

Nonviolence: Does Gender Matter?

Carol Flinders

Thinking, as I've been asked to do, about women and nonviolence, I found myself wondering what difference gender actually makes in the way an individual embraces and practices nonviolence. It felt like an odd question to raise, because the heroes and heroines of nonviolence have a fine way of transcending conventional gender scripts altogether. The almost maternal gentleness of a Cesar Chavez and the unyielding courage of an Aung San Suu Kyi (of the Burmese freedom struggle) confirm our sense that as a human being is "taken over" by the core tenet of nonviolence—the conviction that all of life is one—gender in the ordinary sense becomes meaningless.

That said, I have to add that the life stories of women whose names are, for me, synonymous with nonviolence do take on fresh meaning when read from the standpoint of gender. I'm inclined to think our understanding of nonviolence itself gets deepened in the process as well.

Tend and Befriend

Consider, for example, the discovery made several years ago by a pair of UCLA scientists—both women, as it happens—that the testosterone-fueled "fight or flight" response we'd been told was the human being's normal response to stress and threat is really only normal for men. Women are far more likely to slip into a "tend and befriend" mode: quiet the children, feed everyone, defuse the tension, and connect with other females. It's all about oxytocin, the hormone that kicks in to facilitate labor contractions and the "letdown" response in nursing mothers, but also, curiously, in moments of perceived danger. A woman who believes her children are directly threatened will fight unto the death, but only, it appears, when she's exhausted other strategies.

Both "fight or flight" and "tend and befriend" are adaptive behaviors acquired in our remote, pre-human past. Among chimpanzees, our nearest relations, males patrol the territory within which the females and infants feed. They're primed to fight because nobody's DNA will get reiterated if they don't. Females are rarely out on those frontlines; they're more typically engaged in direct care of their offspring.

Broadly speaking, then, it's never been particularly adaptive for women to engage in direct combat. This fact does not make women inherently better at practicing nonviolence, but it does mean that women tend to come

at it from a somewhat different direction and even live it out rather differently.

Most conversations about women and nonviolence begin by noting that Mahatma Gandhi said he'd learned nonviolence from his wife Kasturba—specifically, from her ability to resist his "petty tyrannies" without ever withdrawing her love or being anything but gentle and patient. In fact, Kasturba was behaving as devout Hindu wives always have, and she could have gone on doing it for another thousand years without giving rise to the "science" of nonviolence if Gandhi himself hadn't been poised on one of those critical tipping points in consciousness. Because he was desperate for a way to transform the powerlessness of his oppressed countrymen into power, something clicked, and he asked himself the kind of simple question we associate with genius: "What if a man were to behave in this way toward his oppressor? What if a man were to lower his fists, drop his gun or his sword or his club, and refuse to fight?"

And of course the rest is history.

When a man decides he will not retaliate, but search instead for common ground, and cultivate love and respect for his opponent, he is going against millions of years of conditioning, and the life stories of men who have made this decision suggest that it can feel very much like a religious conversion or "metanoia"—a dramatic reversal and a powerful re-direction of one's whole being that is both revelatory and profoundly energizing.

From "Bubble" to Action

Women, on the other hand, are rarely stirred in the same way by the idea of renouncing violence. Yet there is, I believe, a comparable "Eureka!" moment in the life of a woman who gives herself over to nonviolence—a Peace Pilgrim, a Dorothy Day, a Mother Antonia—and that is when she voluntarily steps out of the relatively safe, secure, and comfortable enclosure that men-with-guns have traditionally provided for "their" women and moves into places where there is no guarantee she will be safe at all, or even remotely comfortable: the open road in one case, the slums of New York City and Chicago in the second, and a Tijuana prison in the third.

Sister Helen Prejean was forty-two when she left what she calls the "terrarium" or the "bubble" of the comfortable convent in one of New Orleans' better suburbs and moved to the Projects. Within a few months Sister Helen had begun the work that would make her the world's best known opponent of the death penalty. The thrill of walking out of "safe places" into direct contact with her fellow

human beings is a leit motif through all of Sister Helen's writings and speeches. She connects it with "wildness" and a way of life that is increasingly unscripted and improvisational. The winds of grace are blowing through her life now, she says, filling it with joy and almost limitless energy.

There is another and related way in which the nonviolent work of women tends to take a somewhat different tack from that of men. Ella Baker is a good case in point.

Ella who?

Exactly.

Ella Baker is often described as "an unsung heroine of the Civil Rights movement." In the literal sense that's not true, because of all the songs that the black women's a cappella group Sweet Honey in the Rock performs, none is more beloved than "Ella's Song," composed by Sweet Honey founder Bernice Johnson Reagon. The song begins in Ella Baker's own words, "We who believe in freedom cannot rest." Initially a member of Martin Luther King's inner circle, Ella Baker went her own way after two years at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference because she disagreed with its policy of strong central leadership. She gave herself over instead to grassroots organizing, working with young people in particular because she believed that "strong people don't need strong leaders." Today her memory is honored at the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights in Oakland, where an initiative is being launched this summer called Reclaim the Future. The plan is "to build a constituency that can transform urban America by creating jobs, reducing violence and honoring the earth."

Building a New Society

Ella Baker's work, and the work going on today in her name, represents the dimension of nonviolence that Gandhi called, in language that is almost dauntingly prosaic, "Constructive Program."

The spinning wheel was the rallying point, and women the backbone, of



Fannie Lou Hamer and Ella Baker

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Constructive Program, a far-reaching plan to rebuild India from the ground up into a nation that was so strong and self-reliant that it simply couldn't be colonized any longer: The British would leave not so much because they'd been defeated but because a certain kind of hypnotic spell had been broken for colonized and colonizer alike. Dorothy Day envisioned much the same goal for the Catholic Worker movement: "to build a new society within the shell of the old" – a shell that would break and fall away when the life within it couldn't be contained any longer. Quaker sociologist Elise Boulding agrees, arguing that only by building sturdy "cultures of peace" will we be able finally to crowd out cultures of war and violence.

Constructive Program and its analogs are "preventive nonviolence," or even "stealth nonviolence," because they address the root causes of violence – racism, poverty, and militarism for example – at the level of community, neighborhood, and family. Building cultures of peace is long-haul work, undramatic and unheralded, and often infinitely tedious, and most of the people doing it probably don't even think of themselves as practitioners of nonviolence.

Maybe it's time they did.

Resources

Ella Baker Center for Human Rights: www.ellabakercenter.org

Friends of Peace Pilgrim: www.peacepilgrim.com

The Catholic Worker Movement: www.catholicworker.org

Two Rock Institute: www.tworock.org

Sweet Honey in the Rock: www.sweethoney.com

Carol Flinders of Two Rock Institute is the author of the newly-released Enduring Lives: Living Portraits of Women of Faith In Action. It profiles four contemporary women who she believes live and work in the "spiritual mother-line" of women like Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint Catherine of Genoa.