

## Preparation for Nonviolence and Social Change

*The times they are a-changin'* Bob Dylan sang way back when. In retrospect, the upheavals of the 1960s were prelude to the multiple converging crises we're living through now. As the underlying forces of economic injustice, racism, political corruption, and planetary destruction come to a head during a deadly out-of-control pandemic, we find ourselves in the crucible of collective transformation. The unfinished work of so many forebears is being taken up again.

“The arc of history is a long one but it bends towards justice.” That was Martin Luther King’s article of faith, adapted from the words of 19th century abolitionist and Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. Dr. King also saw that it takes human hands to bend that arc. In their courageous civil rights movement, his Beloved Community of activists risked their lives to make the United States a more just society. Their prolonged, carefully-planned campaign of nonviolent direct action and organized noncooperation was modeled on the Satyagraha (Truth-force) methods that Gandhi had used to liberate India from British colonial control.

As we face the challenges that lie ahead, we can look to these and other examples that show how needed change can be brought about through movements like theirs. “All my actions have their source in my inalienable love of humankind,” Gandhi declared. He and Dr. King alike were motivated by an ethic of love that changed the dynamic of conflict. In refusing to meet violence with violence, they required their opponents to engage on a playing field where brute force is no longer the name of the game. They saw that the only battle worth waging was one designed to transform the default model of domination by force into a new model based on respect, interdependence, and care for one another. Through coordinated campaigns that included defying unjust laws, boycotts, walkouts, and mass protests, they taught the established power brokers that another kind of power can hold sway – people power. In doing this while affirming the basic humanity of their opponents, they gradually transformed the struggle into one that left room for peaceable resolution and reconciliation with former enemies in years to come.

Many misconceive nonviolence as passivity in the face of brutality. Nothing could be farther from the truth. By deliberately confronting injustice with principled acts of civil disobedience, nonviolence is bravely proactive. When governing institutions react to this witness violently, they display for all to see how unjust they are. In a determined campaign of nonviolent direct action, many resisters may be hurt and a few may die. But these sacrifices are far fewer than those that taking up arms would surely impose. Most important, by winning a moral victory based on changing hearts and minds, nonviolent movements open the way for societal reforms grounded in an ethic of love, fairness, and inclusion. One example among many of how this can work is the radical turn-around of public opinion and public policy on the rights of LGBTQ citizens that took place in America over the past ten years.

The power of any government depends fundamentally on the consent of the governed. When the governed withdraw that consent, the system must come to terms with the people who give it viability. By employing the tactic of mass noncooperation with the unjust laws and practices under which their people suffered, both Gandhi and Dr. King demonstrated this home truth. In the historic movements they led, the general populace was inspired to take part in demonstrations and acts of noncooperation, to organize in their communities, to provide material assistance, and to support political leaders committed to significant reform.

We Unitarian Universalists have declared ourselves to be on the side of love. In these watershed times, let us reflect on what that calls us to do by way of birthing a more just and humane world.

The idea that we humans cannot do what is required to confront the many overlapping and intersecting crises plaguing our world – from climate breakdown to homelessness to systemic racism – because it’s “too much” was always a lie, a convenient myth peddled by those in whose interests it is for things to remain the same. What the past few months have proven beyond all doubt is that when societies decide to treat an emergency as an emergency ... all manner of possibilities instantly bloom.

*Naomi Klein, WARE keynote speech, 2020 UU General Assembly*

As my sufferings mounted I soon realized that there were two ways in which I could respond to my situation – either to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering into a creative force. I decided to follow the latter course. *Martin Luther King Jr.*

Concerning nonviolence, it is criminal to teach a man not to defend himself when he is the constant victim of brutal attacks. *Malcolm X*

Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble. *John Lewis*

The opposite of love is not hate, it’s indifference. *Elie Wiesel*

On the other side are formidable forces: money, political power, the major media. On our side are the people of the world and a power greater than money or weapons: the truth ... We live in a beautiful country. But people who have no respect for human life, freedom, or justice have taken it over. It is now up to all of us to take it back. *Howard Zinn*

The truth will set you free but first it will piss you off. *Gloria Steinem*

I wish I could say to all those people who consider themselves anarchists or radicals: Please join the nonviolent movement. This is how Gandhi freed India. If Gandhi freed India, we can certainly free the United States from our racism, misogyny, and bigotry. *Dolores Huerta*

The decision to be “not political” is inherently political. *Rev. Bob LaVallee*

Religion without humanity is very poor human stuff. *Sojourner Truth*

## **Questions to Ponder**

1. Nonviolent communication involves treating others with respect and listening to their concerns. If you have used nonviolence for conflicts in your workplace or relationships, how did that work?
2. What kind of world would you like to see emerge from our present state of collective crisis?
3. When you consider speaking up and taking action, does that feel uncomfortable? If it does, describe what comes up for you.
4. If you have participated in movements for social justice, what did you learn from the experience?
5. If you joined a movement presently underway, which would it be? What draws you to that cause?

## **Words of the Day**

Before coming to the Gathering, consider what being on the side of love means to you. The Words of the Day activity is to complete this sentence: “I take the side of love when I ....”