

Walking a Path of Peace and Mercy while Staring into Chaos



By Janet K. Ruffing

Those of us who have read about violent and chaotic eras, here and elsewhere, have perhaps wondered what it would be like to have lived through them and how we would have responded. It seems to me we are finding out right now. And many of us are struggling.

We find ourselves staring into the enormous shadow, in Jungian terms, of our national, unrepentant, social sins. We naively believed ourselves immune to them, or felt innocent of the damage our national history has done to victims of prejudice and violence.

But the consequences live on. Economic and racial disparities intensify amid instant news cycles and social media. We suffer an excess of information – violent speech, lies, innuendos, hyped emotions about the scandal of the day – that creates a

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sense of social desolation, grief, and hopelessness. A dehumanizing effect descends daily, the feeling that progress toward social justice is largely an illusion. This is breaking our hearts, enraging us at the injustices inflicted, or in many cases numbing us into inaction.

Rejecting Degraded Discourse

We are challenged moment by moment to convert *constructively* our outrage and fear about the harm being done to world peace, to immigrants, to the environment, and to the millions of Americans who are poor while the 1 percent grow even wealthier. It is urgent that we relearn methods of nonviolence and nonviolent communication. It is vital that we adopt contemplative prayer and other practices that help us regain our equilibrium by managing our anger, refusing to imitate a degraded political discourse, and resisting its effect on us.

Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) would say this overwrought condition requires that we recognize the desolation gripping us and make vigorous changes within ourselves.¹ Focus on prayer and serious self-examination. Notice how we unwittingly absorb and perpetuate the nastiness ourselves and respond in kind internally, if not with words or actions. I believe many of us need to spend less time on social media and choose more judiciously how we stay up to date. Limiting the inflow of upsetting information can unleash time and creativity to join others in constructive action. We can acknowledge our anger, which is an appropriate response to injustice, while choosing to release it physically through a martial art or other exercise that restores our equilibrium.

Active Hope

Through prayer, we lean more deeply on God. Through reflection, alone or with others, we learn again to nourish the virtue of hope. “Active hope,” eco-philosopher Joanna Macy calls it – a force that begins with gratitude, invites us to honor the pain we feel for the world, widen our vision, and take the next step.

Each of us will discover the right balance for ourselves as we choose specific practices. Matthew’s Gospel offers clues, pairing the beatitudes in the preaching of Jesus (in chapter 5) with the works of mercy in his Parable of the Last Judgment (in chapter 25). Blessed are the merciful and the peacemakers, he says, and those who do acts of mercy for the least of these. Mercy is a practical expression of care for a person or group who is suffering, combined

with an empathic word or gesture that honors their personhood. The Parable of the Good Samaritan, in Luke's Gospel, shows what this looks like.

It remains a basic Christian principle that every person deserves respect and consideration, whether or not others honor that truth themselves. Those caught up in evil whether consciously or not remain deserving of basic human respect and even em-

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pathy. It is especially difficult to extend empathy to those who misuse power in order to fill some personal void. We live in times that blindly drive the most powerful to acquire even more wealth while depriving millions of the basics that sustain their lives, including potable water and breathable air. Despite the specific harm they do, they too deserve to be encompassed in God's compassion. This is what the gospel calls us to do, not condone the behavior but manage to keep our hearts open and peaceful even while we work toward remedy.

Mercy Prevails

These remorseless trends polarize and depress us. The veneer of polite, cultured, informed speech in public life and democratic conduct is supplanted by abusive language, raw feelings, and smoldering, bigoted opinions. I thought we had made more progress.

Resistance *is* mounting. Even so, many participants in protest seem unaware of the depth of training and community support needed – practices of peaceful dialogue and mutual support throughout the endeavor – if they are to remain nonviolent and reach their goals.²

Continuous war since 9/11 is exhausting our nation and creating wave after wave of refugees fleeing uninhabitable Middle Eastern cities. We suffer a

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profound version of compassion fatigue, leaving us overwhelmed, incapable of taking responsibility. We now seem to be blaming the victims of our excessive and reckless violence. It is no coincidence that Pope Francis's last two World Day of Peace Messages are "Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace" (2017)

and "Migrants and Refugees: Men and Women in Search of Peace" (2018).³ Of 250 million migrants worldwide, 22.5 million are refugees "searching for somewhere to live in peace," he declares.

My own order, the Sisters of Mercy, places works of mercy at the heart of vocation. We have long tended victims who suffer the most from poverty and injustice and today, with the help of social analysis, join with others to address the causes of suffering. We recognize we need to infuse all mercy-rooted ministries and social critiques with the practice of nonviolence and peacemaking even as we carry on the work of changing violent structures and conditions.⁴

Waiting for Daybreak

Contemplative theologian Constance FitzGerald describes our era of impasse as a "dark night" that, if we are intentional about it, can eventually serve to strengthen our trust in God.⁵ The broken experience

THE ENEMY

By Maryanne Hannan

for he it is that shall tread down our enemies

Psalm 108:13

**On Your behalf, Lord,
we shall identify the enemy.
Sometimes we'll use external**

**signs, the color of skin,
annual income, place of residence.
Other times we'll probe**

**interior abominations – maybe
different beliefs, style of prayer
or a worrisome lack of church.**

**We can also come to understand
who is our enemy by the judgments
You send: famine, pestilence,**

**earthquake, drought,
plagues of locust,
the winning touchdown.**

**And when we have found our enemy,
help us in our treading. Don't tell us
again to love our neighbor as ourselves.**

of impasse invites us into deeper contemplative prayer, a prayer of surrender to the living God, a prayer that purifies memory (and liberates us from the destructive power that memories hold) and rekindles our hope while we do what we can in service to others.

There is no escape from the dissonance between our most deeply held beliefs about what it means to be a follower of Jesus and their contradiction in public life. But we can and must join with others and intensify our spiritual practices that keep us in equilibrium, deepen our relationship with Jesus in his compassion and nonviolence, and continue to walk a path of peace and mercy as nonviolent actors in our country today, despite the chaos.

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Notes

- 1 Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises and Selected Writings*, edited by George E. Ganss, S.J. (Paulist Press, 1991), no. 319, pp. 202-203.
- 2 Nancy Sylvester, "Engaging Impasse through Contemplation and Dialogue" in *A Matter of Spirit* (Spring 2006), publication of the Intercommunity Peace & Justice Center. See ipjc.org.
- 3 See the annual messages at w2.vatican.va.
- 4 Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, Sixth Institute Chapter, "Chapter 2017 Recommitment: Called to New Consciousness." See sistersofmercy.org.
- 5 Constance FitzGerald, OCD, "From Impasse to Prophetic Hope: Crisis of Memory," *CTSA Proceedings 64* (2009), pp. 21-42.

Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life by Marshall B. Rosenberg (PuddleDancer Press, 3rd edition, 2015). "Nonviolent Communication: a way of communicating that leads us to give from the heart," Rosenberg writes. "We perceive relationships in a new light when we use Nonviolent Communication to hear our own deeper needs and those of others. ... We are dangerous when we are not conscious of our responsibility for how we behave, think, and feel."

Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church by Barbara Holmes (Fortress, 2004). "The world is the cloister of the contemplative," Holmes declares. "There is no escape. Always the quest for justice draws one deeply into the heart of God. In this sacred interiority contemplation becomes the language of prayer and the impetus for prophetic proclamation and action."

Peace is the Way: Writings on Nonviolence from the Fellowship of Reconciliation, edited by Walter Wink (Orbis, 2000). "Nonviolence is the human future," Wink says. "As Martin Luther King Jr. said on the night before he was killed, 'The choice is no longer between violence and nonviolence. It's nonviolence or nonexistence.'"

Shadows of the Heart: A Spirituality of the Negative Emotion by James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead (Crossroad, 1994). "Being angry carries the conviction that something can be done," they write. "This hope makes anger a friend of transformation, an honorable dynamic to change and growth. ... People who are angry with one another are still significant in each other's lives. Indifference is a greater enemy of reconciliation than is anger, because angry people are still linked."

Handbook of Spirituality for Ministers: Perspectives for the 21st Century, Vol. 2, edited by Robert Wicks (Paulist, 2000). "In the face of unbridled individualism, solidarity is a powerful antidote to moral isolation and preoccupation with oneself," writes William Reiser, one of the contributors. "The search for deep, lasting solidarity must be taken seriously as one of the major signs of our times."

Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy by Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone (New World Library, 2012). "What helps us face the mess we're in is the knowledge that each of us has something significant to offer, a contribution to make," they write. "An oyster, in response to trauma, grows a pearl. We grow, and offer, our gift of Active Hope."

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Reflections

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