Training for the Revolution

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THE GRIM NEWS: PBS relayed that there were 372 mass shootings in the U.S. alone in 2015: approximately one mass shooting per day for each day in the year. The Southern Poverty Law Center reported 1051 hate crime incidents since the November presidential election – A number that continues to grow. And according to ThinkProgress, “42% of those incidents included specific references to Trump, his election, or his policies.”

THE ENCOURAGING NEWS: In a time when some people could turn to a militarized police department, deployed in riot gear with tear gas, tasers, batons, and automatic weapons, many are turning to the tried-and-true methods of nonviolence. Assertive, active nonviolence has been proven to be more effective than violence ever has been.¹ In the last few months, Meta Peace Team, a nonprofit organization that trains ordinary people in violence de-escalation skills, has been inundated with requests for workshops and skills trainings.

November 9, 2016 – The day after our most recent presidential election, Meta Peace Team’s telephone was ringing incessantly, and the email box quickly filled up. Just as reports of hate crimes had already begun to sky-rocket, so has a groundswell of people asking for training in violence de-escalation, in bystander intervention, and in combating violence, fear, and hate with the more substantive precepts of nonviolence, compassion, and love.

Offering nonviolence skills training since its inception in 1993, Meta Peace Team – or MPT (originally Michigan Peace Team) – has consistently worked to advertise that there are other ways, more effective ways, of dealing with violence, and actively encouraged people to learn these techniques. Often cold-calling church and civic groups to offer training opportunities, the goal was to find 10 or more people willing to participate in an 8-hour training. MPT’s method of teaching each skill and then having participants practice it in role-play scenarios resulted in a determination that at least 10 people were needed in a training to ensure that all the role-plays were life-like and effective. Invariably, fingers were crossed before each training, hoping that there would be enough interest that the training could go forward. Once trained, participants could not only use these skills in their personal lives, but also join trained teams of volunteers – MPT’s Peace Teams – locally, throughout the U.S., and around the world, going where invited to prevent violence.

Based on the calls and emails, we had hopes that the first training offered following the election would be well-received. Drs. Stephen Gasteyer and Elizabeth Drexler, professors at Michigan State University, offered to host the training on campus following incidents where “Build that wall” was spray-painted on a university building and students wearing hijabs (the traditional Muslim headscarf) were verbally harassed. We were all optimistic that up to 40 students might join in....but we had underestimated the impact that the threat of potential fascism can have on a community: Over 130 people registered for the training, and dozens of university departments and colleges offered to co-sponsor the event, along with the regional Peace
Education Center and Pax Christi Michigan. Headlined as “A Nonviolent Response to Fear and Hate”, the attendees were people of every nationality, age, and economic background. It was quite literally “standing room only”. There were students, faculty, staff, and general community members: A snapshot of what Dr. Martin Luther King referred to as “the Beloved Community”.

In the weeks that have followed, the requests for violence de-escalation skills training continue to come in. Faith congregations, civic groups, and ordinary people are hungry for an effective antidote to the anger and fear that springs from the erosion of civil rights, environmental protection, freedom of speech, and basic human rights that many may have previously taken for granted. The specter of despotism has prodded many courageous people to seek out the morally superior methods of nonviolently dismantling a garrison state.

For citizens looking for a proven methodology to a just, democratic, equitable society, the importance of learning skills of violence prevention and de-escalation, and then employing them strategically, cannot be overestimated. MPT’s nonviolence curriculum focuses on the importance of self-care and introspection, encouraging a daily practice of centering, prayer or meditation. It elucidates the importance of deep listening, and of paying attention to body language. It demonstrates techniques that create a safe space for conflicts to be worked out in, eradicating the “win at any cost” mentality. The training teaches the basic methodology used in Third-Party Nonviolent Intervention (TPNI), including offering protective accompaniment, creating a peaceful presence, practicing human rights monitoring, and participating in interpositioning: putting your body between the potential victim and the aggressor. And it offers ideas of what to do when you’re all alone and you see someone being harassed.

Just last week, a group of 22 people gathered at a bed and breakfast in Northern Michigan for MPT’s Violence De-escalation Skills Training. There were teachers, artists, musicians, lawyers, businessmen, and homemakers. The evening before the training, we gathered around a roaring fireplace while it snowed outside and – in the warmth and safety that that space afforded us – we shared our deepest fears about the increased violence since the election. Many felt powerless and alone. All were here to find some tangible ways of making a difference. The next day, revitalized and with some common ground already discovered, we went through the day: We talked about the differing perceptions of what could be considered violence, practiced what it means to listen intently, focused on how to pay attention to body language, reviewed how to present concerns to someone else in a nonthreatening manner, and learned how to verbally de-escalate someone who is highly agitated. We grappled with how to make quick decisions in a crisis situation, and how to rely on each other to be most effective. By the end of the day, there were people in tears. “This is exactly what I needed...exactly the kind of thing I was looking for, and I didn’t even know it,” said one older woman as she wiped at her eyes. “I knew this training would be good, but I had no idea how good” said a younger...
participant. “Everyone should take this kind of training. This should be taught in schools! Do police officers ever take this?” asked one young man. It’s interesting that, when we first advertise a training, we often hear “Does it have to be eight hours long?” And by the end of the training day, we frequently hear “We want more. Can you come back?” Feeling empowered to take action and decrease the fear and anxiety that surrounds us is exciting. People leave physically tired, but emotionally and spiritually rejuvenated.

Most importantly, the trainings underscore that one person CAN and DOES make a difference. People who may never before have considered entering the political or social arena suddenly feel empowered to do so. It is nothing short of revolutionary! In fact, in the most recent edition of Sojourners magazine, there is an article detailing the rise nation-wide of unarmed civilian peacekeeping. That so many Americans are actively seeking out training in the skills of violence de-escalation should be taken as a sincere sign of hope.

In a time when basic human rights are threatened, there is no time for apathy. While it is frightening to be in the midst of the extremes the “Alternative Right” aggressively purports, the subversive stream of people seeking out how to successfully – and nonviolently – turn the tide is indeed galvanizing.

As author/activist John Dear puts it, “Everyone has to practice nonviolence. Everyone. From the people on the streets to the police, to church ministers and parents, but also our media spokespeople and elected officials. Including the president. And the military. Everyone, everywhere. The days of war, killing, shootings, bombings, torture, executions and nuclear weapons are coming to an end. The days of violence are over. Everyone has to practice nonviolence. That is our only future—if we are to have a future.”

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1 Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict; Maria J. Stephan & Erica Chenoweth, 2011.
2 Everyone Has to Practice Nonviolence Now by John Dear; Huffington Post, May 12, 2015