

RESEARCH AND OPINION

Nonviolence in Urban Areas: Conversations with Practitioners of Nonviolence in the Milwaukee Area, 1989 to 1994

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Editor's note: The following essay is a summary of a Brown Bag Lecture given by Professor Ian Harris at UWM on February 24, 1997, sponsored by the Center for Urban Initiatives and Research. It represents Harris' analysis of 36 transcribed audiotapes of his radio show, "Alternatives to Violence: The Practice of Peacemaking," produced from 1989 to 1994, in which he interviewed practitioners of nonviolence.

*We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now...
We still have a choice today: nonviolent co-existence or violent co-annihilation.
It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence;
it's nonviolence or nonexistence.*

(Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 1986a, p. 276)

Nonviolence provides a comprehensive approach to the problems of violence. Although knowledge about nonviolence has long existed in the United States, mostly through religious teachings, policy leaders and concerned citizens have not systematically employed the tools of nonviolence to address the rush of urban violence that plagues cities. Politicians, in their attempts to respond decisively to the fears of their constituents, often advocate peace through strength strategies to deal with the problems of urban violence, hiring more police and building more prisons. Such strategies react to the high levels of crime and appear to have positive results, although there

is considerable controversy about why crime rates are currently declining in urban areas.

This essay will provide many examples of nonviolent actions that are being carried out in the Milwaukee metropolitan area to help alleviate problems caused by urban violence. Milwaukee has a proud history of nonviolence dating back to the American Indians who lived respectfully with nature. Early German settlers came here to escape conscription by Prussian armies. One hundred years ago, workers used nonviolent protest methods to campaign for an eight-hour work day. Citizens rallied against the draft and used nonviolent strategies to oppose all the major wars in

this century. In the 1960s there was an active movement against the Vietnam War; in the '70s citizens protested against the production of nuclear weapons and power; and in the 1980s, protesters used nonviolent strategies to oppose U.S. involvement in Central America. During the latter half of this century people in Milwaukee also marched against racial injustice and police brutality.

This essay will not cover these historic aspects of nonviolence in this urban area, but will instead focus on the nonviolent strategies being used to address problems of violence in Milwaukee during the 1990s, a period that has seen a sharp rise in homicides and other violent crimes.





What are the dimensions of the problem of urban violence? Violence is a complex phenomenon in human societies. In urban communities we see it manifested in three ways: first, direct acts of **physical violence**, second, problems caused by **interpersonal violence**, and third, issues of **structural violence**.

The familiar **physical acts of urban violence** that we see on television and read about as news include homicide, suicide, assaults, felonies, and other crimes. In addition to the victims represented by the raw statistics, many other people suffer from these acts of violence. These indirect victims are the friends and family members of both the victim and the violent offender.

Interpersonal violence in urban areas causes much suffering and misery and can be broken down into domestic violence, sexual assault, addictive relationships, verbal abuse, intrapersonal violence and posttraumatic stress disorders—forms of violence that spill out into the broader culture in many ways. People who have been sexually assaulted often gravitate toward abusive relationships. Children may be afraid to go to school for fear they will be attacked on the street. Depressed and anxious teenagers kill themselves. Children suffering from posttraumatic stress disorders can't focus on their lessons in school and become high school drop outs. Adults who have been abused resort to drugs and alcohol to numb their pain. Victims tend to blame others for their problems and feel they don't have any control over their lives.

In addition to these direct forms of violence, the residents of urban violence experience many indirect forms of **structural violence**. Many live in unsafe areas where gangs terrorize neighborhoods. Many are

unemployed or underemployed. They can't get jobs that provide family supporting wages. Their schools are falling apart and many children attend classes with substandard instruction. Children lack adequate recreation and stimulating opportunities to develop their abilities and talents. Adults and children often don't have access to good health care. Their environments are polluted. These problems contribute to stresses that often erupt into family fights and domestic violence.

This essay will provide examples of how residents in urban areas are using nonviolent strategies to address these different forms of violence in cities: how volunteers at shelters are housing the homeless, how community-based organizations are using block clubs to provide safety in urban neighborhoods, how staff at recreation centers are teaching conflict resolution techniques, how violent men are learning to redirect their anger, how mediators are using alternative dispute resolution techniques to manage conflicts nonviolently, how adults are using nurturing skills to raise peaceful children, and how citizens are rallying to protect the environment.

This essay incorporates the voices and insights of 36 people who are working to reduce violence in Milwaukee, as transcribed from audiotapes of the radio show, "Alternatives to Violence: The Practice of Peacemaking," produced from 1989-1994 as part of the University Roundtable on public radio station WUWM.

THE POWER OF NONVIOLENCE

Nonviolence provides powerful tools to address problems of urban violence. Nonviolence is "the practice of love." Love urges humans to take

responsibility for others, to practice their capacity for care, charity, and compassion in the face of violence, to take stewardship of the Earth, and to build beloved communities. Love, as a form of kinship, is the basis of friendship relations that provide security. As Kenneth Boulding (1978) has pointed out, kinship ties with neighbors and strangers allow us to live nonviolently. Although headlines announcing violent events dominate the news, daily life is for most people peaceful. They shop, work, and conduct commerce without being attacked or violated. Nonviolence is both an attitude and a course of action that leads an individual or a group of people to resist tyranny and injustice other than by physical force, and to build a community of caring by the reconciliation of adversaries.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1967) said that the only way to end cycles of violence is through nonviolence. Violence creates resentments, hatreds, and more violence. Nonviolence assumes respect for all forms of life. Harvard psychologist Carol Gilligan (1982) stated that nonviolence is the highest form of morality, where women, in particular, base their moral decisions on the principle of causing no harm to others.

Nonviolence is not just passivity. As Gandhi, King, and others have demonstrated, it is an active force that can be used to address oppression and injustice. Around the world, the power of nonviolence has been demonstrated in recent history by the solidarity movement in Poland; in Eastern Europe with the breakup of the old Soviet Union; with the overthrow of the Marcos regime in the Philippines; and through the Palestinian Intafada. We have observed the power of nonviolence here in Wisconsin, where Chippewa Indians used nonviolent methods to preserve



hunting and fishing treaty rights guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution.

Nonviolence implies a commitment to truth. Gandhi in his campaigns used the term “satyagraha,” which means literally, holding onto the truth, but the term also suggests respect for the truths that other people value. Nonviolence implies being open to change, and seeking the truth wherever it lies. As Gene Sharp (1973) and others have pointed out, nonviolence as a strategy for change provides many powerful tactics—speaking out, using boycotts, and practicing civil disobedience against unjust tyranny.

The good news is that human beings have forever practiced nonviolence. Gandhi felt that the human race was achieving greater levels of nonviolence:

*“If we turn our eyes to the time of which history has any record down to our time, we shall find that man has been steadily progressing towards **ahimsa** [Hindu word for nonviolence]. Our remote ancestors were cannibals. Then came a time when they were fed up with cannibalism and they began to live on the chase. Next came a stage when man was ashamed of leading the life of a wandering hunter. He therefore took to agriculture and depended principally on mother Earth for his food. Thus from being a nomad he settled down to civilized stable life, founded villages and towns, and from member of a family he became member of a community, and a nation. All these are signs of progressive **ahimsa** and diminishing **himsa** [Hindu word for violence]. Had it been otherwise, the human species should have been extinct by now, even as many of the lower species have disappeared.”*
(Harijan, August 11, 1940)

LOCAL EXAMPLES OF NONVIOLENCE

What evidence is there that humans are moving toward a new way of thinking that embraces the power of nonviolence, as Gandhi suggested? Can citizens learn to work with each other instead of competing? Currently many people throughout the city of Milwaukee are using nonviolent strategies to address the social causes of violence in community settings—through housing the homeless, sheltering the poor, resolving disputes, teaching parents nurturing skills, setting public policy, providing recreation for children, and training men and women in nonviolent behaviors.

For example, **Casa Maria**, a Catholic worker house in Milwaukee, has for 30 years housed the homeless as a nonviolent action. Volunteer staff run three houses that provide shelter, food, and clothing to single mothers. Another house offers child care to help welfare mothers get jobs. A lead organizer explains how he got involved:

“I moved into the House the very next day and checked in the refrigerator where there was hardly any food. I said, ‘What do you do? How do you feed all these people?’ And he said, ‘You just wait for someone to bring in some food! We don’t have any money.’ So I went out and bought some food. We were sitting down for supper and there wasn’t much food at all because I wasn’t able to buy enough food for all these people and this man came to the door, didn’t mention his name or anything and said, ‘This is for you!’ And it was a big bushel basket full of nice food that we shared with the people. So I learned a good lesson at Casa Maria, that you have to trust in the goodwill of people and God. And things will be OK. And they have been. I think it’s a miracle that the House is still

going... We have no budget. We have no staff. We just trust in the volunteers and donations of individuals.”

Likewise, **Habitat for Humanity** helps poor people own their homes. Volunteers from local churches and synagogues spend their time rehabbing houses in run down neighborhoods. These efforts have revitalized disintegrating urban communities and provided rays of hope for people often locked into dangerous areas with no escape.

The **House of Peace** (at 17th and Walnut) provides nursing care, support groups, after-school activities, and positive social activities for people in the inner city, as do many other community-based organizations. The House of Peace has a “bridges” program that teaches parenting skills to parents who have lost their children through court orders. It offers a clothing bank, an emergency food program, drug and alcohol counseling, adult literacy, and a second chance program for people who have been convicted of major crimes, as an alternative to going to prison.

Many community-based organizations in Milwaukee promote **block clubs** that are one effective way to provide safety in urban neighborhoods. Neighbors working together can create safe streets in the midst of high crime areas. Community organizations help pull residents together to address problems of structural violence such as crime, absentee landlords, rundown houses, and lack of recreation. Working together on these issues helps build a sense of trust and empowerment that dispels some of the fears people have living in urban areas.

One program that has a long track record of working with inner-city youth is the **Boys and Girls Club**.



Workers there report that the problems of youth violence stem from young people being frustrated:

“There’s a sense of hopelessness in areas of the city. Parents feel particularly isolated and unable to cope with the problems they see around them. There are tremendous economic problems. Young people who are not successful at school are feeling that they do not have any control over their lives or any future. Certainly the kinds of stability we would want in our families are not always where we want them to be. It’s very difficult for parents and young people to find the kinds of support they need to make their lives the way they would like them to be.”

Tempers flare, and the ready availability of handguns contributes to a high homicide rate. Recreation centers like the **Boys and Girls Club** provide activities (recreation, cultural events, computer labs, theater, and music and dance programs) as healthy alternatives to violence. After school, staff offer anger management training, violence prevention programs, nonviolent conflict resolution, peer mediation, and Second Step, a program that teaches emotional literacy skills, so that young people learn to communicate clearly and resolve their disagreements without resorting to physical force. A worker at the Boys and Girls Club said:

“Staff at that agency try to establish trusting relations so that young people can tell stories about brutality in their lives and give youth an opportunity to chill out at the club. When I see kids the first thing they do when they come through the door I just tell them ‘C’mon over here, where is it at?’ And we hug. And you know, those kids who are out there in a real

negative society and you know you think that they’re too hostile and you can’t get close to them but all our kids are saying is ‘I need someone to listen to me. I need someone to hug me, you know, to put their hands on me and not be afraid of me because I’m just like you, I’m human. I need things.’ But they’re looking for that acceptance and that’s the hardest thing that they’re going through is that identity crisis. Their heroes and heroines are far and few and in between and they have no idea who they should be like. And it’s not about the flash and cash, but it’s about those people who you don’t see out there, those people who are behind the scenes and are there for you every day if you have a problem. If you’re not feeling well, who can I go and talk to? And you know, consequently, they know that the club is a place that they can do that. People come in and say ‘I just want to sit in your office.’ And I ask why? ‘Cause it’s quiet in here and I have a headache, the kids were too loud at school today, I just want to sit there for a minute.’”

Another youth worker said:

“The good news is that each and every person is born wanting to be completely connected to every other person. And that young people really do understand in their heart that this is not the way the world is supposed to be. And they need some support around that. One of the things that we do very well at the Boys and Girls Club is treat each young person as if they are...because they are, completely valued and completely respected and completely adored. We are delighted with them and we are thrilled that they are there that day, that moment with us. Through our activities we provide a place for the young people to feel good about

themselves, to make a contribution to their own community, to explore their skills and talents, to feel valued and to feel cared about. And it’s like throwing a pebble and those circles of goodwill do travel. When the young person comes home and says to the adults—who may have had a pretty awful day themselves coping with their life—I did this, look at this painting I made, at this award I won, or at this hug coupon I got—it also builds up the parents’ self-esteem.”

The **Milwaukee Mediation Center** is another example of peacemaking in the city. It receives referrals from family court, police, attorneys, family members and neighbors. Mediation provides an alternative to civil court cases where there are winners and losers. When they reach an agreement that both parties find satisfying, there is a high degree of compliance, because both parties are invested in the outcome. A mediator does not impose a solution; he or she engages the disputants in a dialogue to resolve differences. When people go into mediation they think they are one hundred percent right. The mediator gives feedback and allows the parties involved to hear the other person’s perspective. This is nonviolence in practice, where enemies reconcile differences.

All mediations are done by volunteers who are interested in helping others solve their problems. Why do people volunteer?

“I first started doing mediation with the juvenile restitution program in Waukesha. Kids who might have gone to court are ordered to pay restitution for vandalism, or theft, or something, not anything harmful to a person. They would meet with their victim and work out the terms of restitution, how much it would be and



how they would pay it. There were times when I would almost cry because it was so gratifying to see kids come together with victims so that they could see they did something to someone and that it wasn't just this abstract being out there that they had nothing to do with. You get a certain personal satisfaction out of seeing ways that people can learn to resolve conflicts other than in violence and litigation.

The coordinator of this program said, "We are not taught this in school. We are taught to win and get our way. We need to learn peacemaking skills ourselves. We can't count on leaders to make this world peaceful." (This mediation center is now located on the UWM campus in room G33 of Merrill Hall.)

Many of the problems of violence in inner-city areas are caused by people who don't know how to manage their anger appropriately. Several males who worked with men to provide nonviolent alternative dispute resolution techniques at **Sojourner Truth House** and through the men's movement provided insights about interpersonal violence. One counselor at the **Batterers Anonymous/Beyond Abuse** program has this to say about violent behavior:

"We consider physical abuse to be really the tip of the domestic violence iceberg. If you will, almost think of it like a volcano, that there's all kinds of discontent that boils up inside of a family and eventually erupts in a physically violent behavior. What we see as abuse is any kind of misuse of power in a relationship. And that power can be physical, economic, sexual, verbal, psychological, emotional, and probably one of the biggest forms of abuse that we've got is self-abuse. Negative attitudes,

negative self talk, just the negative approach toward life. People who are trying to cover up emotions that they can't stand to feel by taking drugs or alcohol or becoming workaholics."

Deep in each person's psyche is a place where

"boarded, wounded, bound, handicapped and paralyzed emotions are kept. Now this place is the breeding ground for violence. This is a wound. Guarding this wound becomes a full time job for many. Violence toward other people is an externalized way of guarding this wound. Violence toward myself through addictions to work and sex and drugs, etc. is an internal attempt to protect this wound. It's through our program of emotional literacy that a person can heal this wound and come to experience the range of human emotions naturally and fully. And it's only in this way that this cancer of abuse is gradually removed and mature healthy relationships can be realized."

Fifty percent of intimate adult relationships have violence in them. Domestic violence creates wounds that reverberate throughout our society. The head of one of these programs said:

"I used to be involved in a lot of political attempts to stop violence in the world, go out, carrying placards, and protesting in front of buildings and things, and sometimes I would feel as if I really wasn't accomplishing very much. I'd have a feeling of impotency in the face of all the violence in the world. What I started to do was to focus in on areas that I felt as if I had some impact on, some influence in. And that was the local scene, and so my saying is 'I'll save the world by stopping one punch at a time.'"

Another attempt to halt the cycle of violence in urban areas is a nurturing program run out of community centers. It's an attempt to prevent family abuse and the suffering of children. One agency that offers this program is **La Causa** on the south side, which provides 24-hour emergency drop off services for parents who feel they are losing their self-control because of tension, stress, medical needs, economic problems, AODA issues. They are feeling frustrated at home, but don't want to hurt their children. Parents whose lives are chaotic are introduced to a structured program, and are encouraged to establish routines. One of the founders of the program here in Milwaukee says:

"We help people to recognize and understand their feelings and to deal with them appropriately. And that way they can help their children do that, too. Some of the specific things that nurturing programs cover in addition to handling feelings and communicating needs, are recognizing and understanding the needs of other people, which we would call empathy, which is a very important quality for parents. Children are completely dependent upon parents for getting their needs met especially at the beginning. One of the things that children grow into and one of the definitions of the adults I would say, is the ability to meet your own needs. So parents have to learn to meet their own needs and the children will...the parents need to learn empathy for the children so that they can identify the children's needs and meet them appropriately and begin to help children learn to meet their own as they grow in their abilities. The other thing that we work on is establishing nurturing routines for some regular family occasions such as mealtimes,



chores, bath times, allowance, toilet training, all of those kinds of things. How do those things in supportive ways that encourage the kind of positive family interactions that people would like to happen. We always think of sort of the Hallmark view of family—a family, a home is a wonderful safe haven. But in fact a lot of homes are pretty chaotic around meals and toilet training and diaper changing and allowances, and all those kinds of issues that come up. So we help people establish those routines. We work with people on alternatives to hitting, screaming, demeaning, as ways of managing and controlling children's behavior. We help parents encourage behavior in their children rather than being punitive with their children.”

The pillars of the nurturing program are age appropriate expectations; empathy; behavioral encouragement, as opposed to punishment; setting limits instead of hurting; proper family roles; giving children alternatives; negotiating with them; allowing them to say, “No!”; explaining consequences; giving children permission to fail and make mistakes. This program emphasizes privacy and personal space, and the difference between good touch and bad touch.

“Once you get on to nurturing as a way of life, it is a whole lifestyle. And it's infectious. Everybody likes to be nurtured. We all haven't had that experience, but we like it. I really think of nurturing as a social vaccine. You know just like you vaccinate your kids against measles, mumps and rubella when they're small, I think that we can protect our children from violence by teaching them a nurturing way of life. And having their first experience of the universe be a nurturing one.”

Nurturing is universal and nonjudgmental. It helps people build bonds of trust. This experience of nonviolence can help people avoid the trauma of inter-personal and intra-personal violence.

Parents Anonymous is another community based agency that tries to prevent child abuse. It runs 30 support groups for parents who are under stress; has a first-step program that tries to reach parents before kids are born; and runs a 24-hour stress line staffed by volunteers. These self-help programs teach parents that they need to take “time outs” when they are angry so they don't damage their children, and that they are not the only people with these problems. Parents need to learn how to care for themselves. If they are stressed, there is a greater chance they will be abusive to their children. Parents need support to unlearn negative patterns of parenting they may have acquired in their families of origin. Too many parents think they can force their children to obey and show respect. Parents raised in abusive homes can grow up into adults full of rage.

Another community-based activity to promote nonviolence in urban areas is an **environmental town meeting**, held in 1991. The purpose of this meeting was to get political officials, business people, environmental groups, unions, teachers groups, and students all in the same room, talking about common concerns and establishing political priorities. It was a follow-up for Earth Day, a public event where citizens expressed concern about environmental degradation.

The town meeting established a broad-based coalition to address environmental issues, converting individual concern into political action. This coalition performs a watchdog

function, monitoring local governments in regard to protecting and nurturing the environment. The town meeting was organized around themes of transportation, energy, efficient housing, jobs, cleaning up the environment, water, food policy, and air. It grew out of an international effort to address problems of environmental pollution, the Bruntland Report, sponsored by the United Nations, and is a good example of thinking globally but acting locally. This local event was to set an agenda that could be presented to city and county governments, but was also tied to a national conference leading up to the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

An organizer of the town meeting said that a cultural norm allowing environmental violence is short-term thinking:

“When the Iroquois Indians make their decisions, they're considering seven generations out. Typically in our country as well as probably most other industrialized countries when we make our decisions we're usually thinking of a shorter term end-point. Today we realize we can't be thinking just about this generation. We do need to be like the Iroquois, looking farther out in the future, so that's what sustainability would say. It would say that the decisions we make, the policies that we create, the programs that we design, all should be considering how this impacts not just our current generation, but how it will impact the future. So if we're looking at the issue of food production, then when we look at pesticides and we look at soil and we look at erosion and all those issues, we need to not be thinking what—for instance what crop can we put into this piece of land for today, but the question is how long



is this land going to be arable in the future? If we keep using it in a certain way that diminishes the nutrients, then in the long term that land will not be usable, and then what have we done to the future food needs of the future generations?"

CONCLUSIONS

The community-based programs described in this paper are preventive. They are teaching urban residents skills that will help them manage their conflict nonviolently. They are providing an audience for people who have been victimized by violence. Teaching nurturing skills provides nonviolent alternatives for parents raised in punitive households. Citizens using nonviolent tactics have mobilized to dramatize injustice and promote alternative strategies to address some of the forms of structural violence that plague urban residents.

These peace-building strategies are an important but often ignored part of the attempt to create peace in urban areas. Peace-building creates in people's minds a commitment to peace, so that when faced with conflict, they will choose a nonviolent way to resolve their differences. These strategies use the power of love to heal the wounds of violence, in much the same way as we prevent fires by getting people to stop playing with matches. They represent the grass roots efforts of citizens to address the problems of violence that face residents in urban areas. They play an important role in reducing the crime rate in urban areas throughout this nation, although they have not been grabbing headlines. It is important for scholars to document these efforts to help society move toward a world view that is more inclusive, embracing differences, and

using nonviolence to build what Dr. King called the beloved community. As he put it:

"Through our scientific genius we have made of this world a neighborhood; now through our moral and spiritual development we must make of it a brotherhood. In a real sense we must learn to live together as brothers or we will perish as fools." (1986b, p. 209)

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