The Imperative of Revolutionary Nonviolence

Contributed by S. Brian Willson
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Nonviolence is a way of life, an external manifestation of an internal peace. Nonviolence is mindfulness and consciousness of the sacred, of the interconnectedness of ourselves with everything and every being. It is an attitude, an awareness, an understanding, a manner of expression and interaction operating from a deep internal integration that honors this sacred interconnectedness.
It motivates intervention in or confrontation of forces destroying or harming sacredness of life, utilizing consciousness of the sacred in the means of intervention. When we embrace nonviolence we willingly take great risks with courage, enabling a freedom to love unconditionally, even if unsentimentally. The nonviolent practitioner is prepared to endure suffering and hardship as an alternative to inflicting harm or violence upon others.

This sounds, I'm sure, wonderful. Is it realistic? Having been born and raised a white EuroAmerican male in the United States of America means that I have been intensively conditioned by nation, sex, race, and class with a deeply rooted sense of superiority over the remainder of the world. Values and practices of comfort, privilege, domination, patriarchy, chauvinism, and separateness die hard. Even when I intellectually and logically know how destructive the layers of conditioning are, the emotional and psychological patterns and addictions don't automatically vanish. They are deeply imprinted.

Our civilization, the United States of America, as with other empires, was founded on an original "sin" of racism. It has been built through many successive "sins" of racism, sexism, classism, and world wide imperialism. Millions of people in many ancient indigenous cultures inhabited their lands in the "New" world for 40 millenniums before the first invasion by the Europeans. The acquisitions of the territories that now comprise the United States, as with all other countries in the Americas, occurred through violent theft of all the lands by use of deceit, force, and genocide of millions of the native aboriginal people. Perhaps the most egregious genocide in human history, the native populations in what is now North America were reduced in numbers by at least 97% by 1900, while the European-American population had zoomed to over 80 million from zero in 1492. Similar tragedies occurred in Central and South America.

Subsequently, the brutal kidnapping and transporting of millions of indigenous African people from their ancient cultures provided chattel slavery for the economic "development" of the "New" world. Half the African native population is believed to have been decimated by the slave trade.

This grotesque reign of terror that continues to this day in various forms strongly suggests that we have been motivated by a superiority complex, a diabolical arrogance. Perhaps our need to dominate all life masks an even deeper inferiority complex. Our behavior may be rooted in a pathology of fragmentation, of mind from feelings, of human being from nature. Our obsessive insistence upon separation from nature separates us from our own nature, from our own selves. This alienation preempts spiritual understandings, and leads to physical, mental, and social breakdowns. We are blinded by this disintegration which prevents wisdom; we are drunk with its greed-driven force. The advanced deterioration and despair in the United States and other western societies today are symptoms of this fragmented personal and world view.

'Manifest Destiny," a particular U.S. conceitedness rationalized by a religion declaring special providential instruction and enlightenment, continues to be part of our character as a people. It is deeply etched into our subconscious, often accepted thoughtlessly as absolute truth. Since the "founding" of the Republic of the United States of America on stolen land over 200 years ago, our "Constitutional democracy" has acquired by force and deceit 9 territorial additions, 15 islands, and the Panama Canal Zone, increasing its control of land area by more than 4 times. The U.S. has intervened with armed forces into the sovereignty of at least 100 countries on more than 400 documented occasions, murdering and maiming millions of human beings. The U.S. has used the atomic bomb on 2 occasions and threatened the use of nuclear weapons on more than 20 occasions. The U.S. has engineered at least 6,000 covert operations destabilizing

popular movements, overthrowing governments, and assassinating leaders in the vast majority of the world's countries.

The presence of this past within us is no light burden. A painful but liberating process of healing and transformation of consciousness, and therefore of life and work styles, begins to unfold as we learn our sordid history and the depth of our dysfunctionality. Through brutal honesty–a willingness to accept our dark side–awareness expands and we begin to free ourselves from the blinding power of our learned separateness. To pursue a nonviolent way of life, I believe, requires our awareness of this lie of our superiority and a willingness to participate in a process of healing from the dis-ease of fragmentation. Embracing this process enables us to reconstruct reality based upon a consciousness of the sacred interconnectedness of all life. We begin to learn through wisdom and humility.

I believe this more honest understanding of our people's history leads us to the conclusion that nation state empires such as the United States are irredeemable. Leo Tolstoy and Peter Kropotkin (late 1800s and early 1900s), George Orwell and Albert Camus (first half of the 20th century), among others, articulated this theme of the dangers and irredeemability of nation state structures. Nation states generally are based on arrogance, violence, and rationalized injustices. It is critical for the people living within the territory of the United States, as well as those living in other nation states, to understand our integrity and dignity as human beings as part of a sacred ecosystem. We are not hopelessly indebted to nation state structures. We must transcend and abandon them. We cannot continue to erode as individualists. We need to learn how to interact in creative and intimate collective and community efforts. As we learn to become interdependent in grass roots, social and economic empowerment activities, we will enable ourselves to disengage from our complicity with and dependency upon the economic, political, and psychological seductions of what empire claims to offer. We have the opportunity to rediscover mutual aid and cooperation, and redefine our intimate web of personal, social, global, and ecological responsibility. There can be no global or personal peace or security without emotional, psychological, social, economic, physical, spiritual, intellectual, and ecological health and justice for all life.

My comfortable paradigm as a white EuroAmerican male was abruptly interrupted during my duty as a U.S. Air Force combat security officer in Vietnam in 1969. The bliss that possessed me was shaken by a series of very visceral experiences. I honestly do not know if I would have recognized the Lies had I not had the "fortune" of being ordered to Vietnam. There came a point during my Vietnam experiences when the vulgarities of the war were obvious to me and offensive to my mind and stomach. I felt compelled to speak out against further U.S. bombing and urged my superiors to advocate for an immediate withdrawal of all U.S. armed forces from Southeast Asia. This was the first time I had ever questioned seriously the authority of our government, and the foundations of our, and my personal, character and values.

As a result of my Vietnam experiences, I began searching for another understanding, another model in which to know myself and the world. This search has required, and continues to require, much study, experimenting, therapy, exposure to new people, ideas, and experiences, as well as periods of deep reflection. Nonviolence describes most closely a paradigm of a radical alternative that operates on the principles of mindfulness of our deep interconnectedness with all life forms--the unity of everything. When we feel interconnectedness and experience this passion, it becomes more difficult for us to categorize, separate, and dehumanize people in a way that allows us to feel superior enough to treat them unfairly or cruelly.

Nonviolence requires renunciation of any and all claims to disproportionate privileges and power acquired by personal or imperial attitudes and actions of violence. This includes structural violence, such as racism, classism, sexism, and maintaining oligarchic structures which are forcefully preserved at the expense of the integrity and sacredness of other life. Growing up in one of the western or "First" world nations, or in oligarchic families in "Third" world countries, it is difficult to grasp that virtually all our comforts and privileges have been acquired and are being sustained by incredible forms of exploitation and lies. The United States with less than 5% of the planet's human population consumes nearly 50% of the world's resources, ten times our equitable amount. The so-called undeveloped or "Third" world comprises 75% of the earth's population but is restricted to but 15% of the world's resources. This grotesque disparity in distribution of resources has been and continues to be maintained and rationalized by various schemes of enforced exploitation. Every U.S. political administration, executive as well as legislative branches, has been and will continue to be an imperial power in order to assure the disproportionately privileged American Way of Life (AWOL), i.e., U.S. "national security." It really is not complicated. There is no peace without justice. There is no justice without a consciousness rooted deeply in interconnectedness.

I believe my upbringing in the lower middle class represents the values and conditioning of the vast majority of all people growing up in or migrating to materialist, "developed" societies. The process of disengaging and withdrawing from the addictions of such conditioning, comfort and privilege is formidable and, for most, is gradual if it happens at all. Nonviolence is a powerful force for the poor and for people of conscience. It is not a method for those who continue to protect their privilege even while rhetorically espousing a "correct" politics of nonviolence. Thus is the importance of renunciation. Liberation from obsession with our possessions and privileges which directly causes others to go without, and harms the planet, tends to occur in stages and by degrees. Because it usually is a process over time, there is often confusion about the integrity of one's espousal of a nonviolent philosophy. However, nonviolence is not an idea that can for long be verbally articulated without also living and experimenting with it.

Just when I begin to think I have progressed to a new conscious level of awareness, an event, a conversation, or an image "out of the blue" provokes an old learned response which feels violent, hostile, or confusing. It is this dialectical process of becoming aware, while often feeling stuck or regressive, that motivates me to sort it out with trusted friends, perhaps with "radical" therapists, trial and error experiences, and periods of silent contemplation and quiet discernment.

Liberation from our various addictions is a lifelong, radical transformational process, learning that less is more. For the most part this kind of deep transformation is usually provoked and stimulated by very personal, visceral experiences of feeling pain, suffering, and adversity rather than from accumulation of facts and information. It is important to realize that we are freeing ourselves from a greed/selfish power paradigm that has been developing for centuries, really for millenniums. We know that this demonic paradigm of blind greed, the presence of the past inherent in our collective unconscious, is destructive to life. It is based on belief in the separation of Homo Sapiens from nature, and from one another, rationalized by such factors as race, sex, class, age, national or geographical origin, language, religion, and cultural mores.

All human beings possess a common ancestry. Many of the most renowned anthropologists and scientists conclude that cooperation and mutual aid, rather than competition, among Homo Sapiens and with all of nature, dominated human evolution for well over the first 99.8% of our time to date. Peter Kropotkin who pioneered the positive study of ecology with his momentous Mutual Aid (1902), argues that there is an instinct deeply rooted in our evolution that he describes as the "conscience of human solidarity." He eloquently talks of the "unconscious recognition of the force that is borrowed by each man from the practice of mutual aid," in effect, the "close dependency of everyone's happiness upon the happiness of all." There is, I believe, an ancient positive presence of the past, i.e., mutual aid, that is buried in each of us under layers and layers of conditioning. Tapping into this dimension of our essence provides us much hope that the consciousness necessary for imagination, vision, courage, and interconnectedness is waiting to be liberated. We need to restore and honor the principle of the Commons.

My personal frustrations are exacerbated because for the most part the peace and justice "movement" in the United States does not address the structural issues, injustices, and institutions that furnish the foundation and guiding principles for the U.S. empire. Although the "movement" responds to many domestic and foreign policy issues, often with solid organizing and wonderful commitment, analysis of and radical response to the basic political and economic structures, and the values that underlay them, generally remain off limits. It is my belief that to the degree we believe in and work with the 'American system," we are incapable of responding with the kind of radical (to the root) and revolutionary (a nonviolent turning around) energy and movement necessary towards striving for truth and profound transformation. Nonviolence is a term often referring to specific behavior to be adhered to, and even rehearsed, for particular public demonstrations. This exposure may be a good first step in learning about nonviolence but the term rarely describes a process of radical changes in internal attitudes, life and work styles, and emotional growth, as we begin to understand interconnectedness. Development of collective, long term disengagement strategies through creation of networks of decentralized, locally reliant communities, is even more rarely considered.

In essence, nonviolence is a way of life requiring a radical restructuring of personal values, attitudes, and behavior. Virtually no one I know was consciously exposed to this model from parents, church, school, or government. It is inevitable that once this consciousness is felt internally, it will be variously expressed in a public, more collective and political manner. We need to give each other permission to walk our talk, and trust our feelings, as we embark upon this "radical" journey. I like to think of the personal pursuit of nonviolence as walking on a path. Though elusive and rocky at times, and often lonely, it is leading us to new places, new experiences of consciousness, and a deeper understanding of

our selves and our relationship to all. It feels right. It is mysterious, yet real at the same time. It is hopeful and empowering.

Liberation from our dependence upon market jobs versus creative engagement; high speed movement and transiency versus deliberateness and sense of place; dislocation and fragmentation versus continuity and community; national and international currency versus regional currency and barter; highly consumptive lifestyles versus simple, cooperative sharing, will be necessary for revolutionary nonviolence.

Without vital, interactive community, renunciation is virtually impossible. Interdependence, not independence, becomes the model. Those of us who have grown up having learned how to be progressive individualists, now need to learn the dynamic of preserving a sense of self autonomy within the context of intimate, sharing community. A truly decentralized, grass roots, participatory biocracy (democracy is for humans separate from nature) enables us to withdraw from our dependency upon the dangerous, dehumanizing, and violent global and national economy, i.e., the "free" market of the "new world order." As we simplify into local, bioregional communities of economic and energy self-sufficiency, we create substance for a new foundation for the necessary radical changes. This is our mandate as we approach the 21st century.

Nonviolence is not only realistic, it is our only hope if we are to survive with dignity on this planet. As Martin Luther King said, "The issue is no longer between violence or nonviolence, but between nonviolence or nonexistence."

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The author, pictured below on his hand-crank recumbent bike, originally wrote the above essay on January 1, 1994, in Santa Cruz, California. He referenced it on the author's Facebook page on January 14, 2012. Brian Willson's website is brianwillson.com. He is the author of Blood On The Tracks: The Life And Times of S. Brian Willson, his autobiography published in 2011 by PM Press, Oakland. The title refers to his massive injuries inflicted by the U.S. government when he was peacefully protesting arms going to Central America during Ronald Reagan's illegal war involving the Contras.