

Truth Seekers

*Voices of Peace and Nonviolence
from Gandhi to Pope Francis*

Edited with introductions
and commentary by

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Introduction

The Resistance

In an age of fake news and alternative facts, with the rise of reactionary populism in the United States and other countries, it is more urgent than ever that we cling firmly to truth. Democracy depends upon free access to information, reasoned debate, and the negotiation and reconciliation of differences to achieve agreement. These approaches are sorely lacking in official Washington today, where political discourse is shaped more by ideology than evidence, warped by irrational fears and prejudice toward immigrants and those of a different color, religion, or national origin. Although people today are more educated than ever and through the Internet have access to vast stores of information, genuine understanding remains elusive. We are inundated with misinformation, as political leaders spout lies that are meant to obfuscate and confuse rather than shed light.¹

In this era of increasing polarization, we have become more narrow-minded and intolerant of others. Facebook and social media platforms permit the spread of anonymous and unverified claims that distort our thinking. They enable us to create self-defined bubbles and echo chambers that affirm preexisting convictions and shield us from inconvenient facts. Our knowledge becomes particular rather than comprehensive, technical rather than scientific. Our biases and preconceptions are reinforced,

¹ Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo, and Meg Kelly, “President Trump Made More Than 10,000 False or Misleading Claims,” *Washington Post*, April 29, 2019.

and our minds are closed to evidence that might challenge our assumptions. In this new reality, the quest for truth becomes more indispensable than ever, and is necessary for our survival.

Gandhi made the search for truth the central focus of his life and core principle of his philosophy of active nonviolence. He titled his autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. The very purpose of life, he said, is to pursue truth. Those who are religious believe that God is truth. Reason is the attempt to understand truth through intelligence and logical analysis. As no one can have complete knowledge of all reality, different interpretations of truth always exist and may lead to conflict. Our perceptions of what is true are shaped by patterns of power and authority and by the socioeconomic and cultural context in which we live. Learning how to resolve inevitable differences without violence is the enduring challenge of human society and is the central focus of peace studies.

Oppression and human suffering are based on ignorance and denial of truth. The shibboleths that undergird injustice and violence are many: people of a different race are less human, domination over others is for their benefit, war is the answer to terrorism, and so on. In rejecting these deceits, we speak truth to power, as the Quakers say, but always through nonviolent means and humble recognition of the limits of human understanding. Because we can never know absolute truth, we have no authority to impose our moral values on another by physical force. Only through nonviolent means, through the contestation of ideas and the demonstration of moral commitment, can we come closer to the truth, striving constantly toward higher synthesis and greater understanding.

The readings in this volume examine the dilemmas of searching for truth and using nonviolent means to overcome violence and oppression. Each author addresses particular issues and challenges, but all arrive at a common conclusion about the importance of nonviolence as the means for achieving change. Martin Luther King Jr. applied Gandhian methods in the struggle against racial segregation in the United States

and said that “nonviolent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in the struggle for freedom.”² Writer and activist Barbara Deming wrote in the 1960s of the need for more forceful nonviolent defiance of war and oppression. She used the image of two hands: one firmly resisting injustice, the other calmly reassuring and refusing to harm the adversary, creating the possibility for accommodation and escape from the condition of mutual enmity.³ Feminist writer bell hooks connected the struggle against sexism to the larger goal of ending violence and all forms of domination, “reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires.”⁴ Pope Francis has linked violence to the marginalization of the poor and the exploitation of the environment. He calls us to be in solidarity with the *miserando*, the lowly who are “mired in desperate and degrading poverty, with no way out, while others . . . [are] vainly showing off their supposed superiority and leaving behind so much waste that, if it were the case everywhere, would destroy the planet.”⁵ Help for the poor, John Paul II tell us, comes from the rights of labor and “nonviolent commitments of people” refusing to accept oppression and lies. In these and all the writings in this volume, we see a consistent commitment to seeking truth and overcoming injustice, and achieving change through peaceful means.

Some may think it naïve to produce a work on nonviolence and pacifism at a time of xenophobic nationalism and right-wing politics, in a world threatened by civil war, terrorism, and

² Martin Luther King Jr., “My Trip to the Land of Gandhi,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 25.

³ Barbara Deming, “On Revolution and Equilibrium,” in *Revolution and Equilibrium* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1971), 203–4.

⁴ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000), 26.

⁵ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*, Encyclical Letter (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2015), 62–63, ¶91.

nuclear proliferation. Civil conflicts and wars (the latter defined as a conflict with a thousand or more deaths per year) remain widespread, the bloodiest in Syria and Afghanistan.⁶ Terrorist attacks continue to take thousands of lives annually.⁷ Nuclear dangers exist in North Korea and have grown in Pakistan and India. Tensions with Russia and Iran have worsened as Washington tears up nuclear agreements and rebuilds its nuclear arsenal. No wonder Pope Francis spoke of “piecemeal” world war.⁸ Yet it is precisely in such times of increased insecurity and danger that the quest for peace and nonviolence becomes all the more urgent. For inspiration we can turn to the masters of the past, and the most significant voices of today, as we seek to defend the essential truths of nonviolence and peace.

Part of the war we seek to end is happening here at home in our streets, schools, and places of worship, where gun violence destroys thousands of lives a year. The students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, suffered this violence firsthand. In response, they began the March for Our Lives and issued an impassioned plea for action against gun violence. They see themselves as standing on the shoulders of those who resisted war before. Matt Deitsch, class of 2016, wrote this:

Organizing put an end to the war in Vietnam. Young people organized to stop their friends from coming back in body bags. Today, the war is on our soil, with our weapons, taking our lives. It will take young people organizing to end this war too.

⁶ Therése Peterssen and Kristine Eck, “Organized Violence, 1989–2017,” *Journal of Peace Research* 55, no. 4 (July 2018): 535–47.

⁷ National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism. *Annex of Statistical Information: Country Reports on Terrorism 2016*. Final report prepared for the U.S. Department of State (College Park, MD: START, 2017), <https://www.state.gov>.

⁸ BBC News, “Pope Francis Warns on ‘Piecemeal World War III,’” September 13, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com>.

These students bring an urgent new voice and social standing to the movement against violence.⁹ They reinforce the campaigns of Black Lives Matter and other groups against police abuse and the killing of unarmed people of color.

In the United States and other countries, social resistance to the policies of bigotry and ignorance has increased.¹⁰ Moments of political crisis can become times of social mobilization. The Women's March at the time of Trump's inauguration was an unprecedented moment of protest, as more than 4 million people across the country, seven hundred thousand in Washington, DC, spoke out for human decency. It was the largest single day of protest in American history.¹¹ Organizations working for social justice, women's rights, the environment, and peace have experienced a surge of membership and support. These movements have many agendas but they share a common commitment to preventing violence, upholding truth, and protecting the vulnerable.

Those of us who participate in this resistance are following in the footsteps of Gandhi, King, and so many others. Our success depends on maintaining nonviolent discipline and acting in the spirit of love that is appropriate to our purpose, seeking to attract ever larger numbers to the cause of defending human freedom and dignity. My hope is that the reflections and insights contained in these readings will encourage continued commitment toward that end.

⁹ Matt Deitsch, "Mobilizing Countrywide and the Future of the Movement: April and Beyond," in *Glimmer of Hope: How Tragedy Sparked a Movement*, by the Founders of March for Our Lives (New York: Razorbill Dutton, 2018), 204.

¹⁰ David S. Meyer and Sidney Tarrow, eds., *The Resistance: The Dawn of the Anti-Trump Opposition Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹¹ Conor Friedersdorf, "The Significance of Millions in the Streets," *The Atlantic*, January 23, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com>.

An Outline of the Book

In this volume I present excerpts from the writings of some of the world's most significant nonviolent leaders and strategists. The selection of readings is eclectic and idiosyncratic, reflecting my interest in nonviolence not only as a set of moral commitments but as a guide to effective action for change. The volume is intended for engaged scholars who seek insights on nonviolence from primary sources, and active practitioners who hope to learn from lived experience.

My interest in nonviolence stems from a lifetime of activism for peace, beginning with opposition to the Vietnam War as an active-duty soldier and continuing over the decades in numerous campaigns against war and nuclear weapons, and today in supporting implementation of the peace agreement in Colombia. I have participated over the years in many peace and disarmament movements, and also in campaigns for the environment, human rights, and racial justice.

My perspectives on nonviolence are informed by writers past and present, many of them excerpted here, both thinkers and doers: Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Barbara Deming, Cesar Chavez, Dorothy Day, A. J. Muste, Desmond Tutu, Leonardo Boff, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, and many others. Some led historic nonviolent campaigns for social justice. Others are scholars and analysts, including Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan with their cutting-edge empirical research, and Gene Sharp with his study of nonviolent methods and strategy. The final section of the volume includes religious perspectives from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

My purpose in offering these selections is to examine both the principles and practices of nonviolence. I have a scholarly interest in peace research, but that curiosity is shaped by a desire to apply the acquired knowledge in practical movements for change. In this sense, scholarship and practice are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Theory guides practice, and practice informs theory. Knowledge and social action are in con-

stant dialectic to forge new meaning and a deeper understanding of why and how nonviolence works.

The readings reflect the evolution of knowledge through distinct historical experiences and cultural contexts. They show refinement and expansion over the years in how we understand peace and the principles of nonviolence. The concept of peace has broadened to incorporate issues related to economic and social justice, and more recently issues of gender, governance, and the environment.

The works range from early pieces by Gandhi more than a hundred years ago to important writings of today. They are classic not only in their enduring value but in their relevance for now. The authors are from nearly every continent and draw lessons from an array of historical experiences and movements for change: the freedom struggle of India, the civil rights movement in the United States, the global campaign against apartheid in South Africa, the struggle for human rights in Latin America, and the movement to free Palestine. The readings address the theory and practice of nonviolence, the methods and strategy of social action, and the religious roots of nonviolence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

A special word about gendered language. Many of the writings cited here were authored before the recent shift in English language usage, long overdue, toward gender-neutral pronouns and nouns. Most of the authors, including Deming, use “man” to represent humankind, a usage that is no longer acceptable to many readers. In the early phases of excerpting and editing these writings, I attempted to change the noun and pronoun usage of Gandhi, King, Muste, and others to gender-neutral forms, but the resulting edited text was awkward and difficult to read, and in some cases lost the eloquence and majesty of important writings, such as King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” To preserve the meaning of the authors and the authenticity of their work, therefore, I have retained the language usage of the originals in the excerpts.