

## Worship and Action Update, 6/27/03

Dear Friends in New York Yearly Meeting:

When we rise in the morning, we slip on our own spectacles; lenses ground for our eyes, fitted to the shape of our head and the placement of our eyes and ears. Why, then, when we walk into the light, should we understand reality through another's eyes? Yet how can we engage our neighbors, and invite them into our vision of truth, if we see through different lenses?

A culture imbued with faith in violence constructs for itself, endlessly repeats to itself and devoutly believes a "combat myth" in which the good and godly can overcome the (external) evil one through, and only through, the infliction of lethal violence. In a culture gripped by the combat myth, waging war, like the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, appears justifiable because looming evil threatens the Garden, or even because our warriors can deliver the invaded from the evil in their midst, like the Taliban or Saddam Hussein. As Walter Wink explains in *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Fortress Press 1992) (at pages 16-17):

Every coherent theology of holy war ultimately reverts to this basic mythological type.... The distinctive feature of the myth is the victory of order over chaos by means of violence. This myth is the original religion of the status quo, the first articulation of 'might makes right.' It is the basic ideology of the Domination System. The gods favor those who conquer. Conversely, whoever conquers must have the favor of the gods.... Life is combat. Any form of order is preferable to chaos, according to this myth. Ours is neither a perfect nor a perfectible world; it is a theater of perpetual conflict in which the prize goes to the strong. Peace through war, security through strength: these are the core convictions that arise from this ancient historical religion.

This is not Friends' understanding of God's reality. A most recent effort to explicate the spiritual core of nonviolence, as understood by both "secular" and "religious" thinkers, is offered by Jonathan Schell in his new book *The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People* (Henry Holt & Company, Incorporated 2003). Here is an excerpt(at page 207):

To live in accord with [the cohering values of our world, according to Václav Havel, is] to live in truth. A similar confidence was expressed in the saying that, in the Western tradition, must be considered the foundation stone of any philosophy of nonviolence, namely Jesus' 'They that live by the sword shall die by the sword.' The advice does more than prescribe conduct; it makes a claim about the nature of the human world.... [W]e can suppose he means that violence harms the doer as well as his victims; that violence generates counterviolence; and that the choice of violence starts a chain of events likely to bring general ruin. What Gandhi, Havel, and most of the others who have won nonviolent victories in our time believed and made the starting point of their activity was a conviction - or,

to be exact, a faith - that if they acted in obedience to certain demanding principles, which for all of them included in one way or another the principle of nonviolence, there was, somewhere in the order of creation, a fundament, or truth, that would give an answering and sustaining reply.

Nor is the combat myth Friends' vision of reality. As early Friends declared in 1661:

[T]his is our testimony to the whole world... The spirit of Christ, ... which leads us into all Truth, will never more move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the Kingdom of Christ, nor for Kingdoms of this world.

(Declaration "Against All Plotters and Fighters in the World" addressed to Charles II by George Fox, Richard Hubberthorne and 10 other Friends, January 21, 1661; quoted in *The Journal of George Fox* at 399-400.)

And this is not our experience of the reality of history. We need only name the "descending spiral of destruction" in Congo, Israel/Palestine, Colombia, Indonesia, Liberia, Haiti, Afghanistan, Iraq, and on and on to confirm that "violence multiplies violence". (Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength To Love*, 1963)

Yet because the combat myth demands unbounded faith in the holy efficacy of violence, a culture in its grip may experience appeals to nonviolent methods of conflict resolution or even criticism of war-making as so alien to its paradigm as to be incomprehensible and as heresy. And because we live amidst the myth, we risk being confused by its fractured light.

How, then, do we maintain our vision amid a devotion to violence? And even more, how do Friends relate to neighbors, community and polity that sees the world through such different eyes? How do we overcome the dilemma of residing on different levels of Plato's cave.

We invite NYYM Friends to share with each other and with the broader community of Friends and friends their reflections on and experiences of truth telling and spiritual commitment in a society laden with myths of redemptive violence. We would be pleased to participate in that sharing by publishing Friends' contributions in these Updates.

Peaceable greetings,

Linda Chidsey, Vicki Cooley, and Fred Dettmer  
NYYM Worship and Action working group

Truth alone will endure; all the rest will be swept away before the tide of time.... What may appear as truth to one person will often appear as untruth to another person. But that need not worry the seeker.... Truth and untruth often co-exist; good and evil often are found together.... Use truth

as your anvil, nonviolence as your hammer and anything that does not stand the test when it is brought to the anvil of truth and hammered with nonviolence, reject it.... Truth and nonviolence demand that no human being may debar himself from serving any other human being, no matter how sinful he may be.... Truth is the first to be sought for, and Beauty and Goodness will then be added unto you.... An error does not become truth by reason of multiplied propagation, nor does truth become error because nobody sees it.

*Mahatma Gandhi*