

## **A Radical Practice of Love: Non-Violence As a Response to the Sept. 11<sup>th</sup> Attack** **Helen Fox**

A Talk given at a Student-Organized Teach-in, "Knowledge Is Power"  
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Sept. 21, 2001

Two days before the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, I was on my way back from Cambodia, where I had spent several weeks traveling and learning about the people and their history, and giving a paper at a conference called "Language and Development" that drew participants from all over Southeast Asia. On my 17-hour plane ride back to Detroit, I had plenty of time to think about what I had learned there, especially about the shocking history that the beautiful country of Cambodia has had to endure. Between 1975 and 1979, Cambodia was a hell on earth. In a horribly misguided social experiment, the Khmer Rouge government, under the leadership of Pol Pot, suspended all education, burned books, abolished money, blew up the central bank, halted postal services, and sent two and a half million people, including children, the elderly, and sick people roused from their hospital beds, on a forced march from the capital, Phnom Penh, to the countryside to work as slave labor in the rice fields. Hundreds of thousands of teachers, doctors, artists, engineers, technicians, and students were executed by the Khmer Rouge, often after being starved and tortured, because their education and skills threatened the regime. I visited a former high school, the infamous S-21, where 17,000 men, women, and children, all considered "enemies of the organization," were chained on cement floors, with their fingers smashed and genitals shocked and burned, starving, for months, before they died. Children were often recruited to do the killing. Ten year olds learned to slice people's throats, or drown them in rice paddies by wrapping their heads in plastic bags and pushing them under water. The authorities took pictures of everyone before they killed them. You can tell by the eyes of some of the younger victims that they went mad with shock and grief.

As I talked informally with people at the conference (which, by the way, had nothing to do with Cambodia's brutal past), I asked them what they remembered about this period. A beautiful young woman, a teacher-trainer, told me in a whisper how she lost her father to the killing fields and two older sisters to starvation. A translator remembered seeing the Khmer Rouge in his village execute an old man for stealing a potato that he had grown himself. A teacher – who in the 1970s was an ordinary farmer -- told me about the 14-hour days he endured in the rice fields and the single meal of gruel – a bit of rice boiled in water – that was allotted to him at the end of each day. We sat at the conference lunch table, talking, and three times he went back to the buffet to heap his plate with pats of butter, which he ate straight – without bread. He still remembered the feeling of that awful hunger after twenty-five years.

Who were these monsters that inflicted such suffering on the Cambodian people? They were not an external enemy, nor were they some different ethnic or religious group. They were Cambodians who had turned against their neighbors, their teachers, their colleagues, even their own families. This is what haunts Cambodians today, that they did all this to themselves, that they became so brutalized by an idea, and committed such atrocities, out of fear, or revenge, or cold-blooded self righteousness. Looking around as I walked through the streets of Phnom Penh and the other villages and towns I visited, I

realized that many of the people I saw had been young adults during those terrible years, and had either been very very lucky, or had participated in some way in this evil system.

But strangely enough, I did not see a nation of people degraded by evil. In fact, I found Cambodians to be some of the most gentle, hospitable, and delightfully sunny people I have ever met. As a nation of Buddhists (which they have been for thousands of years), they revere all forms of life and deplore inflicting pain on others. To get angry in public – over a cab fare or some other petty complaint – is considered childish and embarrassing. Even raising one’s voice is culturally inappropriate. This is not something that arose recently, after the experience of such opposite sentiments. These values have been present throughout Cambodian history. I was also struck by the connectedness people seemed to feel in traffic jams. Trucks, cars, and especially motor scooters were all over the road, going any direction, the roads deeply potholed, the potential for accidents extreme, yet everyone seemed to watch out for each other, passing within centimeters without incident, without fear, without a hint of road rage. Were these the same people who gave rise to the demented fanatics of the Khmer Rouge regime only a generation ago, I wondered? Or was the concept of “demented fanatic” somehow wrong?

The conclusion I came to in my seventeen hours over the Pacific, flying over the ice floes and glaciers of the Canadian North, over the huge, beautiful earth that is our home, was this: People who commit unspeakable crimes and who aid and abet such crimes are not “inhuman.” They are not monsters. They are victims of an idea – whether that idea is a militant political philosophy or a twisted interpretation of a religious creed. And most importantly, they happen to live in a time and place where conditions are right for that destructive idea to take hold and feed upon itself, blooming and mushrooming until it explodes in violence. And as that violence begets an ever more violent response, the idea grows even stronger, and those who hold that idea, who are in a sense the victims of that idea, believe more and more firmly that they must carry out these crimes and that their society, their values, their dignity, their way of life, all depend on it.

The hijackers who so terrified and angered us last week were not monsters, not demented, not inhuman. In fact, the Washington Post describes them as educated, well-traveled people, technologically proficient, who had lived a few years in a Western country and perhaps suffered personal humiliation or a deep sense of culture shock during their stay. One of the perpetrators was described by his professors as “deeply intelligent,” a former doctoral student at a US university who wrote an excellent dissertation about city planning, then became depressed and angry about the casualties of the Gulf war – where 100,000 of his people, not 6700 that probably perished in the Sept. 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, but 100,000 people, were blown to bits by U.S. military might. Another hijacker was married and had a child; the husband and wife were described by a neighbor as “nice, ordinary people” who hosted a children’s party for the neighborhood, complete with McDonalds Happy Meals, before they vacated their apartment, before the husband and father boarded the plane and steered it very deliberately into the side of the World Trade Center.

There is no doubt that these attacks were crimes against humanity. The people of the United States did not deserve to suffer this; no human being deserves such a fate. But if the perpetrators were not monsters, but ordinary people seized by a vengeful idea, ordinary people, who *could* act compassionately at a different time and in a different context, can Americans really be all that different? And if Americans are not all that

different, then maybe our actions in this crisis share some of the same characteristics with those of the people who oppose us. How can we deplore the suicide bombing and at the same time, send our own young people to Afghanistan to kill for God and country? What is the difference between the terror, grief, and outrage felt by the victims and their families in New York and Washington this week, and that of civilians who died in the atomic blast at Hiroshima? Are “they” the only ones who are capable of such extreme acts of intolerance? Are these acts worse when they’re done to us than when we take the initiative to do it to them? Are we less culpable when we feel forced to respond in kind?

Here is a definition of extreme intolerance:

- \* absolute certainty that your way of seeing the world is the only right way
- \* willingness to demean, ridicule, and abuse groups or members of groups, or see them as “subhuman”
- \* readiness to kill and die for your views
- \* willingness to subject yourself to authoritarian control in order to carry out your attacks on others

All that happened in Cambodia. But doesn’t this seem eerily familiar, those of you who have been listening to presidential rhetoric, and those with first hand knowledge of the way the military (in whatever country) works? “Wanted, Dead or Alive,” says President Bush referring to Osama Bin Laden. The front page of a newspaper in South Africa, called the Sowetan, recently showed a Hollywood Western style poster of Bin Laden with the caption “Wanted dead or alive” -- and in parentheses – “(guilty or not).” More rhetoric from our administration: “It’s a battle of civilized countries vs the rest of the world.” And from our military: Here’s the way you shove your rifle into someone’s stomach. Here’s how to deploy a land mine, defoliate the countryside, and bomb an entire country “back to the Stone Age.” You are asked – no, you are *required*, to do these terrible things to protect “the American way of life.” Our freedom and democracy. Our “American interests abroad.” You are told that all these are “worth fighting for,” in the awful, but necessary battle of good against evil. Are we, too, victims of an idea?

Politicians and military brass make a strong show of their religious convictions in times like these. They call for a moment of silence. They show up at the National Cathedral. They have visited Mosques in New York and Washington, along with the news media. Yet major tenets of all the great religions are:

the love of life,  
and the restraint from violence.

The Talmud states, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man. That is the entire law, all the rest is commentary.” Hinduism and Buddhism offer similar expressions of the Golden Rule: “This is the sum of duty; do naught to others which if done to thee would cause thee pain.” says the Hindu Mahabharata. Buddhism teaches, “Hurt not others with that which pains yourself.” The Koran tells Muslims that they are not allowed to kill women or children or unarmed men. It is prohibited to destroy buildings. It is prohibited to destroy a tree that has a green leaf. Christianity teaches: Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to those that hate you. When someone strikes you, present to him other cheek. Resist not evil. What happens to these

teachings when our emotions tell us to attack and seek revenge? Isn't this exactly the moment those teachings were designed for?

Despite our emotions urging us to armed attack or defense, it is hard for most humans to learn to kill, hard to overcome our natural resistance to doing extreme violence to another human being. Stirring words help make the aggression seem inevitable and right. Hateful ethnic slurs are tolerated, even encouraged on the battlefield, and soon they find their way home and into the national vocabulary: "A-RAB, camel jockey, sand nigger." Is it any wonder we have seen hundred of attacks on Arab Americans, Muslims and South Asians who look vaguely Middle Eastern in the past few weeks?

Images are important, too, in pushing us beyond our internal taboos against killing: the picture of the exploding World Trade Center accompanied by the screams of the onlookers is flashed again and again on the television screen; the families of victims appear with the President when he announces his campaign of revenge and terror. In the military, battle units need strict hierarchies, a rigid command structure, and heavy penalties for hesitation or refusal, to make sure that soldiers kill consistently and effectively. Remember the definition of intolerance? You agree to put yourself under someone else's authoritarian control. You are ready to humiliate others, to think of human beings as objects, or lowly, disgusting animals, or monsters, which makes it easier to kill them. And you are willing to die for your cause – because it is right. This is not only intolerance, it is self-imposed oppression. As Martin Luther King said, "The potential beauty of human life is constantly made ugly by man's ever-recurring song of retaliation."

To free ourselves from the endless cycle of violence, we must come up with alternatives. The trouble is, what alternatives? We have become so practiced at making war throughout the centuries that we have neglected to develop the much more difficult practices of peace. Turning the other cheek is simple enough when someone slaps you; but what if they come at you with an airplane, or a nuclear bomb, or biological weapons? Unfortunately, our rapidly expanding knowledge of science and technology has far outstripped our discoveries about how to live together and settle our differences as a global community. We do have some tools though: self-reflection as a nation, diplomacy and legal recourse, individual acts of friendship – the force of which must never be underestimated – and, most importantly, a radical practice of love.

Love means respect, understanding, listening to another's point of view, taking responsibility for others and for our own actions, and restraining people, in non-violent ways, from hurting themselves and others. It requires a change in thinking, from the narrow, selfish idea of "national interests" to a concern for world interests, as agreed upon by all cultures and peoples. It implies more equitable sharing of resources, and outrage at the enormous gap between the billions living in the most grinding poverty and those like us who live in comparative luxury. It implies working toward a system of laws and core values that everyone in the world agrees to live by – values that go beyond self interest and expediency, and that allow a great latitude for cultural and religious and individual diversity. The radical politics of love would require nations with the most high minded ideals and systems of democracy to practice those values and laws in their dealings with other countries and peoples rather than suspending them as soon as they cross their own borders. It would require an end to the arms trade that supplies a stream of weapons to desperate countries and people who have been swept up in extremist

movements. It would exert moral and legal pressure against governments that ignore the ecological needs of the planet and a sharing of resources with those who have nothing to trade but their fund of the world's environmental heritage.

Last night, President Bush pledged a long war on terrorists and on the countries that provide them shelter. Their fate, he said, will be to end "in history's unmarked graves of discarded lies." Fine words. "Prepare for casualties," he told us. "Prepare for the coming global struggle." He would have been better advised to heed the wisdom of MLK, who said:

The oceans of history are made turbulent by the ever-rising tides of revenge. Man has never risen above the injunction . . . 'Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.' In spite of the fact that the law of revenge solves no social problems, men continue to follow its disastrous leading. History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that pursued this self-defeating path.

Many fear non-violence because it seems to imply inaction or weakness. Nothing could be further from the truth. Nonviolence requires complex planning and organizing, a deeper understanding of human relationships than we have ever had before, and the transformation of that knowledge into principled action. It involves dedication to the difficult process of coalition building, and the involvement of all people, with all their different points of view and religious convictions, with all their emotions and fears and susceptibilities to powerful ideas.

Pledge non-violence and you will not be alone. Yesterday, 2000 anti-war protesters marched at my alma mater, the University of California at Berkeley. There have been over 100 anti-war protests on US campuses, some very large, and all peaceful. Numerous petitions calling for justice without violence, signed by tens of thousands, are circulating on email and the Internet. And if you can't see the radical practice of non-violence as an option in this current climate, you can at least join others in their call for restraint. A statement called "A Religious Response to Terrorism," signed by Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims and Buddhists calls for the terrorists to be brought to justice but asks that our government avoid indiscriminate retaliation. The nation's Roman Catholic bishops sent a letter to President Bush urging a response guided by national and international law, and saying that any military action must respect "sound moral principles," and avoid civilian casualties. You can also reach out beyond your usual circle of friends to high school students and other college students who find the prospect of war inevitable, or even exciting and meaningful. Today's New York Times quotes an undergraduate at DePaul university as saying, "There's something in me that would like to go. I mean, I've lived in the Midwest my whole life. There's something that's exciting and fulfilling about it." And another prospective draftee, at Florida A & M. told a reporter, "If the president says you have to fight, you have to fight. You have to do what your leader says." You have probably heard other sentiments like these. There is plenty of opportunity for discussion with these folks. I am sure there are many, many more students are still numb from the attacks, fearful because of the invasion of our borders and the prospect of other invasions soon to come, supportive of war because it is such a familiar, seemingly logical response, to the problem. These students need to hear your

ideas, your commitment to social justice, your concern for all the world's peoples, not just for Americans. They need to know there is another way to go.

Building a new world community based on principles of fairness, cooperation, mutual understanding, civil liberties, religious freedoms, international law based on shared principles and values, and a strong commitment to non-violent conflict resolution is a long, complex process. But we must begin. I have every confidence that you will help move us in that direction.



Karim, a 13-year-old street worker, practices painting, his favorite pastime, at a non-profit school in Kabul, Afghanistan. Later in the day he will collect wood and metal and sell it to buy food for his family. The Afghan Streetworking Children in New Approach (ASCHIANA) gives street children two meals a day and helps them learn work skills. - ROBERT HARBISON – STAFF