

Civil Disobedience: The Virtue of Sharing Your Truth

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Earlier this week, those of us who tune into television for our news saw compelling images from the Gaza Strip. I saw a young man, obviously in pain, being supported by two others as he entered a hospital. He looked frightened. Other victims of violence came in on stretchers. Still other images showed angry people acting with violence and apparent hatred.

Not much about this situation is clear to me. The roots of the conflict seem to rest in ancient ethnic battles. Western powers in the last century further mucked things up by redrawing borders in ways that placed warring factions in the same countries, ensuring long-term instability.

Both Jews and Palestinians have suffered oppression. Both could see themselves as victims. Jewish people were in exile, without a homeland from the first century until the 20th. Displaced Palestinians have since struggled, in a similar way, for a sense of home. From the start, the two sides seem to have been set up for conflict, tension and the failure of peace initiatives.

This week's distressing images from Gaza contrast sharply with the compelling images I associate with Civil Disobedience, images of people who have been victims refusing to be treated as such AND visibly and clearly refusing to use the oppression of violence in response to oppression. These images include....

- A slight man in simple robes walking across the great subcontinent of India to protest the salt tax, and the growing throng around him.
- Dogs attacking civil rights demonstrators in Birmingham, Alabama.
- A charismatic young preacher looking out the window of a jail cell.
- A man standing in front of a tank in Tiananmen Square, in China.

What do all these images have to do with us? A great deal, in principle. Our principles, that is. One of our seven Unitarian Universalist principles calls us to "affirm and promote" justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. Another calls us to work toward a world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. We are, and have been, a peace-loving, justice-seeking people.

These images of Civil Disobedience also have a great deal to do with our history. Today I'd like to talk to you about the role one Unitarian played in these images of people claiming and using their power to end injustice.

This person was born and raised Unitarian, and was buried in a Unitarian cemetery when he died. We tend to claim him as one of our own, even though as an adult he probably wouldn't have said he was Unitarian. He wasn't well known in his own lifetime, and doesn't enjoy well-spread fame even today.

The man is Henry David Thoreau, a writer and lecturer born in 1817. In 1849, at the age of 32, Thoreau published an essay based on lecture about an experience he'd had a few years before. This essay would change the world in ways that led people around the world to choose to resist injustice.

Basically, starting in 1842, Henry David Thoreau refused to pay his poll tax, a set of local taxes that mostly went to the city and state. In 1846, he was arrested and spent the night, one night, in the Concord Massachusetts town jail, until someone paid his tax for him and he was released. That was it. Those are the concrete events that led to the lecture that led to the essay that changed the world.

In the eyes of the world of his time, Thoreau was a tax evader, and tax evaders are a dime a dozen. Why preach about a tax evader? What does tax evasion have to do with those images of courageous people standing up to oppression? Clearly, there's more to the story than the observable facts.

Thoreau was a part of a free-thinking group called the Transcendentalists. Through this circle, he knew Unitarian Bronson Alcott, father of Louisa May Alcott, who wrote the famous children's book "Little Women." Two years before Thoreau first refused to pay his taxes, Bronson Alcott had done the same thing. Alcott was arrested and held for two hours, until a friend paid his tax, in the same town jail that would later hold Thoreau.

Soon after Alcott's imprisonment, an anti-slavery newspaper printed a letter explaining Alcott's action as "...founded on the moral instinct which forbids every moral being to be a party, either actively or permissively, to the destructive principles of power and might over peace and love."

The editor of that paper, William Lloyd Garrison, had founded a group called "The New England Non-Resistance Society." This society banned both individual and state

violence, even for self-defense. Its members pledged non-cooperation with violent systems, vowing not to hold office in a nation that had a standing army, a police force, or a jail. Pretty radical, huh?

The Nonresistance folk (including many Transcendentalists) adhered to a strict and specific moral code grounded in love. One member, the Universalist minister Adin Ballou wrote, “by adhering to the law of love under all provocations, and scrupulously suffering wrong, rather than inflicting it, they shall gloriously overcome evil with good....” It’s no mere coincidence that this sounds like the philosophy later espoused by Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Henry David Thoreau knew about the Nonresistance Society and was sympathetic to their beliefs. After his imprisonment he began touring the lecture circuit, talking about his experience in the Concord town jail, and at first explaining his reasons for refusing to pay the poll tax as being like Bronson Alcott’s.

However, Thoreau’s thinking evolved away from Alcott’s over time as he creatively drew together different influences in his life. In 1849, he published a revised version of his lecture under the title, “Resistance to Civil Government.” In this revised work, Thoreau made it clear that his reasons were now different from those of the “nonresistance” group.

Thoreau advocated for *better* government, rather than *no* government. He wrote, “Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step towards obtaining it.” He said that each person’s demands of government should be based on the dictates of that person’s own conscience. Thoreau wrote,

“When a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize. What makes this duty the more urgent is the fact, that the country so overrun is not our own, but ours is the invading army.”

Thoreau refused to pay his poll tax because our government supported the institution of slavery, and because the war it was waging with Mexico had no purpose but to expand territory. He saw both as injustices, and came up with this act of resistance to express his opposition.

In taking this concrete action Thoreau broke ranks with the Nonresistance Society and most Transcendentalists. He argued that it is enough merely to speak, to write, and to vote one's views. He found it necessary also to act. He says, "There are thousands who *in opinion* are opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them."

Refusing to pay his taxes was an action he was prepared to take, even if it meant going to jail. One scholar argues that Thoreau was not a mere tax evader, but rather a selective tax resistor focused on particular ethical change. His resistance had the virtue of social conscience. His action is akin to that of Rosa Parks, who as an individual resisted injustice by sitting down.

Thoreau was not the leader of some grand nation-wide movement, nor did he wish to be. He was not interested in politics. All he wanted to do was to wash his hands of any participation in a government he saw unjust, and then to return to his usual concerns, as little affected as possible.

That said, Thoreau does urge others to follow his example. He compares government to a machine, and sees his act of resistance as slowing the machine's progress. He urged, "Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine." He thinks if enough people joined him, it would grind to a halt.

Thoreau is too complex to be dismissed as a mere tax evader, or an anarchist, a pacifist, a mere individualist, or a brainiac who ponders the world and does nothing. He was a man of conviction and action, surprisingly pragmatic for one of the Transcendentalist crowd.

How did this scholarly 19th century white man inspire campaigns that overthrew entrenched systems of oppression? One scholar says the crucial element in that inspirational essay was the original way Thoreau brought together different influences in his life. In it you can see ideas of pacifism from liberal religious groups like the Quakers brought together with political liberalism from people like William Lloyd Garrison. Thoreau brought these influences together in ways both "subtle and ambiguous."

Thoreau's unique perspective, subtle and ambiguous as it was, provided both Gandhi and King an intellectual framework for their movements. Both men were inspired by Thoreau's idea that when faced with unjust systems we always have a choice. We can

choose to abide by them (often by not doing anything) or to resist them. King said an unjust law is not really a law at all, but a perversion of the law, and so not to be obeyed.

Gandhi read Thoreau's essay in 1906, shortly after he'd started forming his own idea of *satyagraha*, nonviolent resistance. The essay had been re-titled "Civil Disobedience" in a collection published after Thoreau's death. Gandhi took "civil disobedience" as the nearest English translation of his concept of *satyagraha*. He used Thoreau's ideas to frame his own for an international audience, and to structure his plans for non-cooperation.

Gandhi agreed with Thoreau's assertion that if you deeply object to the injustices committed by your nation, you should relinquish any advantages you receive from its laws. Gandhi liked Thoreau's notion that one should refuse to participate in (and benefit from) an evil system, choosing instead a life of voluntary simplicity and poverty. It is not surprising that Gandhi cited Thoreau as having been one of the foremost influences on his life.

Martin Luther King Jr. admired Thoreau's work as well. On the eve of the bus boycott in Birmingham, Alabama, the first major act of resistance he helped organize, King took some comfort in Thoreau's essay. Later he wrote,

"I remembered how, as a college student, I had been moved when I first read his work. I became convinced that what we were preparing to do in Montgomery was related to what Thoreau had expressed. We were simply saying to the white community, "We can no longer lend our cooperation to an evil system."

Gandhi and King, both of whom spent a lot of time in prison, must also have drawn strength and reassurance from Thoreau's radical words, "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is in prison."

Much as both Gandhi and King admired Thoreau, both went far beyond his work. The answer to the question in the title, whether he was the grandfather of the civil rights movement, is "no, I think not." He was an influential uncle or mentor or distant cousin, perhaps, but no more. Thoreau wanted to "wash his hands" of the system and remove himself from it so he could turn to other concerns. Widespread social or political reform movements did not interest him.

For Gandhi and King dismantling injustice was their primary concern. Their notion of resistance was active rather than passive, but nonviolent. In this they departed from

Thoreau, who was not absolutely opposed to violence in the cause of justice. For instance, he supported John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry.

In contrast, Martin Luther King Jr. said that violence is the language of the unheard – I think meaning that people who see themselves as victims often resort to violence. By embracing nonviolent means of resistance, King and Gandhi created a new vocabulary for speaking the truth to power. Both men made sure carry out their resistance in the public eye, with media present to relay those compelling images to the world.

It is ironic that by adding the idea of nonviolence, Gandhi and King's views became more like those of the "Nonresistance Society" from which Thoreau distanced himself. This brings us full circle in the nonobservables of Thoreau's thinking that led to his modest yet world-changing essay.

By exercising the virtue of speaking and writing his truth, a truth rooted in both thought and experience, Thoreau unwittingly laid a foundation for radically nonviolent revolutions. By devising his own simple way to "clog the machine" he inspired others to bring the machinery of oppression to a standstill, to change the tides of time. Was he the grandfather of the Civil Rights movement? No, but he did put out ideas the inspired others.

It's easy for many of us to dismiss our own experience, our own thoughts and unique perspectives in a world of billions of souls. It's easy to imagine our truth to be unimportant, and to remain silent, thinking we cannot make a difference. What this story says to me is that we never know how our words or actions might ripple out to affect others in future times and in places far removed. It is therefore crucial to speak the truth of our thoughts and life experience to the world.

Returning to the situation in Israel and Palestine, one wonders how people from one or both sides might nonviolently resist the oppressions of terrorist and military action. Can you picture Israelis and Palestinians working together to break the cycle of violence and retaliation? Can you picture Palestinians and Israelis finding creative nonviolent ways to address the mess that was made for them, and to put to rest ancient ethnic hatreds?

Perhaps more importantly, can you picture yourself finding creative and nonviolent ways to address any messes in your own lives? Can you picture ways to break the

resentful patterns that cycle through your life? If you can picture these things, and act on them, it's likely that people in and around the Gaza Strip are capable of doing so, as well. They may already be doing so, we just don't see such images in our media.

If we can make peace around deep-rooted battles in our own lives, we can find hope for peace for people in war-torn places. Working nonviolently for solutions in our own lives and sharing our struggles with others can help us picture similar solutions growing in the hearts of people far away. We can begin to imagine both Israelis and Palestinians who, by refusing to cooperate with the oppression of violence, could slow and stop the well-oiled mechanisms of hatred, strife and terror. So may it be for them, as well as in our own lives.