The Two Hands of Nonviolence

The Two Hands of Nonviolence Exercise was inspired by the writing of the late Barbara Deming, a feminist writer and activist. In her book Revolution and Equilibrium, *Deming's metaphor of the two hands underscores the creative tension that fuels both interpersonal transformation and social change:*

With one hand we say to one who is angry, or to an oppressor, or to an unjust system, "Stop what you are doing. I refuse to honor the role you are choosing to play. I refuse to obey you. I refuse to cooperate with your demands. I refuse to build the walls and the bombs. I refuse to pay for the guns. With this hand I will even interfere with the wrong you are doing. I want to disrupt the easy pattern of your life." But then the advocate of nonviolence raises the other hand. It is raised out-stretched – maybe with love and sympathy, maybe not – but always outstretched… With this hand we say, "I won't let go of you or cast you out of the human race. I have faith that you can make a better choice than you are making now, and I'll be here when you are ready. Like it or not, we are part of one another."

The Two Hands of Nonviolence – 20 min.

Share the following in your own words.

> To conclude our investigation of violence, we'll explore what each of these responses might feel like in our bodies with an exercise called, "The Two Hands of Nonviolence." I'll demonstrate first the three typical approaches to violence.

> First, there's *avoiding violence*. This can be depicted by bending over at the waist, covering your ears with your hands, and closing your eyes. It's a sense of retreating from the situation and of not being involved. One could also just turn around.

Demonstrate each of these postures while describing it.

> Next, there's *accommodating violence*. This can be depicted by extending your arms in front of you at about a 45-degree angle (halfway between pointing down or parallel to the ground) with your palms facing up. It's that experience of simply passively accepting whatever is happening.

> Next, there's *counter-violence*, meeting violence with violence. This can be depicted by extending your arms straight out in front of you, parallel to the ground, palms facing out away from you, pushing outward.

> Finally, there's *active nonviolence*. This can be depicted by combining two of the aforementioned poses: one arm is outstretched at a 45-degree angle with the palm facing up and the other arm is straight out in front, parallel to the ground. Finally, pulling these two hands (keeping them in their same mode) closer to the body -- in a relaxed but steady way.

Active nonviolence is a process that holds these two realities in tension and is like saying to a person:

On the one hand (symbolized by the hand that is out in front of me), I will not cooperate with your violence or injustice; I will resist it with every fiber of my being.

On the other hand (symbolized by the hand that is open), I am open to you as a human being.

Perform each of these slowly. Invite people to hold each pose for 15 to 30 seconds. Ask people to notice any feelings or sensations that they experience as they hold the poses and imagine in front of them someone with whom they are in conflict. After going through the entire set, ask people to return to the approach they think they use most in responding to conflict or violence. Then ask them to return to the approach they think they use the least.

Debrief in Pairs

Invite the participants to pair up and share with their partner on the following:

- What did you notice in doing the postures?
- What did you feel in your body?
- Did you notice any difference between the first three responses and the fourth (Two Hands) response?

Bring the group back together and conclude the exercise with two or three sharings from the participants. Convey the following in your own words if it has not been raised:

Thinking in terms of "scripts," and trying to experience what they might feel like bodily can be helpful in our recognizing what we are doing, and how we can possibly unlearn these scripts and write new ones.