

When you first hear the term “nonviolence” my bet is the first two words, names actually, that spring to mind are “Gandhi” and “King”. Learning about nonviolence through learning about these people is important, but there is much more to the topic, so in order to describe efficiently why learning about nonviolence is a good idea I need first to describe what nonviolence is a little more fully. To start off, let’s take a look at the word itself. What first comes to mind is that “nonviolence” is “non” + “violence”. But unlike other uses of the prefix “non”, nonviolence isn’t as simple as the lack of, or opposite of, violence. The root word of “violence” is defined as “to bear in on with force” (Nagler 31). Nagler goes on to say that violence is a human phenomenon, and that we’re violent whenever we injure the interconnected biosphere of life (Nagler 31). Ultimately Nagler states that violence is a lack of imagination to come up with a nonviolent solution (Nagler 190).

So we have some sense of what violence is, now to explain what nonviolence is in light of my brief explanation of violence above. A direct translation of “nonviolence” in Sanskrit means “the absence of the desire, or intention, to harm” (Nagler 44). However that is just the surface, the opposite of violence. A common, but wrong, way to view nonviolence is as the weapon of the weak (Nagler 46). On the contrary, nonviolence can only be achieved by those with the power to be violent (Nagler 225). In practicing nonviolence one embodies two sides of the picture, one where you nonviolently push back on your opponent, and one where you acknowledge that your opponent is human just as much as you are. You may be risking your life so that no one else has to (Nagler 72), and your ultimate goal will be to awaken sleeping consciences by making your opponents aware of the pain they’re causing (Nagler 93). We can imagine violence as dehumanizing (Nagler 144), where nonviolence rehumanizes (Nagler 146); as such nonviolence is an antidote for violence (Nagler 165). Violence requires less preparation and uses physical

force, whereas nonviolence requires special preparation (Nagler 251) and uses slow, steady force (Nagler 164). Nonviolence will always be a healing force, whereas violence is a hurting one (Nagler 128). In short, nonviolence is a constructive way to get things done between opposing groups, whereas violence will always make things worse.

So with that way of defining nonviolence, admittedly still not entirely complete, why does Nagler argue that an “education in nonviolence” (Nagler 59) is important? He has many strands in his book that are answers to this question. The one that stuck out at me first was this: “...we can get rid of *all* problems with a nonviolent revolution.” (Nagler 132) I admit that nonviolence isn’t just nonviolent revolution, but this quote still embodies the enormous potential that nonviolence has to make change. As I’ve barely started studying nonviolence I can’t be too sure of the truth of the statement, but I know that as I’ve been reading Nagler’s book I’ve gotten increasingly excited about nonviolence and what power it has for productive change. Therefore I believe that everyone should take some time to learn about this lesser understood, yet powerful, force.

At this point I can imagine what you are thinking: “This is good and all, nonviolence is important, and I want to learn about it, but does it really work?” As anyone who knows the history of the United States should know, not just those who’ve studied nonviolence, it does indeed work. At the start of this essay I wrote the two words you originally had associated with nonviolence. King was an iconic figure for our Civil Rights movement, a largely nonviolent movement on the part of the African Americans who were involved (sadly the white government officials were quite violent in response). I won’t say much more regarding the Civil Rights movement as proof of nonviolence working simply because I assume most of you know enough

about it already. However, there are two other prime examples of nonviolence working that I wish to illustrate for you here.

Gandhi was the second word I imagined you'd have associated with nonviolence. He was the older figure, and was actually around when the term was first coined (in 1923, Nagler 44). Gandhi helped pull together many nonviolent campaigns to liberate India from Britain, but the one I'll use here is the salt march. Back in Gandhi's day Britain was ruling over India. They restricted Indians from producing certain products in order to force them to pay Britain for the products; one of these was salt. The salt march consisted of Gandhi and an ever-increasing number of locals from the villages he passed through marching across the length of India to the sea to produce salt. This was in open opposition of the ban on salt production. Over the course of the march, and then through the illegal salt production, eventually the campaign made Britain give up on the ban. This was an entirely nonviolent campaign on the part of the Indians.

For my final example of where nonviolence has worked (there are countless examples I could choose from) let me turn to the group that has committed what some consider the worst sin against humanity, that is, the Nazis. It may seem impossible that something commonly called the weapon of the weak would stand a chance, much less make possible a small victory against the Nazis, but it did. Here's a brief summary of this unexpected event. After most Jews had been taken from Berlin in 1943 the police and Gestapo arrested the remaining Jews, those who were married to Gentiles. Within hours their wives heard what happened and by the following morning the women converged on the Rosenstraße detention center demanding the release of their loved ones. All day they defied Gestapo orders, and as their numbers swelled the prisoners started squeezing through the barred windows. Gestapo headquarters was just blocks away, so they could have swept the street clear at any time. A day or so later the remaining prisoners

were formally released. Nagler used this example (around page 100), and for me, it was one of the most powerful examples of nonviolence given that the opponent was the Nazis.

Nonviolence works, as has been proven with these few examples, not because of physical power, but because of the way nonviolence taps into some part of the core of what being human is. We don't learn nonviolence; rather we both unlearn aggression (Nagler 146) and learn to see ourselves in the shoes of our opponents. Examining these (and other) examples of nonviolence may make you wonder what would have been (and what could be now) if nonviolent movements, and not violent warfare, had affected some of the historical victories that have shaped our modern world.

There are so many angles from which to study nonviolence that I'm sure there are aspects of it I want to learn about, but don't even know exist at the moment. Nonviolence is a massive topic, and in many ways an integral component of peace studies. I can't so much conclude in saying what exactly I want to learn more about nonviolence, but rather simply that I'm excited to dive into the case studies of nonviolent movements, in which I'll learn more (but by no means all) of what there is to learn regarding nonviolence. Following the interdisciplinary nature of peace studies, I can already say that studying nonviolence is something that everyone should do just to understand themselves, society, and our world more completely than they already do.