

Nonviolence: Attempt at an Answer

Dieter Duhm, 1981

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I.

I was around 14 when I received my wake-up call, hearing about concentration camps for the first time in history class. I have always been afraid of violence. In 1948, I was scarcely 6 years old when I was caught up in an attack in a village near Lake Constance that local children – incited by their parents – carried out against immigrant refugee children. I was a refugee too and left the scene notably changed. They beat me up and then covered me in tar “in order for the wounds to better heal.” A few days later they tied me to a telephone pole and pelted me with horse turd. This was how I was initiated into the psychology of the human being. When I later, at 14, found out what was committed in the concentration camps I did not want to believe any of it. I defended myself with all mental weapons available to me; I tried to persuade myself

that the victims were in reality the perpetrators or that perhaps adults do not suffer as much under pain. Then I began interrogating my parents and their relatives. I must have annoyed them quite a bit. My hope to find something comforting, moderating and pain-soothing disintegrated the more I researched. There was no consolation. Auschwitz: this was the reality, at least an ineradicable part of it. A last hope remained; perhaps this was reality, but no longer is. The hope died. Ten years later, I saw the photos of Vietnamese women with cut off breasts. I saw the images of people burned by napalm. I saw the downside of occidental morals and culture. Then came the time of the declining students' movement and the fights among different left-wing factions in the early '70s. The KPD/ML [Communist Party of Germany/Marxists-Leninists] carried Stalin posters. In Mannheim I witnessed the homicide of an alleged spy. I experienced the tyranny of political doctrine, which railed against any "sentimentality." I experienced the inhumanity of a political practice which had not overcome the inner structures of the system it fought against. I understood the most elementary fact of political life: that ideological beliefs are interchangeable so long as the human structures remain the same. Whether these are structures of suppression or structures of latent or manifested violence does not matter.

Violence against human beings mirrors the same violence carried out against animals. When I hear about animal testing I need to think about the methods with which it is carried out. When I see fur coats I think about snap traps. There is no reassurance for me and I do not want it anymore either. These acts are atrocious. Any attempt at seeing higher wisdom or guidance in this is abhorrent to me. The consolation of religion was an invitation for the human beast to continue its excesses. None of my mental and spiritual exercises have made me more heroic. I am oversensitive to pain. Even Nietzsche, whom I consider to be the deepest German philosopher, could not redeem me. His tendencies at glorifying violence violate the dogma of the cells in my body.

Before I come to the actual matter, I still need to report something. In my private studies I realized that these atrocious acts of history often carried a sexual stimulus, both for the perpetrators and for us contemporaries who hear about them. The question of nonviolence is also a question of transforming our own psychological structures – transformation not in a moralistic, but a substantial sense.

II.

The accessible history of the human being was a history of violence. Cruelty is, as Nietzsche said, "the oldest festal joy" of humankind. The selected methods exercised make an adequate description impossible. Who could possibly describe what happens to a person that is tortured, mutilated, or burned? If we take a longitudinal section through the past three thousand years of history or a latitudinal section through everything that happens today in this moment on our planet among human beings (and also among human beings and animals), the visual faculty of the healthy eye quickly reaches its limit – the limit of horror cannot be taken in anymore.

The attempt at overcoming the atrocity in the human being through morals and religion has historically failed. Any tie of the human monster to a moral codex, a Bible, a God, gave rise to a new blood trail, a new incentive for cruelty, a new passion for killing. The existence of a humanitarian God that steers our fortunes toward goodness has, at the latest since Auschwitz and Hiroshima, been historically disproven (however the religious question is far from answered in an atheist sense). Facing the accessible past and facing the present, facing a technology of killing that has driven itself into ecstasy, and facing an emerging global apocalypse, we cannot escape the question of whether there was a systematic mistake in the classic definition of “humanity.” Perhaps it is necessary to fully lift the human being out of the ideological sphere of humanistic notions in order to actually grasp what “humanity” means. Facing the continuous permanence of violence and the futility of all peace efforts, we need to seriously ask, “has the hope for peace any objective chance, one that is grounded in the psychological anatomy of the human being, or is it simply based on delusion, an error in perspective, wishful thinking outside of reality?”

We are in a situation where it no longer makes sense to bind the questions and answers to the habits of taste and morality. If there is still any solution to the problem, it is beyond our inclinations, beyond our morals, and beyond all thinking habits: as also the reality of our pre-apocalyptic situation and the reality of the human being stretches beyond the power of our imagination. What would be required is an evolutionary leap of perception and a mental-spiritual change of perspective to take us out of everything familiar, to break all emotional relations to notions that have long proven untenable.

The question of peace is far from decided, neither positively nor negatively. Extrapolating from the empirical past and present, we sense an imminent collective downfall. A three-thousand-year era of slaughter however is no proof that it must remain this way. The human being still – perhaps – has another possibility. Where facts however stand with such overpowering force against a positive answer, those who nevertheless do not want to give up need to engage with other means, other ideas, other mental and spiritual possibilities.

The concepts that the human being and human society have developed so far are de facto concepts for producing violence. A serious plea for peace would therefore be a plea for a new concept of the human being and of society. When an entire epoch of humankind was characterized by violence, the question of peace turns into the question of a new epoch. The transition from structural violence to structural peace would be a change of eras that would come close to a mutational leap in the evolution of humanity. The former and present type of human being would need to transcend into a new one. The planet would radically transform. This is at least the perspective that opens by itself when we look at the question from a necessary distance. A peace movement in this sense would thus not be a resistance movement; it would be the organized preparation and implementation of an epochal change. Its aim would not only be to prevent the worst (although this would be a necessary part), but it would catalyze a real transformation of the human being and the concrete development of a

new concept for human society all the way down to the elementary realms of sexuality, nutrition, research, and work. Resistance would ally with the fundamental regeneration of human values, human ways of life, human axioms. The impending downfall would be averted by a complete paradigm shift in thinking and political practice. (We are still in a thought experiment, not yet dealing with the question of how this could be manifested.)

III.

In the following I will try to capture the content of such transformation. To state in advance: when we speak of nonviolence we do not only refer to external, but also internal nonviolence, not to just physical nonviolence, but also psychological nonviolence toward all inner powers of growth, warmth, and love. Physical violence always stems from some form of inner violence. A culture that generates subjects and opportunists by breaking the powers of growth in the individual, already in early childhood, is always primed for explosive, violent acts, as the history of the Christian oxidant and particularly of our country [Germany] proves. In the sense of structural peace, above all the inherent double sidedness of the character, which suddenly reveals the concentration camp executioner behind the well-adjusted family father, would need to be overcome; where alongside normative sexuality, sadistic and masochistic fantasy excesses are bottled up; where alongside paraded morality, the odor of evil secretly clouds the senses. What needs to be overcome is not only instances of cruel excess, but the overall psycho-social structure they are based on (we thereby hope that a far more delightful kind of “excess” could still be saved, as Eros has so far hardly had any decent chance of survival).

The transformational work of a new peace movement would be conscious of the fact that violence in the modern world is not the product of surplus energy, but the product of suppressed and constricted energies. Violence results from narrowness. Rats bite each other when too many are imprisoned in a cage. This image of narrowness is valid both physically and psychologically. Our everyday societal forms are simply too narrow: those of communication, of love, of work, of research. So are our ironed ways of behaving in our highly glossed culture so we can understand who we are – the phenomenon of the human being in its entirety. High voltage animalistic, human and divine needs are thereby suppressed, hidden, and denied. The mental-spiritual orientations we usually use to elevate ourselves from daily worries are also too narrow: they do not allow us to be fully able to freely think and perceive. Too narrow are the morals to allow our drives and potentials in life to be creatively expressed. Suppressed energy seeks a way out in an asocial and violent manner. Unconsciously and violently, the restricted organism attempts to burst the narrowness of a cage that cannot be opened from any direction. Violence is mostly the eruption of blocked life energies. Humaneness is therefore only possible without suppression. This would, for example, mean a form of sexual humaneness that does not suppress “perversity,” aesthetics that do not suppress dissonance, peace that does not suppress aggression.

The transformation of the system of structural violence into a system of structural peace would occur on all levels of human and societal existence. It would require implementing different economic and political systems; it would require fundamentally reshaping the elementary human realms of the relation between the genders, raising children, and of building community – and it would require new mental-spiritual tools in order to radically overcome the values, the ingrained programs, and the axioms of the patriarchal epoch (without falling back into the matriarchal one). The transformation would, among other things, need to fulfill the following postulates, which based on the currently available knowledge about human processes we can name as “parameters of a nonviolent society”:

1. Developing an ethical position beyond (former) morals.

By trying to suppress “evil” and the natural drives, conventional morality achieved the opposite; the asocial structures in the suppressed zones of the character got out of control. In this way it perpetually created the evil it fought against. All suppression generates structural violence. The idea of suppression itself, even when it is directed against evil, belongs to the paradigms of the violent era. It is to be replaced by a new thought from the realm of integration, self-organization, and synthesis. A nonviolent humaneness moves away from the conceptual field of morality toward one of identity, consciousness, and development.

2. Complete integration of all psychological and instinctual energies into an individual and societal life practice.

Overcoming the double sidedness of the character and the division of the human being into an official and a hidden person. Establishing areas of activity and social behavioral patterns wherein suppressed energies can be transformed into positive, creative powers. The true process of individuation, accepting one’s own “shadow,” not only needs to be carried out on a therapeutic level, but on the entire interpersonal and social level.

3. New forms for love and sexuality.

Liberating erotic love from the too narrow and rigid forms of marriage and family. Free expression of sexual life according to the autonomous functional principles of Eros and according to the autonomous ethics of those involved. An essential element of a violent society is the issue of unresolved love and the longing for love. Perhaps this issue currently generates more violence, child abuse, and fatal car accidents than all other factors combined. Transformational work would be tasked with developing a clear, positive, and gentle relation to all sensual and creatural activities of the human animal; overcoming marital borders by establishing larger systems of personal relationships and engaging communication; soothing the fear of loss and jealousy through a general enrichment of relationships and activities; establishing

communitarian supply systems in order to overcome social and economic dependencies.

4. New social and emotional structures for raising children.

The existing potentials for violence mostly originate in early childhood. The family situation is too narrow, too erratic and too overburdened to enable the child to develop freely. The emotional connections between love, fear of loss, and hatred, which characterize almost every subsequent love relationship, among other things, is a result of the nuclear family situation. As a permanent psychological structure, it is one of the essential foundations of structural violence. The disappointment of the child's trust is often the original trauma that creates the disposition for all eventual forms of revenge, cynicism, and merciless brutality. The family structure would need to be superseded by communitarian systems that could offer the child more genuine affection, more stable nests, while offering a free choice of partners for the parents, and more unburdened mothers.

5. Overall ecological integration of human society into the biosphere.

Reintegrating human life into the "gentle" structures and functional principles of the living. Convivial organization of the life systems of plants, animals, children, and adults. Replacing biological and mental monocultures with ecological diversity. Creating mutually complementary and supportive systems with permaculture and its translation into the social area. Replacing the old way of dominating nature through a new way of cooperating with nature. Developing self-evident ethics based on contact toward all fellow beings.

6. Categorical change in the system of thinking.

Concretely developing new intellectual, mental, and spiritual structures and axioms in accordance with the functional logic of the living world. Renouncing the "male" programs of harshness, definiteness, practicability, self-suppression and ways without detours. Steering toward the organic principles of "gentle power," of integration and interaction, of sensing and circling, of functional opposition, of pulsation, frequency, and resonance, of development and open systems, of complexity and the dialectic fusion of the part with the whole. Categorical change, even in political thinking, in the sense of gentle power – of aikido, of homeopathy and of resonance. An increasing fearlessness and a growing experience of gentle power could lead to a new kind of religiousness that is no longer attached to the old forms of seriousness, sanctimoniousness and constraint.

IV.

These were theses about what would be necessary, not whether they are feasible. The aforementioned points all demand creating new systems for human communication and community. In order to realize such cultural transformation, fundamental

decisions of a personal and existential sort would be necessary for all people involved, decisions that would stand in stark opposition to the deeply rooted habits of living and thinking. Whether such a paradigm shift of personal life would be possible, with a sufficient number of people and in the time that still remains, and whether it could develop into a global political power may be questioned. Tendencies toward it are available. Perhaps there are justifiable hopes of a new kind. Changes in the power system of our times are no longer subject to political calculations of the old sort, but of the specific functions and leaps of an overall situation approaching a qualitative tipping point. The fermenting effect of a nonviolent power could be of surprising efficiency if it was connected with the breakthrough of a convincing future vision and a new human identity.

Dr. Dieter Duhm (born in 1942) is a psychoanalyst, sociologist, art historian and author. He was one of the intellectual leaders of the “New Left” during the the 1968 Students’ Revolt in Germany, where he became known through his bestseller “Angst im Kapitalismus” [“Fear in Capitalism”]. Later he left the dogmatic left and founded with other pioneers a comprehensive life experiment to research a nonviolent future society. He wrote this essay in the initial years of the project, in 1981. The postulates described formed the basis for a research work on building future models and communities of trust that has been going on for forty years - and continues in Tamera and the emerging global network for the [Healing Biotopes Plan](#).