



LETTER: On Non-violent Activism in the Undergraduate Context

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Two years ago I enjoyed a rich dialogue with a student from the University of Rochester about the book [How Nonviolence Protects the State](#) by Peter Gelderloos. This student, who had been involved with the MK Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence here in Rochester, NY, for several years, read Gelderloos' book, which raises some valid questions about strategic nonviolence and its uses, especially its use by people of color. As a Muslim and young man of color, this U of R student wanted to form his own opinions, and I was grateful for the chance to look again at strategic nonviolence, or the employment of nonviolence primarily as a tool for political change, vs. principled nonviolence, or nonviolence as a way of life. The latter form is the one that both Gandhi and King advocated for as necessary. For me, ultimately, our conversation strengthened my personal commitment to principled nonviolence as a way of life that has political consequences. It also helped me to refocus the Gandhi Institute's programming and overall approach, to make sure that our work included the internal and interpersonal aspects of nonviolence as well as the structural and strategic aspects.

¹ More information about the M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence can be found online at www.gandhiinstitute.org.

Closer to the present moment, as I type these words in our headquarters in a formerly abandoned house near the University of Rochester campus, I hear students from a sorority laughing downstairs as they work on screen-printing second hand clothing with images of King and Gandhi, to be sold as unique up-cycled garments to raise funds. The Gandhi Institute's practices, programs and education include sustainability as ideas that were essential to Gandhi himself. Almost 100 years ago, he predicted that if we human beings lost the ability to make and mend the things that we need for daily life, if we lost our connection to the effort that it takes to bring forth food from the earth, then we as a species risked over-consumption and even perishing from the earth. Decades later, Gandhi's words were prescient. Especially in a world with a shrinking natural resource base, the principles and tools of nonviolence are ever more critical. Violence itself is resource-intensive and destructive socially, environmentally and psychologically. We need to evolve past it in order to have our descendants' lives be more than just about survival.

I have found that whether students are interested in the pragmatic aspects of resource management, social justice, psychology or sustainability, nonviolence 'works' as a source of concrete practices, wisdom and inspiration. For students interested in international relations, social change and politics, we now have Erica Chenoweth's book [Why Civil Resistance Works](#) to refer to. In that book and in her terrific TED talk on the same topic, Chenoweth and her co-author document the steadily increasing success of nonviolence as a strategy for political change and as a force that is far more likely to yield a democratic society post-conflict.

One form of activism that the Gandhi Institute especially is involved in is environmental activism. Students joined staff to travel for two days to 350.org's climate march in New York City this past September 21 (the international day of nonviolence!) They work with us doing riverbank and neighborhood clean-up efforts, in planting gardens, and in events related to the prevention of hydro-fracking here in New York State.

A second focus of the Institute's activism is combating racism, which manifests as individual prejudice but even more destructively as structural racism. Because poverty and violence disproportionately affect people of color, our focus includes teaching skills to analyze violence itself as well as racism. Students have joined us for anti-racism trainings and helped to facilitate community dialogues on race in the Rochester area.



Lastly, we support student activist groups working on issues ranging from homelessness to veganism to gender violence through hosting events, films and workshops at our headquarters. We also provide capacity-building training for student groups, and occasional financial support. We have also enjoyed hosting undergraduates from colleges in other parts of the US who come to us as individual interns or as a group to experience an alternative spring break.

We are blessed as an organization to have the energy of undergraduate and graduate students as part of our daily lives. Collectively, they are some of the most important ‘wind beneath our wings’. If any of you reading this feel inspired to do so, please come visit us sometime. I can be reached at kmiller@admin.rochester.edu.