

Discomforts

Some things rest uneasy on the mind: In a pinch, how prepared would I be, for instance, to live by the protocols of nonviolence? And if you extirpate the pinch, how would a commitment to such principles alter my behavior from what it is right now? At the rebirth of the South African state, Nelson Mandela's determination to pursue a course of peace rather than vengeance stunned the world as forcefully as the violence that maimed it had kept him imprisoned on Robben Island for over two decades. The new South Africans called apartheid terror's aftermath "truth and reconciliation," as had occurred among former Yugoslav political actors a few short years before. At the death of Nelson Mandela on December 5, 2013, three of the twentieth century's exemplary figures converged on our collective memorial sense of what remains, apparently, difficult to achieve, and that is to say, the daily mobilization of Gandhian *Satyagraha*—and at the commencement of our terrible winter this year and always, everywhere, the threat of war, there they were—Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela, reminding us across cultures of that unease on the mind. No pabulum here; no straight down the middle; no squirreling away from the point.

To get more firmly to the matter for some future interrogation, we might juxtapose a few impression points:

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1. In *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954–63* (1988), Taylor Branch opens the fifth chapter, “The Montgomery Bus Boycott,” with a story set in Nagpur, India, December 1955: James Lawson, a young black American theologian, is teaching at a Methodist missionary school near the town and had gone to India to study Gandhian nonviolence. The *Nagpur Times*, soon after the historic meeting at the Holt Street Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, reported that “thousands of Negroes were refusing to ride segregated buses in a small American city” (143). Lawson read the news, rejoiced in it, as Branch tells the story, and would soon meet MLK at Oberlin when he (Lawson) returned to the United States to participate in the fledgling movement and become one of King’s most creative “lieutenants” in the application and adoption of nonviolence to the US scene.

2. In an early biographical study of Gandhi’s life (*The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*), Louis Fischer points out that Gandhi, in 1906, amends his cousin’s *Sadagraha* (“firmness in a good cause” [84]) to *Satyagraha* in founding a term to name the Indian movement against the South African government’s unfairness to Indian citizens of the Transvaal. Apparently a neologism, Gandhi’s term combines *satya*, or “truth,” “which equals love,” and *agraha*, or “firmness or force.” “‘Satyagraha,’ therefore, means truth-force or love-force” (84).

Nearly a century later and, ironically, in a proximate theater of action, truth and reconciliation appear to make possible the rebirth of a nation-state once devoted to racial and racist hierarchy. Are truth and reconciliation a distant and mimetic response to *Satyagraha*, and how related are both iterations of praxis to what we know as nonviolent action in the United States? In its robust insistence, this complex of ideas, unlike the usual commemorative gesture, confronts us with the possibility of transformative action—an opening in the chain of necessity?—and to act, according to James Baldwin, is to be in danger. In this case, one might well want a way out.

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