

The Courage to Be Non-Violent by Rev. Doug McCusker

When I was a child, I used to watch the Roadrunner cartoon every Saturday. I considered it pure entertainment. I would laugh till my sides hurt. But, little did I know that it was teaching me a profound lesson about violence. Every week, the Coyote would try to kill the Roadrunner, but he always failed. He tried every scheme in the book. He would set elaborate traps but the Roadrunner would always outsmart him. He tried every kind of weapon including guns, bombs and rockets, but nothing worked. The violence always came back around to get him in the end.

Maybe the creators of the Roadrunner had read the Tao Te Ching. The 30th verse of that ancient sacred text teaches us:

One who would guide a leader of men in the uses of life will warn him against the use of arms for conquest. Weapons often turn upon the wielder.

Where armies settle, nature offers nothing but briars and thorns. After a great battle has been fought, the land is cursed, the crops fail, the earth lies stripped of its Motherhood.

After you have attained your purpose, you must not parade your success, you must not boast of your ability, you must not feel proud; you must rather regret that you had not been able to prevent the war.

You must never think of conquering others by force. Whatever strains with force will soon decay. It is not attuned to the Way. Not being attuned to the Way, its end comes all too soon

Okay, maybe the Roadrunner taunted the Coyote from the time to time, but usually he just went on his way like nothing had happened. He was a non-violent actor. The key message in this passage is that force creates a counter-force. Violence creates counter-violence. If no one breaks the cycle, escalation results in terrible losses for everyone. I am a graduate of the Naval War College. One of the main things that I learned was that war is failure. When things are settled by force everyone loses.

Let's take the current crisis that is unfolding on the Korean peninsula. The North Koreans remind me of the Coyote. They have ordered from the Acme company rockets and nuclear bombs and they plan to point them east toward Japan, South Korea and the United States. This is a long running drama that sadly is no cartoon. It's an unresolved stalemate from the very beginning of the Cold War. Korea is the most heavily armed real estate in the whole world, a veritable powder keg.

Except for the nukes, we have seen how this played out before. Vietnam was a horrific civil war that dragged on for 20 years. The number of deaths vary widely, but they are believed to be between 1.5 million to 3 million combatants and civilians including 58,000 Americans. The land was decimated with toxic pesticides and millions of acres of burned out jungle. We will never know how many innocent animals were caught up in that madness.

Even though the war officially ended in 1975, it caused deep spiritual and psychic scars that will last several generations. I recently watched Ken Burns' excellent 10-part documentary on the war. It was the first time that I heard first person accounts from both North and South Vietnamese. I was profoundly moved by their sadness of all the devastation. And of course, we here in the United States were deeply divided as a

society as the war dragged on. Just like the Coyote, the violence turned upon the wielder and consumed everything in its wake including trust in our own government.

The problem with peace through violence is that violence remains in the heart. The only true and lasting way to defeat violence is through non-violence. And at the center of non-violence is the principle of love. I'm not talking about romantic notions of love or passive acquiescence to physical or psychological abuse. I'm talking about love that sits at the heart of human justice; that enables us to connect with one another despite our differences, that sets boundaries around certain behaviors but is willing to stay in the struggle for however long it takes. This kind of love is not easy. It requires tremendous resolve and sacrifice. One must be totally committed and willing to suffer hardship and possibly death in the pursuit of a higher purpose.

In the Tao Te Ching, non-violence is compared to water. "Nothing in the world is softer and weaker than water, but for attacking the hard, the unyielding, nothing can surpass it." Water is relentlessly gentle. And yet, it has worn away mountains of rock, burrowed deep canyons and caves with its relentless action. It cannot be deterred from its mission to flow to the low places and circulate the planet. It is not rigid and cannot be cracked.

The non-violence that I am talking about is usually referred to as non-violent direct action. It is anything but passive. It is all about showing up and resisting without force. The Salt March in India is perhaps one of the most famous examples of non-violent civil disobedience. The 24-day march, organized by Mohandas Gandhi to protest British taxation of salt production gained worldwide attention and is credited with galvanizing the Indian independence movement.

The simple act of marching to the sea and making salt as Indians had done for hundreds of years started something that the British could not stop with all their weapons and their magnificent navy. It stirred the call of justice and freedom in the hearts of ordinary citizens. Thousands of people were jailed, but it awakened the latent power of the masses against Britain's colonial rule. It also caught the attention of other independence movements around the globe as well as the civil rights movement here in the United States.

Peaceful, non-violent people power against violent power is like water against a rock. It starts out like a trickle and can be easily stopped through terror and intimidation. But, as long as there are those who are willing to organize and show up, the flow continues. In the beginning it is usually extremely risky and dangerous. That is when the courage to follow one's moral compass despite the odds is heroic. Solitary actions like the man who stood in front of the Chinese Army tanks on Tiananmen Square are amazingly courageous, but their real value comes when they inspire others to join the struggle and to organize.

In the South, during the 1950's and 60's, the African-American churches and universities were critical to the civil rights movement because they were places where people could organize and learn the art of non-violent direct action. Recently, in Charlottesville when the white supremacists and neo-Nazi's arrived with weapons and fully armed militias, many people showed up to resist them. That's because a call had gone out several weeks in advance from churches and local civil rights groups to peacefully and non-violently form a counter protest. People from our congregation answered the call.

The night before the rally, many people attended a training at one of the local churches on what to expect and how to resist violent intimidation. One of the things the organizers taught was the idea of zones of resistance. Those on the front lines, who are the most exposed to bodily harm or arrest are in what's called the red zone. They were instructed to link their arms tightly with one another to protect the most vulnerable parts of their bodies. Bill was one of those people in the red zone. He told me that it was terrifying, but being connected gave him the courage he needed.

Behind them were people carrying signs, giving speeches, march, chanting songs and providing the human power of solidarity. They are in the orange zone. And behind them are the people making the signs, bringing water and supplies and watching out for trouble. They are in the yellow zone. And further in the back are people engaging onlookers, talking to people passing by and watching out for the young ones and the elderly. They are in the green zone.

The key point here is that not everyone has to be in the red zone. Not everyone is able to commit to that level of sacrifice. But the other zones are just as important and vital to the success of the action. The real aim of non-violent direct action is to wake up the silent masses who aren't there.

At Charlottesville, the people in the red zone were counting on being beaten and they were willing to take it. The objective was to engage the nation's moral compass and to show them the brutality of people like Nazis and white nationalists who use violence to control power.

Unfortunately, that message was diluted a little bit by some counter-protesters who believed that violence was the only way to counter violence. The black clad anti-facists were fighting the good fight, but in my opinion, using the wrong methods. Without being asked, they jumped in front of the non-violent protestors and engaged the neo-Nazis in a street brawl. This opened the door for the President's "violence on all sides" remark and for the Alt-right to claim that the real danger is the left-wing extremists, not them.

Nonetheless, the Charlottesville incident did open people's eyes to the real threat of violent white supremacy and racism that persists in our society. It has had the effect of inspiring people to engage in other acts of non-violent protest. It has tapped into a well-spring of love that will be needed to counter hate.

There are many causes that intersect with anti-racism such as environmental justice, prison reform and gun control that will require the same level of awareness, sacrifice and action to change the status quo. It's not solutions that are lacking. We know what to do. It's primarily courage that is lacking. Courage to even engage in conversations and to stand behind our convictions.

Jesus taught his followers to love their enemies and to do good to those who hate them. That takes courage also. It's easy to see our enemies as monsters. Vietnam vets said that they were taught to hate their enemies, to consider them as inferior humans so they could kill them without losing their sanity. But many admit to losing a piece of their soul in the process.

Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and all past and present leaders of non-violent direct action know that love must be at the center of the struggle. We must maintain focus on the other's humanity, no matter how deluded by violence they have become, because that is the only way that we will maintain our humanity.

The Tank Man stopped that tank because he awakened the humanity of the tank driver. He did not use force, he used love. There are no guarantees that love always prevails in the near-term. China is still a repressive regime. Oppression of all kinds is upheld by force and eventually it decays and turns on the wielder. But only if there is a relentless flow of love probing for cracks and steadily scouring the surface one layer at a time until the whole evil enterprise falls under its own weight.

Love takes courage because it leaves us vulnerable to the cries of the oppressed and the marginalized. This kind of love is not passive, it is active and direct. And if we love, we must become active. People engaged in the struggle against climate change say that it only takes 3.5% of the population or around 11 million people in the United States who are fully committed to a cause to make drastic changes. And this works for anything worth fighting non-violently for. Find the zone that works for you and get engaged. Be the water that wears away the stone.