Nonviolent Direct Action as Social Parable

Nonviolent direct action is known by many names. Gandhi called it *satyagraha* (truth or soul force). Henry Thoreau's actions became known as civil disobedience. Activists in North Philadelphia sometimes call it street heat. In the Philippines, democracy activists call it people power.

Underneath all of these names are similar concepts: Ordinary people using tactics (like street protests or fasting) outside of normal institutions, to pressure traditional powerholders for justice, freedom, and rights. They all refrain from violence (some on moral principles, others on practical strategy). And they all involve waging conflict for justice.

Core to all of these terms is bringing together people to make change. It's much more than merely making winnable changes – it's about changing the political understanding of "winnable" by changing the moral narrative.

One way to understand it is as a social parable. But we'll get to that in a second. Let's start by exploring what nonviolent action is and isn't.

A Definition of Nonviolent Direct Action

We use a simple definition of nonviolent direct action:

> *Nonviolent direct action are techniques outside of institutionalized behavior for waging conflict using methods of protest, noncooperation, and intervention without the use or threat of injurious force.*

In essence, people generally turn to nonviolent direct action after the standard institutionalized ways of settling disagreements are unsuccessful.

In the civil rights movement, African-Americans and their allies turned to nonviolent direct action after years of fighting in the courts and petitioning government to end established (and legal) racial segregation. The courts and government did not provide the relief needed. So they turned to nonviolent direct action to take things into their own hands.

They didn't continue waiting for agencies or the officials to act, they *took action to make the change they wished to see.*

In this method of struggle, people either do what they're not expected to do, or are even forbidden to do, like African-Americans insisting they be served coffee at a segregated lunch counter. Or nonviolent direct action can be refusing to do what is expected or required – as when early US American colonists refused to pay a special tax to the English king for the tea they drank.

Virginia Lee Graves, Ann Fraizer, and Joan Adams were one of many participants in what became known as the national sit-in movement. Nonviolent direct action is made-up of regular people.

Nonviolent direct action, therefore, can be distinguished from other forms of handling conflict that are within current institutions and traditions, like going to court or competing in an election, which are not nonviolent direct action.

When the courts, elected officials, and official institutions abandon their moral responsibility, where to turn? People turn to nonviolent direct action.

So why does nonviolent action work? Aren't institutions like the Supreme Court imbued with more power than frustrated citizens? The answer, surprisingly, is no – not when people use their power.

It's All About Power

Most of us see politics as flowing from the top downwards. In this conventional notion, those on top have the power. A janitor takes orders from their supervisor, who takes orders from the district head, and so on – all the way up to the President of the United States.

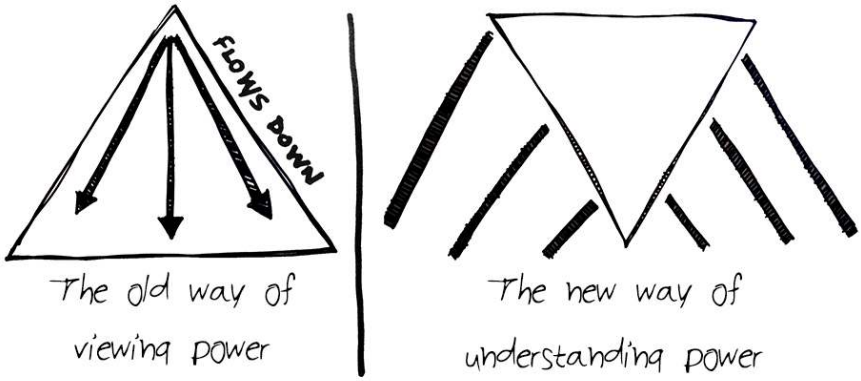
Most institutions in our society are viewed this way: corporations have at their top the CEO, cities have Mayors at the top, our legal system has a federal Supreme Court, and even our religious institutions often have a single leader at the top who gives orders to those below.

In that view of society everyone below has to follow orders or face the consequences: such as being fired, facing political retribution, or being placed in jail.

But that is not the only type of power.

Power also flows up. The CEO is helpless if employees refuse to take orders. The Mayor is helpless if the citizens withhold their financial support for his initiatives (e.g. refuse to pay taxes), undermine his policies, and collectively refuse to go along with her orders. The Supreme Court

is disabled if cities refuse to implement its interpretation of laws. And our religious institutions are disabled if the parishioners refuse cooperation.



Nonviolent direct action uses a form of power flowing from the bottom – from the people – upwards. *People power.*

A great thinker in nonviolent action who recently passed away after 60 years of studying what he called social power, Gene Sharp, explained it this way:

> *By themselves, rulers cannot collect taxes, enforce repressive laws and regulations, keep trains running on time, prepare national budgets, direct traffic, manage ports, print money, repair roads, keep markets supplied with food, make steel, build rockets, train the police and army, issue postage stamps or even milk a cow. People provide these services to the ruler through a variety of organizations and institutions. If people would stop providing these skills, the ruler could not rule.*[1]

In Philadelphia, I worked on a campaign fighting two unwanted casinos. A story from that shows this clearly.

At every turn the citizens were locked out of the process with no public debate over the largest slot parlors being forced into people's backyards.

The Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board (PGCB) set the rules for this. And they refused to allow the public to speak at their "public hearings."

We tried petitioning elected officials to do the right thing. We asked the PGCB to change the rules. We tried to negotiate. But you cannot squeeze water from a stone.

So we needed to change the equation. Rather than accept the unjust rules from the PGCB chair that we could not testify, a few us decided to testify anyway.

At a PGCB board meeting in fall of 2007, several of us from Casino-Free Philadelphia stood up, one at a time, to testify. Each one was gaveled down and told to be quiet by the chairwoman. A recess was immediately called. Those of us who spoke were escorted out of the building and told we would not be allowed to return.

Ed Goppelt was escorted out while attempting to speak, along with a dozen others. This image was captured in dozens of articles and wide social media sharing.

But others were still inside, waiting.

When the board reconvened after recess, the chairwoman warned the group not to interrupt. Several others immediately stood up and attempted to testify. Another recess was called.

When the PGCB reconvened (and again and again), the people inside continued to try to testify. Finally, the chairwoman shut down the entire PGCB meeting rather than allow the people to speak.[2]

The result: Rather than risk another such engagement, she allowed the public to speak at the next hearing. Moreover, she initiated a larger shift in policy and now gives time for citizens to speak at several meetings throughout the year.

Mohandas Gandhi said that ultimately the power of the people lies in their choice to either cooperate or not. Noncooperation with unjust or corrupt authority is at the heart of nonviolent direct action.

That's why people who are oppressed and disenfranchised turn to nonviolent action: to act for our own empowerment and win changes – *even if we are not famous celebrities, powerful politicians, or any part of the elite.*

Nonviolent Action as Social Parable

The Philadelphia action became known as a "public filibuster." It's one of many tactics in the toolbox of nonviolent direct action and the action inspired many others in that movement and beyond.

It's important to note that the group did not carry signs. They did not need to explain their deed. *The action was the message*: people would not stand for being silenced by the PGCB. A parable is a story that illustrates a moral truth. The public filibuster was a social parable.

Social parables are not about branding. They emerge because the action *is* the moral intervention. They did the right thing and took an ethical action (speaking at the hearing), whether or not it was fashionable, allowed by the rules, or initially accepted. They didn't wait around for someone else to do the right thing: they did the moral thing *without waiting for permission*. By doing so, they created a social parable.

The great Teachers of all religions and faiths used parables to educate and deliver moral principles. Let's remind ourselves about what a parable is.

One example: Nathan delivers to David a parable in the 12th chapter of Samuel:

> *There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor.*
>
> *The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.*
>
> *Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him.*

When David heard the parable, he was immediately angry. But Nathan delivered a stinging rebuttal, "You are that rich man." It changed David's life.

What makes parables so powerful is that they can illustrate many layers of morality without having to explain them all. They are able to showcase morality (or in this case immorality). They make it simple to see and perceive – and they do it in a compact story.

Nonviolent direct action is the same way.

Like a parable, nonviolent direct action can tell a story that ultimately teaches a universal moral code to society. Nonviolent direct action can highlight a specific aspect of injustice and demand alternatives within the context of a simple story.

In the wake of the 2018 Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Florida, the survivors are writing a national parable about gun reform legislation. They are creating this parable by acting outside of normal politics and institutions. Young people – victims of gun violence no less – are re-writing the code of what is acceptable in U.S. society.

Nonviolent direct action thus cannot be understood as a single action. A single action blows away in the wind. Nonviolent direct action when most effective is a commitment to implementing a new morality, and it does this by generating a specific story – with a specific demand to a specific set of actors.

This story creates an ongoing conversation. Survivors of the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting are composing this countrywide conversation by taking action into their own hands and using their personal experience as victims. They have harnessed national attention surrounding their traumatic experience and are compelling others to join them in creating change.

Emma Gonzalez joined her classmates at Stoneman Douglas High School in a protest immediately following the shooting. She shared her story and placed moral responsibility on the NRA and politicians who accepted their money.

(Image from Rhona Wise/AFP/GETTY IMAGES)

Sometimes such parables emerge seemingly spontaneously. But they can also be carefully crafted.

The civil rights movement was adept at this. Just think of all the social parables it generated: the southern student lunch counter sit-ins spread to 75 cities within two months. Rosa Parks' lone refusal (though not the first) to leave the bus led to a 381-day boycott, which ultimately led to the U.S. Supreme Court finding that racial segregation was unconstitutional. These actions were often well-planned ahead of time. They left images seared into our collective consciousness and re-shaped the morality of this country.

When thinking about nonviolent direct action as a social parable, some elements are necessary to create effective actions:

1. Drama and confrontation
2. A clear story
3. Discipline
4. A moral tension point

Let's explore these briefly.

Drama and Confrontation

If people are going to share a social parable, it needs to stick with them. It needs to have some drama to it.

Yet most marches are not dramatic. We know basically what's going to happen. When we hear about most marches, the only question is "how many people showed up?"

What makes a drama is an unknown ending.

The great Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi understood the power of drama. To resist the British empire, he spent nearly six months trying to figure out a drama that would oppose imperial law and also arouse millions of people. He chose the British salt laws because salt was a natural resource and we human beings cannot live without it. He announced that he would defy British law and walk to the sea to make his own salt. He would venture on an ambitious 24-day, 241-mile march to the sea through villages and towns, culminating in a brazen act of open defiance against the law.

Nobody knew how the march would end – which was part of the drama. Even more, people wondered: will the British arrest him before he gets to the sea?

Confrontation with a specific target helps generate that drama.

Many books have been written about his campaign and its brilliant strategy. But we should note two others:

- he was open and transparent in his organizing – knowing he might face time in jail, he knew that if he organized in secret, it would be harder to get the word out; and
- he declared his intention ahead of time and set the timeline – in other words, he set the pace of events.

Gandhi started with seventy-nine individuals who trained with him, but when they reached the sea thousands were involved.

This differs with actions that merely appeal to or ask *someone else* to do the right thing. When the British colonial government refused to yield to Gandhi's letter to the viceroy, he did what was moral – creating a powerful drama reported across the globe.

In Gandhi's case, he made it all the way to the sea. At the Dandi beach, he made salt – an act starting civil disobedience across the country as people defied British law. The Indian people stopped obeying unjust authority, and it was beginning of the end.

In our social media age, the act of creating drama is all the more important. Mainstream journalists don't want to cover actions that are boring. And social media thrives on drama.

We can use this to our advantage: by creating social parables with drama and confrontation as part of them, we can create parables that others want to share.

A Clear Story

Parables are complex and multi-layered. They say many things in a compact story. But they are a single, simple story, often about one person or a single interaction.

This is different than trying to talking about everything all at once. We're not creating a story that way. With a story, you can *connect* it to everything else – just as Gandhi's action of making salt gave him a platform to talk about independence, economic justice, and much more. But this approach is different than, say, organizing a march and asking everyone to show up with a wide array of signs. This is about creating a *story*.

Said another way: social parables are not a sermon. We not *talking* about "economic dignity" or "social justice." We are acting out a moral tale for everyone to see, in a way that shows clearly those of us doing what is moral and those who attempt to thwart us.

Parables have a narrow focus: the boy who cried wolf, the Prodigal son, or the frog in a milk pail.

So do social parables: Public filibusters, Indians making their own salt, or people doing lunch counter sit-ins. Even while working on one issue the anti-casino activists taught about democracy; Indian independence taught about the evils of colonialism and the importance of self-determination; and the lunch counter sit-in campaign taught about what it means to live in a truly equal society.

That's why it's so important that we pick a specific story hoping it will resonate. Through the right story, we can talk about intersection of these injustices. People learn best through specifics – and a specific story can be a powerful teacher.

Discipline

Some activists see discipline in a direct action only as another way of restricting individual behavior and expression. They have seen how too often the call for "discipline" is merely about subjecting ourselves to someone else's authority. And calls by well-meaning activists for discipline *are* sometimes a cover for "acceptability politics" – choosing to do what is socially acceptable by throwing other marginalized communities under the bus.

This is an important tension point and like many big tensions, we shouldn't expect it to be solved. It's to be wrestled with.

This helps us understand different ways to explain discipline in our actions to our membership.

One argument for discipline in nonviolent direct action is that we are intentionally breaking social norms. The outsider therefore may wonder: "If they'll break this social norm, what other social norms will they break?" If the answer is all of them, we turn off many potential allies. Discipline, such a code that says we will not harm individuals, helps reassure potential allies.

Discipline can also help us keep our focus.

During a recent nonviolent direct action training, a middle-aged woman shared a story. During an action that she was part of, she was accosted by a bystander. He was verbally abusive and physically threatening. Defensively, she yelled back and stood her ground. Only later did she realize that if a video camera had been there, that interaction could have overshadowed the reason that hundreds of others had shown up.

An image of one of ACT-UP's die-ins on the streets in New York City), protesting lack of access to FDA-approved anti-AIDS drugs.

(Image from United in Anger)

If we let ourselves get distracted with every bump along the way, we'll cloud the power of our story. Discipline, such as commitments to act calmly and speak to everyone courteously, can keep the focus on the action.

In this era of political repression, a third key reason for discipline is the need for safety of participants. Act-Up serves as a model for this.

Act-Up, which nonviolently fought for the lives of people with AIDS, had very escalated actions. One of their more dramatic was while they were trying to pass national legislation for AIDS funding that could immediately save people's lives. They targeted the legislators that were stalling.

Their action involved going into the people's houses of worship during service. There they performed a public die-in, explaining to the stunned (and often confused or angry) audience that the legislators were killing their friends and families by not passing needed legislation.

Act-Up deliberately chose nonviolent direct actions that were angry, outlandish, and bold. But they took great pains to make sure that no one was ever arrested or had encounters with police who didn't want to.

To achieve this, they created action roles. Action roles may include police liaisons, medics, legal observers, support people (both during and after) , photographers, even sometimes diversion teams. Sometimes they create a buddy system or small groups to watch out for each other and make sure everyone was safe. They always used clear plans.

Knowing that they could participate in a variety of ways and that measures were in place to protect their safety, new participants continually joined and the movement grew.

(And, by the way, after that action, coupled with others, they also won!)

A Moral Tension Point

Nonviolent direct action is different than *asking* for our rights. This is about *acting* for our rights.

Nonviolent direct action can give us a basis for mutual trust, potentially result in wide public support, and serves as a focused channel to highlight injustice. As with a parable, by doing what's right, the injustice can become so obvious that it must be acknowledged and moral alternatives contemplated.

Dozens of groups around the United States have defied the law and offered "sanctuary" to folks facing final deportation orders. New Sanctuary Movement of Philadelphia (NSM) provided sanctuary for mother-of-two Angela Navarro. She stayed in a church round-the-clock, during which she and others in NSM mobilized public pressure. Two months later she won a stay of deportation.[3]

The heart of nonviolent direct action is not a creative action or a skit where we demonstrate what we think should happen.

It is not good branding, well-crafted signs, or powerful words. It is not a call to action that is inclusive.

And it is more than asking others to do the right thing.

It's implementing what is moral. Right now. Ourselves. And facing the consequences.

Now that's power to the people.

by Daniel Hunter
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[1] From Gene Sharp in his thin and helpful book: *The Politics of Nonviolent Action, available for free download: https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/resource/the-politics-of-nonviolent-action-volume-2/.*

[2] You can read more about the anti-casino campaign in a fascinating book: *Strategy and Soul*, by Daniel Hunter. Available at *www.StrategyAndSoul.org*. This is recommended reading for an organizer to see the ins and outs of organizing, especially about how to develop creative tactics.

[3] Read more of New Sanctuary Movement, "Angela's Story," *www.sanctuaryphiladelphia.org/index.php/campaigns/sanctuary-for-families/angela-s-story*.