

# At the End of our Tether: The Rationality of Nonviolence\*

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Somebody must begin it.

William Penn

Perhaps humankind will do the right thing, as Winston Churchill once said of Americans, but only after it has exhausted all other possibilities. In human relations we've tried brute force and that is the story of empires rising and falling and the lamentable catalog of folly that we call history. In 1648 the creators of the Westphalian system of sovereign nation-states improved things slightly by creating a few rules to govern interstate anarchy in Europe. The architects of the post-World War II world improved things a bit more with the creation of international institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the United Nations. But war and militarization have a stronger hold on human affairs than ever and sooner or later violence whether by states, terrorist groups, or simply by demented individuals will devour the human prospect.

In the last few centuries we applied the same mindset to nature. We've bullied, bulldozed, and re-engineered her down to the gene and that got us into more trouble and perplexities than a dozen scientific journals could adequately describe. It is now proposed that we manage nature even more intensely—but the same goal with smarter methods will only delay the inevitable. Either way we are rapidly creating what climate scientist, James Hansen, calls a “different planet” and one we are not going to like. We can quibble about the timing of disaster, but, given our present course, there is no rational argument about its inevitability.

Whether to nature or human affairs we continue to apply brute force with more powerful and sophisticated technology and expect different results—a definition according to some of insanity. True or not, it is a prescription for the destruction of nature and civilization that is woven into our politics, economies, and culture. The attempt to master nature and to control destiny through force has not worked and will not work because the world, whether natural or international, as Jonathan Schell puts it, is “unconquerable” (Schell, 2003). The reasons are to be found in the mismatch between the human intellect and the complexity of non-linear systems, and no amount of research, thought, or computation can fill that void of ignorance, which is only to acknowledge the limits of human foresight and the inevitability of surprises, unforeseen and unforeseeable results, unintended consequences, paradox, irony, and counterintuitive outcomes. But the limits of human intelligence do not prevent us from discerning something about self-induced messes.

So what kind of messes have we made for ourselves? Some are problems that are, by definition, solvable with enough rationality, money, and effort. The problem of powering the world by current sunlight, for example, is solvable given enough effort and money. But some situations are dilemmas which by definition are not solvable by any rational means—although with enough foresight and wisdom they can be avoided or resolved at a higher level. British economist E. F. Schumacher, once described the difference between “convergent” and “divergent” problems in much the same terms. In the former, logic tends to converge on a specific answer while the latter “are refractory to mere logic and discursive reason” and require something akin to a change of heart and perspective (Schumacher, 1977, p. 128). Donella Meadows, in a frequently cited article

on the alchemy of change, concluded that of all possible ways to change social systems, the highest leverage comes, not with policies, taxes, numbers and the usual menu of rational choices, but with change in how we think (Meadows, 1997). The crucial issues we face are not so much problems as they are dilemmas. They cannot be solved by the application of more technology and smartness but they can be transcended by a change of mindset.

Two dilemmas stand astride our age. The first has to do with age-old addiction to force in human affairs. We don't know exactly how or when violence became the method of choice or the precise point at which it became wholly counter-productive (Schmookler, 1984). But no tribe or nation that did not prepare for war could survive for long once its neighbors did. And since it makes no sense to have a good army if you don't use it from time to time, preparation for war tended to make its occurrence more likely. If it was ever rational, however, the bloody carnage of the past one-hundred years should have convinced even the dullest among us that violence within and between societies is now self-defeating and colossally stupid. Violence and threats have always tended to create more of the same—a deadly dance of action and reaction. The development of nuclear and biological weapons and the even more heinous weapons now in development have changed everything . . . everything but our way of thinking as Einstein once noted. In an age of terrorism, the scale of potential destruction and the proliferation of small weapons of mass destruction mean that there is no sure means of security, safety, or deterrence anywhere for anyone. The conclusion is inescapable: from now on—whatever the issues—there can be no winners in any violent conflict, only losers. Nonetheless the world now spends \$1.2 trillion each year on weapons and militarism and is,

unsurprisingly, less secure than ever. The United States alone spends 46% of the total or \$17,000 per second, more than the next twenty-two nations combined. It maintains over 737 military bases worldwide but it is presently losing two wars while threatening to start a third. Economist Joseph Stiglitz estimates that the total cost of the Iraqi misadventure alone will be \$2 trillion. Beyond the economic cost it will surely leave a legacy of yet more terrorism, violence, and ruin in all of its many guises.

The word “realism” has always been a loaded word. In world politics it is contrasted with “idealism,” believed by realists to be the epitome of wooly-headedness. In realist theory, the power realities of inter-state politics required military strength and the aggressive protection of the national interest defined as power. Realists were the architects of empires, World Wars, Cold Wars, arms races, mutual assured destruction, the Vietnam War, and now the fiasco in Iraq. But one of the pre-eminent realists of the post-World War II era, Hans Morganthau, was more of an idealist than commonly appreciated. He once proposed that governments give control of nuclear weapons to “an agency whose powers are commensurate with the worldwide destructive potentials of those weapons” (Joffe, 2007). George Kennan, another post World War II realist similarly proposed international measures to prevent both nuclear war and ecological decline—ideas that are anathema to influential neo-conservative realists now.

The second dilemma is the insolvability of long-term economic growth in a finite biosphere. As ecological economists like Herman Daly have said for decades the economy is a subsystem of the biosphere not an independent system. The “bottom line,” therefore, is set by the laws of entropy and ecology, not by economic theory. The effort to make the economy sustainable by making it smarter and greener is all to the good, but

altogether inadequate. It is incrementalism when we need systemic change that begins by changing the goals of the system. Economic growth can and should be smarter and corporations ought to reduce their environmental impacts and with a bit of effort and imagination it is possible for most of them to do so. Could we, however, organize all of the complexities of an endlessly growing global economy to fit within the limits of the biosphere in a mostly badly governed world in which greed, corruption, corporate competition, and consumerism dominate? As you read these words the answer is being written in the disappearing forests of Sumatra, in the mountains being flattened in Appalachia, in the 1000MW per week of new coal plants being built in China, in the billion dollars of advertisements spent each year to stoke the fires of Western-style consumption, in glitzy shopping malls, in the fantasy world of Dubai, in the temporizing of governments virtually everywhere, and by the corporate pursuit of short-term profit. Progress toward a truly green economy, as Thomas Friedman (2007) notes, is incremental not transformational change and a great deal of it is of the smoke and mirrors sort. If we had hundreds of years to make the necessary changes we might muddle our way to a sustainable economy, but time is the one thing we do not have. If we intend to preserve civilization, the inescapable conclusion is that we need a more fundamental economic transformation and that means three things that presently appear to be utterly impossible: (1) a transition from economic growth (creation of more stuff) to development which genuinely improves the quality of life for everyone, first in wealthy nations and eventually everywhere; (2) the transformation of the consumer economy into one oriented first and foremost to needs not wants; and hardest of all, (3) summoning the compassion and wisdom to fairly distribute wealth, opportunity, and risk. The fact that

these three seem wholly inconceivable to most of us indicates the scale of the challenge ahead and the necessity of a different manner of thinking.

Both dilemmas are intertwined at every point. To maintain economic growth the powerful must have access to the oil and resources of poor third world nations whether they like it or not. Global trade, often to the disadvantage of poor nations, requires the use of military forces to patrol the seas, enforce inequities, strike quickly, and maintain pliant governments willing to plunder their own people and lands. The result is animosity that fuels global terrorism and ethnic violence. The power of envy and the desperate search for “a better life” requires the “haves” to build higher fences to keep the poor at bay. Profit and the fear of possible insurrection and worldwide turmoil drives the search for more advanced Star Wars kind of technology—robot armies, space platforms, and constant electronic surveillance. But, as Gandhi said repeatedly, our wealth and weapons make us cowards and our fears condone the injustices that underpin our way of life and fuel the hostility that will some day bring it down.

In sum: (1) the time to heal our conflict with Earth and those between nations and ethnic groups is short; (2) both are dilemmas, not merely problems; (3) neither can be resolved by applying more of the kind of thinking that created it; (4) the connection between the two is our addiction to violence; and (5) neither can be solved without solving the other.

We are at the end of our tether and no amount of conventional rationality or smartness is nearly rational enough or smart enough. We need deeper, transformational change. The remorseless working out of big numbers whether climate change, the loss of biological diversity, or the combination of hatred and the proliferation of heinous

weaponry are wreaking havoc on our pretensions of control. This is not the time for illusions or evasion; it is time for transformation.

Self-described realists will argue that, however necessary, humans are not up to change at this scale and pace—muddling along is the best that we can do. And for those inclined to wager that is certainly the smart bet. But if that is all that can be said, we have no good reason for hope and might best prepare for our denouement. On the other hand, transformational change is not only necessary, but it may be possible as well. Do we have good reasons to transform the growth economy and transcend the use of force in world politics? Is the public ready for transformation? Is this an opportune time (a “teachable moment”) to do so? Do we have better non-violent alternatives?

There is a great deal of evidence to suggest a more hopeful view of possibilities than most “realists” are inclined to see. A recent BBC poll of attitudes in 21 countries, for example, shows that a majority, including a majority of Americans, are willing to make significant sacrifices to avoid rapid climate change—even though no “leader” has thought to ask them to do so. Can we craft a fair and ecologically sustainable economy that also sustains us spiritually? The present economy has failed miserably on all three counts. As Richard Layard puts it “we are as a society no happier than fifty years ago. Yet every group in society is richer” (Layard, 223). Beyond some minimal level, in other words, economic growth advances neither happiness nor well-being. But the outlines of a non-violent economy are beginning to emerge in the rapid deployment of solar and wind technology, in a growing anti-consumer movement, in the slow food movement, and in the fields like biomimicry and industrial ecology. In world affairs, the manifest failure of neo-conservative realism in the Middle East and elsewhere may have created that

teachable moment when we come to our senses and overthrow that out worn and dangerous paradigm for something far more realistic—security for everyone. And at least since Gandhi we have known that there are better means and ends for the conduct of politics.

The transformative idea of non-violence can no longer be dismissed as an Eastern oddity, an historical aberration, or the height of naiveté. At the end of our tether it is rather the core of a more realistic and practical global realism. There is no decent future for humankind without transformation of both our manner of relations and our collective relationship with the Earth. Gandhi stands as the preeminent modern theorist and practitioner of the art of non-violence. His life and thought were grounded in the practice of *ahimsa*, a Sanskrit word that means unconditional love. To denote the practice of *ahimsa* Gandhi coined the word *satyagraha*, which combines the Sanskrit word *sat* meaning truth with *graha* meaning “holding firm to” (Schell, 119). Gandhi honed the philosophy of nonviolence into an effective tool of change in India as Martin Luther King Jr. later did in the United States, but we’ve never known what to do with persons like Gandhi and King. On one hand we occasionally pay them lip service in public speeches and name holidays in their honor but on the other hand we ignore what they had to say about how we live and how we conduct the public business. The time has come to pay closer attention to what they said and did and fathom what that means for us now.

The beginning of a more realistic realism is in the recognition that violence of any sort is a sure path to ruin on all levels and that the practice of non-violence is a viable alternative—indeed our only alternative to collective suicide. But that implies changing a great deal that we presently take for granted beginning with the belief in an unmovable

and implacably evil enemy. Richard Gregg, an associate of Gandhi, for example, said that the goal of practitioners of nonviolence:

is not to injure, or to crush and humiliate his opponent, or to 'break his will' . . . [but] to convert the opponent, to change his understanding and his sense of values so that he will join wholeheartedly [to] seek a settlement truly amicable and truly satisfying to both sides (Gregg, 1935/1971, 51).

As with war, the practice of nonviolence requires training, discipline, self-denial, strategy, courage, stamina, and heroism. Its aim is not to defeat but to convert and thereby resolve the particulars of conflict at a higher level. For Gandhi it required its practitioners, first, to transcend animosity and hatred to reach a higher level of being in "self-restraint, unselfishness, patience, gentleness" (Fischer, 1962; 326) The aim is not to win conflict but change the mindset that leads to conflict and ultimately form a "broad human movement which is seeking not merely the end of war but [the end] our equally non-pacifist civilization." In Gandhi's words, "true *ahimsa* should mean a complete freedom from ill will and anger and hate and an overwhelming love for all" (Fischer, 207).

Gandhi applied the same logic to the industrial world of his day, regarding it as a "curse . . . depend[ing] entirely on [the] capacity to exploit" (Fischer, 287). Its future, he thought, was "dark" not only because it engendered conflict between peoples but because it cultivated "an infinite multiplicity of wants . . . [depriving] people of a "living faith in Divinity" (289).

The philosophy, strategy, and tactics of non-violence have been updated to our own time and situation by many scholars including Anders Boserup and Andrew Mack (1975), Richard Falk and Saul Mendlovitz (World Order Models Project), Michael

Shuman and Hal Harvey (1993), Gene Sharp (1973, 2005), and the Dalai Lama (1999). Clearly we do not lack examples, precedents, alternatives and better ideas than those now regnant. It is time—long past time—to take the next steps in rethinking and remodeling our economy and foreign policies to fit a higher view of the human potential. The first steps will be the hardest of all because the impediment is not intellectual but something else that lies deeper in our psyche. Over the millennia violence became an addiction of sorts. Our heroes are mostly violent men. Our national holidays mostly celebrate violence in our past. Most of our proudest scientific achievements have to do with the violent domination of nature. There is something in us that seems to need dependably loathsome adversaries even if, sometimes, they have to be conjured. And to that end we built massive institutions to plan and fight wars, giant corporations to supply the equipment for war, and a compliant media to sell us war as a patriotic necessity. In the process we made economies and societies dependent on arms makers and merchants of death and changed how we think and how we talk. We often speak violently and think in metaphors of combat and violence so we “kill time” or “make a killing” in the market, or wage futile wars on drugs, poverty, and terrorism. Worse, our children are being schooled to think violently by electronic games, television, and movies. We have made no comparable effort to build institutions for the study and propagation of peace and conflict resolution or to cultivate the daily habits of peace. We have barely begun to imagine the possibility of a nonviolent economy in which no one profits from war or violence in any form. And so it is surprising that we are continually surprised when our collective obsession with violence manifests yet again in violence down the street or in some distant place.

The transformation to a nonviolent world will require courageous champions at all levels—public officials, teachers, communicators, philanthropists, artists, statespersons, philosophers, and corporate executives. But it will most likely be driven by ordinary people who realize that we are all at the end of our tether and it is time to do something a great deal smarter and more decent. And “somebody must begin it.”

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- \*The title is adapted from H. G. Wells, *Mind at the End of its Tether*. New York: Didier, 1946. Wells wrote: “This world is at the end of its tether. The end of everything we call life is close at hand and cannot be evaded” (p. 1).