mind of God, to economic institutions that put the rights of capital ahead of the rights of people, to political institutions premised on the notion that might makes right, to cultural institutions that give superiority to people of one race or gender--in all these ways, and more, violence is woven into the very fabric of our collective existence.

The bad news is that violence is found at every level of our lives. The good news is that we can choose nonviolence at every level as well. But what does it mean, in specifics, to act nonviolently? The answer depends on the situation, of course, and a thousand situations might yield a thousand answers. Yet running through all of these answers we will find a single "habit of the heart": to be in the world nonviolently means learning to hold the tension of opposites, trusting that the tension itself will pull our hearts and minds open to a third way of thinking and acting.

In particular, we must learn to hold the tension between the reality of the moment and the possibility that something better might emerge. In a business meeting, for example, I mean the tension between the fact that we are deadlocked about what to do and the possibility that we might find a solution superior to any of those on the table. In a post-September 11 world, I mean the tension between the fact that we are engaged in the endless cycle of war and the possibility that we might someday live in a world at peace.

Of course, finding a third way beyond our current dilemma may be possible in theory, but it often seems unlikely in life. In a contentious business meeting, a better solution may well exist, but the pressures of ego, time, and the bottom line make it unlikely that we will find it. In a world at war, peace may be our dream, but the grim realities of greed, fear, hatred, and doomsday weaponry quickly turn that dream into a delusion.

The insight at the heart of nonviolence is that we live in a tragic gap--a gap between the way things are and the way we know they might be. It is a gap that never has been and

never will be closed. If we want to live nonviolent lives, we must learn to stand in the tragic gap, faithfully holding the tension between reality and possibility.

I harbor no illusions about how hard it is to live that way. Though I aspire to be one of those life-giving people who keeps a grip on both reality and hope, I often find that tension too hard to hold--so I let go of one pole and collapse into the other. Sometimes I resign myself to things as they are, sinking into a life of cynical disengagement. Sometimes I embrace a dreamy idealism, living a life of cheerful irresponsibility that floats above the fray.

Deep within me there is an instinct even more primitive than "fight or flight," and I do not think it is mine alone. As a species, we are profoundly impatient with tensions of any sort, and we want to resolve every one of them as quickly as we can.

For example, we are in a meeting where a decision must be made. As we talk, it becomes clear that people disagree on the matter, and our frustration grows as we listen to various options. Uncomfortable with holding the tension of conflicting viewpoints and wanting to "get on with it," we call the question, take a vote, and let the majority decide what course we should take.

The tension has been resolved, or so it appears. But by cutting the exploration short, we have deprived ourselves of a chance to find a better way by allowing opposing ideas to enrich and enlarge each other until a new vision emerges. And by letting the majority decide which way we should go, we often drive the tension underground, creating an embittered minority who devote themselves to undermining the decision we thought we had made.

Sometimes our instinct to resolve tension quickly is played out on a much larger stage. When it became clear what had happened on September 11, 2001, the people of the United States were caught in a tension between the violence that had been done to us and what we would do in response. Of course, the outcome was never in doubt. We would respond by wreaking violence on the perpetrators--or on stand-ins who could be made to look like the perpetrators--because that is what nation-states do.

But we had an alternative: we might have held that tension longer, allowing it to open us to a more life-giving response. If we had done so, we might have begun to understand that the terror Americans felt on September 11 is the daily fare of a great many people around the world. That insight might have deepened our capacity for global empathy. That empathy might have helped us become more compassionate and responsible citizens of the international community, altering some of our national policies and practices that contribute to the terror felt daily by people in distant lands. And those actions might have made the world a safer place for everyone, including us. Had we held the tension longer, we might have been opened to the kinds of actions proposed by William Sloane Coffin -- actions that place us in the gap between reality and possibility:

We will respond, but not in kind. We will not seek to avenge the death of innocent Americans by the death of innocent victims elsewhere, lest we become what we abhor. We refuse to ratchet up the cycle of violence that brings only ever more death, destruction, and deprivation. What we will do is build coalitions with other nations. We will share intelligence, freeze assets, and engage in forceful extradition of terrorists if internationally sanctioned. [We will] do all in [our] power to see justice done, but by the force of law only, never the law of force.

Instead of holding the tension and being pulled open to options such as these, we allowed ourselves to be caught on the horns of the "fight or flight" dilemma. Since "Americans never turn tail," we fought and, as of this writing, are still fighting. But we do not feel any safer today than we did on September 12, 2001. We have simply acquiesced to fear.

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