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Speech as Nonviolent Action

"Let's stop talking about this and DO something!" How many times have you wanted to fling this sentence at people gathered for a meeting to discuss a given problem? Did it do any good? Probably not. Stagnant speech cannot be replaced by productive action because speech is action. When talking about something goes nowhere, it is because speech is being actively used to block progress on the issues. Action that will solve problems begins with constructive speech. Like other forms of action, speech can be violent or nonviolent. Violent speech seeks to force compliance, to vanquish opponents with flashes of verbal brilliance, and to obliterate opposing arguments with flawless logic. Nonviolent speech works to discover and build upon common ground that nurtures both parties.

Speaking can happen before a large audience or it can happen one on one. In any case, the primary message of nonviolent speech comes from Gandhi's word for nonviolence: *Ahimsa, I will not harm you.* The paradox of this message is that it implies a deeper message: *You will not harm me.* The "you will not harm me" message neither comes from threat, from a raised voice, from superior logic, nor from moral condemnation, but from confidence that the truth of your message will speak for itself if you put it forth with clarity and compassion. In the words of the civil rights hymn: "The Truth shall set us free."

Speaking nonviolently comes from a profound respect for the humanity of the person to whom you are speaking. It also demonstrates a belief that the moral ground you are standing on is big enough for all. If you take up all of the moral ground by backing others into a corner, forcing them up against the wall, or pushing them over the edge of a verbal precipice, they cannot join you in your opinion. Nonviolent speech seeks agreement with dignity.

Building common ground assumes that people share at least one value in common -- the desire to do the right thing. Very few people get up in the morning and say to themselves, "I think I'll go out and be a real force for evil in the world today." Almost all people act out of a desire to "do the right thing." It can be extremely difficult to believe this about people who seem hell- bent on destroying our families, denying us all public recognition and respect, and distorting democracy into a blueprint for the rise of a new

"Third Reich." But even if we think their actions -- their speech-- will result in these horrors, we can still recognize that they don't intend to do evil. Again, in Gandhi's terms, the challenge is to overcome our own fight or flight reaction and to grant the other person the respect of assuming that their intention is to "do the right thing."

Actually, most people, especially from within one given society, share many values. Any time we refer to these common values, we extend the common ground to make room for both of us. During the Measure 9 campaign in Oregon (1992) I [Bonnie Tinker] was preparing for a debate in a rural community that is home to a Quaker college. I decided to open my remarks with a list of the points I had found I shared with "the other side" (list follows). Referring to any of these points will help give the message, "I believe you to be a person of moral principle, worthy of respect, and it is not my intention to harm you."

Once you have established respect for the other person in your own heart, there are specific things you can do and say to convey the message, "I will not harm you." Most importantly, establish links and similarities between yourself and the audience. The first measure of respect is to get to know your audience. If this is an informal, personal setting, simply ask questions and listen to the answers, responding with anything from your own experience that parallels or extends the story you are told by the other person. When first asked to speak to a group, begin by finding out as much as possible about the people who will be listening to your speech.

The easiest way to get this information is to ask questions -- lots of questions from lots of people. Ask about the purpose of the group, the lifestyles of members (income level, political commitments, religious practices, occupations, hobbies, dress, age, family structure, etc.). Ask what the members think of this topic and what they expect to hear from you. Do they expect to agree or disagree? If possible, talk to someone who knows they disagree with you or who didn't want you to come in the first place. Try to understand the nature of their opposition and look for something you have in common with that person.

If this is a speaking engagement, think about what you will wear. Matching the style of the audience is another way to give the message, "I will not harm you." This doesn't mean that you dress in a way that is unnatural for you -- because you also want to give the message, "this is honestly who I am" --

but try to select an outfit that will not be intimidating or startling. This is not a matter of giving in to a controlling power that won't let you express who you are; rather it is assuming that because you have power in this situation, you will use this power to make the other person comfortable, to give the message, "I will not harm you."

Another underlying assumption of nonviolent action is that most aggression is born of fear. If you find yourself becoming loud and aggressive, ask yourself "what am I afraid of?" Looking at the people you are talking to will help diffuse both your fear and theirs. If they are making you angry, focus your image of them to see the person who is terrified and to see yourself as the one who can release them from this terror. Think of how you would approach a small child or a large animal who is frightened. To calm fears, we instinctively move slowly and talk softly. In the case of nonviolent speaking, this means not only slowing down our physical gestures, but also the speed of words and the intellectual pace of our message.

Consider, for example, trying to lead a frightened horse over a bridge (most horses seem to recognize bridges as human-made constructions, unworthy of full trust). Horses are very big animals that can present a thousand pounds of danger if they bolt in fear. You can try to get this animal across the bridge by beating it -- and you might even succeed if you are ruthless --or you can try to calm its fears until the horse feels you can be trusted to lead it over the bridge. Either way, you can get the horse across the bridge. But the next time you approach the bridge, the terrorized animal may bolt in fear while the gentled animal will cross without problems. Terrorism-- physical, psychological , or verbal -- may succeed in the short run, but in the long run it will come back to haunt you, causing more trouble than it is worth.

Another value that most people share is that they don't want to hurt another person without justification and without feeling that the person can somehow resist. Fear and anger block us from seeing the vulnerability in other people. Think back to the 1960s. Many white Americans lived their lives oblivious to the daily pain inflicted by institutional racism. Nonviolent resistance to police batons and dogs during the civil rights movement made the pain of discrimination starkly visible. The tactics of nonviolent protests during the civil rights movement were chosen not only for philosophical reasons, but also because they worked. It is very difficult for a human being (aside from a few psychopaths) to beat on another person who does not resist. It is not right to hurt people without justification, and most of us want to "do the right thing." When the American public saw unresisting demonstrators viciously beaten by police officers, public sympathy turned toward the demonstrators (although the continuing institutional racism of our society is evidence that the process is far from complete). Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was publicly vilified when he began leading nonviolent protests, is now a national hero.

When we speak about sexual orientation issues we also want people to see the pain we have experienced firsthand because of discrimination. (This may be the pain we experience on behalf of friends, colleagues, and relatives.) This is a complex process. Remember, we want to give the message, "you cannot harm me," in order to provide a sense of safety to our audience. And yet, we have to be vulnerable in order to appeal to their humanity. This means finding a way to experience and admit pain while keeping the core of our being, our dignity, intact.

We also have to reveal the pain we have experienced without guilt- tripping the listener. Remember, most people want to "do right." They cannot tolerate both seeing pain and publicly acknowledging that they have unjustly inflicted this pain. Even if they are guilty as sin, they can rarely admit it unless they come to this conclusion themselves, in private, and make the decision to change.

We leave room for change with dignity by placing the responsibility for our pain in institutions, history, or persons beyond the individual or individuals to whom we are talking. We present the opportunity to "do right" by showing the people with whom we are talking specific things they can change in institutions and their personal behavior. By assuming that the people we are speaking with are decent human beings who will surely want to relieve the pain we suffer from unjust discrimination once they understand it, we leave room for them to join us with their dignity intact. (At this point, I must acknowledge that these are not ideas I made up, but are principles passed down to me by my ancestors in the struggle for justice. I did not learn these lessons by doing it right, but was helped along the way by many people who were willing to learn the truth of what I was saying in spite of my verbal attacks.)

Again, once these principles are clear in your heart, there are a few simple reminders that will help you express yourself nonviolently: Don't make fun of other people. Be very careful of humor. Laughter can release tension, but it can also cover anger and resentment if people in your audience feel you are putting them down. Don't guilt-trip; people hate to be wrong, and they'll turn on you rather than admit you're right.

Above all, share of yourself. We know that the people most likely to support equality based on sexual orientation are people who are personally acquainted with a lesbian or gay person. Be that person (or provide an introduction to someone you know). When all is said and done, all we really have to give one another is ourselves. We're all in this together and it is in our interest to reach out to people who disagree with us.

Paulo Freire, the noted Brazilian pedagogue and revolutionary, spoke very memorably at a seminar a few years ago. Although his native language is Portuguese, he was speaking to us in Spanish. One phrase he gave us became a guiding principal for my social change work: *"Nadie salva a nadie, ni nadie se salva solo. Juntosnos salvamos."* (Translation: Nobody saves anybody else, nor does anybody save themselves alone. Together we save ourselves.)

Five Key Elements
In Using Speech As Nonviolent Action

1. Take away the threat; create a safe space

Gandhi's message – Ahimsa – "I will not harm you"

Try to set a tone. "We are not here to attack each other."

Deeper, paradoxical message – You will not harm me. Does not come from raised voice, superior logic but from confidence that the truth of your message will speak for itself if put forth with clarity and compassion.

2. Underlying this message "I will not harm you," establish—to the extent you are able--a profound respect for the other in your own heart

Quakers talk about "speaking to that of God in everyone." If you prefer non-religious language, think about speaking to the goodness or the deep humanity in the other person.

It helps if you try to understand how the other person might be seeing the world.

This is very hard sometimes—and harder for some of us than for others

This process can be used selectively or as a philosophy of life, but either way, it's important to be as genuine as you can.

3. Allow the other person some moral ground to stand on

Assume they're trying to do the right thing.

Think about experiences you may have had from the other side and how it feels to have someone assume they are entirely in the right and you are wrong, immoral, etc.

If you treat people this way, it allows everyone to leave with a sense of dignity

4. Make connections, find common ground

Think about values and feelings you probably have in common. With people you know, things specific to them. With people you don't know, general things such as the following (see manual for more):

- not wanting to discriminate unfairly
- caring about safety of children
- awareness of many serious problems in society; sense of things being out of control

Share yourself—personal feelings, stories. Become a real human being Open your own heart.

5. Most people don't want to hurt another person without justification and resistance

Let them know how you or others have been hurt; share your pain—while keeping the core of your being intact

Don't blame. Place blame elsewhere—institutions, history, other people.

Assume they are a decent human being who will surely want to help relieve the pain of injustice and discrimination once they understand it.

Leave room for them to join us with their dignity intact.

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