

Acceptance Speech by Peter Ackerman
for Morehouse College's
Gandhi, King, Ikeda Award for Peace
Given April 5, 2018

President David A. Thomas, Dr. Lawrence E. Carter Sr., and the distinguished audience here today, I am deeply honored to receive the Gandhi, King, Ikeda Award for Peace. It has never been my expectation to be recognized this way but it is very pleasant now that it has occurred. So thank you.

I thought it appropriate to share with you the impact Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Daisaku Ikeda have had on my work.

The future of tyranny (also known as authoritarianism, despotism, or dictatorship) has been a major concern of my professional life. As of 2018, it is estimated that 1.85 billion people in the world live under the tyranny of unaccountable rulers who deny them their fundamental human rights. The consequences of this are immense. Many of the worst inhumane acts in history have been perpetrated by tyrannies or emerged from the oppression and depravity that tyrants create. Tyrannical regimes develop societies in which:

- fear is pervasive
- corruption and unfair policies lead to massive stratification of wealth and poverty.
- workers are exploited without recourse
- humanitarian and public health crises are much more likely to emerge due to incompetence or deliberate actions of powerholders.
- elections are biased, fraudulent, or nonexistent
- the judicial system is arbitrary and serves the interests of elites
- the media and educational environment is monopolized by propaganda and misinformation and finally
- attempts to challenge the system by those who live under it are met with severe repression and systematic human rights abuse

Historically citizens living in despotic regimes are believed to have had two choices: Either abject submission or violent insurrection. Now, largely as a result of the examples provided by Gandhi and King, there is a third alternative that in my humble opinion is profoundly changing the world.

It is nonviolent civil resistance which is what people do when they are living under intolerable oppression without a viable military option. Instead they rely on strikes, boycotts, mass protests, and hundreds of other acts of civil disobedience to undermine the perceived legitimacy and then the power of the tyrant to continue to govern.

Fifteen years ago, I founded the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC) to share knowledge about how strategies of civil resistance have enabled ordinary citizens to overcome oppression. Since inception ICNC has worked with dissidents from more than 75 countries to help them improve their performance during their conflicts with undemocratic rulers.

Stories are critical to creating hope for dissidents and so we have produced documentaries on 9 successful cases of civil resistance including the:

- Indian Independence Movement
- American Civil Rights Movement
- Anti-Apartheid Movement in South Africa
- Danish Resistance to the Nazis
- Anti-Pinochet Referendum in Chile
- Polish Resistance to Communist Rule
- Fall of Milosevic in Serbia
- Orange Revolution in Ukraine Against Election Fraud
- Unfinished Revolution in Egypt

While each story has its own compelling narrative, viewed together they validate a critical idea: Despite the fact that these events happened in different decades and on different continents, they tell the same story about the efficacy of campaigns of civil resistance.

The movies have won over 20 film festival awards, including an Emmy nomination, and the 2003 Peabody award for documentary excellence. They have appeared in 20 languages and have been seen in over 100 countries.

The two most watched films have been:

- the Indian Independence Movement and the American Civil Rights movement.

The movie on India, visually portrays Gandhi as a towering moral figure, who would not have been so universally remembered except for one seismic event. In 1930 he left his ashram walked 210 miles to Dandi Beach picked up a handful of mud threw it in a kettle of boiling water and made salt. It was illegal under the British Raj to make salt but immediately 250 million people followed suit. This nonviolent tactic was so disruptive that the Viceroy told his secretaries of state that if the 100,000 local constabularies maintaining order around India began making salt –or tried other acts of civil disobedience– the British would have to leave.

The civil rights movement featured a litany of disruptions to the normal order. The ICNC film focuses the Nashville lunch counter boycotts led for King by Reverend Jim Lawson (who has also become a dear friend of 20 years).

When asked to opt for more tranquility Reverend King responded in his letter from a Birmingham Jail:

"Why direct action, why sit-ins, marches, and so forth? ... [it is because]... Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has consistently refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. I just referred to the creation of tension as a part of the work of the nonviolent resister. This may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension." I have earnestly worked and preached against violent tension, but there is a type of constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth.

It may be no coincidence that there was such an identity of strategic insight between Gandhi and King. In 1936 Mohandas Gandhi was visited by a well-known African American minister and his wife, who asked him at one point whether nonviolent resistance was "a form of direct action." Gandhi replied vigorously, "It is not one form, it is the only form...It is the greatest and the activist force in the world...It is a force which is more positive than electricity, and more powerful than even ether."

Were Gandhi and King right? Have their ideas about civil resistance been validated outside the regions and decades of their own conflicts?

Recently a study funded by ICNC looked at 323 insurrections between 1900-2006. They were divided into two categories: insurrections dominated by violent tactics and insurrections dominated by nonviolent tactics. These were the results.

Based on the goals of the insurrectionists the success rate of the violent uprisings was 26% but it was 53% for the nonviolent uprisings. The average length of the violent conflicts were 9 years and had one tenth the chance of ending in substantially improved democratic governance than the nonviolent conflicts that lasted on average only 3 years.

Gandhi and King were right. But what about the future? Looking at the recent past it is easy to become pessimistic. According to the definitive annual Freedom House survey for each of the last twelve years more countries have lost freedom than have gained freedom. Will that trend reverse? Most experts either equivocate or say no: I disagree.

Here's why. Natan Sharansky, the Soviet refusenik asks and answers the following question:

"How is that dissidents rotting in the gulag were able to predict, many years earlier, not only when but how the Soviet Union would collapse—something that escaped all the world's scholars and intelligence agencies alike? The reason is simple.

Every totalitarian society consists of three groups: true believers, double-thinkers and dissidents. In every totalitarian regime, no matter its cultural or geographical circumstances, the majority undergo a conversion over time from true belief in

the revolutionary message into double-thinking. They no longer believe in the regime but are too scared to say so.”

The genius of nonviolent civil resistance as mastered by Gandhi and King is to use societal disruptions to turn double-thinkers into dissidents. But then why would true believers –protected by the existing system– take the risk of being exposed as double-thinkers? The only answer possible is that people are basically decent and ultimately abhor what tyrannies do to their fellow citizens. My optimism is premised on Daisaku Ikeda's expectation for mankind's future that he described in a lecture delivered at Harvard in 1993:

“It is my earnest desire and prayer that in the twenty-first century each member of the human family will bring forth the natural luster of this inner ‘treasure tower’ and, wrapping our azure planet in the symphonic tones of open dialogue, humankind will make its evolutionary advance into the new millennium.”

Thank you again for this honor.