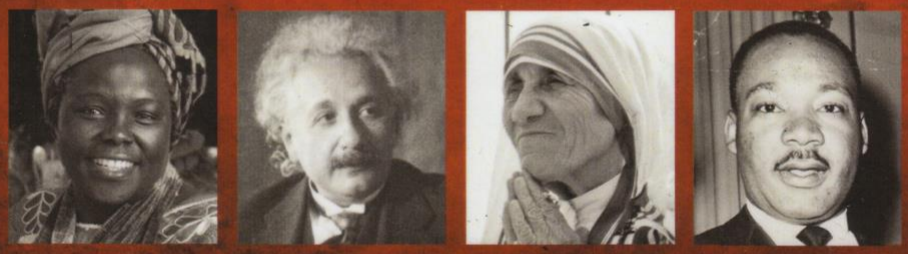
The Elements of Peace

How Nonviolence Works



J. Frederick Arment

An Excerpt from The Elements of Peace: How Nonviolence Works, published and copyrighted by McFarland Academic Publishers.

Preface

The Yeas and Nays of Civil Disobedience

Peace is the world dream. From a hungry child in Somalia to a billionaire on Wall Street, from the democratic leader in Burma to a silent general in the North Korean army, everyone's deepest desire is for a life of peace. To have a feeling of personal safety, prosperity for our families, and a quality of life that gives us personal inspiration are the illusive visions of peace we all hold in our collective dream.

Yet peace is controversial. The word has been bandied about and claimed by armies and dictators that have wreaked havoc on our world. Peace is the poster child of ambiguity. Is it the absence of war? The attainment of justice? Faith? Communion with nature? A healthy meal? Or is it simply a quiet morning to read the paper and contemplate the blessings of our life? Peace defies a complete description as surely as the elephant is denied totality to the blind man's touch.

When I was in college during the early 1970s, the world was reeling from a tumultuous decade when hopeful revolution had

paled in the shadow of violence. Civil rights had made progress but there were five dead on Kent State University's lawn. Women's issues had made it to the public debate but drugs and assassination had taken the hallowed icons of a generation.

I was repelled by political corruption yet energized to work for electoral change. Vietnam was winding down but the global wars for oil had just begun. Proceedings from the high-profile Watergate Committee competed for media attention with the underground rants of the Black Liberation Army. Radical notions of all sorts vied with pragmatic, work-within-the-system approaches to win the minds of youth.

For those of us who came of age in the '70s — and had bought into the '60s mantra that the times were a changin' — found ourselves with a choice. We could choose to give flight to our frustration by cynically dropping out of society. We could add to the rancor of the angry, join a group like the Weather Underground, and declare a "state of war." Or we could lick our idealistic wounds, fold seamlessly into society, and do what we could to make a difference.

Trouble was, either dropping out or blending in went against my grain, just as it did many of my generation. I didn't believe in the conspiratorial "them" or the uncompassionate "they." I didn't have a hardened or angry heart. I simply wanted

to live and work in my own unique way and find this illusive peace.

Not that I presumed to know the answers. I was no Gandhi or King. Even then I understood that if I reached up real high I could almost touch the knees of a Nelson Mandela or Mother Teresa. Yet like them and everyone else in the world, I had a choice.

I sat down and considered. I put my thoughts on paper. As a naïve twenty-year-old college student in a sweat-browed hour of Socratic questioning, I ended up with a disjointed essay that cleared away the noise of history and showed me my path. In a prophetic touch of whimsy and droll, I entitled the two-page, hand-scribbled treatise "The Yea and Nay of Civil Disobedience."

"Change is inherent in governments and societies," I wrote as a pithy ending to the first passage. "Therefore even utopia could only be temporarily attained."

I pondered my postulate. "Since governments and societies are devised to allow us to live with one another," I continued with the seriousness of a history major, "systems should create stability. And violent civil disobedience entails instability."

At length, there seemed only one conclusion. "Therefore civil disobedience must be limited to nonviolent attempts to achieve gradual change in a search for stability."

It was my epiphany. It wasn't the Declaration of Independence or the Sermon on the Mount, but it was personal and definitive. Nonviolence would be my choice.

Indeed, we all make decisions about the way we approach the world. Deceit or honesty. Bully or advocate. Status quo or change. Fear or courage. My Socratic questioning may have been a playful expression of my college antiquities course, but those guileless postulates have stayed with me all these years. Nonviolence as a means of change is the choice that has always made the most sense to me.

Nonviolence. And I thought peace was controversial. The term nonviolence is caught in the same ambiguity. Do you have to be a pacifist to be nonviolent? Is nonviolence fine on a personal level but to be left at the border when it comes to national interest? There are seven billion people in the world and everyone, it seems, has a different idea about how to approach conflict.

That is the point that gave the first impetus, or reason, for this book. The world has billions of people, with different cultures and faiths, with strongly held opinions and beliefs, with starkly individual expressions and desires. The collective mind stops at the door of personality. Anyone who has gone to a political debate or even a family reunion or business meeting

knows that the individual nature of peace is a fundamental truth.

As individuals, we have the right to find peace in our own way. My way is not, necessarily, your way. From this natural individuality springs the many ways, even billions of ways, to find peace.

Which brings me to the next reason for this book. The methods of nonviolence are many. The individual nature of our way to create peace in our lives spawns a variety of methods. From artistic endeavors to working for the environment or holding silence at a peace vigil, the many methods of nonviolence, the thirty surveyed in these pages, allow for every individual to find their personal way to work for peace.

Why are the methods of nonviolence so individual in nature? Now comes the third reason for this book. A study of nonviolence shows that the heroes who have made a difference in this world have within their characters the personal, individual qualities that drive their success. The virtues of peace, such as forgiveness and empathy, wisdom and a sense of fair play, are the values these famous men and women embody. The virtues of peace are the specific character traits that have allowed Bishop Tutu to achieve reconciliation in South Africa and César Chávez to lead the boycott of grapes that changed the lives of

thousands of migrant workers. The methods of peacemaking are the manifestations of an individual's virtues.

As we contemplate the real-world examples of nonviolent peacemaking throughout history we are astounded and inspired. We see how from the fires of violence comes the progress of humanity, which is the fourth reason for this book. As a human society, we are slogging our way through the historical phases of slavery and dictatorship, through epochs of hunger and poverty, through centuries in the darkness of ignorance and abuse.

The real-world examples of progress surveyed in *The Elements of Peace* are testaments to how nonviolence has changed the world. These stories cannot help but give us hope and promise. Through civil rights abuses, colonialism, the slave trade and nuclear brinkmanship, the most intransigent problems that have plagued our history have been transformed by the work of peacemakers. The progress from where we've come, if really contemplated with clarity, is undeniable.

Which brings us to the fifth and final reason for this book. To fully embrace the progress we've made is one way to heal our wounds. Optimism can, indeed, be therapeutic. Like a hypochondriac who loves misery, we sometimes dwell on the negative. Yet doctors tell us that worry is not a prescription but rather part of the diagnosis.

To heal the wounds of the past, to see our way clear to the next level of human achievement, requires a clear, unadulterated consciousness of the progress we've made. The result of that clarifying healing comes the next step in our journey: the actionable component of peace, which is love.

To have love for ourselves, to love others, to love the collective human contingent of the needy and abused, is the reciprocal energy that creates the inner and outer peace we all seek. Love is the peace we make.

With that profound and oft-repeated insight, I want to convey my love and appreciation for those who have contributed to the making of *The Elements of Peace*. First and foremost are my family and friends who each, in their own way, are finding a better world through integrity, humbleness, and attention to their creative instincts. I also am deeply grateful to my colleagues and peers, many of whom are included in a more extensive acknowledgement in this book.

When all is said and done, though we collaborate and find warmth in those closest to us, we are alone in this world with our decisions. I have chosen to work for peace even with the knowledge that the knees of Mandela are above me and the mystical sense of Mohandas Gandhi is beyond my reach. Yet I know that peace could, actually, beyond all reason, begin with me. Such is the promise for us all.

Full Book available from McFarland Publishers or from Amazon and other distributors: ISBN 978-0-7864-6854-6