

## The Way of Nonviolence

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The Way It Is

William Stafford

There's a thread you follow. It goes among  
things that change. But it doesn't change.  
People wonder about what you are pursuing.  
You have to explain about the thread.  
But it is hard for others to see.  
While you hold it you can't get lost.  
Tragedies happen; people get hurt  
or die; and you suffer and get old.  
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.  
You don't ever let go of the thread.

For William Stafford, the thread he followed all his life was the way of nonviolence. In Kim Stafford's inspiring book, *Early Morning: Remembering My Father William Stafford*, he writes that his father had a clarity about aggression, namely: "it's never okay. Nor if you are alert, should it be necessary. Violence signals a failure of imagination." (p. 40)

Kim tells what happened when his father went before the draft board in Hutchinson, Kansas in 1942, which was headed by a retired military man. He demanded to know where Stafford had gotten his ideas about pacifism and objection to war. Stafford quietly answered: "You were my Sunday School teacher, sir, when I was a child. You taught me not to kill. I never forgot."

Granted conscientious objector status, Stafford lived and worked in the isolation of Civilian Public Service camps in Magnolia, Arkansas, where he and some of his fellow CO's were accused of being spies and almost hung during a trip into town, in Los Prietos camp near Santa Barbara, California, where he fought forest fires and met his pacifist wife, Dorothy Hope, and finally at the camp near Belden, California on the Feather River.

William Stafford's account of his CO experiences is entitled *Down In My Heart*, which is the title of an old CO song which includes the words "I've got that feeling against conscription down in my heart." In the introduction to that book, Kim Stafford writes:

Thrown together by chance, these tough and genteel men were forged into a kind of university of the soul during the duration of the war.... [T]hey schooled each other in alternative ways of seeing history and human possibility.

Kim goes on:

They pooled their books and made a library. They decided collectively to rise before first light, and give first energy to the life of the mind – classes, performances, debates, writing, reading and discussion – and then trudge off for the day shift, doing physical labor....

In this school – along with callused hands and a deft way with ax or shovel – my father developed his life-long habit of writing each day before dawn, of honoring fellow seekers of understanding from whatever class or background, of seeing in human cruelty episodes where we let "the fragile sequence break" but might by heroic calm find our way back into community. (*Deep In My Heart*, pp. xii–xiii)

Heroic calm. Could that be our calling in these uncertain, fearful times when the fragile sequence that makes community possible has been broken? Could that be what it means to be what Jesus called all those who follow the thread of nonviolence: the salt of the earth, the light of the world, a city set on a hill? My friends, I believe that is our calling here at CCC: to be a faith community now of heroic calm; to have the courage to not agree when government tramples on human rights; to resist rhetoric that divides us; to oppose intimidation that seeks to curtail free speech and freedom of the press; to stay connected to and stand with the most vulnerable; to advocate for peace and diplomacy instead of war. During this interim season at CCC, we seek to discern who God calls us to be now and in the future. I suggest that one of the threads for us to follow in answering that question is the way of nonviolence, the way of heroic calm.

The book that has been guiding some of our thinking during this Epiphany Season, John Philip Newell's *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*, urges us to reclaim the nonviolence of Jesus' teachings because it is an essential feature of rebirthing. Newell writes:

The rebirthing of God is about what is deepest in us coming forth again. It is about our sacred depths being reborn afresh in radically new ways. A prominent feature of this rebirthing is nonviolence, the refusal to use violent force against one another in our relationships as individuals, as nations, and as a species. (pg. 75)

Newell reminds us of how Mahatma Gandhi led a nonviolent movement in India for freedom from British rule that included a Salt March in 1930 where thousands of Indians marched 240 miles to the sea to make their own salt and protest the monopoly the British held on salt. Like William Stafford's radical acceptance of fellow seekers, Gandhi, a Hindu, considered Christians and Muslims his sisters and brothers. He also demonstrated how loving your enemy is a fundamental practice of nonviolence. He reminds us that the way of nonviolence is not passive. There is a thread you follow. Heroic calm.

To walk the way of nonviolence in a world filled with violence and to challenge injustice can be, and often is, costly. Gandhi and his followers were beaten and jailed. Rosa Parks was hauled off a bus and thrown in jail. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his followers were often clubbed, tear-gassed and jailed. Civil rights workers were murdered. Father Daniel Berrigan, along with many others, was jailed for protesting the Viet Nam war. And so it has been throughout our history. "There is a thread you follow." Heroic calm.

My friends, the way of nonviolent resistance to injustice and oppression is in our DNA as a United Church of Christ Congregation. It is intrinsic to our "sacred depths".

A bit of history. In 1846 members of various New England Congregational churches formed a Protestant-based abolitionist organization, the American Missionary Association (AMA), its main purpose being to abolish slavery, educate African Americans and to promote racial equality. Its members were both African American and European American. At the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, the AMA opened camps in the South for freed slaves, and by war's end there were over one hundred such camps, many having AMA teachers.

In addition to safety and shelter, one of the primary objectives of the camps was to teach freed slaves how to read and write. The first teacher the AMA hired was Mary Smith Peake, a freed African American woman who started a school for former slaves in 1861 near Fort Monroe under what became known as the Emancipation Oak in present-day Hampton, Virginia. Prior to being hired by the AMA, Mary Peake had been teaching freed African Americans, as well as slaves, to read and write, which was against the law at that time; a reminder that civil disobedience has often been part of nonviolent movements for change. "There is a thread you follow." Audacious poise in the face of harsh laws and brutal enforcement. Heroic calm.

The AMA founded over five hundred schools and 11 colleges in the South after the Civil War. It continued its work for racial justice and to be closely aligned with the Congregational Christian Churches. When the United Church of Christ was formed in 1957, the AMA became part of the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries.

While Ann and I served as Co-General Secretaries of the AMA for four years, we organized a peace initiative in 1993 that included taking a dozen students from six of the original African American colleges founded by the AMA to Germany to attend a conference that brought together peace and justice activists and congregations from around the world. As part of that unforgettable experience, we partnered with a Berlin congregation that had an ecumenical partnership with a Black South African Congregation from Lady Smith, South Africa, that had brought a delegation of adults and students to Berlin for the conference. The sharing of stories about working for freedom and justice was profound. The joy, especially the singing, was boundless. And the commitment to continue to work for justice and peace through the way of nonviolence was celebrated and renewed. "There is a thread you follow." Heroic calm. Brave composure.

Some of you will remember that in the 1980's, many churches joined together in the Sanctuary Movement to provide safe haven for Central American refugees fleeing civil conflict and war and who faced U.S. federal immigration policies that made obtaining asylum difficult for Central Americans. At its peak, Sanctuary involved over 500 congregations in the United States that, by declaring themselves official "sanctuaries," committed to providing shelter, material goods and often legal advice to Central American refugees. Movement members acted in defiance of federal law, and many prominent Sanctuary figures were arrested and put on trial in the mid and late 1980s.

During that time the Northern California Conference of the UCC voted to be a Sanctuary conference, and the four UCC congregations in Marin County - Fairfax Community Church, First Congregational Church of San Rafael, Mill Valley Community Church and CCC - voted to host the El Salvadoran family the Conference received in sanctuary. Susanne Bristol from CCC was one of the leaders, as were Carol Hannon from Fairfax and Ann Eichhorn from Mill Valley. The Marin UCC Sanctuary Committee raised money, provided translation, and helped the family settle into a rental home in Novato. There is a thread you follow. Plucky, persistent calm.

John Philip Newell, along with many other observers today, believes the Western Christian Church is in rapid decline, and he predicts that in another twenty-five years "much of the Western Christian household, as we have known it, will be no more." "Who," he asks, "will be there in another quarter of a century?"

Who will be here at CCC in 2042? Many of us won't be; however, what we do today, tomorrow, this year and the next will surely shape what CCC is in ten years, in twenty years. I believe if we reconnect with a passionate commitment to nonviolence and live out that commitment together, CCC will continue to be an undaunted, faithful light on this hill.

"There is a thread you follow.... You don't ever let go of the thread."

Amen.