

# Nonviolence – Political Action from the Stance of Harmlessness

Ana Raffai

## **(De)blockage**

There was a time when, before setting out work, writers would invoke muses to inspire them to be able to finish the work they had commenced. I am a child of secular times, so at the start of this text, instead of invoking muses, I reflect on my blockages. Why do I find it difficult to write about nonviolence in an unfettered way? I suppose the reasons vary; two of them are most visible to me. The first is the violence around me. We follow the development of the war in the Middle East and Far East in the media. I am inundated with a feeling of frustration and helplessness. There are quite a few individuals, organisations, networks in the world that publicly and unequivocally oppose the business that is war. In the USA and the UK (to mention only demonstrations in the countries that are nowadays the leaders of the warfare pack) prior to the outbreak of the war in Iraq, hundreds of thousands of citizens came out to the streets in the biggest anti-war protests since World War Two, only to see the political leadership of these countries attack Iraq as though none of their voters had said anything. Iraq has been devastated, and the war is spreading, and it seems that every effort against the advance of violence is futile, which is frustrating and makes me feel powerless. This slap in the face of democracy is repeated when over 60% of citizens of Croatia, according to the current polls, do not accept joining NATO, but still that doesn't worry the elected executors of power who continue to work on joining this military association. It feels discouraging when the majority of citizens cannot make the elected management structures

of a state act in accordance with their voters' will. In both of these instances, a public display of dissent is clearly not enough. Particularly so at the present moment, which it seems, is not the right time for peace talks. And presenting nonviolence as a realistic alternative in this context, instead of a vision with no practical value, is far from simple.

The blockage that has to do with the seemingly inefficient nonviolent vision is increased when I'm aware of the violence I produce myself. I notice it and then feel bad about it, or fail to notice and feel even worse when someone else warns me about it. There is no clear space, a place or a community that would be a realm of nonviolence. Not even within me is there 'immaculateness' by violence, which would give me the right to, being 'perfect' and 'nonviolent', demand nonviolence or at least advocate it on the grounds of my infallibility.

So, I have at my disposal neither the environment, nor a context that would assure my actions are nonviolent. Nor am I devoid of errors as a subject of action, so that I could, working on social changes, feel a life-long citizen of 'the state of peace', i.e. one that acts infallibly from the position of a completed state and with the moral right that would bestow in another kind of world; we could call it 'the state of unrest'. On the contrary, it feels as if the space is so saturated with violence that it is considered, however morally judged against, 'normal' and here I am, with this text, trying to justify my objecting to this 'normal' by claiming that there is a realistic alternative that calls for the transformation of social conflict to begin on its grounds. Even I, who advocates it, am no more successful in terms of this alternative than others who are perhaps less aware of its existence.

I would like to, through this text, relying on my own experience of searching for ways to live nonviolence, note some moments or points of orientation that are useful landmarks for me. I would also like to articulate some points that lead me in my nonviolent action with the goal of making this text helpful for those who have decided to try their hand at nonviolent strategies, or to be an encouragement for those who are just getting to know nonviolence on this occasion.

## What is nonviolence and how does it start?

At the roots of this notion is experience. I want to look back on those who instil life into the word *nonviolence*, i.e. women and men who have made a Copernican turn in concrete life situations of extreme violence, have chosen a path other than violent defence which was resorted to by a great majority of others in their surroundings. This is the path that we wish to promote here. “When I was clear about the fact that I would not kill another person, even if it was the only way to save my own life, I choose not to kill rather than to save myself – that’s when I turned a new page in my life”, a peace activist from Osijek said on one occasion, a woman who started her peace engagement in the midst of the war in her city in 1991.<sup>1</sup> She hadn’t been driven by circumstances. Unless we accept that circumstances had become so unspeakable that they have helped fine tune the antennas for the possibility of breaking the closed cycle of violence, which is what may have happened to Rosa Parks<sup>2</sup> when she sat in the front of the bus in M, tired, and thus, tired as she was, refused to conform with the (unjust) racist law according to which she, as a black woman, was forbidden to sit in the company of white people.

In both cases, it is about disobedience to the existing conditions that the majority will consider to be the only possible and realistic ones, whilst the opposition is labelled as non-realistic, ridiculous and perhaps insolent as well. Who do you think you are to change our current course of events? And in both examples, the people who decided to no longer accept the given frameworks, rules of the game, accepted another thing: that in a situation of violence, they would rather endure than inflict pain on other. The initial spark for nonviolent action is the decision to ‘spend’ courage on the refusal of violence. This effort is an eye and spirit opening one in terms of new options of getting out of a

\* .....

- 1 Quotation after K. Kruhonja, workshop entitled ‘Reconciliation in the context of peace building’, *Miramida Plus!* 9, 2001.
- 2 Rosa Parks is a black woman, a seamstress, who in 1955 broke the law and took a seat on a bus in the area reserved for white people. She was arrested for misdemeanour, which gave rise to nonviolent resistance of black people against racial discrimination. Compare M. L. King, *Freiheit*, Wupertal, 1984, page 3.

situation from which there is seemingly no way out. But, the first step is to say NO to violence.

For that reason, the very notion of *nonviolence* has its justification. It expresses the initial step, the initial point that is, at least in majority of cases, a NO to violence that surrounds us and that, as learned patterns of behaviour and thinking, we reproduce. And as long as society, globally speaking, in the great majority of cases is organised on the principles of violence, it does make sense to define alternative with a word that begins with a NO to the violent paradigm.

The notion of 'nonviolence' can also be interpreted with an exclamatory intonation as WE DON'T WANT VIOLENCE! WE OPPOSE VIOLENCE! – and thus see in it the will for something else, for protest or resistance.

On the other hand, most of the theoreticians of nonviolence hold it against the notion of 'nonviolence' that it is too much of an expression of what we do not want. In a way, whenever we mention nonviolence, we promote, at least at the level of the word itself, violence as well. And we do not say anything, or very little, about what we do want. Adding adjectives or nouns to the word nonviolence is an attempt to fix this shortcoming. Thus, in French, there is the expression of *alternatives nonviolentes* (nonviolent alternatives).<sup>3</sup> This emphasises that it is about the new, alternative paradigms offered by nonviolence. In Croatian, there is the expression of *aktivno nenasilje* (active nonviolence) that indicates that nonviolence is realised through action, i.e. in practicing the values that are the contents of the nonviolent stance. Along with this, the notion of active side by side with nonviolence removes the misconception that nonviolence equals passivity. In German, on the other hand, there are two terms that are most often used to denote nonviolence: *Gewaltlosigkeit* (nonviolence) or even more frequently in the form of the adjective *gewaltlos* (nonviolent) and another, more recent, and in my opinion more appropriate term, *Gewaltfreiheit* (freedom from violence) or *gewaltfrei*, in its adjective form. I find *Gewaltfrei* to be a more appropriate word because instead of the suffix '-los' meaning 'without'/'devoid' *gewaltfrei* has the suffix '-frei', meaning 'free of': be free of the necessity, of the use of violence. The value foundation of

\* .....

3 Compare. Title of the organisation Fr. MAN (mouvement des alternatives nonviolents)

nonviolence is even more clearly expressed in the third, and the least used expression, *Guetkraft*, literally translatable as ‘the force of goodness’.

All these notions stand for two words that Gandhi uses to name nonviolence. The first of these is *ahimsa*, a Sanskrit word that, literally translated, means lack of harm, not to harm anyone. We translate it as respect and, what’s more, absolute respect towards everyone and everything that lives. Ahimsa covers what we in education for nonviolent action call the *stance of nonviolence, the stance of respect towards others and affirmation of self*. The other word was coined by Gandhi himself, because in his nonviolent struggle he needed a word that would denote the mode of action. This word is *satyagraha*. Literally translated, *satyagraha* means the force of truth. Satyagrahi are people who struggle because they hold on firmly to the truth they have realised, they rely on the power of love, justice and truth and thus choose nonviolent means in their actions. In other words, they find different forms of struggle that are in accordance with the stance of respect towards other people.<sup>4</sup>

### **Connection between political action and spirituality of nonviolence**

Institutionalised value systems, such as religion, for example, emphasises the importance of one’s own ethical values or principles and their implementation in practice. In Christianity, for example, the Bible on numerous occasions encourages the practice of values we adhere to with our stance; in the epistle of Jacob, it is said that ‘faith without action is dead’ (Jacob 2, 26).<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, there is a reality in which the vision has still not been realised, when the principle is still not turned into practice. Religion allows for that discrepancy and interprets it through a theology of human imperfection or human sinfulness. It does make sense to allow time for the process of maturation because we cannot value effort only by its success. The same goes for nonviolent action: no one will ever be perfect in a way that they could say for themselves: there, I am

\* .....

4 J. Semelin, Christian Mellon, *QUE sais-je? – la non-violence*, Paris, 1994, pages 7 and 8.

5 Compare the entire section of Jac 2,14-26 how he sees the relation between stance (faith) and practice (action) and how he defines action.

nonviolent. This is about affirmation of self and respect for others, this is about exercise that slowly becomes *habitus*/mode of action. These attempts we describe as the *zone of nonviolence* are realised when I affirm myself assertively<sup>6</sup>, and respect others empathically<sup>7</sup>. Sometimes we manage to be more in the zone of nonviolence, and sometimes less.

Still, apart from this similarity to religions, according to J. M. Mueller<sup>8</sup> nonviolence is different from a religious system in that it is important for nonviolence to be realised through nonviolent strategies. Otherwise it would make no sense to call it nonviolence. Thus we reach the second key issue in understanding nonviolence, the question of HOW I do something? HOW I communicate, not only WHAT the contents of my message are. How do I reach my goal? How do I realise myself? How do I build society? The question of HOW over and over again. Turn your attention to public discussions, the focus of concentration in a conversation, making your point in decision making. In all these cases, the attention of participants of the interaction will be directed towards the WHAT. The arguments, goals, benefits or disadvantages... Rarely, very rarely you have nurtured discussions, dialogues in the true sense of the word, in which you will encounter, apart from acuteness, composure. Pauses along with speed. Space for silence along with a bunch of sentences. You can carry out a short query and watch any show on TV under a magnifying glass of these two questions: how much it is important WHAT they're saying in a discussion, and how much the speakers are aware of HOW they communicate. I recognise nonviolence where there is a *correlation between the road/way and goal*.

This is one of the basic rules of nonviolent action. Gandhi speaks, picturesquely, of the relation between the seed and the plant: a birch tree cannot sprout from a grain of corn. You cannot suddenly create a society of peace and

\* .....

6 Asserto Lat. – I assert myself, another word for assertiveness in Croatia is *prodornost* (compare Rječnik stranih riječi).  
7 Ein patho (Gr) – to empathise, to feel standing next to; another word is Croatian for *compassionate*.  
8 Compare Video recording of the interview with J.M. Mueller, *Les colombes de l'ombre – acteurs nonviolents en Israel Palestine*, production CANVA, Carcasonne.

justice in violent ways. Because the violence itself contains injustice and unrest towards someone. ‘Peace is not the goal, it is the very road to peace that is the goal’<sup>9</sup> – violence carries in it the injustice and the seed of a new conflict.

It may sound unusual to make connections between spirituality and politics at all. In our region politics is much more often linked to criminal than to socially accepted behaviour. The combination of politics and religion that I know in my surroundings are the major Churches (Catholic and Orthodox) which usually results in advocating populist political options (e.g. talking the faithful at religious gatherings into voting for the party complying to the political stance of the representative of religious community in question) promoting national exclusiveness, and its political result is nationalism. So, in the context I currently live in, I’d rather speak of linking social action and spirituality. But there are other possibilities. The examples of political leaders such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King, as well as activists led by inspiration of nonviolence have shown that it is not necessary to, while being engaged in politics, lie, possess, deceive, talk idly. On the contrary, spirituality is not a purpose in itself, but it is, according to their judgement, the core of politics. Inspired by values they will work towards changes even when they don’t find personal gain in their engagement. And, vice versa, without the exaltation or vision, political action is in danger of being violent. I don’t see spirituality as necessarily adhering to a certain religious code, i.e. confirming the righteousness of churches and religious communities. I see it as values and inspiration that are on the other side of short term success. The belief that it is politically correct to be honest, to tell the truth, to accept the democratic way and to listen to the will of electorate strikes one as idealism, in the contemporary world. But, there is something that is spirituality as ‘that which gives spirit or breath’ to politics, and it is found in the word inspiration. Inspiration is possible when action stems from the belief that what we do is true and good. This is when inspiration is a fruitful soil of new ideas for solving the old problems. Every nonviolent action is a creative miniature in the mosaic of nonviolent acting. Therefore it cannot be repeated. Every one of them is original, and it surprises

\* .....

9 Gandhi, *Tous les hommes sont freres*, Gallimard, UNESCO, 1969, Section ‘Goal and means’, page 149.

and inspires for new creativity. In our politics there is no creativity because there is no faith that creativity is linked to inspiration, and that inspiration is linked with honesty and sincerity. Political engagement of the *satyagraha*, the ones who practice nonviolent strategies, is led by the conviction that 'politics is wrapped around us like a snake that coils around our body and we cannot release ourselves from it, despite our best effort. I want to battle against the snake'.<sup>10</sup>

### Structural violence and some road signs of nonviolent action

The first things that the word violence brings to mind are physical violence, fighting, war, potential physical abuse. Violence for which we can define the perpetrator (agent) we call *direct violence*, be it physical or another way of inflicting damage ('harmfulness') or disrespect to oneself or another person.

In the 1970s, the practice of liberation of Latin American societies (Helder Camara/Nicaragua) as well as conflict studies (J. Galtung/Norway) reached a similar realisation: that apart from direct violence, there is also violence for which we don't know the agents, it's constituted by everyone, because we support an unjust constitution or we are a part of structures that perpetrate violence legally, but not justly.<sup>11</sup> Some, due to their positions in society, are more responsible for that violence and they wish to maintain the existing conditions because they live well in it. Others are victims of institutions. The ones at the bottom of the power ladder also contribute to their remaining in unfavourable positions through their passivity. Hildegard Goss Mayr portrayed the violence in society through a triangle standing upside down, resting on its point.<sup>12</sup> Various groups and individuals support violence because they perform what is asked of them uncritically; this is about violence that H. Camara calls *institutional violence*, and J. Galtung *structural violence*. 'The mother of all violence is injustice, unjust division of goods within a society', H. Camara maintains.<sup>13</sup>

\* .....

10 Gandhi, *ibid*.  
11 Compare Galtung, *Kein Zweifel: Gewaltlosigkeit funktioniert! Werstatt fuer Gewaltfreie Aktion*, Baden, 1995.  
12 Compare. H. Goss Mayr, *Evangelje i borba za mir (Gospel and Struggle for Peace)*, Zagreb 1993, page 55 etc.  
13 *Werkstaette fuer den Frieden*, work material of Pax Christi 1999, pages 32-33.



Structural violence within a community/society is constituted, along with the unjust division of goods, by the ways in which power is distributed in a society, ways in which decisions are made, and in which discrimination of one group over another is maintained. Structural violence is not as obvious to everyone as is the case with direct violence. It is more difficult to recognise it in times of peace, because it requires values to be accepted such as equality and equal rights of all citizens, social rights, social sensitivity for the less powerful in society, the right of all citizens to work, individual's right to choice. Along with it, it is as a rule supported by theories or an ideology that 'interprets' the existing constitution of the society as the right one. An ideology that affirms the violence of the structures is called *cultural violence*.

All three forms of violence are linked: cultural violence conceives structural violence, structural violence provokes the reaction of the subordinated one so that they take up arms and attempt to reach the just goal of liberation through violence. H. Camara calls this chain process a *spiral of violence*: violence of the state provokes the violence of the rebels that is then justified through violence of repressive legal organs of power, violence of army and police against the rebels. Since this doesn't solve the problem of oppression, rebels increase their violence, and the state responds through yet more repression. Thus the conflict escalates.

For this reason one of the road signs in the strategy of nonviolent acting is to initiate actions that move in the opposite direction and break the spiral of violence. Starting with the knowledge of the problems of escalation of conflict and being aware of our own responsibility in supporting structural violence, nonviolent fighters strive to focus on a problem against which they struggle and the means they use in this struggle. Spirituality of nonviolence comes into focus here since, in the conflict, it *focuses on the problem, without diminishing respect towards the person of the opponent*. The key rule of conflict transformation is thus: 'be firm with the problem and mild with the person'. It is very human, and probably the experience of most of us will confirm it, that in a conflict I see the opponent/enemy as the embodiment of my suffering. I don't even want to see them, and in my imagination I'd much rather wipe them off from the face of the Earth. However, the strategy of nonviolent resistance observes the point of

acting, i.e. how to achieve a long term solution of the problem. In the long run, removing the perpetrator of injustice is not a solution. Injustice and everything that supports it structurally is our 'real enemy'. Otherwise, by removing the opponent and not solving the problem, the problem between us will still remain. The examples of changing the leaders in certain offices in dictatorship regimes prove it, since the problem remains regardless of those personas being gone. Focusing on the problem helps like an immune property against the *mimetics of violence* (R. Girard).<sup>14</sup> Wherein we maintain our desire to, however much damage the opponent does to us, we won't inflict damage on them. However much the opponent fails to see us as people, we want to see them as a person who, does know what we are fighting against, but still remains a person who has the right to live and who can change. Many nonviolent actions use some rituals from the sphere of spirituality or soul-searching, such as: prayers, meditation, fasting, and sermons or, from more secular sources: songs, humour, dance.

When J. Fox, a Quaker in the peace service in Iraq, was viciously murdered at the end of 2005, his Mennonite friends have not once expressed their grief over a loss of a friend through any act of counter-violence.<sup>15</sup> They haven't demanded for the 'evil perpetrator/s to be justly punished' because they know that the punishment is a way of solving secondary problems which only helps to increase the violence which Fox gave his life for. Nor have they demanded revenge or belittled those who killed their friend even though he had worked for the people of Iraq. Instead, they kept reminding themselves of the violence of the war, supported by the wealthy countries involved in the war in Iraq due to their interests, and terrorist violence that is very similar to the former in its ways and goals. They kept reminding themselves of the problem, not the 'culprits' and protested against violence, and not against its protagonists. In their prayer proclamation on the occasion of Fox's killing, they said: "We call

\* .....

- 14 From: *Que sais je? – la non-violence*, after Rene Girard, *La violence et le sacre*, Grasset 1972, pages 78 and 79.
- 15 The Quakers and Mennonites are in our region the best known members of historical peace churches. This term includes churches originating in the Reformation (16<sup>th</sup> century) that explicitly added Christian nonviolence to their beliefs.

a prayer for everyone suffering violence in Iraq, a prayer for those who kidnap people for political reasons or merely to make money out of it, a prayer for those who wouldn't leave people of Iraq stranded."<sup>16</sup>

### Resistance or defence

Every violent behaviour is 'contagious' in one way or another: we are tempted to respond in kind to a blow, on the basis of the right of an innocent victim. However, by exercising this right, we actually become more and more similar to the ones we fight against, and in time a question legitimately arises of: what right do we have to ask for a third, unbiased, party's sympathy, if we are increasingly resemble our opponent in our ways of fighting.

Some road signs in the struggle against structural violence can be provided by the terms *defence and resistance*.

Nonviolent actors prefer to use the term RESISTANCE for their acting, whilst armies usually use the term DEFEND. I deliberately use the word struggle for both ways of acting because there are similarities between them: they both require preparation and organisation. In both cases, groups are organised and have their strategies of action, goals, and analyses and how to reach those goals. In both defence and resistance the protagonists need to be bold and brave because there is risk involved in both situations – even the risk of losing their lives. And yet again, there's a great difference between what is readily visible, which is the use or refusal to use any arms as a means of struggle.

The difference is also that the defence is interpreted as a response to an attack. By the very fact that one side has been attacked, that side has the right to defend themselves. The ones who defend themselves find explanations for their behaviour in the actions or unjustness of others. Is there such a thing as an unjust defence or a just attack? The attack comes first, followed by defence. Resistance seeks justification in reasons immanent to it. It can, but doesn't have to, be a second step to the first step of the attack. We resist and thus act because

\* .....

16 Quotation after an e-mail news of 11 March 2006 was sent by the German Mennonite Peace Committee (dmfk.menno.peace@t-online.de).

of values we care for, because of an awareness of justice and our attempts to change the unjust conditions.

Thus the jeopardy in case of defence comes from the other side, with which, at least as long as the defence lasts, there must be no communication. Quite the contrary, when it comes to resistance, nonviolent communication is one of the basic means of action. Through communication, we influence our opponent, through communication we influence the public, wishing to gain its favour. Defence assumes that our side is being just, and that the opponent is being unjust (because they are the ones who attacked). It is therefore difficult to confess to our own injustice nowadays, after the war, when we are assured we were defending ourselves. The construct of defence reverts us to the anger towards the enemy, the anger of ourselves having been attacked, the anger of the injustice of someone having entered our lives, our villages, our homes, our living rooms, having touched what belongs to us and NOT them.

Resistance in these situations draws attention to the problem of entering itself, and not to the person who has done it. Thus it is not considered just for anyone to enter, be it the attacked one or the one defending themselves. The solution is in meeting our need to have security in our own space, in nurturing our lives and our identities. The solution is that the road/way to finding solutions is not contradictory to this solution. The power even now is within those who cannot demolish even when their own people do, and do not exile people when you yourself are being exiled – and due to their faith/value that they follow. And because of the farsightedness of the strategy: resistance is aware that there will be bills to pay after the war. It knows that the pattern of destruction against the enemy destroys the ones who perpetrate violence, too.

### **Nonviolence or violence: a choice, not necessity**

It's difficult to de-mythologise defence as long as the generally accepted opinion is that the offended ones have a moral right to reach for violent methods in order to defend themselves. It is not popular, sometimes it sounds virtually mad or insolent, to advocate the point that every behaviour, and thus also violent behaviour as defence, is a matter of choice. This statement stems from the logical

train of thought that a free, mentally more or less sound adult has, in every situation of their lives, a chance to decide what to do, even when this freedom is narrowed so much as to make this choice poor. Citing choice does not have the goal of blaming those who defended themselves, their families, what they deem valuable, with arms; some would call these things holy. The arguments I will list in favour of violence being a choice, not a necessity, are a protest against the ideology that is immanent to the western culture (compare cultural violence), that glorifies, legitimises and legalises violence (compare J. M. Mueller)<sup>17</sup>. It's not the people who were shooting that irritate. But we are allowed to oppose those who often lead others to it (whilst they themselves are preserved from violent defence). At the same time they speak of wanting peace, but claim that peace is not possible to attain because they estimate that violence is inevitable. I am irritated by the avoidance of one's own responsibility, propagating heroism that is, I presume, only good and just in the movies. The media in all the countries of the former Yugoslavia, more or less the same ones that were active during the war, failed to critically examine the ideology of the necessity of violence. The very notion of cultural violence is scarcely known as well.

A nonviolent stance is a protest against the armed defence being unquestionable and the idea that it goes without saying, even if we were to see and live with all the consequences of wartime violence, from psychologically spent defenders to raped women, from dislocated families to orphans, from torn relations and devastated villages. As if the experience of the war had not taught us to simply condemn violence, instead of only opposing the 'unjust' violence. Isn't the argument about the necessity of violent defence essentially a reflection of a belief that violence is efficient? This belief should be exposed as fake confidence, and as opposing the religions that exist in our regions. Regardless of the fact that religious institutions are not the leaders in promoting nonviolence in their respective communities. Promoting nonviolence is a protest against stupidity in which we repeat the same losses. We are not victims of a fatal destiny that ties us to our predestined warfare. In my opinion, those who still manufacture thoughts, images

\* .....

17 Compare video *Les colombes de l'ombre*.

in our heads, such as there is no way other than a just war, along with everyone else who approves of their ideologies, are more responsible for maintaining faith in the necessity of violence but ‘just’ defence than those who fought in the war themselves, and I think the former are still a majority in our societies.

### Reaction or initiative

Initiative is a term that defines choice more closely. When I say choice, I point out WHAT the result is, when I say take the initiative, I speak more of HOW to reach the choice. Initiative is a tool of nonviolent strategy. Someone who has the initiative directs. Students in demonstrations in Belgrade in the early 1990s took initiative by talking to the police; protesters who always come up with the new ways of making their message interesting to the public have the initiative. In the procedure of nonviolent communication, the person who initiates a dialogue using I-messages is the person taking the initiative. Nonviolent resistance is a way for a group to communicate their demands. Regardless of whether it is a conflict initiating resistance or resistance awoken by someone’s assault, it is always important that by nonviolent action a group does not respond to the assault but responds from their own demands; instead of referring to behaviour of others/other groups or opponents, it estimates what is negative and struggles against the negativity.

In the biblical text with the well known motive of ‘turn the other cheek’<sup>18</sup>, a protestant theologian Walther Wink exegetes at least two characteristics of initiative: *surprise and affirming one’s own dignity*. For centuries this text has been interpreted as a call for suffering violence. Wink, however, sees in, based on the interpretation of the verb *anthistenain*<sup>19</sup> as a call to the oppressed to

\* .....

18 Compare from the Gospel of Matthew: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’. But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” ( Matthew 5:38-39)

19 *Anti* means against and *histemi* in its noun form means nonviolent rebellion, armed defense. The verb was used to denote military conflict, a moment when two armies collide. The word refers to a potentially lethal excess or an armed uprising. Thence Wink translates: “Do not do evil in return for evil, or do not strike back with the same force” (Compare W. Wink, *Jesus and Non-violence*, Osijek 2005, page 8 etc.)

resist by doing something unexpected. The one who strikes does not expect to be provoked by their victim by the victim's exposing themselves. However, this exposure contains a great amount of confidence. And even more surprises for their opponent.<sup>20</sup> Recognising the moment of initiative is a matter of awareness that there is the possibility to start something new and unexpected as an individual or a group. To initiate communication, to make the first step. All else is a practice creating new experience.

### MYSELF as a field of action

What is it that can help me remain on the path of nonviolence, if that is my choice? At the beginning of this essay, I mentioned the nonviolent stance being inseparable from the mode of action. Every time I can nurture within myself, be aware of and rouse the will for my part to be the part of nonviolence. In some cultures there is the belief in the power of word; you can't break a word you've given. Meditations particularly emphasise the importance of words as means of making things present. I would say, from a rational point of view, that word influences my actions if I invoke its meaning to my consciousness as my will. I can't vouch for my infallibility at every moment of tension, but I can invoke nonviolence to modify my actions at any time. We have the power to direct our stance, our stance influences our action. Our action affirms our stances. Many times have I encountered some kind of disbelief in how much it is really possible to live nonviolence. I don't share this scepticism about how non-realistic it is to live goodness, love and then also nonviolence. I have worked with people a lot and through that work I have encountered and learned to recognise goodness and value in them. I think the problem is not people's capacity for good and for peace. Because I think they do have it. The question is how much time do we take and invest in bringing our capacities to our awareness and developing them; that is how I would describe *working on oneself*. How much it matters to

\* .....

20 Master's striking the slave is cited. To turn the left cheek means to provoke your master to strike you, but no longer by the back of his hand, by a stroke that expresses a socially superordinate one over the subordinated slave. In order to be able to hit him, the master now needs to use a boxers' stroke, that was only appropriate in a battle of equal opponents.

us. I believe that the delight in trainings in nonviolent action is very much a consequence of the fact that they are spaces in which magic occurs, as one of the participants of a training in Macedonia put it, a magic of dealing with one's own self and communication of acceptance.

When I am in a conflict, the capital gained from working on myself is a gift to the community. Nurturing oneself as a whole being is a space of nonviolent action. Communities that live inspired by nonviolence, of Ghandian type, for example, therefore have a time of day when they pray, sing, discuss, meet, dance together in order to maintain or increase their nonviolent capacities. Focusing on a problem along with consideration for respecting a person, resistance as an awareness of one's own needs instead of attack as defence, choosing the way and not the necessity of nonviolence – these are all aspects that we can find in the notion of *composure*. I think that striving to build oneself has the goal of making me be 'together with myself' as often as possible. I see composure as a means of nonviolent action, as a powerful state of an individual, and then also harmony and organisation within a group. I see composure as a sense, a goal of doing something. A great spiritual contentment is achieving composure; the experience of being able to manage your day/time independently and in an aware manner and to, regardless of difficulties that might surround you, be able to live profoundly content, I would even say happy, if I see happiness as my wishes coinciding with what I currently live.<sup>21</sup>

**Some examples of nonviolent action in the region of South Eastern Europe (the Balkans)**

The benefit of our shared war in the Balkans is a vaccine of peace work in these regions. Still, after fifteen years of work in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, groups were organised that systematically and in the long run promote the values of nonviolence. The individuals themselves can do something towards peace every time. Organised groups become a social factor through persistent work. Both of these are required, I wouldn't value

\* .....

21 Compare the same root of Croatian words for 'happiness' and 'to meet' (sreća and sresti).



being organised more, bearing in mind that I know how much the pioneers of new ways of thought had meant in my life and in the environment I live in. They have influenced other people.

In this section, I would like to view the actions of groups. Limited space and my information being partial will have the effect of this choice being arbitrary; much like a brainstorming of ideas I will remember some examples and neglect other. I ask the readers in advance not to hold the fragmentary selection of this overview against me, because my goal is not to point out some at the expense of others, but to list some examples that encourage change.

In Croatia, where I live, an anti-war group Antiwar Campaign, acted from the beginning of the war (1991). Its members have managed, through their nonviolent actions, resisting dislocation of non-Croatian citizens from state-owned apartments, to enact a new law much more favourable for the wronged tenants. In the years after the war, violence is mostly invisible, partly due to overall impression of warfare events, partly due to peace influence in society being systematically prevented. However, even at that time, non-governmental organisations worked on protecting human rights, women's human rights, through their first systematic education, working on the laws on, for example, civil military service. All this we view today as results of social change: while during the war, it was risky to refuse to carry arms as a conscientious objector in some parts of Croatia, nowadays more than half of the recruits serve in this manner and their number is on the rise. Human rights are commonplace in the public discourse; women are more visible in public. The first area where nonviolent articulation of one's own demands in public was accepted was the area of environmental protection; from protests against power plants in Istria to preventing construction of oil pipeline in the Adriatic Sea as a protest against the 'Alpe Adria' project.

Approximately at the same time, at the beginning of war, the Antiwar Action in Belgrade was established, and in my opinion, the strongest agents of antiwar movement in Serbia today are Women In Black. Thanks to them, massive peace demonstrations for ousting Milošević regime were nonviolent and creative. In the north of Serbia, in Vojvodina, a de-militarised zone of Trešnjevac was organised and in Novi Sad peace activists acted through continual street

actions for the rights of women and against xenophobia and nationalism, around various non-governmental organisations such as Women's Studies 'Mileva Einstein' and EHO 'Ecumenical Humanitarian Service'. In Sombor, at the beginning of the war, the Sombor peace group continued its activities, i.e. association of 'Ravangrad' and didn't cut contact with their partners in Croatia, e.g. the Peace Centre from Osijek, not even during the fiercest warfare events.

This Centre has collected documentation on the war crimes of Croatian soldiers in East Slavonija as early as 1992 and presented them to the public, which was until recently perceived as an act of treason. Along with the change of district attorney, this documentation becomes a source of information.

In order for nonviolent action to take place in public, citizens need to be informed and educated. As of the end of the war, there is a continual supply of alternative education for peace in Croatia. Its results can be seen, for example, in peace demonstrations 'My voice for a legal state': many of the present are my former students of Peace Studies; a part of them is active in organising the protests themselves. It was similar with anti-war demonstrations against the war in Iraq. The latest protests, last year, entitled 'Matija Gubec' managed to, in spite of a relatively small number of participants, abolish the law that prohibited demonstrations in front of the Croatian Parliament building. Finally, there is an action going on in the Croatian police entitled 'Violence does not live here' and one of its products is a brochure that helps prevent domestic violence against women and lists contact addresses of women's non-governmental organisations among others. What preceded such development among police structures was the work of associations through education and cooperation with the police.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, except for non-governmental organisations, there are individuals within religious institutions that have, as early as during the war and at the price of risking their own lives, publicly protested against the war between the Croats and Muslims. The others work on the promotion of shared living and, even though they are individuals, they have the support from their peers within religious institutions. One such permanent manifestation is the choir of 'Pontanima' from Sarajevo that has already received recognition from their hometown even though they had suffered insults and threats both

from their own community (Catholic context) and dominant political structures (Muslim context). However, their strategy was: personally influence contacts in the media and through them and the media – the public. Nowadays, the image has changed and they are the pride of all Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the tradition of Franciscan peace culture, a House of Peace on RAMA is in operation nowadays. In Banja Luka, Pax Christi has acted for many years and one of their activities was to be present while the apartments were being given back to dislocated Banja Luka citizens of non-Serbian origin, which included direct physical contact with the police and opponents of the law being implemented.

Eventually, I will go back to Croatia where our association is a mentor of the work of teams of several peace organisations. In some villages, profoundly damaged by war, the very existence of a peace organisation of multi-ethnic membership is a provocation and the initial phase of their action starts with the question of how to respond to being vilified by local people in power. Anti-war initiatives, such as, for example, publishing a poster in Berak, end with a police interrogation as a rule. A similar thing happened to the activists of an antiwar protest against Mladić in Niš. However, the example from Berak could be an encouragement: along with the development of the organisation and its becoming recognisable, it also becomes an address for the representatives of local government to turn to when they need to organise the local population.

Finally, nonviolent action in public, in my opinion, is also performed by Radio 101 when they broadcast their ‘bad good’ news on Sunday evening, i.e. positive news from the world, and is therefore, unfortunately, still an exception among the informative programmes. I’d also like to mention the influence of public figures, for example musicians such as Edo Maajka, whose lyrics promote living together and the beauty of diversity.

The changes brought about by these and many other efforts towards nonviolent transformation of unjust conditions are not the only benefits attained in solving a concrete problem. Gradually, they become commonplace in citizens’ awareness. Fifteen or so years ago, radio listeners would not have invited non-government associations to solve a certain social problem so matter-of-factly,

and rarely has it occurred to anyone to turn to the associations when they hadn't known where to look for their rights to be respected. And what I consider to be of particular value in this process and that the listed actions can claim as their merit, is the fact that individuals who are organised or actively participate in them experience the fact that general passivity is not eternal, that they can struggle without jeopardising their opponents. Such groups and individuals are a long-lasting virus of nonviolence in the society and I do not believe that there is an antivirus system against them. They will only continue to produce even more sophisticated viruses of peace.

**Summary**

If we summarise the presented road signs through which we can recognise nonviolence, it is 'a doctrine of the principle of behaviour that advocates the absence of any sort of violence in any area... and denies violence as a means of political action'.<sup>22</sup> It is particularly important, in a special situation such as conflict, to show that the transformation of conflict follows the principles (ahimsa) that support strategy (satyagraha). A new paradigm of action is offered in a culture in which a rationalist approach to communication and interactions is dominant. The novelty is the approach in which it is important HOW we reach our goals, and not only WHAT our goal is, because this approach believes that the very nonviolent path in itself leads towards a just goal. In the nonviolent transformation of conflict it is important to be aware that we can be very brisk in sorting out the problem, and mild towards the opponent who is, at that time too, a person who has the right to be respected and to maintaining their integrity.

In social conflicts, nonviolence means to consciously oppose structural and cultural violence without adding links to a spiral of violence and thus de-escalating conflict. It is possible if I develop resistance, and not accept defence, be it in its military form or its teaching, that it is just for a victim to strike back at offenders. Nonviolent action doesn't require the power of the victim because it rests on the awareness that when I have the initiative I also have many more chances for a

\* .....

22 Compare Larousse French dictionary after *QUE sais je?* – *La non-violence*

solution without violence, much more so than when I wait to react to someone's move. In every situation it is possible to choose which way we want to respond to violence, i.e. the necessity of violence is not recognised for the very reason that it is necessary to personally take responsibility for one's own action in order to find the way out of the entanglement of violence. Finally, the basic and the strongest instrument of nonviolence is a human being, a person who strengthens his/her capacities for nonviolence working on them and particularly by sharpening their 'togetherness'. These are the foundations for building nonviolent political action.

Considering the listed guidelines, nonviolence refers to other parameters and is placed in a different context than violence. Unlike the prejudice that the one who will not 'fight until sacrificing their own life to a just cause' neglects justice, nonviolence does indeed fight for the truth. The truth that transcends one-sidedness of the eagerness of a violent struggle. Nonviolence does not need to be, in order for it to be realised, forgotten in the struggle for justice, goodness and peace that belong to all people, even to our current opponent. Violence needs to renounce that memory, in order to be efficient. On the contrary, one needs to always remember that nonviolence advocates the values of humaneness. Therefore:

*Who is right does not matter  
but who is benevolent.  
The one who cares about peace  
matters more than the one who is right.  
The one who cares about friendship  
is the one who is right.  
The one who has understanding  
is the one who is right.  
The one who cares about joy and harmony,  
that one is right.  
V. Krmpotic<sup>23</sup>*

\* .....

23 From: *Stotinu i osam* (A Hundred and Eight), "Nije važno tko je u pravu", 69<sup>th</sup> poem in the Volume number 64.