

Notes by Gail Thomas from

Nonviolent Response to Aggression

An online presentation by George Lakey, 3/20/2022

Sponsored by Santa Monica Friends Meeting

Over 400 people attended. (Many video connections had more than one person listening in.)

George began by sharing how deeply the situation in Ukraine has impacted him. Then he asked: How can nonviolence be “good news”? He reminded us of Gandhi’s reply to the question, “Is it ever O.K to fight back?” Gandhi said yes, if a violent response is all the person can think to do, then that is the action the person should take; but Gandhi also believed there is always a non-violent path that can be pursued.

In the midst of the current horror in Ukraine – or any violent situation that happens far from us – often the most we can do is honor the resistance and courage of the people in the struggle, and learn what we can from their experience.

In stress situations, innovation is key. George reminded us that Quakers in the seventeenth century were innovators. For example, upset by all the time people wasted in the marketplace, haggling over prices, Quakers decided to set fixed, fair prices for the goods they sold. Very quickly, they were gaining rather than losing customers because of this innovation.

Another example of Quakers breaking convention, many Quakers who first came to America refused to carry guns with them. This actually turned out to make them safer.

We need to ask ourselves: What behavior helps break through to our common humanity? What works? We need to look at history.

George reviewed the success of nonviolent resistance campaigns in Czechoslovakia in 1958 and the Ruhr Valley in 1923. In both cases, he speculated that if the people had been trained in nonviolence, if they had had clear strategies, they likely could have accomplished even more than they did with their spontaneous actions.

He contrasted the response of Denmark and Norway to German invasion in WWII. Denmark submitted, but subverted many of Germany’s objectives. For example, boat builders sabotaged the construction of military ships, and many Jews were rescued. Norway resisted militarily, retreating further and further north with much wreckage and bloodshed. They resisted after occupation, but much in Norway was destroyed.

Statically, it has been shown that using nonviolence against aggression, 35% of the time folks “win,” and often more quickly. Using violence, also, 35% folks win. Violence doesn’t give us much advantage, yet we are told that military power keeps us safe.

George shared a resource, a survey of case studies like these, published in book form as *Why Civil Resistance Works*.

George argued there are surprises embedded in our peace testimony, if we are courageous enough. Nonviolent response can be improved with training and planning. The civil rights actions in the south in the 60s are excellent examples. We might do well to consider now how we want to react to the buildup of rightwing militia currently here in America.

He mentioned that in a recent survey, Ukrainians expressed strong support for civic resistance, and there have been powerful stories of individual nonviolent actions in Ukraine and Russia. We can honor their tactics and learn from their innovations.

Further resources:

Global Nonviolent Action Database
<https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/>

Waging Nonviolence newsletter
<https://wagingnonviolence.org/>

Q&A

Asked for examples of nonviolent resistance in Ukraine, George gave several examples, commenting that it takes experimentation – so many people still stuck with an ideology that prizes violence.

Asked what we can do, George suggested organizing here to resist sending further weapons to Ukraine. More weapons mean more violence, but Biden is under a lot of pressure to send them. It would be hard to start a mass movement now that would be effective.

George reiterated that we need to challenge the unstated assumption that violence is more powerful than nonviolence, and he reminded us that violence and nonviolence are each about 35% effective. He stated that the book *Why Civil Resistance Works* looked at 323 cases and concluded chances of success were double using nonviolent means. Every movement has to rediscover the power of nonviolence.

Asked how peacemaking can be profitable led to a discussion of our deep involvement in the military industrial complex. The economic elite control this country. As long as they are in charge, we can change little. It's not even clear that the U.S. is even a democracy any more. The Princeton Oligarchy study looked at decades of public policy decisions in the U.S. The study found that, whenever the position of the economic elite contradicted the will of the majority of citizens, the resulting legislation always favored the elite position. The U.S. has dropped in a global rating of democratic countries to the second level – not really a democracy. Can we overthrow the current power? Read George's book, *Toward a Living Revolution*.