

# 3 Ways to Improve Our Outreach

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## Why I wrote this article:

I started volunteering for peace and social justice movements in the 1960's and never stopped. For half a century I have volunteered especially to organize strategically effective nonviolent grassroots movements for peace and a variety of other issues. Grassroots movements for peace, social justice, environmental care, and other progressive issues have enormous potential to reach our goals if we would conduct our outreach more effectively.

Based on half a century of my own organizing experience – and based on new research I've been reading – **I'm convinced that we can move people toward peace and social justice by:**

- 1. Sharing our first-hand personal experiences; and by**
- 2. Connecting at the level of deeply held values; and by**
- 3. Grounding ourselves and our outreach efforts in profound nonviolence.**

## 1. People's First-Hand Experiences – Personal Stories – Are Powerful:

We keep reading fact sheets about war, social and economic problems, environmental damage, and other problems we care about. Facts have always been important. Nowadays – more than ever – the truth is being suppressed by governments and mainstream media. The Trump regime is lying more blatantly than other administrations, and right-wing media promote their lies.

Decades ago we all read, watched and listened to the same news. But now people read, watch and listen to news that reflects our own biases, so our nation has lost a common denominator and a common sense of what is real and true. Soon after Trump took office, his administration characterized his lies as “alternative truth.”

While we must continue to convey accurate information to the public, we must convey it in ways that people will be able to hear and understand and accept. **This requires more than merely listing facts.** We need to be **savvy about how to overcome people's fears and other psychological barriers** that prevent them from hearing and absorbing facts that are different or make them feel uncomfortable.

We can **help the public empower themselves** to work on serious issues, including hard or frightening issues such as war, nuclear weapons, the death penalty, and the climate crisis.

In order to really engage the public on these hard and frightening issues, we must **deliberately strategize how to address the public's fears and other psychological barriers that inhibit them from learning about and acting on** these issues.

Unfortunately, we typically neglect the public's fears and psychological barriers. Our outreach and organizing keeps focusing on the scary facts only without also paying any attention to people's real psychological needs. **In order to move the public on these serious, frightening issues, we must devote at least as much strategic attention to people's psychological needs so they will be able to hear and absorb the facts and decide to take action.**

Beyond the facts, people are more likely to be deeply moved by hearing someone's first-hand experience. A fact sheet about Vietnam or Central America or Afghanistan might be useful, but an ordinary American is more likely to be deeply moved – have their consciousness raised – by hearing someone who is **from**

Vietnam or Central America or Afghanistan tell about **their own first-hand experience** of being on the receiving end of U.S. warfighting.

We have discovered this regarding other issues too. On a number of occasions I have organized speaking engagements for innocent persons who were convicted of murders they did not commit and were sentenced to be executed. The truth came out only many years later, and some of these innocent persons have been speaking to the public about what happened to them. When these persons tell audiences their first-hand experiences of being innocent on death row, the audience members are

moved. These actual stories are more memorable than mere statistical facts about the death penalty.

Each person reading this article has your own first-hand experiences that can move the public deeply for peace or other important issues beyond what abstract facts can do. Your own personal experiences – and the awakenings and consciousness-raising you have experienced – can help to move the public toward peace and justice.

Also, asking people about their own personal experiences is a great way to show respect for them and to draw them into serious conversations.

**2. People No Longer Share the Same Reality, So People Don't Believe Facts.  
We Must Reach People at the Heart Level More than the Head Level.  
We Must Communicate Through Our Values:**

On the first page I said that different kinds of people have different sources of news. This means that some of us hear and believe some things, and other people hear and believe things that are very different.

Truth – including scientific truth – is held in low regard now. A few months ago I was on a street corner holding a sign urging people to take care of the climate. A pedestrian walked by and said in a contemptuous voice, “Bah! Science is just some guy’s opinion!”

As a society, we need to restore respect for truth, including scientific truth.

Also – as I said above – we can cut through the public cynicism by sharing our first-hand experiences. We need to share from the heart. People can still hear and empathize with heart-level realities.

Research has shown that – even across political divisions – people can resonate at the level of deeply held values. When you reach out to people with your message, use your best values to shape your message, and also shape your message to appeal to other people’s best values. This will help you connect with the general public. Your values – along with your first-hand experiences and your raised consciousness – can help

the general public move away from the default of U.S. militarism, commercialism, and other dominant assumptions – and toward a universal respect for all of the world’s people and a more profound sense of social justice, environmental integrity, and other humane values.

Let’s shape our approach to address the general public’s underlying values that we share in common with them. Nearly everyone has values that seek something better than the status quo. So:

1. If we are urging peace, and if we know the public is concerned about national security, we should explain how war actually threatens our own nation’s security and how a peaceful foreign policy will make all of us more secure.

2. If people care about their children and grandchildren, we can help them prevent climate disruption that would hurt the people they love.

3. If we are urging care for the environment and we know people will worry that this might cost them their jobs, we should research and provide information to address this concern head-on, show how protecting the climate can create jobs, etc.

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### **3. Nonviolence Is More than Ethical. Nonviolence Actually Works Better:**

A profound grounding in nonviolence underlies what I'm talking about. A profound grounding in nonviolence can help all of us connect better with other people and move the public toward peace.

Most people think nonviolence is “nice and moral” but naïve and not practical in the real world. But actually nonviolence is what really does work. 100 years ago World War I was “the war to end all wars.” Did it accomplish that?

Violence does not work. Violence often backfires.

Research has shown that nonviolence really does work. It works better than efforts that include violence. Recent research proves that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century scrupulous nonviolence worked better than conflicts using

even small amounts of violence. I highly recommend the well-researched and highly readable book *Why Civil Resistance Works* by Erica Chenoweth & Maria Stephan and Erica Chenoweth's TED Talks and YouTube videos.

For more than half a century, Gene Sharp has researched and written about nonviolence and how to use it effectively. I recommend the publications available at his website, the Albert Einstein Institution, [www.aeinstein.org](http://www.aeinstein.org)

I also highly recommend the book by Mark Engler & Paul Engler: *This Is an Uprising* – and their website, [www.thisisanuprising.org](http://www.thisisanuprising.org)

#### Violence keeps us “stuck.” Nonviolence offers a creative alternative:

It has been said that war is a failure of imagination. People in conflict get stuck in binary thinking and fail to imagine creative alternatives. People are taught that the only options are “fight or flight.” You either use violence or run away. Actually, nonviolence is a creative alternative that involves “fighting back” without using violence. And nonviolence actually works!

Nonviolence is more than a set of specific tactics. It is grounded in human nature, history, psychology, spirituality and more, and it has been used successfully in many times and places, but the Establishment keeps teaching history as a sequence of wars and other top-down actions without paying attention to the effective “bottom-up” actions of nonviolent resistance and non-violent organizing for social change.

Let's recognize the many dimensions of violence so we'll be able to devise nonviolent responses to all of them. Beyond violent crime, social and economic injustices are violent against people. Likewise, pollution is violent against the environment and public health.

Also, militarism is inherently violent even without actual shooting. The threat of violence is itself violent.

If someone were to confront you on a sidewalk and rob you by saying he has a gun (even without pulling a trigger, and even without showing a gun, and even without even possessing a gun), that person would be prosecuted for “armed robbery.” The mere threat of violence against a person or nation is inherently violent.

We Americans – more than people of nearly any other nation – are so used to thinking that we can solve international problems by sending troops or dropping bombs or doing “regime change.” Americans tend to think this is normal. It is not normal (and not effective). It is not how civilized nations behave.

If your only tool is a hammer, you'll treat every problem as if it were a nail. Since the late 1800s the U.S. has been threatening and using military violence against many other nations. Instead of solving problems, we have antagonized the rest of the world and made problems worse.

Also, the U.S.'s excessively high military budget has wasted our tax dollars on destruction instead of meeting human needs. This is yet one more way in which militarism is inherently violent.

#### We must take responsibility to work for peace and justice:

Every human being needs to pay attention to our role in the world, make decisions about how to live in the

world, and take responsibility for what we do and what we fail to do. We can't escape deciding. Failing to

decide is deciding to fail. We must take responsibility to work for peace, human rights, the environment, and so forth.

History does not go in one simple direction. Different historical forces push in different directions. We need to decide which side we are on. In the early 1980s when Regan was escalating U.S. militarism and nuclear weapons, many people asked me whether we were doomed or whether we would avoid nuclear war. I always replied by asking what they thought. If someone said we were doomed, then that person was opting not to help turn things around, so I would tell that person that assuming we were doomed would doom us. Other people said they thought we could organize to prevent nuclear war, so I agreed with them that their belief that we could work for solutions meant that we would indeed prevent nuclear war.

### **Nonviolence is consistent with how the universe wants to work:**

Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” I agree. The universe and humanity function better:

- When we practice justice, not injustice
- When we live peacefully, not violently
- When we speak the truth, not deceive others
- When we respect the environment, not abuse it

Our responsibility is to live our lives in ways congruent with how the universe likes to function – a world of justice and peace. We need to actively work to promote justice and nonviolence in our local community and in the world around us.

One of the most important reasons why nonviolence works is that nonviolence uses means that are consistent with the ends. If we want to build a world that is peaceful and just, we must use methods that are peaceful and just. What we do sows the seeds of the world that will grow. Violent and unjust seeds produce a violent and unjust world. Peaceful and just seeds produce a peaceful and just world.

Gandhi said an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth would leave everyone blind and toothless.

### **Nonviolence requires courage:**

There is a huge difference between *pacifism* (grounding in principled nonviolence, as we’ve been

The lesson of this is that our future really is “up for grabs.” The future is what we will make it. If we take responsibility to solve the problems, than we will indeed solve the problems. The remedy is nonviolent grassroots organizing. A person with religious faith might recognize that we are God’s hands and feet here on earth. Other people could use other metaphors for recognizing that it is up to us.

The main factor that will determine humanity’s future is the cumulative efforts of individuals and groups of people who organize nonviolently at the grassroots to build movements for peace and social justice. If we strategize well and practice smart nonviolence, then everything we do will make a difference.

Nonviolent behavior is congruent with how the universe functions best. Nonviolent behavior is sustainable. Violence, militarism, abuse of human rights, disregard for the environment are not sustainable. Let’s ground ourselves in nonviolent values and practice nonviolence scrupulously so we can make progress.

Let’s recognize that all people are one human family. Do not let anyone split us apart from each other or divide any groups into “us” vs. “them.”

Conflict has always existed, and conflict will always exist. What nonviolence does is change the dynamics of conflict so one party or both parties are able to pursue workable solutions. Nonviolence changes the script of what the conflict is about and how the conflict will play out.

Nonviolent solutions are sustainable solutions because they are based on truth and they preserve the human dignity of the adversaries, along with our own. Nonviolence recognizes the essential humanity of each person even while we may strongly disagree with their behavior. Nonviolence can work on the conscience of each adversary (including ourselves) and also on the conscience of the other people around us.

discussing here) and *passive-ism* (merely doing nothing). Many people think that nonviolence means just doing nothing and letting evil prevail. That is **NOT**

what nonviolence means! Actually, nonviolence can include many different ways to resist and overcome violence and evil – but without using violence.

Many people of faith believe that God is trying to move the universe toward more justice and unity, so violence interferes with that, but nonviolence works whether or not you have that spiritual grounding. Other people have other profound groundings for trusting the power of nonviolence.

**Since violence is the problem, it can't be the solution.** In contrast to people who say “the end justifies the means,” nonviolence asserts that **the means must be consistent with the end. If we want peace and justice, we must use means that are peaceful and just.**

Nonviolence requires as much courage as violence does (sometimes more courage, since we rely upon internal strength instead of external weapons), but nonviolence requires a lot more creativity, and nonviolence has an advantage because nonviolent methodology is congruent with how the universe functions best.

## Summary

This article's main points have been:

- Facts are still important, especially in a political climate where lies predominate.
- Beyond facts, sharing people's personal experiences will be more memorable than facts. Personal experiences – your own experiences and those of other people – will be memorable and will connect at a deeper level than facts alone.
- Find ways to share at the level of values – a heart-to-heart level – that will really connect with the other people at a level deep enough that will allow them to appreciate and absorb your message.
- Ground all of this in profound nonviolence. Nonviolence really works. Nonviolence is a truth that we must embrace and practice in order to create a sustainable and peaceful future.

## I'm looking for audiences and **locations where I can present my 6-session workshop series on “Nonviolent Grassroots Organizing.”**

I am looking for audiences and locations where I can present my 6-session workshop series on “Nonviolent Grassroots Organizing.”

It starts with a thoughtful grounding in profound nonviolence. It proceeds through the theory and practice of organizing grassroots movements, including strategizing, practical nuts & bolts, and how to get our message out to the public.

Each session could be as short as 90 minutes, but I recommend each session to be 2 hours to allow even more interaction. Especially for out-of-town locations, you may arrange for 3 sessions on one Saturday and the other 3 on the next Saturday.

Contact me for more information.

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See more resources about nonviolence and a variety of issues at [www.parallaxperspectives.org](http://www.parallaxperspectives.org)