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*University of Wollongong*

*Year 2004*

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Nonviolence insights

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This article was originally published as: Martin, B, Nonviolence insights, Social Alternatives, 2004, 23(2), 70-76. The original journal can be found <[a href="http://www.socialalternatives.com/" >here</a>.](http://www.socialalternatives.com/)

This paper is posted at Research Online.

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# Nonviolence insights

Compiled by Schweik Action Wollongong

from interviews with

**Abel Hertzberger, Anthony Kelly, Harky Klinefelter, Jason McLeod,  
Janne Poort-van Eeden, Joke Reijntjes, Jo Le Cornu, Lineke  
Schakenbos, Margaret Pestorius, Ralph Summy and Wim Robben**

Published in *Social Alternatives*, Vol. 23, No. 2, Second Quarter 2004, pp. 70-76

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## Introduction

'You've been working a long time towards a more nonviolent society. What have you learned? Can you tell me?'

That's basically what we asked eleven experienced and committed individuals. We wanted to learn some of the insights they had acquired over many years of action and reflection.

Our interviews were open-ended. We talked to nonviolent activists, trainers, educators and community-builders. Six were from the Netherlands and five from Australia. Six were men and five were women. Their ages ranged from 20s to 60s. Many are quite well known in nonviolence circles and beyond.

We took extensive notes on the interviews, wrote down all the insights, classified them into categories (such as education and cultural context), and amalgamated, rearranged, edited and sometimes rewrote them. Then we sent the result to all the interviewees for further comment.

This list of insights is just a beginning. There are thousands of other experienced proponents of nonviolence, with many additional insights. You may disagree with some of the points here, or perhaps find some of them obscure. We hope, though, that you will find some new ideas or helpful reminders. If you can find just *one* helpful thing to take away, then the exercise is worthwhile.

Careful readers will note tensions between certain insights. That's okay. We were after personal insights. They won't apply in all circumstances.

We welcome additional contributions for the web version of this report at <http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/pubs/02schweik.html>.

Doing the interviews was part of our goal. We hoped that the interviewees would find it thought-provoking to articulate what they had learned over many years. We certainly found it stimulating to classify and edit the insights.

We thank our interviewees - Abel, Anthony, Harky, Jason, Janne, Joke, Jo, Lineke, Margaret, Ralph and Wim - for their time and trouble, but most of all we appreciate their efforts towards a nonviolent future.

Who are we? Schweik Action Wollongong is a small voluntary group fostering awareness of nonviolent defence. The group is named after the fictional character Schweik (or Svejik), a soldier who created havoc in the Austrian army during World War I by pretending to be extremely stupid. See Jaroslav Hasek, *The Good Soldier Svejik and His Fortunes in the World War* (Penguin, 1974). The nonviolence insights project was carried out by Brian Martin, Sharon Callaghan and Yasmin Rittau with assistance from Chris Fox.

## **Personal/psychological**

### **Individual peace**

Dealing with the personal level is important as a foundation for dealing with society-wide issues. The effect of a person at peace with themselves can radiate to families, organisations, villages, society. Nonviolent activists need to be deeply committed to their own principles in their lives regarding social change.

People working for a nonviolent future need to continually develop their emotional ability to live nonviolently. Activists have emotional responses, but sometimes are unconscious of them. They need to become aware of them, though this can be difficult when activist groups fail to validate emotional responses to the world.

Activists should recognise and get in contact with the violence in themselves and in their own lives, and deal with it.

For example, in a rally against cruise missiles, some demonstrators were throwing glass at military personnel. Lineke asked them to stop but they continued. Lineke understood herself well enough to decide to move away so she would not become violent herself.

### **Realistic hopes**

Have realistic expectations. Don't expect dramatic social change to occur quickly. It is easy for activists to despair about things not changing as much as they hope. Therefore, be prepared for ideals not to be realised in actual change. Activists should be content to do what they can and not get too worried about making things happen. Wisdom is gained

through being detached from the results and having faith. This also helps to prevent burnout.

For example, one thing that has helped Ralph to keep going over many decades is that he has no grand expectations. He thinks that social progress will have to occur incrementally and that his contribution will be 'infinitesimal,' but he hopes it will be positive. [Schweik comments: Ralph is too modest!]

### **Emotional distance**

In personal interactions with a potential for violence, don't get too emotionally involved: keep emotional distance so anger doesn't take over.

Janne recommends using Thomas Gordon's books on effectiveness training, such as *Parent Effectiveness Training*. Stay out of the power role when operating for example as a parent vis-a-vis a child or a teacher vis-a-vis a pupil.

### **Daily nonviolence**

It is good to have things that people can do in their daily lives as alternatives to violence. This helps to change personal attitudes. In the UN Decade for a Culture of Peace, one component is a personal commitment for action in daily life. Include micro and macro measures. (Micro includes addressing conflict in our lives, buying organic food and riding a bike. Macro includes war tax resistance).

### **Fearlessness**

Nonviolence involves fearlessness and doing 'scary things'. People who practise nonviolence need to always take respectful, powerful action. People who do powerful and scary things are both attacked from within the movement and face repression from the outside.

## **Education**

### **Tell people about alternatives to violence**

We need to give people alternatives to violent responses. At a local level we need to teach and learn alternatives for dealing with violence on the street.

For example, in a mental hospital, for dealing with a violent patient, a technique from the nonviolence field was used, namely having several people circle a violent person. The key idea here is to move towards the violence, not away.

Harky notes that even the Netherlands military says that 'peacekeeping' in ex-Yugoslavia won't work and are themselves interested in nonviolent alternatives such as mediation. In

his opinion, politicians promote 'peacekeeping' as a concept for their own purposes.

### **Education starts with the young**

Nonviolence education should start with very small children. Parents need to learn alternatives to shouting and violence with the very young. Then, when children are older, neither parents nor children will be as likely to use violence as an 'easy option.'

Select the right school for children - a school where the teachers are not rough or insensitive. And remember that education is going on informally everywhere we are.

### **Teaching: be practical**

For writing and training purposes we must be practical and use examples. We need to show rather than explain. We need to be transparent: clear and understandable.

### **Nonviolence in the curriculum**

Promote nonviolence education at schools. Education in social skills for nonviolence should be a routine part of school curriculums, rather than people only responding to violence when there is a crisis.

Wim describes a Dutch government-funded organisation that developed a conflict resolution programme for students, but could not get any money for it from the Education Department, which preferred to give money for measures such as preventing knives getting into schools. Physical 'prevention' is supported but not development of social skills.

### **Protect peace studies courses**

Promoting peace education is a long and challenging process, so advocates need to be prepared for lack of immediate success.

Ralph first introduced peace studies at the University of Queensland in 1975. Then, it was seen as something on the fringe. Persistence was needed to keep the course going. Later, other teachers, who had included some peace content in their courses, were approached to build up a peace studies major. Ralph believes that if teachers are dedicated and can show that numbers of students will be attracted, then success is possible. Today peace studies is far more accepted in the fields of political science and international relations.

### **Learn from nonviolence leaders**

Read history with nonviolence in mind and find examples of alternatives to violence. The writings of the Indian nonviolence leader Gandhi, and in particular his autobiography,

inspired Margaret in her nonviolence work. We can also learn from successful communities and cultures.

### **Be an example to others**

How we behave is a powerful means of influencing others. Gandhi, Thich Nhat Hanh (a Vietnamese Buddhist monk prominent during the Vietnam war) and Martin Luther King, Jr. (US civil rights leader) are key role models for many nonviolent activists.

### **Communicate in terms that others can accept**

Rather than insisting on a special nonviolence language and concepts, often it's better to use terms that are familiar and acceptable to others, such as 'defending local communities' or 'defending a way of life'. In the movement against corporate globalisation, 'defending democracy' may have more appeal than 'dismantling capitalism'.

Use language that people feel comfortable with. For example, since conflict resolution has been fashionable, a course was named 'Introduction to peace and conflict analysis.' Once courses are set up, there is a fair degree of freedom within the framework. The lesson is not to force views on people.

Many activists have a principled commitment to nonviolence, but it may be better to promote nonviolence using the argument that it is more effective than violence. This is called the pragmatic approach. Ralph thinks this approach, used for example by nonviolence scholar Gene Sharp, is more appropriate in a capitalist society in which values are opposed to nonviolence. Some people who get involved will then move gradually to principled positions. In a more spiritually oriented society, though, it might be better to start talking from a perspective of principled nonviolence. To reach people, in Ralph's view, it is better to set aside one's personal views rather than cramming them down people's throats. In short, one's personal philosophy may differ from the immediate strategy that one advocates.

### **Build the positive**

Many people fight *against* what they oppose. While this can be useful, it is more productive to build the positive.

In keeping with the idea of creating useful examples, Abel also wants us to *create* the positive side of a situation. He says that to fight militarism wastes energy, even for an antimilitarist. We would be better served to empower the positive, which embraces how we learn, teach, move around, eat, speak, and ultimately how we live.

He notes that the Montessori approach to education, an alternative that emphasises self-education by children, was later in part incorporated into the general school system.

## **Learn nonviolence as a way of life**

There is a need for training in nonviolence as a way of life, which includes living in a more modest way, for example using sustainable agriculture.

## **Make nonviolence personally relevant**

Deal with daily life issues, such as violence in the home, schools, street, and bullying at schools and work. With 75% of the world's violence in homes, Wim wants to focus on male violence at home, which will see changes in behaviour elsewhere such as at work and in politics.

## **Learning comes through action**

Action is an 'exercise' (a learning process) individually, in groups and generally in society.

For example, anti-nuclear-power activists aimed to stop nuclear waste transport. Abel said to them that it was just an 'exercise' and did not endear himself in this way. The activists were focussing on the task, whereas Abel was oriented to empowerment.

## **Learning occurs through both suffering and joy**

Only mentioning the positive can be limiting. Learning comes through all life experiences and debriefing after the worst of these may produce some insights for another day.

Abel says the project in Srebrenica cannot create a nonviolent society - that is too big a goal - but it is great value to reduce tension a little. Volunteers for two months will have life experiences. Debriefing will make this a learning process.

## **Special nonviolence skills**

There are special skills for nonviolence that don't require bureaucratic or other mainstream experience. Learning these skills is a way of involving young people. Many of the useful skills are creative ones, including drama, song and dance.

## **Nonviolence materials are needed in all media**

Nonviolence materials are needed in all media - books, magazines, films, TV, pictures, internet - to appeal to different audiences. The recent TV series 'A force more powerful' is a great addition. According to Harky, the best film is 'From Memphis to Montgomery.' An excellent TV film, very good for teaching, is 'The sheriff without a gun,' about the first black police chief in Mississippi. Another good film, an old one, is 'Salt of the earth,' about mineworkers. Furthermore, there's a need for more nonviolence materials that appeal to

the emotions rather than just the intellect. Harky has a vision of a nonviolence comic book, without words.

### **Communicate using symbols**

Often it's better to present information in symbolic form that directly 'talks' to people. This can be through community art, street theatre or religious ceremonies. Creative skills are needed to act, perform and make things, in particular to make symbols link together. Making and displaying interesting props and banners can be carried out in an atmosphere of fun.

## **Groups, organisation**

### **Process is fulfilling**

The process is more important than the end. The process in the nonviolence movement should be and is fulfilling and enjoyable. Also there is a 'digger' (common soldier) spirit that emanates from struggling for a common goal, which leads to bonding. Ralph values this process that involves 'relishing the moment'. Through this approach he has met lots of interesting rank-and-file people in the broader peace movement to whom he can relate.

### **Process to reflect nonviolence**

Nonviolent alternatives need to be reflected in the process and structure of nonviolent campaigns and organisations. The organisational forms need to involve collaboration, consensus and skill-sharing and to be nonhierarchical. Yet, consensus approaches shouldn't be used too rigidly. Some spontaneous discussion should be allowed, without overfacilitation, but on the other hand discussion shouldn't be too unstructured.

### **Support within organisations is important**

Support within organisations and strategies for dealing with potential interpersonal conflict is as important as an organisation's goal of developing nonviolent alternatives to the violent, repressive and 'top-down' methods of the state. Also, people need to be aware that egos can inhibit interpersonal relations, which makes it harder to grow into a nonviolent society.

Anthony describes Pt'chang as an organisation that responds to conflict and interpersonal conflict within social change networks and also is a nonviolent alternative to the police.

### **Leadership in everyone**

The task is to develop leadership in everyone. Allocate specific jobs to get people to be more responsible for tasks. Also, let others suggest what they'd like to do.

### **Be holistic**

Combine political, emotional and spiritual approaches together. Individual aspects are important such as the development and expression of feelings, motivations, wounds and having a relationship with oneself. Also political aspects are important such developing a sense of community that enables personal change. Yet, both approaches aren't always combined. Jo developed friendships in the Rainforest Action Group but found that politics often took precedence over personal and spiritual levels. She believes that an emphasis on the emotional/spiritual side was lacking and that this was a limitation of the dominant ideological/political line.

### **Organising operates on one-to-one basis**

Most nonviolence organising is done on a one-to-one basis that is built on friendship.

### **Strategic thinking prevents burnout**

Following a long-term strategy helps put day-to-day activities in context and thus helps prevent burn-out.

### **Create sustainable organisations**

Create solid, long-lasting and sustainable organisations. They provide sustainable support structures for a wide range of actions, and they capture and maintain experience, knowledge and wisdom.

Anthony gives the example of the antiglobalisation campaign in Australia, in which the effectiveness of the protest at the World Economic Forum meeting in Melbourne can be attributed to well-established socialist groups and a range of nonviolent community organisations. These sustainable organisations acted in a crucial support role by providing back-up through a legal aid observer team, first aid, bicycle courier and communication team and independent media.

Also, nonviolent sustainable organisations help to build the alternative society by providing the support structure of the alternative. For example, Peace Brigades International helps support nonviolent struggle, helps ensure that struggles remain nonviolent and helps long-term activists who face volatile situations.

### **Create organisations based on fluid relationships**

Temporary as well as long-term relationships, based on spontaneous actions on random targets, are important in building nonviolent activist communities. It challenges the idea of always needing to take strategic actions.

For example, Margaret is involved in fun and creative actions in Cairns, Australia, such as 'paddlers for peace', 'recycle the roads', 'buy nothing day actions' and Gulf war actions. None of the groups has continued but an 'intersection' of people turns up. This has built really close friendships that have helped create a community founded on a particular network of relationships. Some people are more and some less committed to the community. It involves a food co-op, ecological villages, neighbourhood, church and reconciliation counselling.

### **Organisations to act independently**

It's better for organisations to act independently. When several organisations try to work together they need to adjust their organisational styles, which wastes a lot of time in meetings to plan activities.

### **Build coalitions and support coalitions**

Build diverse coalitions rather than focus entirely on affinity groups in which it is easy to build agreements around being committed to principled nonviolence. Nevertheless, coalitions are a good opportunity to develop the nonviolent process. They can develop links between those groups and individuals who promote violence and those who promote nonviolence. Pragmatic nonviolence is one of the few bottom-lines that can hold people together.

People need to understand the purpose of coalitions. The coalitions should not make decisions or take actions: rather the individual groups should act autonomously. Also, the emphasis is on how to work together rather than what individuals and groups believe. Coalition work involves assessing weaknesses, strengths and opportunities, sharing information about what everyone is doing, and disseminating this information to people's own organisations and groups.

For example, Jason intends to help build an international solidarity coalition that supports struggle in West Papua. He is looking for individuals open to nonviolence in West Papua, Australia, Indonesia and internationally regardless of where they are coming from and how they see social change working. He wants to help identify the people who will support the process, particularly in the early stages. The idea is to develop a nonviolent affinity group in Australia prepared to initiate and facilitate coordination of a strategic nonviolence campaign. In the process this group should build good links with people in West Papua, Indonesia and internationally. Once this group has developed, others will be drawn into a campaign of strategic and principled nonviolence.

## **Movement**

## **Keep the nonviolence movement nonviolent**

Deal with agents provocateurs and any others who advocate or use violence: they do great damage to the movement.

## **Use everybody and everything**

Use everybody and everything to build a nonviolent society. People can and do contribute to nonviolent social change even though they are not consciously or officially part of a movement. The traditional method was to go to the top (e.g. government) and then spread the idea/change. Instead, do it with every person. For example, Jose, a nun, is helping traumatised people by teaching them massage so they can help others and themselves. Also, small children are taught massage so they can detraumatise.

## **Utilise direct action people**

Utilise direct action people rather than lobbying groups that focus on elites. It can be too frustrating to be involved in lobbying elites as it gives away power and diverts energy from developing campaigns that encourage people to participate.

## **Strategy is important**

Strategy is very important. Some good activists do their best but without much thought about what's going to work. Lots of actions are done because they've been done before (such as petitions and rallies), again without much thinking about strategy. For example, in some actions it's important to think about the key groups that keep a regime in power. Also, coordination of nonviolent campaigns can be considered.

## **Coalitions are important for linking diverse movements**

Coalitions are important for linking together diverse people and movements. Personal relationships are a good basis for building coalitions. They require people to commit to a process that respects autonomy but clearly articulates a bottom line for taking action together. Nonviolent people can benefit from working with others, as long as the most important values aren't compromised.

## **Develop skills in public relations and fund raising**

The nonviolence movement needs skills in public relations and fund raising. For example, there are all sorts of peace groups in the Netherlands such as those that involve physicians and other particular sectors of society. However, the issue of finances constitutes a weak point. The movement needs financial advisers and public relations people to give free time. The International Fellowship of Reconciliation has its international headquarters in the

Netherlands and is experiencing a financial crisis with most of the jobs lost.

### **Spirit, science, skill and song**

Ralph has found that four internal, interrelated ingredients are important to the success of nonviolent campaigns. They can be called the four 'S's, namely *spirit* (commitment to the goal and to each other), *science* (understanding the theory and dynamics of nonviolent political action), *skill* (training in how to react nonviolently) and *song* (representing the full range of artistic expression in advancing the cause). Often activists concentrate on interaction with the opponent and neglect developing their own independent strength.

## **Cultural context**

### **Strategies and culture**

Strategies are culture-dependent. Harky notes that Netherlands is a largely nonviolent society, non-macho, and hence ahead of others in these respects. Strategies also depend on the period in history.

### **Low institutional recognition**

It's very difficult to gain official recognition that nonviolence is important. Governments say they support peace but don't give real support; actually they support violence. Governments will give money for dealing with symptoms, such as police, surveillance cameras, public lighting, etc., instead of supporting fundamental change. The media regularly report violence but seldom report nonviolence. There is a great discrepancy between the potential of nonviolence and the lack of official interest in supporting it in practical ways.

### **No good and bad guys**

Society is not made up of good and bad guys. Actual people range across the spectrum of good and bad, and individuals are complex mixtures of good and bad.

To change society, don't have high walls between the old and new society, since otherwise it is too hard to change. So: don't look at people as bad, instead look at a bad system. It is difficult to do this, since it's easy to return to bad/good dichotomy. Making the good/bad split is 'easy' since it provides an ego boost. Psychological energy is required to overcome the dichotomy since decisions about good/bad need to be made at all times, about one's own good/bad aspects/actions as well as others'. Reflection is needed on one's own every action, even minor ones, that contribute to difficult situations.

When Lineke was a child and later when first in the peace movement, dividing the population into good/bad had advantages, for classifying people quickly. When a group went to a US nuclear air base in an action organised by the Franciscan movement, the

leader of the activists shook hands with the military person at the gate and then organised praying. When Lineke saw this, she realised she was against the system, not against this military person.

'Hate the sin not the sinner.' Almost no one is 100% good or 100% bad. People at the leading edge of nonviolent change can affect those closest to them, who in turn can affect others who are less sympathetic, etc. This is better than directly trying to change the 'masses'.

### **Build on people's values**

Work with values that people have. For example, Hell's Angels value heroism, so show how they can be heroic by throwing themselves in front of the target of violence. Netherlands currently has a strong campaign against 'senseless' violence, such as someone shooting through a door killing people.

It can be good to re-connect with a cultural identity with which we are familiar. Look at what's good and nonviolent in that culture. For example, the more that Margaret had delved into Catholicism the more that she has seen a good working community and much culture that is embedded in that community.

## **Community-building**

### **Involving people through ritual, symbol and energy**

Nonviolence aims to be creative and involve people. Nonviolent actions involve creating ritual and working with symbols and energy. The form of ritual is important in nonviolence. Also it is important to raise and ground energy, which involves a process of raising and lowering energy levels.

Margaret believes that people on the 'left' have lost sight of this. It became noticeable to her at a 'sorry day' commemoration intended to foster reconciliation with Aborigines. It was led by a person who had a 'left' background and who made speeches to the converted. It turned more into a rally, which was less appropriate as a ritual. Yet, towards the end of the occasion people sang, which she thought was important and appropriate.

### **Keys to communal living**

Each individual in a shared community should maintain a still centre, a personal place to reflect and be aware of the web of life on a daily basis.

Involvement in nonviolence should not just be focused on the structural level. Rather, it should be grounded in the personal struggle of people who feel the worst effects of the system. For example, homes can be opened to refugees and people on margins of society.

The community should have an outward purpose beyond living together. There should be at

least one common purpose that everyone shares. There is a need to make a common outward commitment and to support each other's personal campaigns.

There also needs to be a basis for a common life together. This includes things like regular shared meals, having fun, house meetings and prayer, as well as efforts for social change outside the group.

### **Act at all levels**

Work both at the grassroots level and, as well, through higher level institutions, 'at the top.'

Harky reported that in the Netherlands there was nonviolence training at folk high schools which started through the workers' movement and which were government-subsidised. Then the government cut 25% of funding and changed the funding mechanism, leading to the collapse of the folk high school movement. The schools reoriented to management training. This shows the risk of depending on government.

### **Nonviolence involves community**

When people feel safe and supported they can move against feelings of powerlessness and fear. Recruiting support for yourself is a means of taking action. From there, a person can organise for others to take action. This is a way of building community/communities around yourself.

Work with others. Individual nonviolence, such as becoming a peaceful person, is only part of the solution. Specifically, we need to build alliances with others (especially people open to nonviolence rather than needing to win over whole organisations) and to provide resources to social change movements.

### **Find ways to generate satisfaction and energy in activism**

Nonviolent activists should incorporate activities that give energy, hope, fun. For example, learning meditation generates happiness, satisfaction, energy and is a constructive way to sustain our work.