

Not An End But a Beginning

Final Paper
Spirituality and Non-Violent Social Transformation
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***Kaufman-LeDonne** was a student in the Rev. Dr. Dorsey Blake's "Spirituality and Non-violent Social Transformation" course in fall 2006. Hear her podcast discussion with Dr. Blake and student Perry Pike by going to the www.sksm.edu home page and clicking the "Podcasts" button.*

Freedom is best experienced through participation and self-determination.

--Caesar Chavez, The Words of Caesar Chavez, 97.

"One must reach people in many ways, you know."

-Father Pacific Roy, From Loaves and Fishes, Dorothy Day, 131.

I felt that God could be realized only through service.

--Gandhi, All Men are Brothers, 16.

We come here tonight to be save from that patience that makes us patient with anything less than freedom and justice.

--Martin Luther King, A Testament of Hope, 433.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to study the lives and works of Gandhi, Day, Chavez, Du Bois and King over the course of this semester. The inspiring words and deeds of these people have helped me to begin to understand more deeply the nature of prophetic work in the world.

Throughout this course I have been particularly drawn to consider what it is that creates and distinguishes *transformational* social movements. Looking into this question has called me to consider the importance of “narrative constructions” that carefully and intentionally provoke an imagination or at least make possible an articulation of a “we” (however conceived). It is this “we” that can become the seed for collective action in the face of injustice.

Moreover, I come to see, looking into these prophetic examples, that what may be specifically *transformational* about “transformational” social movements like those led by Gandhi in India and South Africa, by Day in her Hospitality Houses, by Chavez and the United Farm Workers Union, and by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with the Student Non-Violent Organizing Committee and Southern Baptist Leadership Conference, is not simply that each movement sought to impact people’s real, material bodies and lives, but that that each of these movements did this by *organizing how people understood and felt* about their material bodies and lives.

Native American writer Gerald Vizenor has written that “we are”, in effect, “the stories we tell about ourselves.” That is, we are “who we imagine ourselves to be.” In this

view, “narrative constructions” are not just frameworks for understanding, but frameworks for living; impacting how we relate to ourselves, to each other, and the kind of choices that we make everyday.

The prophetic examples presented in this class help me to see that transformation in how people think about their own agency and collective power seems to be accomplished through the creation and articulation of “narrative structures” or “stories” which enable collective action. These narratives are successful and powerful because they are able to address themselves to specific injustices experienced in the present moment. This is accomplished through naming these injustices and demanding specific action and redress. Such narratives are *transformational* powerful because they situate people’s real, lived experiences inside historical and spiritual context. Such narratives, to be inspiring and empowering, must reinvigorate historical memory, activate a sense of agency and call forth historical and moral imperative.

Such narratives must necessarily draw from the cultural, religious, or political sources that already reside in the wisdom of the communities themselves, and Chavez provides an excellent example of how narrative construction functioned in this manner for the United Farm Workers. The mainstay philosophy of Caesar Chavez’s work and the United Farm Worker’s movement is articulated succinctly by Chavez: “Pilgrimage, penance, and revolution” (Sacramento March Letter, March 1966.) His articulation helped workers understand their historical agency, and to do this he drew from the cultural and religious experiences that were the context of workers lives.¹

¹ Chavez points to, for example, the “religion-cultural overtones” of the march from Delano to Sacramento. He outlines the ways in which “the pilgrimage” has been historically understood within the Mexican cultural experience as an “expression of penance and commitment.” This is undertaken for “some sincerely sought benefit for body or soul.” Likewise, Chavez points out that many who later became part of

The United Farm Workers Movement also reveals that an intentional unbinding of historical memory—one that rings authentic for people—may have the effect of unleashing a constructive, creative political life all of its own.

As mentioned, the critical function of these narratives seems to be the creation of a “we” which is then embodied and experienced through collective action. In the process of understanding oneself as a “we” people are transformed for we understand ourselves, each other, and our material lives anew. Thus, continuing to look at narrative, King draws me to consider how “God” and “faith” function in his articulation of a “we.”

It is this “we” that becomes the powerful common ground upon which the Non-Violent Civil Rights Movement demands economic and racial justice. It seems that “God” enables for King a divine source against which people are united in the common experience of being alive as human beings. “God” creates a natural “we” among mortals. If we are all children of “God” then we may all be equal in the sight of “the Lord.” Thus, “God” provides clear grounds for commonality.

Also vital for King was the idea of non-cooperation with systems of evil.² Challenged by King to look at my own complicity in systems of “evil” and “injustice” I am attempting now to train my vision on the current moment.

the Farm Workers Movement would have walked many pilgrimages in their lives. Finally, the Lenten penitential processions—in which penitents would walk the streets demonstrating as a sign of penance for their sins—were also, as Chavez indicates, part of the primary religious-cultural experience for many Mexican Americans. For the United Farm Workers, rooting the demand for the right to organize in **culture** was *as important* as rooting it in demands for “human rights”—the language of Western liberal discourse. Yet, Chavez and the farm workers also powerfully incorporated this language into their struggle as well “We the undersigned...”(The Plan of Delano, 16-17). This movement was powerful, it seems, because it articulated from multiple identities with an authentic voice: human being, Mexican American, democratic citizen.

² King looked to Gandhi, and also to Thoreau’s Civil Disobedience to find that “...he who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it, is really cooperating with it (A Testament of Hope, 429).” King then began to see the Montgomery bus boycott as an effort in non-cooperation with an evil system. For King and others, this non-violence is means (though not just the method) towards an “end”, an end understood as redemption,

In this class what has been demonstrated to me is that a visionary is *not* one who can look immediately to some unknown future, but one *whose vision is trained on the present*, and can locate this within a historical framework that relates the *now* to the past and future.

To this end, I have two main projects that I hope will be the beginning, and not the ending to the work I have begun in this class. One is to continue to research and practice locating what I would call potential grounds for the creation of a narrative of a “we” within the current historical moment. This will mean continuing to look into my own experiences and the experiences in the communities within I live and work. This will be by own experiment in naming, understanding, and beginning to seek a narrative that might respond to what I would call a current “crisis in citizenship”. This would have to bring together diverse people and communities who each desire social justice and are deeply dissatisfied with injustice in its many forms. As this bears for much more reflection, I hope thinking about such a narrative will continue to inform the ways I seek to collaborate with others within and outside of faith communities to create meaningful and transformative social change.

Secondly, one of the primary inspirations I draw from *Loaves and Fishes*, is the ways in which Dorothy Day’s magazine became a project around which a movement was born. I see that a creative project has the ability to focus energetic efforts that are political and transformational. In such a vein, I am hoping to become trained in the Theater of the Oppressed techniques which are used internationally, and by a variety of communities to

reconciliation, and creation of a beloved community (8). Inspired by Gandhi, King accesses that people have three responses when faced with injustice. One is acquiescence and submission, passive receipt of the injustice. The other is violence, which can tend towards destruction, massive suffering and release of unbridled passions. The third is carefully considered non-cooperation with a system of evil that perpetrates the injustice.

explore, communicate and envision solutions to injustice. This draws from and responds to my own experience as a theater teacher for people with different abilities, for I find that theater can create a dynamic space for collaborations which transform the way we understand ourselves as human agents. I will start here, and continue to train my eyes on the present, looking for ways enable creative collaborations against injustice and systems of oppression.