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For the UN International Day of Peace

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Peace Theory and Civil Rights

No justice; no peace.

In my formulation of just peace theory, there are three broad categories which contains the ten just peace principles – truth, respect, security. Respect for the dignity of humanity and respect for the integrity of all of creation is an important element in just peacemaking. The imperative to advance democracy, human rights and religious liberty is a just peace principle that falls into the category of respect.ⁱ Civil rights is an important aspect of human rights. Both emerge from a respect for human beings. Human beings are social creatures; we rely on society for our survival. We organize ourselves into political and economic states that allow us to bring order into our lives. We live under both explicit and implicit social contracts. Civil society creates laws that outline a person's privileges and obligations in a government, and unwritten laws dictate mores. Certain underlying presumptions about persons and groups of persons find expression in the social contract. However, social contracts are not always just. They do not always respect the personhood or the dignity of all its citizens. They do not always respect the personhood or the dignity of people in other states. When this is the case, some people find themselves compelled to work for justice, to work toward a more perfect social contract. This is necessary because where there is no justice, there can be no peace.

Justice work begins at the root of the grass roots. It is bottom-up work to end the structural and personal violence that diminishes the lives of ordinary human beings and that diminishes creation itself. It is the work of justice that brings the civil rights movement together with the peace movement.

August 12 is civil rights day in the countdown to the UN International Day of Peace and Global Ceasefire,

September 21. Such a day to commemorate the intersection of civil rights and peace is appropriate. Each can lay claim to some of the same people, tactics, philosophy and way of life.

Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King JR are both icons of nonviolence. King was deeply influenced by the idea of Satyagraha (truth/love force). It is a technique of noncooperation. It is a philosophy of nonviolence. It is a way of life that understands the power of truth and love. Using the technique of noncooperation during the Montgomery bus boycott, King came to believe in nonviolence as a way of life. He understood that nonviolence would not work an immediate miracle on those who held power and who benefit from oppressive systems. Nonviolence, however, changes those suffering from the oppression. In an essay, "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence", King writes: "It gives them new self respect; it calls up resources of strength and courage that they did not know they had."ⁱⁱ

Later, King extended his philosophy of nonviolence to include conflicts between nations. At one point in his thinking he saw war as a negative good necessary to stop the spread of evil and of totalitarianism. He changed his mind. Modern weapons of warfare "totally rules out the possibility of war ever serving again as a negative good" (39). He wanted the church to be a voice for the end of the arms race because he saw nothing less than human existence at risk. "The choice today is no longer between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence" (39).

King, however, was not the only figure in the civil rights movement to embrace nonviolence both on a local and global level. Bayard Rustin, raised a Quaker, came to the civil rights movement after working with the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a peace organization, and the Congress of Racial Equality, originally organized as a pacifist organization. He travelled to India to learn the technique of nonviolence. He was the primary organizer of the August 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Later in his life, Rustin, an openly gay man, worked for civil rights for homosexuals.

James Lawson is another example of a figure in the civil rights movement who embraced Gandhi's Satyagraha. Lawson, a Methodist minister and missionary, also travelled to India and brought home nonviolent techniques and taught them to young people. Diane Nash, one of the founders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was one of his students. In the late sixties, she travelled to North Vietnam and spoke out against the Vietnam War.ⁱⁱⁱ Even figures in the civil rights and black power movements who did not advocate nonviolence saw value in the United Nations and spoke out against the Vietnam War. Malcolm X thought the civil rights movement ought to become a human rights movement and that African-Americans should press their case for human rights at the United Nations. Angela Davis and others opposed the Vietnam War.

Beyond the shared figures committed at some level to peace and to antiwar activism, the peace and civil rights movements share a commitment to the technique of nonviolence. It is a technique that allows people to find their own self respect in the power to decide to cooperate with their own oppression or not. SNCC as well as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) helped people to recognize the power of saying no. When blacks and whites rode together in busses going south, they said no to segregated transportation. People who wanted to maintain the status quo of segregation answered their nonviolence with violence. The freedom riders endured beatings and jail. When the civil rights movement encouraged people to register to vote, it told them to say no to disenfranchisement. It helped them to find the self respect to demand this basic right of citizenship. Again, nonviolence faced violence. For the act of seeking to register to vote, African Americans endured beatings, jail, and loss of employment. Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney, all civil rights volunteers were murdered. In public demonstrations and marches activists and ordinary people faced dogs, hoses and beatings. All of this, the nonviolence demonstrations and the violence responses called attention to the violence of injustice and to the violence necessary to hold it in place.

Despite the violence, people learned how to identify and to wield passive power. There is power that acts – active power. There is power that allows – passive power. Nonviolence relies on the active power of public demonstrations along with the passive power of noncooperation. The Montgomery bus boycott was an example of passive power. The legal actions that African- Americans brought against segregation were examples of active power. Nonviolence as a technique, as a tactic, give people more options in a struggle for justice.

While some people saw nonviolence as a tactic in a larger strategy, others adopted it as a philosophy and as a way of life. Satyagraha, truth/love force, as a way of life requires a commitment to truth-telling and to radical love. As a philosophy, it considers the oppressor Other as a human being whose human dignity ought to be respected. It works against the oppressive power without hatred of the person. Such is an existential decision. It is an act of intentionality that sees beyond sight to the impossible possibilities of forgiveness and reconciliation. It is a bet that when a more perfect justice comes that even the oppressor will breathe free. Deception blinds everyone, and when the truth is told, everyone sees more clearly.

Hatred hurts all of creation. It is important to remember that nature is red in tooth and claw. Earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, cyclones, tornadoes, flood and fire are awesome in their destructive power. Such realities make it all the more necessary for human beings, creatures who have the capacity for rational thought, creatures who are ruled by our own decision making and not only by instincts, exercise this capacity and choose against violence. Choose justice. Choose peace. “May peace prevail on Earth.”

ⁱ See Glen Stassen, ed., Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War, 2nd ed (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1998)

ⁱⁱ Martin Luther King JR, "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King JR, ed. James Melvin Washington (New York: Harper & Row Publishers San Francisco, 1986) 39.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Rosetta E. Ross, Witnessing & Testifying: Black Women, Religion and Civil Rights, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).