

The New Nonviolence – Becoming Repairers of the Breach Harry C. Boyte and Marie-Louise Ström
“You will rebuild the ancient ruins... You will be called the repairer of the breach” Isaiah 58:12

Millions believe our political system is dysfunctional. “We the people” are divided. The New Nonviolence rebuilds civic life.

What are the roots of the New Nonviolence?

The New Nonviolence has ancient roots in diverse religions – Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and others. It is also woven into the warp and woof of US, Native American, and immigrant histories. Nonviolence as a method of large scale change was first developed by Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa, who called it “soul force,” *Satyagraha*, in contrast to violence. Nonviolence was taken up by the Indian Independence movement from Great Britain. The movement’s “soul force” inspired leaders like Bayard Rustin, Septima Clark, and Martin Luther King in the American civil rights (“freedom”) movement. Since then nonviolence has been used by other movements including the United Farm Workers movement in California, the “Velvet Revolution” which overthrew communism in Czechoslovakia, “Mass Action for Peace” by Christian and Muslim women in Liberia which ended a civil war, the “Arab Spring,” and others.

What is the New Nonviolence?

Past nonviolent movements struggled *against* oppression. While such struggle is still necessary in today’s world, the New Nonviolence also emphasizes repairing the social fabric and reclaiming joint responsibility *for* the civic life of our democracy. In fact, while today nonviolence is seen as a tactic to undermine the “pillars of power” propping up dictatorial leaders, even a tactical approach for significant change (tactics like the gay movement’s creation of a narrative beyond liberal-conservative -- see Tina Rosenberg, “Lessons in What Works,” *New York Times* January 31, 2017) requires “soul force,” because refusal to demonize the other in our bitterly divided society means polarized, binary thinking.

- The New Nonviolence is struggle, not inaction. In addition to strategy and tactics, it includes spiritual, moral, and psychological disciplines.
- The New Nonviolence seeks to understand opponents, both individuals and groups, not defeat or humiliate them.
- The New Nonviolence “hates the sin but loves the sinner,” recognizing that we all can be saints or sinners.
- The New Nonviolence is based on impartial love for enemies and friends alike, concern for others’ potential.
- The New Nonviolence holds that we begin with self-change – not trying to get others to change. This “calls up resources of strength and courage [people] did not know they had,” as Martin Luther King put it.

The New Nonviolence also stresses “rebuilding the ancient ruins” of civic life.

Repairers of the breach

The New Nonviolence enriches concepts that build civic life--the public culture of places--including everyday politics, civic empowerment, and public work.

- *Everyday politics.* Everyday politics is politics centered on citizens, not politicians. It highlights the fact that democracy is a way of life we all build, far more than elections. It involves working with people who are very different, including opponents. The New Nonviolence emphasizes understanding opponents, not humiliating them.
- *Civic agency:* Civic agency is the capacity to take effective action across lines of difference. It depends on skills like building public relationships, learning to tell one’s “public narrative,” conducting one on one relational meetings, and “mapping power” around issues. The New Nonviolence infuses practices of such civic skills with moral purpose. It calls up resources of strength and courage.
- *Public Work:* Public work involves a mix of people (“a” public) who work on shared tasks (“for” public purposes) “in” public. Public life, the setting for public work, is different than private life. We work with those who are radically different, whom we may even dislike. Nonviolence calls us to engage in struggle for change, not remain passive.

Practices of the new nonviolence

Nonviolent movements develop everyday practices. “If you want to work through nonviolence you have to proceed with small things,” said Gandhi. In Montgomery’s civil rights movement, domestic workers walking to work rather than taking segregated buses became a symbol. A driver offered an elderly woman a ride. She refused. “I’m not walking for myself,” she explained “I’m walking for my children and my grandchildren.” In our divided society, where do we start?

Form a study group: Become familiar with key materials on nonviolence and civic life.

Unusual meet-up: Meet with someone you disagree with. Don’t judge what is wrong with their views. What’s their story? Why do they feel strongly? Are there things you can learn? Is there common ground?