

Active Nonviolence Across the World

by Richard Deats, 2009

In the 19th century, Victor Hugo wrote, “An invasion of armies can be resisted, but not an idea whose time has come.” Looking back over the past century, especially since the movements Gandhi and King led, we see the growing influence and impact of nonviolence as an idea whose time has come.

Mohandas Gandhi pioneered in developing the philosophy and practice of nonviolence. On the vast subcontinent of India, he led a colonial people to freedom through *satyagraha*, or soul force, defeating the greatest empire on earth, the British Raj. Not long after Gandhi’s death, **Martin Luther King, Jr.** found in the Mahatma’s philosophy the key he was searching for to move individualistic religion to a socially dynamic religious philosophy. He said that the spirit of Christ and the method of Gandhi was the combination that made means and ends consistent and powerful. Its application led to a movement that propelled the struggle for civil rights into a nonviolent revolution that changed the course of U.S. history.

The Gandhian and Kingian movements became a seedbed for social ferment and revolutionary change across the planet, providing a mighty impetus for social transformation. Many, perhaps most, still do not recognize the significance of this development and persist in thinking that in the final analysis it is lethal force, or the threat of it, that is the decisive arbiter of human affairs.

Public awareness of the nonviolent breakthroughs that have been occurring on every continent is still quite minimal. This alternative paradigm to the ancient belief in marching armies and bloody warfare has made great headway “on the ground,” but it is still little understood and scarcely found in our history books or in the media.

While “nonviolence is as old as the hills,” as Gandhi said, it is only in recent decades that the philosophy and practice of nonviolence have grasped the human imagination. In an amazing and unexpected manner, individuals, groups, and movements have developed creative, life-affirming ways to resolve conflict, overcome oppression,

establish justice, protect the earth, and build democracy.

More and more, active nonviolence is taking the center stage in the struggle for liberation among oppressed peoples across the world. What follows, in necessarily broad strokes, are highlights from the past four decades of this alternative history.

Asia and the Pacific

In 1986, millions of unarmed Filipinos surprised the world by nonviolently overthrowing the brutal dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, who was known at the time as “the Hitler of Southeast Asia.” The movement they called “people power” demonstrated in an astounding way the power of active nonviolence.

Beginning with the assassination in 1983 of the popular opposition leader, **Senator Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino, Jr.**, the movement against Marcos in the Philippines grew rapidly. Inspired by Aquino’s strong advocacy of nonviolence, the people were opened to the idea that armed rebellion was not the only way to overthrow a dictator. Numerous workshops in active nonviolence, especially in the churches, helped build a solid core of activists – including many key leaders – ready for a showdown with the Marcos dictatorship.

In late 1985, when Marcos called a snap election, a divided opposition united behind **Corazon Aquino**, the widow of the slain senator. Despite fraud, intimidation, and violence employed by Marcos, the Aquino forces brilliantly used a nonviolent strategy with marches, petitions, trained poll watchers, and an independent polling commission. When Marcos tried to steal the election and thwart the people’s will, the country came to the brink of civil war. **Cardinal Jaime Sin**, head of the Roman Catholic Church in the islands, went on the radio and called the country to prayer and nonviolent resistance. He instructed the contemplative orders of nuns to pray and fast for the country’s deliverance from tyranny. Thirty computer operators tabulating the election results, risking their lives, walked out when they saw Marcos being falsely reported as winning. After first going into hiding, they met with the

international press and publicly denounced the official counting, exposing the fraud to the world. Corazon (“Cory”) Aquino called for a nonviolent struggle of rallies, vigils, and civil disobedience to undermine the fraudulent claim of Marcos that he had won the election.

Church leaders fully backed her call; in fact, the Catholic bishops made a historic decision to call upon the people to nonviolently oppose the Marcos government. Crucial defections from the government by two key leaders and a few hundred troops became the occasion for hundreds of thousands of unarmed Filipinos to pour into the streets of Manila to protect the defectors and demand the resignation of the discredited government. These “unarmed forces of the Philippines” gathered along the circumferential highway around Manila which ran alongside the camps where the rebel troops had gathered. The highway is called *Epifanio de los Santos* – the Epiphany of the Saints! Troops sent to attack the rebels were met by citizens massed in the streets, singing and praying, calling on the soldiers to join them in the “People Power Revolution.”

Clandestine radio broadcasts gave instructions in nonviolent resistance. When fighter planes were sent to bomb the rebel camp, the pilots saw it surrounded by the people and defected. A military man said, “This is something new. Soldiers are supposed to protect the civilians. In this particular case, you have civilians protecting the soldiers.” Facing the collapse of his support, Marcos and his family fled the country. The dictatorship fell in four days.

Corazon Aquino, the new president, later said: “The world saw and recorded a people who knelt in the path of oncoming tanks and subdued with embraces of friendship the battle-hardened troops sent out to disperse them and annihilate the military rebels. All the world wondered as they witnessed, in the space of two months, a people lift themselves from humiliation to greatest pride.”

Ending the dictatorship was only the first step in the long struggle for freedom. Widespread poverty, unjust distribution of the land, and an unreformed

military remained, undercutting the completion of the revolution. Challenges to the further development of an effective people power movement have continued with a determined grassroots movement working to transform Philippine society.

Stunning developments took place in **China** in the spring of 1989. What began as a memorial march for a deceased leader quickly led into a mass expression of the pent-up longings of the Chinese people. With slogans such as “people power” and “we shall overcome,” students – later joined by workers – called for democracy, an end to corruption, a free press, and other democratic reforms. Hundreds of thousands of Chinese joined the protesters in Tiananmen Square. Day after day, week after week, they peacefully called on their government to accede to their demands. First a few, then hundreds, joined in a fast. Growing numbers of citizens, including police, soldiers, even many generals, expressed sympathy for the movement. The first soldiers sent to stop the demonstrators were disarmed with gifts and goodwill, just as the Filipinos had done in Manila. The top leaders of the government, in an important concession, met in a televised session with the students. The movement spread, beyond control it seemed, to other cities. Finally, however, a confused and divided government replaced the troops in the capital with soldiers from North China who could be counted on to follow orders and use brute force. Thus, on June 4, 1989, the massacre of Tiananmen Square occurred, setting back for years the democracy movement in China.

This great tragedy was not necessarily the end of people power in China, however, any more than the Amritsar massacre of unarmed Indians by the British was the end of the Indian revolution nor the assassination of Benigno Aquino was the end of the people power movement in the Philippines. Both of those tragedies, in fact, proved to be beginnings rather than endings. Martin Luther King reminded us that “unearned suffering is redemptive.” This can be true for a people as well as for an individual, though years, even decades may be required to rekindle such a movement.

China has also sought to destroy the culture and self-determination of the people of **Tibet**, claiming that land as an integral part of China. The Tibetans' exiled leader and 1989 Nobel Prize laureate, the **Dalai Lama**, bravely persists in calling his people not to flag in their nonviolent efforts to gain their freedom. He believes that these efforts will resonate with China's democracy movement which was so brutally setback at Tiananmen Square. The Dalai Lama maintains that following the way of Buddhist compassion and the course of nonviolent resistance can in time bring political concessions from China that seem unimaginable at present.

Events remarkably parallel to China's occurred in **Burma** (Myanmar) in 1988. In Rangoon (since renamed Yangon by the government), a students' nonviolent movement was launched in the summer of 1988 against the harshly repressive military rulers. Students began mass marches that increased week by week as professionals, middle class, and working people joined in.

During this tumultuous period, **Aung San Suu Kyi** quickly rose to prominence. The daughter of Aung San, the father of modern Burma, she had earlier married an Englishman who was an Oxford professor, and moved to England. She returned to Rangoon in 1988 from abroad because of her mother's illness. Suu Kyi was drawn into the democracy movement and fearlessly spoke at mass rallies, once walking through a contingent of soldiers ready to fire on her. Because of her heritage, her eloquence, and her brilliance, she quickly rose to national prominence and acclaim.

Finally, however, as would occur in China a year later, the threatened military leaders ordered a bloody crackdown. Thousands of unarmed demonstrators were killed, with thousands more fleeing into the jungle and into exile. Nonetheless, in the May 1990 national elections, the people voted overwhelmingly for Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, even though she and the other NLD leaders had been placed under house arrest months earlier. The government refused to recognize the results of the election and continued to govern, keeping Suu Kyi under house arrest.

Meanwhile, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991.

In one of her essays, she wrote, "The wellspring of courage and endurance in the face of unbridled power is generally a firm belief in the sanctity of ethical principles, combined with a historical sense that despite all setbacks the condition of man is set on an ultimate course for both spiritual and material advancement." Her quiet determination and courage has continued as a tower of strength to the Burmese in their quest for freedom. Under arrest, she was not allowed to go to her husband's funeral in England nor have her sons been allowed to visit her.

In August 2007, with Aung San Suu Kyi still under house arrest (as she'd been for 12 of the previous 18 years), the people again rose up in a mighty nonviolent movement of marches and ongoing protests against corruption, inflation, and brutal rule. Senior Buddhist monks played a key role in inspiring a "saffron revolution." Within two months, the demonstrations were stopped by a bloody crackdown, but what Suu Kyi called a "revolution of the Spirit" promises to be repeated until freedom is won.

"Engaged Buddhism" as articulated by the Vietnamese monk, **Thich Nhat Hanh**, the Cambodian monk **Maha Ghosananda**, and the Thai activist/intellectual **Sulak Sivaraksa** has contributed to nonviolent struggles in many places in Asia. **Thailand** has evidenced ongoing nonviolent efforts against its military, including a successful student-led movement in 1973 that brought down the dictatorship. Recurring pro-democracy movements from the 1980s to the present have continued this long-term struggle.

In the 1990s and 2000s, annual Buddhist peace marches across the former "killing fields" of a devastated **Cambodia** have promoted healing and the rebuilding of trust and hope among a war-weary people. **Maha Ghosananda**, monk and leader, died in 2007, but the marches and the movement, known as *Dhammayietra*, continue.

In **Taiwan** and **South Korea**, pro-democracy

efforts have won out over authoritarian regimes. The 20th century ended with South Korea under the presidency of **Kim Dae Jung**, a human rights crusader who finally triumphed over those who tried repeatedly to kill him. His daunting effort to bring reconciliation between bitterly divided North and South Korea was a hallmark of his presidency (Nobel Peace Prize, 2000). Kim's "Sunshine Diplomacy" opened doors to North Korea, though a state of war still exists on the peninsula. At the Sydney Olympics, for the first time a unified Korean team of athletes from North and South marched together as one. Despite many setbacks, long-term reconciliation has made headway.

Pro-democracy students in **Indonesia** have been unrelenting in their struggle against dictatorship, corruption, and military involvement in politics. Unceasing rallies and protests – a democracy in the streets – finally brought down the authoritarian Suharto in May 1998, leading to a duly elected president in October 1999.

At the same time, however, agitation for independence by **East Timor**, the former Portuguese colony taken over by Indonesia in 1975, was brutally crushed by Indonesian-backed paramilitaries in 1999. **Bishop Carlos Belo** and **José Ramos-Horta** received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996 for their nonviolent leadership in the East Timor freedom movement. After great losses and suffering by the people, the U.N. exercised the administration of East Timor until the first presidential election of 2002. The situation East Timor went through demonstrates the tragic inability of central states, such as Indonesia, China, Yugoslavia, and Russia, to deal justly with challenges to their authority, and the weakness of the United Nations and the world community in fostering a just and peaceful resolution of such conflicts.

The Middle East

One of the places where a just peace between two peoples seems intractable is **Israel/Palestine**. The scene of recurring wars and violence, it is at the same time the key to peace in the Middle East and a challenge to humanity's yearning for peace.

Along with the wars, the violence, and the suffering, Israeli and Palestinian individuals and groups working for both justice and peace are unrelenting in their refusal to give up the struggle, to stand for justice and compassion, and to foster nonviolent efforts.

Beginning in 1967 there were two sectors of the Palestinian resistance movement, the paramilitary and the civil. The first *intifada* (Arabic for "to shake off") was from its inception a multi-dimensional movement containing many nonviolent aspects such as:

- strikes by schools and businesses, called to protest specific policies and actions of the occupying authorities;
- agricultural projects, e.g. the planting of victory gardens and trees planted on disputed lands;
- committees for visiting prisoners and families of those who had been killed;
- boycotts of Israeli-made products;
- tax refusal, as in the Palestinian village of Beit Sahour where the VAT (value added tax) and income taxes were not paid;
- creative solidarity actions, such as when villagers were unjustly arrested, other residents went to police stations asking to be arrested also; and
- the establishment of alternative institutions to build Palestinian self-sufficiency.

Commenting on such developments, Labor Party leader Schlomo Avineri observed, "An army can beat an army, but an army cannot beat a people. ... Iron can smash iron, it cannot smash an unarmed fist." Nonetheless, the Palestinian resistance was met with brute force, from deliberately breaking the bones of demonstrators to demolishing the homes of suspects' families, from smashing the moveable goods of tax protestors to sealing off areas for months at a time, preventing people from going to their jobs or even going to the hospital.

The just demands and nonviolent actions of the

intifada strengthened the voices of Israelis working to find a just and peaceful resolution of the conflict. And, despite grave legal risks, covert meetings between Palestinians and Israelis slowly built growing areas of understanding. In March 1989, **Dr. Nabil Shaath**, the chairman of the Palestine National Council's political committee, told a New York audience how secret friendships with Jewish leaders helped Palestinian leaders to publicly adopt a two-state solution. In the fall of 1992, Norway began hosting a series of 14 covert meetings between Palestinians and Israelis, out of which the Declaration of Principles was forged that provided the basis of the Israeli-PLO Accord signed on the White House lawn on September 13, 1993.

The accord was, however, only a way station on the long road to peace. Palestinian land was still being seized, settlements expanded, the separation barrier built, and arbitrary policies imposed upon the Palestinian people. Israelis still lived in fear of terrorist attacks. Extremists on both sides were unrelenting in their efforts to undermine the peace process. The assassination of **Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin** by a Jewish religious student and the electoral defeat of his government were immense setbacks to the cause of peace.

The second *intifada*, which began in 1996, was much more violent than the first, reflecting the radicalization of both Palestinian and Israeli policies and widespread discouragement in building bridges over which trust and hope can be regained.

Rebuilding the foundation that showed so much promise remains elusive, despite the continuing, valiant efforts of Palestinian and Israeli peace activists. In the final analysis, however, there is no alternative to peace. To those who say this is impossible, Gandhi reminds us, "Think of all the things that were thought impossible until they happened."

In March of 2003, President George Bush launched the invasion of Saddam Hussein's **Iraq** as part of the "War on Terror" that was his response to the events of September 11, 2001. He was impervious to worldwide protests in which as many as ten million persons demonstrated against the move

toward war. The war in Iraq lasted longer than the global conflagration of World War II. Peace and human rights groups such as Christian Peacemaker Teams, the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), and Voices in the Wilderness (later Voices for Creative Nonviolence, or VCNV) opposed the war through marches, rallies, vigils, civil disobedience, and fact-finding in print and on the internet.

In 2008, FOR partnered with September 11 Families for Peaceful Tomorrows to support an Iraqi initiative called La'Onf (the Arabic word for nonviolence), representing Iraqis from every ethnic and religious group throughout Iraq. La'Onf advocates nonviolence as the most effective way to struggle for an independent, democratic, and peaceful Iraq, implemented through an annual week of nonviolence that includes nonviolence training.

In **Lebanon** a nonviolent movement for democracy and human rights took momentum following the assassination of former Lebanese **Prime Minister Rafic Hariri** on February 12, 2005. Deeply inspired by the courageous nonviolent life and witness of Hariri, they work for the restoration of democracy in Lebanon. The Center for Democracy in Lebanon seeks to spread true democracy with freedom and respect for human rights throughout the Arab world. This work has included education, sit-ins, and vigils. During the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel, Lebanese walked to the Israeli border to call for peace, joined by **Kathy Kelly** and VCNV.

In **Iran**, FOR since 2006 has been sending citizen diplomacy delegations to express friendship and goodwill for the Persian people. Building on a long tradition of going to adversary and "enemy" peoples, this is seen as a way of changing a hostile climate and making peace possible.

Africa

Decades of resistance to apartheid and witness for a multiracial, democratic society slowly but surely wore away the stone of oppression in **South Africa**, whose white leaders had proclaimed

“white supremacy for all time to come.” The brutal policies of the government convinced many that apartheid would only end in a violent showdown, and to that end the African National Congress had an active military wing. Nonetheless, the heart of the resistance movement was classic nonviolent resistance: education, vigils, rallies, marches, petitions, boycotts, prayers, fasts, and civil disobedience. Governmental attempts to stop this resistance with massive detentions and imprisonment, bannings of organizations and individuals, intimidation and murder, as well as emergency rule, could not, in the end, stop the movement. Gandhian influence was strong (Gandhi had begun his nonviolent labors in South Africa).

Chief Albert Luthuli (Nobel Peace Prize, 1960), a Christian and early leader of the African National Congress, said, “The urge and yearning for freedom springs from a sense of Divine Discontent, and so, having a divine origin, can never be permanently humanly gagged.”

In 1989, the churches responded to the draconian measures of emergency rule with a nationwide effort called “effective nonviolent action” that trained citizens for grassroots campaigns to break racial barriers in housing and transportation, defend conscientious objectors, visit prisoners across racial lines, and similar efforts. Emergency rule, rather than strengthening the government, exposed its desperation and moral bankruptcy. A towering leader in the anti-apartheid movement was Anglican **Archbishop Desmond Tutu** (Nobel Peace Prize, 1984).

An unexpected breakthrough came when **President Frederik deKlerk** began instituting reforms. He eventually legalized the African National Congress and released **Nelson Mandela**, who had been in prison for 29 years. The dramatic changes illustrate a concept from the U.S. civil rights movement, “top down/bottom up,” i.e., pressure for change from the grassroots is met by reforms accepted by/or initiated from the top, creating a dynamic tension that fosters change. In the midst of these developments the government still carried out brutal policies. But the force for change was not to be denied. In 1994, the first open elections in South Africa’s history were

held in an amazing manifestation of a whole nation peacefully voting for revolutionary change, moving from a white racist regime to multiracial democratic rule. Mandela’s passion for freedom and justice for all was expressed in a greatness of spirit that reached out to his former enemies. Though he never forswore the ANC’s recourse to violence, his approach has been remarkably nonviolent and reconciling. In his inaugural address, he held before the people a unifying vision “in which all South Africans … will be able to walk tall, without any fear in their hearts, sure of their inalienable right to human dignity – a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world.” Mandela and deKlerk received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993.

To deal with the bitter legacy of apartheid policies, the new South Africa established the **Truth and Reconciliation Commission** whereby the crimes and suffering of the years of apartheid were aired publicly in an atmosphere that fostered forgiveness and healing. This approach, which had previously been used in more limited contexts in a few other countries, has been replicated in many other societies since then, an historic advance in humanity’s nonviolent “experiments with Truth” as Gandhi called such efforts.

Madagascar, in a nonviolent movement similar to that in the Philippines, overthrew its dictator Didier Ratsiraka in 1991 through the combined efforts of Catholic and Protestant churches and many of the organizations that make up civil society. The subsequent government is seeking to address the great poverty, illiteracy, and ecological devastation on the island. **Jean and Hildegard Goss-Mayr**, International Fellowship of Reconciliation educators and trainers in nonviolence throughout much of Latin America, Asia, and Africa, were called on to help prepare for the nonviolence campaign.

Europe and the Former Soviet Bloc

As a whole, Europe, once a continent marked by recurring warfare and conflict, has moved in the direction of peaceful societies living harmoniously and cooperatively, together, with shrinking armies,

lowered barriers and boundaries. Living through two devastating world wars, they have learned far more than the United States of the destructiveness and horror of armed conflict.

Both **Spain** and **Portugal**, once brutal dictatorships, have chosen the way of peace and freedom.

Germany has made ongoing efforts to root out its Nazi heritage and has taken its place among the world's leading democracies. Peace finally seems to have been achieved in **Northern Ireland**. Nobel Peace Prizes have been awarded to a number of key persons in that long, long struggle: **Mairead Corrigan Maguire** and **Betty Williams** in 1976 for their leadership in the women's movement there, **John Hume** and **David Trimble** in 1998.

Scandinavia, the **Netherlands**, and **Switzerland** are zones of peace, tolerance, and political/economic well-being that illustrate the role small states can have in contributing to human progress and nonviolent policies.

Among the present challenges to Europe is the urgent need to peacefully and fairly integrate the flood of immigrants and refugees coming into the continent. Another challenge is to fairly respond to the historic conflicts within nation-states, such as that of the Basques in Spain, the Chechens in Russia, and the Kurds in Turkey (and other states). Wars in the breakup of the former Yugoslavia show how lethal the resolving of such challenges can be.

The "top down/bottom up" process in countries such as South Africa occurred in the unraveling of **the Soviet bloc** that took place following the policies of *glasnost*, *perestroika*, and *demokratizatsiya* (openness, restructuring, and democracy) instituted by **President Mikhail Gorbachev** (Nobel Peace Prize, 1990). Pressure from below – relentless persistence – helped to create a climate ripe for change. This ferment was long in building. On the one hand, there was a small but determined band of human rights advocates such as **Andrei Sakharov** and **Yelena Bonner** who were unrelenting in their demand for the observance of universally accepted standards of human rights. Others – religious, peace, and environmental groups; artists and poets – refused in varying ways

to submit to totalitarian rule.

The crushing of **Czechoslovakia's** 1968 experiment to create "socialism with a human face" strengthened the widely held assumption that communism was incapable of peaceful change and democratic openness, and that nonviolence might "work" in India or the United States, but never with communist regimes. Foreign policy "realists" held that authoritarian states could change but not totalitarian ones. This added fuel to the Cold War and the nuclear arms race and the belief that World War III was a virtual certainty. Not many paid attention to those aspects of the Czech experiment that contained hints of the "people power" revolutions that were to flower in the 1980s, but they were highly significant.

The 1968 invasion by the Warsaw Pact armies had been expected to crush all Czech resistance in a few days. It took eight months. Czechoslovakia's large and well-trained army was ordered to stay in its barracks while the populace responded in unexpectedly creative, nonviolent ways. The Czech news agency refused to report the disinformation that said Czech leaders had requested the invasion. Highway and street signs were turned around to confuse the invading forces. Students sat in the path of incoming tanks; others climbed on the tanks and talked to the crews. While they did not physically fight the invaders, the people refused to cooperate with them. Clandestine radio messages kept up the morale of the people, passing on vital information and instructions, such as the calling of one-hour general strikes. The Czech leaders were able to hold on to their offices and continue some of the reforms until the resistance finally began to erode, quite possibly through the work of *agents provocateurs*.

Twelve years later, in August 1980, neighboring **Poland** took up the fallen nonviolent banner as the Gdansk shipyard workers went on strike and, with mass, prayers and rallies, *Solidarity* was born under the leadership of **Lech Walesa** (Nobel Peace Prize, 1983) Using strikes, sit-ins and demonstrations, Solidarity gave laborers an independent voice, creating a grassroots movement

for change that spread rapidly across Poland. The government responded with swift imposition of martial law in December 1981. But instead of its destroying Solidarity, the people began the creation of an alternative society at the base, choosing to live "as if they were free." The unprecedented visit of the first Polish pope, **John Paul II**, to his homeland was a phenomenon that further strengthened the cause of freedom. A new society was born in the shell of the old. When, finally, in 1989, open elections were held, Solidarity won by a landslide.

The Polish elections were aided by the breathtaking changes occurring in the **Soviet Union**.

Gorbachev's reforms, beginning in 1985, opened the floodgates of pent-up longings for change that were eventually to sweep away even Gorbachev and the Soviet system. One by one, totalitarian rule in the nations of Eastern Europe was overturned by people armed only with truth and courage. A critical mass had been reached as growing numbers of people were emboldened to break their chains. In Czechoslovakia, Charter 77, with the writings of imprisoned **Vaclav Havel**, led to the Velvet Revolution. Havel called their quest for freedom "living in truth" as distinct from the lies and deception under which they had lived. By November 1989, some 200,000 to 350,000 were gathering daily in Prague's historic Wenceslas Square. Havel became the first president of a free Czechoslovakia.

Prayer meetings and discussion groups in Leipzig, **East Germany**, brought Christians and Communists together as they openly challenged the *Stasi*, the feared secret police. Their gatherings ended with participants walking in the streets with burning candles and continued calls for freedom. On August 5, 1989, one hundred thousand marched. By October 31st, their number grew to 300,000. The symbol of the spreading and vast changes was the peaceful breeching of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989. The old order collapsed throughout Eastern Europe and discredited regimes were swept aside with remarkably little violence or loss of life (the main exception to this being **Romania**).

The widespread assumption that totalitarian regimes could not be overturned by unarmed struggle has been decisively shown to be wrong. Governments ultimately derive their strength from the consent – either passive or active – of the governed. Once that consent disappears and resistance spreads, governments find their power to rule weakened and, under the right circumstances, destroyed.

The reforms speeded up the stirrings for change across the U.S.S.R., as thousands of grassroots groups sprang up to deal with a whole spectrum of social, economic, political, environmental, and cultural issues. In July 1990, one hundred thousand coal miners went out on a strike in Siberia that spread westward to **Ukraine**. Strongly disciplined, the miners policed themselves, closed down mining town liquor stores, and gathered for massive rallies.

From the local to the national level, elections became more democratic, bringing about the election of reform candidates. In the spring of 1989, two thousand persons, including **Andrei Sakharov** (Nobel Peace Prize, 1975), were elected to the Congress of Peoples' Deputies in the freest election since the revolution. Popularly elected legislators came into office throughout the U.S.S.R., breaking the monopoly of the Communist Party. The lead for these changes came from popular fronts established in republic after republic, beginning with **Latvia** (October 1988), then **Ukraine** (September 1989), and finally **Lithuania**, where Sajudis won multi-party elections (February 1990). Respect for the language, history, and traditions of the various nationalities challenged the Russification that had undergirded Soviet power and control. Across the three Baltic states, in a line stretching 430 miles, as many as three million persons (out of a population of seven million) demonstrated for freedom. This was possibly the largest demonstration in history to that time, rivaled only since by the millions protesting around the world on the eve of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.

On March 11, 1990, Lithuania became the first of

the Soviet republics to proclaim outright independence. This most repressed of the republics started a “Singing Revolution,” defying decades of cultural repression by reviving Lithuanian folk songs, festivals, religious practices, and traditions. The movie *Gandhi* was shown repeatedly on nationwide television, strengthening the nonviolent resistance of the people. Trying to halt the dissolution of the Union, Moscow retaliated with a crippling blockade. The following January, crack Red Army troops moved on the capital of Vilnius, killing 14 unarmed demonstrators protecting the nation’s TV tower. Instead of surrendering or issuing a call to arms, Lithuania called on the citizenry to “hold to principles of nonviolent insubordinate resistance and political and social noncooperation.” The Lithuanians did just that, continuing their nonviolent and independent course. They protected their parliament with unarmed citizens and requested the Fellowship of Reconciliation to provide nonviolence training for the volunteer militia they had established. A similar Singing Revolution in neighboring Estonia was also successful in throwing off the Soviet yolk.

Then in August 1991, elements of the Communist Party, the KGB, and the Army tried to stage a coup in Moscow. Despite the arrest of Gorbachev and his family, resistance was widespread. People poured into the streets to protect the Russian parliament. Women and students called on the soldiers to join the people. Religious people knelt in the streets in prayer. People trained in nonviolence passed out writings of Gene Sharp and others on the methods of nonviolent struggle. Closed newspapers and radio stations quickly set up alternative media. The Mayor of Leningrad, **Anatoly Sobchak**, told the military there not to follow the orders of the plotters, and the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, **Patriarch Alexy II**, threatened excommunication to those who followed the coup. Even some members of the KGB refused orders, risking death for their defiance. Eventually the coup attempt collapsed, opening the way for Lithuania and the other republics to begin an independent course.

The breakup of the Soviet empire was followed by

years of upheaval as its constituent parts struggled to find their place in a world reaching for democracy but often lacking the experience, patience, and vision to implement the hope. The collapse of Soviet-style communism was followed by a predatory capitalism that in many places left the people with the worst of both systems. At this point in history we have learned a great deal about nonviolent resistance to evil and bringing down oppressors. We still have far to go in knowing how to take the next steps in fostering the democratic evolution of society that includes justice and peace, freedom and order. Bold experiments in nonviolent change have continued. **Georgia** threw off a corrupt and unrepresentative regime with its Rose Revolution in 2003, represented not in the clenched fist but in the hand holding a rose. **Ukraine** struggled through 2004 and 2005 to bring about its Orange Revolution with masses of citizens camped on city streets in protests symbolized by orange flags and shirts and tents. But the building of a truly civil society worldwide still has many uncharted ways to master.

Democracy is the institutionalization of nonviolence, with the focus not on rigid dogma but on problem-solving in society that includes the goal of political and economic well-being. Education, conflict resolution, the struggle for justice, organizing for special needs, voting on issues, adjudicating differences, framing laws for change and reform – these are all nonviolent in essence, expressive of the politics of love that Gandhi and King advocated. Their goal is, in the words of theologian **Walter Wink**, a domination-free order. Democratic nations are truest to their values when they deal with other nation-states nonviolently, through diplomacy, treaties, mutual respect, and fairness. **Jonathan Schell** contrasts *coercive power* with *cooperative power*, the latter being the nonviolent path which has increasingly taken center stage in history’s unfolding. Coercive power is like a cancer, destroying as it spreads, whereas cooperative power builds in a holistic, organic fashion.

The tragic warfare and ethnic cleansing that plagued the dissolution of the former **Yugoslavia**

brought immense suffering to the region. Nonetheless a stubborn and substantial nonviolent movement in Serbia finally brought down the autocratic rule of Slobodan Milosevic. Through most of the 1990s, a powerful nonviolent movement in **Kosovo** resisted Serbia's oppression of the majority Albanian population. Tragically, Kosovo's nonviolent path was ignored until armed resistance started there against ethnic cleansing; then in 1999, NATO came in with a heavy bombing campaign against the Serbs. Violent assistance to armed fighters seemed natural; nonviolent assistance to a nonviolent movement was not even attempted by nations schooled in the ways of war.

The Americas

The dictatorships that characterized Latin America in the 1980s were ended for the most part by the unarmed power of the people. Consider **Chile**, for example. The Chileans, who like the Filipinos suffered under a brutal dictatorship, gained inspiration from the people power movement of the Philippines as they built their own movement of nonviolent resistance to General Augusto Pinochet. To describe their efforts, they used the powerful image of drops of water wearing away the stone of oppression.

In 1986, leftist guerillas killed five bodyguards of Pinochet in an assassination attempt on the general. In retaliation, the military decided to take revenge by arresting five critics of the regime. A human rights lawyer alerted his neighbors to the danger of his being abducted and they made plans to protect him. That night cars arrived in the early morning hours carrying hooded men who tried to enter the house. Unable to break down reinforced doors and locks, they tried the barred windows. The lawyer's family turned on all the lights and banged pots and blew whistles, awakening the neighbors who then did the same. The attackers, unexpectedly flustered by the prepared and determined neighbors, fled the scene.

Other groups carefully studied where the government tortured people and then, after prayer and reflection, found ways to expose the evil. For example, they would padlock themselves to iron

railings near the targeted building; others would proceed to such a site during rush hour, then unfurl a banner saying, "Here they torture people." Sometimes they would disappear into the crowd; on other occasions they would wait until they were arrested.

In October 1988, the government called on the people to vote *si* or *no* on continued military rule. Despite widespread intimidation of Pinochet's critics, the people were determined. Workshops were held to help them overcome their fear and to work to influence the election. Inspired and instructed by Filipino opposition to Marcos, voter registration drives and the training of poll watchers proceeded all over the country. The results exceeded their fondest expectations: 91% of all eligible voters registered and the opposition won 54.7% of all votes cast. Afterwards over a million people gathered in a Santiago park to celebrate their victory.

In the late 1980s, throughout Latin America, dictatorships fell one after the other, not through armed uprisings but through the determination of unarmed people – students, mothers, workers, religious groups – persisting in their witness against oppression and injustice, even in the face of torture and death. In **Brazil**, such nonviolent efforts for justice were called *firmeza permanente* – relentless persistence. Base communities in the Brazilian countryside, for example, became organizing centers of the landless struggle to regain their land. Roman Catholic **Cardinal Arns** and Presbyterian leader **Jaime Wright** directed a systematic, secret accounting of all of those whose human rights had been violated and had the names simultaneously published in Brazil, Europe, and the United States, exposing the enormity of the Brazilian dictatorship's cruelty to its citizens. This irrefutable document undermined the credibility of the government.

In **Argentina**, "mothers of the disappeared" were unceasing in their vigils and agitation for an accounting of the *desaparacidos* – the disappeared – of the military regime. The vigils at Argentine missions worldwide led to the release of **Adolfo**

Perez Esquivel (Nobel Peace Prize, 1980). In Montevideo, **Uruguay, Fr. Luis Aguirre**'s fast in the tiny office of Serpaj (Service for Justice & Peace) brought to the fore the first public opposition to Uruguay's rapacious junta and elicited widespread sympathy and fasts of solidarity that turned the tide toward democracy.

An outstanding example for the whole world is **Costa Rica**, where the abolition of the army was part of a larger effort to improve education, health care, work, and living conditions. Costa Rica, without a military, remained at peace during the 1980s while much of Central America was in turmoil and war. Instead of building fortifications to keep its warring neighbors out, it made real the saying of A.J. Muste: *There is no way to peace. Peace is the way.*

A new initiative called the Nonviolent Peaceforce started in 2000, inspired by Gandhi's *Shanti Sena* ((peace army). Co-founders **Mel Duncan** and **David Hartsough** and a number of leading nonviolence individuals and organizations established a multinational, nonviolent peacekeeping force that is nonpartisan and professionally trained to go by invitation to areas of conflict and work with local groups to protect human rights and deter conflict. So far they have worked in 22 countries. They are in conversation with United Nations representatives to encourage peacekeeping efforts by the U.N. and of finding ways of working together.

Nonviolent movements in the **United States** have a long and significant history, including: the abolitionist struggle against slavery; the women's movement; the labor movement; the environmental movement; the peace movement; the movements for the rights of African Americans, farm workers, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, as well as other minorities and oppressed groups. Peace studies in colleges, conflict resolution in schools and communities, and similar developments in many areas of life give hope for the building of a culture of peace. Nonetheless, there is still far to go when one considers the degree of violence in the national life and in the foreign and domestic

policies of the United States.

Throughout the world, **women** are increasingly taking leadership in nonviolent movements. They are also being recognized for the leadership they have long exercised, even if not acknowledged. This was dramatically seen in the thousands of women who gathered in 1995 at the Beijing U.N. women's conference in China. They expressed a strong challenge to the violence against women throughout the world, not only in warfare but in the workplace and in the home. The Women's Peacemaker Programme of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation has played a pioneering role in the empowerment of women.

Women such as **Coretta Scott King**, **Kathy Kelly**, **Sisters Joan Chittister** and **Mary Evelyn Jegen**, **Hildegard Goss-Mayr**, **Aung San Suu Kyi**, and **Diana Francis** express the variety and strength of this leadership. **Shirin Ebadi**, distinguished Muslim jurist from Iran and 2003 Nobel laureate, has courageously taken on injustice against Iranian women and children. **Wangari Maathai** (Nobel Peace Prize, 2004) founded the Green Belt Movement of African women planting trees to restore the land and fight poverty. Women have led the way in self-help projects made possible through microfinance funding developed by the founder of the Grameen Bank, **Mohammed Yunus** of **Bangladesh** (Nobel Peace Prize, 2006). The first woman head of state in Africa, **President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia** was elected following a powerful women's Mass Action for Peace movement led by **Lehmah Gbowee** and Christian and Muslim market women who successfully challenged the years of war, rape and killing of the cruel regime of Charles Taylor

Conclusion

At the time of the overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship, a Filipino writer said that whereas the previous century had been dominated by Karl Marx and the armed revolutionary, the next hundred years would be shaped by Gandhi and the unarmed *satyagrahi*, the votary of Truth. Gandhi

said that “God is Truth” and “Truth is God” and that the Truth expressed in the unarmed struggle for justice, peace, and freedom is the greatest power in the world.

During Gandhi’s lifetime, many looked on him with contempt. Winston Churchill dismissed him as a “half-naked fakir.” Communists and other advocates of violent revolution branded his nonviolence as bourgeois and reactionary. He spent many years in British prisons. But he gave brilliant and compassionate leadership to the Indian freedom movement as he proclaimed and incarnated revolutionary nonviolence both as a way of life and a strategy for change. His influence has continued to spread in the years since his death.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was likewise despised by many who were infuriated by his witness for justice and peace. He was arrested 29 times and there were many attempts on his life as he characterized humanity’s “triple evils” as racism, war and poverty. Yet his stature only grew through his writings, speeches, and visionary leadership. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, and in 1983 his birthday was recognized as a national holiday in the United States.

Yet most advances in the human race have faced long years of ridicule and opposition. New insights of truth are often considered heresy. Prophets are driven out, their followers persecuted. But the influence of Gandhi and King, the martyred prophets, continues to grow as nonviolent movements spread around the world. They proclaim a belief in nonviolence as moral and spiritual, an expression of Truth rooted in the nature of life itself. Others see nonviolence as purely a strategy that is workable and effective. Both approaches to nonviolence, the principled and the pragmatic, are allies in building what Martin Luther King called “the Beloved Community.”

If a global, democratic civilization is to come into being and endure, our challenge is to continue developing nonviolent alternatives to war and all forms of oppression, from individuals to groups, from nation-states to the peoples of the world. We must continue to challenge the age-old assumptions

about the necessity of violence in overcoming injustice. We are called to ceaselessly resist oppression and establish social well-being with what Gandhi called “the indomitable will.” In November 1998, the U.N. General Assembly unanimously proclaimed the first decade of the 21st century to be a **Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence**, a prescient recognition of the future that must be built if humanity is to endure.

What if in 1980 someone would have predicted that unarmed Filipinos would overthrow the Marcos dictatorship in a four-day uprising? That military regimes across Latin America would be toppled by the relentless persistence of their unarmed opponents? That apartheid would end peacefully and that in a massive and peaceful plebiscite all races of South Africa would elect Nelson Mandela to the presidency? That the Berlin Wall would be nonviolently brought down? Such a person would probably have been thought ridiculously naive and dismissed out of hand. And yet these things happened!

Why do we so resist the potential of the not yet stirring in the present moment? The sociologist **Elise Boulding** reminds us how deadly pessimism can be, for it can undermine our determination to work for a better tomorrow. Hope, on the other hand, infused in an apparently hopeless situation can create an unexpected potential for change. As the theologian **Walter Wink** has written, “History belongs to the intercessors who believe the future into being.” This is the faith that sings, in the face of police dogs and water cannons, “We Shall Overcome.” Or, as **Joan of Arc** muses in George Bernard Shaw’s *St. Joan*, “Some people see things as they are and ask ‘Why?’ I dream of things that never were and ask, ‘Why not?’”

Richard Deats is editor emeritus of Fellowship. This essay is an updated revision and expansion of his article, “The Global Spread of Active Nonviolence,” published in Fellowship, July-August 1996.

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