

TURN THE OTHER CHEEK? YEAH, RIGHT!

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“I don’t see myself as a pacifist. I see myself rather as a violent person trying to become nonviolent...”

- Walter Wink, liberal Christian theologian

A little less than 2000 years ago, a man from a town called Nazareth was murdered on a cross on a hill called Golgotha. His followers didn’t quite know what to make of their teacher’s death. They had come to rely on him, come to see him as special and important, had come to find courage and hope in his message of justice and love. And then, he died without even putting up a fight.

People, of course, began to tell stories about this strange man, to make meaning out of his amazing life and very disappointing death. And of course, we know today, in what was to become the most prominent story, Jesus’ murder came to be understood as a necessary sacrifice, freeing us from the eternal punishment of our original sin. Within the Christian tradition, this story became the first example of what could be called salvation through violence. Through violence, we are saved.

This version of Jesus’ death serves as a complex example of a much larger story that Walter Wink, theologian and author of *The Powers That Be*, calls the Myth of Redemptive Violence, the belief that violence saves, that war makes peace, that death brings life.

We all know this myth very well in its most basic form. We see it on television, at the movies, in books. Basically, an irredeemable bad guy threatens the safety of society. A hero arises to challenge this great evil, but he (it’s almost always a he) finds himself nearly outmatched. But then, through some miraculous display of strength and will, the hero manages to slay the enemy and save society from the brink of destruction.

We see the omnipresence of this myth in our society, everything's a war: the war on drugs, the war on AIDS, the war on crime, the war on poverty, the war on cancer, the war against terror. Walter Wink writes, "This Myth of Redemptive Violence is the real myth of the modern world. It, and not Judaism or Christianity or Islam, is the dominant religion in our society today."

Yet, I imagine, some may hear my words and reject them outright. Violence works. We must use violence. It's a kill-or-be-killed world. Turn the other cheek? Yeah, right!

Wink addresses this as well when he writes that the Myth of Redemptive Violence, "is so successful because it doesn't seem to be mythic in the least. Violence simply appears to be the nature of things. It's what works. It seems inevitable, the last and often, the first resort in conflicts."

Yet, when we think realistically and honestly about our own lives, do we not recognize how incapable violence is of solving our most difficult problems?

Not to be dismissive to this country that I love, but our government provides a perfect example of this failed idea. We spent over \$420 billion on our military last year. That amount is more than the next 23 most powerful nations combined. It accounts for almost half of all military spending on earth and more than half of our federal discretionary budget. Yet, despite this spending, the United States, out of all the industrialized nations, has the highest incarceration rate, one of the worst infant mortality rates, near the greatest number of children living in poverty and without health care, and the largest gap between the rich and poor. Plus, we are stuck fighting a war a majority of Americans now believe was a mistake, having lost over 2200 soldiers and well over 100,000 Iraqis. Iran and North Korea seem on the verge of obtaining

nuclear weapons. And Osama bin Laden remains free while al Qaida seems to be growing. It makes you wonder.

You know what some say is the definition of insanity – doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. Violence, violence, violence, violence, violence.

And that is perhaps the greatest tragedy of this Myth of Redemptive Violence. When dealing with our difficulties, conflicts, and problems, it promotes a profound failure of imagination... a one-solution-fits-all approach, the repeated placing of square pegs in round holes.

Did you know that imagination is a word that the religious right has managed to have banned from textbooks? Apparently, only witches imagine. We rarely acknowledge it, but the cultivation of imagination is one the greatest values of democratic society. Imagination is at the heart of empathy, the ability to walk in someone else's shoes. Imagination is also at the heart of creativity, allowing us to expand our minds to hope and possibility, to consider alternative realities. Imagination is the seed of resistance within a society of oppression.

This is why Jesus was killed. He dared to imagine.

The Myth of Redemptive Violence would have us believe that there are only two ways to respond to threat: fight or flight. Yet, the power of imagination opens us up to a third alternative – the power of nonviolent resistance.

Jesus was murdered on the cross – I use that term intentionally, his death was a state-sponsored murder – because he dared to resist the oppression of his time. And he did so not with violence or with the “turn the other cheek” passivity that some have associated with him, but with a strong and intentional call for nonviolent resistance.

And we can look to his words to prove it.

In Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount, he spoke, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your outer garment, give your undergarment as well; and if one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his pack one mile, go two."

This short declaration is one of the most radical political statements in history and also one of the most misunderstood. The 4 phrases in this simple speech challenge us to a profound form of resistance, yet we must understand their context to recognize their power.

Each of these phrases has a subtlety of meaning that has been lost in translation. Societies built on the Myth of Redemptive Violence thrive on the idea that only two alternatives to conflict are available to us – violence or submissiveness – so it is no surprise that these phrases have been pacified. Yet, Walter Wink helps us reclaim their intended meaning.

"Do not resist an evildoer" – the Greek word used for resistance is *antisthenai*, which means literally to stand against. This phrase is a common term of warfare, describing the way opposing armies meet on the battlefield. It is a phrase of violence. The scholar's version of the Gospel of Matthew interprets the phrase as, "Don't react violently against the one who is evil." In other words, do not resist evil in kind – a completely alternative understanding.

"If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." – Imagine someone striking you on the right cheek. How could they do so? If they were to punch you, they would hit you on your left cheek, unless of course, they were left-handed. But

people in that time, only used their left hand for unclean tasks. So, to strike someone on the right cheek, the striker would have to use a backhand slap. Jesus lived in a society of oppression and was speaking to oppressed people. They would all know the indignity of a backhand. To turn the other cheek is to prevent a second backhand, putting your nose in the way. It forces your superior to strike you with a fist, when only equals fight in such a way. It is to say, "I have dignity. I am your equal." We recognize now that Jesus has a radical sense of humor, that he is encouraging people to engage in a kind of nonviolent ninjitsu – using the power of oppression against itself.

And Jesus' other two phrases have similar twists of meaning.

"If anyone wants to sue you and take your outer garment, give your undergarment as well." At the time, the wealthy were often taking the poor to debtor's court. The law allowed their outer cloak to be the last thing a wealthy person could take. But to give them your undergarment as well is to be what? Naked! And in that culture, it was embarrassing not to be naked but to witness nakedness. Imagine a poor person giving over his cloak and then his undergarments also. And then imagine that person walking naked out on the streets of town. His friends would ask him what happened. Crowds would gather. Others might join in the nakedness, too.

"If one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his pack one mile, go two." Roman troops carried packs that weighed as much as 85 lbs. and there was a law at the time that troops could force people to carry their gear, but for no more than a mile. Imagine a Jew coming upon the mile marker and continuing to joyously carry the Romans pack, refusing to give it back. What would a Roman soldier make of this? Is this person crazy? Hostile? Kind? Imagine the soldier trying to chase down the person carrying his pack. It would be completely bewildering to him.

All these scenarios when understood in their context reveal a very different Jesus. Hardly passive, he used humor and the claiming of power to resist the oppressions of society. This is why Jesus was so dangerous, the same reason why Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. were so dangerous, and the same reason why they were all killed. Nonviolent resistance, a third way, not violence or submissiveness, is profoundly threatening to the powers that be.

Walter Wink wrote, "I don't see myself as a pacifist. I see myself rather as a violent person trying to become nonviolent.."

I am not at a point in my life where I find myself willing to reject violence entirely as a form of protection. However, I strongly seek to improve the odds for nonviolent resolution to our interpersonal and international conflicts.

The most radical act in a society founded in violence is to imagine, to consider alternatives. Those caught in the spell of the Myth of Redemptive Violence will challenge such imagination, beginning by removing the word from textbooks. The power of the myth lies with how many people believe violence to be the only realistic solution to our problems. Those wedded to the myth will call any alternatives to violence a fantasy, a pipedream. Yet, it is up to the rest of us to see a higher call. We must dare to imagine... and encourage others to do the same.

Let us imagine a world of peace and love, of justice and freedom... the beloved community on earth... where "earth shall be fair, and all her people one." There is no end to the power of what we can imagine. With each new dream of peace, each new vision of hope, we step closer and closer to a world without violence. Hallelujah and Amen.