

Non-violence and Nonviolence

by Kazu Haga, from *Healing Resistance: A Radically Different Response to Harm*

In Kingian Nonviolence, a philosophy developed out of the teachings of Martin Luther King Jr., there is a distinction made between nonviolence spelled *with* a hyphen, and nonviolence spelled *without* a hyphen. “Non-violence” is essentially two words: “without” “violence.” When spelled this way, it only describes the absence of violence. As long as I am “not being violent,” I am practicing non-violence. And that is the biggest misunderstanding of nonviolence that exists.

I live in one of the most diverse neighborhoods in Oakland, with an equal mix of black, Latino and Asian residents. One day, I was taking a nap in my apartment when I was woken up by a couple yelling at each other below my second-story window. I decided to get out of bed and look, and I saw a woman on the ground being beaten, crying and screaming for help. I jumped up, put on my shoes and ran downstairs. By the time I arrived, about 15 of my neighbors had also come outside, but they were just watching this woman get beat, doing nothing to help. I managed to break up the fight and get the two to walk away from each other, one fuming with anger and the other in tears.

My neighbors who were just watching this were practicing “non *hyphen* violence.” They weren’t throwing punches or kicks. They were explicitly being “not violent.” So, you see how, from a Kingian perspective, what a difference that little hyphen makes. You see how big of a misunderstanding it can create if we think that nonviolence is simply about the absence of violence. If we define nonviolence as “not violent,” then we can hide behind the veil of nonviolence while still condoning violence.

It’s easy to be a bystander. We see rising homelessness, and we turn the other way. We see unarmed black folks being killed by police, and we blame the victim. We hear about high suicide rates among LGBTQ youth, and we do little or nothing about it. We read reports on the climate crisis but leave it to the next generation to deal with. We watch our communities and the earth being assaulted every day, and we just gather around and watch.

Nonviolence is not about what *not* to do. It is about what you *are going to do* about the violence and injustice we see in our own hearts, our homes, our neighborhoods and society at large. It is about taking a proactive stand against violence and injustice. Nonviolence is about *action*, not *inaction*.