



## Ahimsa, Fear and Racial Justice

A Brief Note By

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# Ahimsa as a Weapon in the Struggle for Racial Justice

## I

### An Antidote to Fear

*Ahimsa* was a Sanskrit word with deep resonance in all of South Asia's ancient karmic religions, Buddhism, Hinduism, and (especially) Jainism, in which **ahimsa stood for a commitment to refrain from harming living things**. [Gandhi] felt there was no good English language equivalent for *ahimsa*, so he created the term *nonviolence*...., but told [Howard] Thurman that he regretted the fact that his coinage started with the “negative particle ‘non.’” On the contrary, Gandhi insisted nonviolence was “**a force which is more positive than electricity**” .... [Visions of a Better World, Dixies and Eisenstadt, describing a historic 1935 meeting between Mahatma Gandhi and Howard Thurman] (emphases added)

“...When the looting starts the shooting starts....”

Two days after George Floyd's murder the President of the United States was depicting Minneapolis demonstrators as a rampaging mob meriting a violent response. He and others who echoed his words manipulated white observers who were discomfited by Floyd's assassination but who were more readily frightened by the spectre of black or radical violence. Ahimsa is potentially a powerful weapon to combat this kind of manipulation of racial fears and tensions which stand as obstacles to racial justice.

The authors of this Note are African-Americans, raised to believe it is anathema to be indifferent to injustice. We are also 30 year “beginning” practitioners of yoga. Both these spheres of human experience have exposed us to the ethical precept of *ahimsa* which is vital to vanquishing fear and establishing justice.

For historical perspective, it's important to observe that Ahimsa or “non-violence” was foundational to two important struggles of the last century, for Indian decolonization, and for African-American freedom. This is illustrated in part by the dialogue between two leading voices of those movements Gandhi and Howard Thurman. (Thurman would become one of the Gandhi-ists around

Dr. King.”) In this conversation Thurman asked Gandhi “Is non-violence from your point of view a form of direct action?” ... “**It is not one form,**” Gandhi replied, “**it is the only fm**”

Just pause here and observe a point of tension in our discussion of Ahimsa. Its utility does not depend on the assertion that it is the “only form” of effective resistance or in oversimplifying its appeal. Implicit in Gandhi’s response to Thurman was the belief that non-violence was the only *ethical* form of struggle against injustice. This assumption was not one that the authors or most Black Americans have been permitted to indulge.

A co-author of this Note, Raymond sat wide eyed as a youth in offices and church basements in the ‘50’s and early 60’s while his father, Raymond A. Brown, a great civil rights leader debated the moral and strategic underpinnings of non-violence with local leaders and with giants like A. Philip Randolph, Ella Baker, John Lewis and Bayard Rustin. These discussions inevitably addressed the strategic implications of fear on the part of oppressors and oppressed. Parallel discourses unfolding around the country were not theoretical because they shaped the freedom “movement” of the ‘60’s. The resulting consensus favoring non-violence was not universal or inevitable and most folks wavered at times – and for good reasons.

On August 5, 1965 Alberta O. Jones a Louisville, Kentucky civil rights pioneer, the first black prosecutor in that City and Muhammad Ali’s lawyer was assassinated. Her killers have never been prosecuted and her death had a profound impact on a young Louisvillian, the other co-author of this Note, Wanda Akin, who had already declared her intention to be a lawyer in Jones’ mold. Her declaration fostered robust family debate for years to come featuring equal measures of fear and hope. The tension between living in a world frequently punctuated by racial violence while immersed in a movement wedded to non-violence was and remains omnipresent for us.

In fact, the 1960s were punctuated with urban rebellions in America amidst compelling arguments for use of force in response to violent oppression. Earlier leaders like the anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells Barnett, and mid century organizations like the Deacons for Defense and Justice, and the Black Panthers argued in favor of armed defense for blacks. Many of the “foot soldiers” of the American “civil rights” movement included persons (like both Raymonds) who supported armed struggle in South Africa and other lands where colonial oppression had left its mark. Why then consider a continued commitment to ahimsa and non-violence now?

One possible answer is hinted at again by our Thurman-Gandhi dialogue in which the Mahatma argues that ahimsa mandates struggle. “Nonviolence, Gandhi said, does not exist without an active expression of it, and indeed, **“one cannot be passively nonviolent.”**”

Thus, even in the absence of armed struggle there is an alternative means of fighting for justice. Indeed, it is one that requires us to vanquish fear for the oppressed and for those who allow themselves in the illusion that they are bystanders.

Although our yoga teacher, Beryl Bender Birch was in the Ashtanga lineage of K. Pataabhi Jois she encouraged us to read BKS Iyengar. Iyengar’s “translation” of Patanjali’s version of ahimsa reads; *“When non-violence in speech, thought and action is established, one’s aggressive nature is relinquished and others abandon hostility to one’s presence.”* [Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali Sutra II.35]. His words provide a dynamic but idealistic formula for the use of ahimsa as a weapon in an environment in which fear is ubiquitous.

Foremost amongst leaders we have known who saw that fear itself was the great impediment to justice was Raymond’s father. He was a Roman Catholic who had fought in World War II who was not an ideological pacifist. Here is a small illustrative episode in the struggle for justice using non-violence as seen through Raymond’s eyes.

## II

### JIM CROW MUST GO!

A Story from Raymond's Youth

*"The **Prophets** Used Much by Metaphors to Set Forth Truth"*  
John Bunyan

*"The Negro is America's Metaphor"* Richard Wright

*It may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of nonviolence is delivered to the world*

Mohandas K Gandhi THE PAPERS OF HOWARD WASHINGTON THURMAN

It is 1952, the first year in the 20th century in which no African-Americans are reported lynched -- although the horrifying Mississippi murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till is still to come. (Till's lynching will leave a vivid impression on me because it will take place 4 days after my ninth birthday). The Brown family lives in the Booker T. Washington Housing Project in Jersey City. My father attends law school at night and works on the docks during the day. He and many of his "boys," have recently returned from defeating fascism and installed their families in Booker T.

One family friend who does not live in Booker T. is Fred Martin, a Jersey City legend as the first black man to serve on the City Council, and as a skilled entrepreneur. From a small vat tucked away on Jackson Avenue in Jersey City, Fred and his brother Richard, produce enough Nile hair pomade to coif the universe. (Jackson Avenue will become an unhappily decaying street renamed Martin Luther King Boulevard). Although Fred does not live in Booker T, he has been instrumental in seeing that our families and others find shelter there.

This particular morning, my six-year-old self awakens to my mother's fussing about someone throwing stones at our window. The culprit is stationed across the street in front of the trucking terminal which is the source of much of the ambient sound of my early childhood. Mom is reassured, once dad goes to the window, predicting that some "blame fool" is about to get his

ass kicked. Dad dissolves into laughter because the assailant is Fred Martin, who wants to talk but who insists on stoning our window to get our attention. Fred has declared that, "It'll be a cold day in hell before I set foot in that damn Jim Crow project."

My mother, Elaine, reluctantly accepts this excuse for Fred's conduct. I marvel at his marksmanship. I also wonder about this guy, Jim Crow, who provokes Fred's ire, and owns not just our building, but the whole "projects!" Over the coming months, I grow more impressed with Jim Crow's power and influence as I hear dad talk about his experiences serving in the "Jim Crow" Army, criticize the "Jim Crow" education available to Negro children, and condemn "Jim Crow" accommodations in the south.

I do not yet realize that this Jim Crow is more sinister than mere flesh and blood -- that he is a metaphor for the system of white supremacy that emerged from the ashes of Reconstruction. I am still to learn the consequences of taking Jim Crow's demise for granted. As my mother warned me more than once "every shut eye ain't sleep, every good bye ain't gone." In fact, a ritual query posed by my maternal grandmother Anna during my early adolescence offers sad testimony to Jim Crow's capacity to play the confederate pimpnel.

My dad works incredible hours. However, every Sunday he takes us on a "mysteryride." He refuses to disclose our destinations in advance but we all pile into the car alongwith his mother Elizabeth, my mother's mom Anna, and other members of our extended family. We invariably head for the City.

We visit museums, parks and other exotic locales. We feel that we own a piece of the carousel in Central Park. We never miss the feast of San Gennaro in Little Italy. We see Fidel Castro at the window of his hotel room in Harlem's Hotel Theresa during his controversial 1960 visit. We visit Michaux' "House of Common Sense and Proper Propaganda" on 125th Street. We hear Robert Frost read poetry at the 92nd Street "Y". We see the great French Mime Marcel Marceau whenever he is in New York. We learn about the history of the Triangle Shirtwaist Building, the Bowery and El Barrio. We visit theatres, circuses, ballparks. We leave no part of Manhattan's environs unexplored.

From Luchow's in Midtown, to Wah-Kee's in Chinatown (where we eat with the waiters in the kitchen) each trip culminates in a major culinary experience. However, whenever Anna is with us, she sounds a puzzling refrain as we reach the door of the day's chosen eatery. She turns to my dad, and with a sad persistence asks, **“Ray, can we go in there? Do they serve the Colored in there?”**

As a small child, I do not understand this mantra. As I grow older, I grasp its significance, but its genesis remains obscure. Anna has lived in the North her entire life. As far as I know, she has experienced no racial trauma beyond the "quotidian" humiliations of Jim Crow culture. Why is this question always on her lips?

My father's response to her is always the same unprintable description of how he will dismantle the restaurant if they try to keep us out. No one ever does. We have our share of slothful

waiters whose lousy service we are sure is racially motivated. But that experience is available anytime in any American city.

Nonetheless, month after month, “mystery ride” after “mystery ride” Anna offers the same frightened refrain, testimony to Jim Crow's hypnotic and crippling staying power – “Can we go in there?”

That same question generates a historic response from a group of black students in North Carolina in 1960 when they decide to protest their exclusion from Southern lunch counters. Within two months, the sit-ins spread to 59 cities in nine states.

My dad decides to take advantage of the sit-ins in Greensboro to break the cycle of fear in Jersey City. He organizes a boycott of the Woolworth's Five and Ten Cent Store on Jackson Avenue. He intends to kick off the boycott by picketing the store.

A meeting is held on a cold February Saturday at the NAACP headquarters. Somebody asks “Why we are gonna picket the Jersey City Woolworth's? We can eat at their lunch counter!” Dad explains that it is necessary to support the Southern students by putting pressure on the “Five and Dimes” around the country. There is grumbling. A few folks depart. The fear is palpable. The theme of his speech is one that punctuated much his of public discourse, “Fear no man.” He discussed the historic efforts in Jersey City and throughout the country to intimidate black folks from asserting their rights. He described in detail the training the southern students were undergoing to prepare for their sit-ins including having comrades posing as hostile observers shouting epithets, spitting on them and harassing them emotionally and physically. There is audible grumbling at this description.

Ultimately, however, out of several hundred folks assembled to hear him, only four of us set out from the NAACP office with picket signs. This contingent consists of the old man, big-

hipped Lucille Wallace, the first black woman on the Jersey City Police Department; future Assemblyman Addison McCleon, and me. I am 14 years old.

I have always known Lucille Wallace. She lives next door to Anna. Lucille has the loudest voice I have ever heard on a woman. As we walk up Jackson Avenue she bellows to folks watching us from the windows urging each by name to join us. They stare with embarrassment and then retreat from their windows.

I ask my dad why everyone is afraid.

He reminds me that the Hudson County Democratic machine is dominated by political descendants of Frank "I am the law" Hague. They brook no opposition. He tells me how they assassinated Doc Canon.

When dad was a kid in the '30's, the only black man who publicly defied Hague was a Doctor named Canon. Dad says that one day as Doc stood on the corner waiting for a lift, a Public Service Bus deliberately ran him down as a lesson to "uppity niggers."

While I am absorbing that, he tells me the United States Supreme Court had to tell Boss Hague in the 1930's that it wasn't lawful to ban public gatherings by requiring citizens to get permits from the Director of Public Safety. He says, however, the Supreme Court couldn't keep Hague and his successors from muscling people and intimidating them.

We arrive in front of Woolworth's and I see what he means. There are at least 10 police cars and 30 cops poised menacingly in the middle of Jackson Ave. Dad smiles and says "Son, fear no man!" He grabs a picket sign and starts walking in large circles in front of Woolworth's. Lucille follows behind him singing loudly "We shall not be moved." Addison joins them and I bring up the rear. For an hour it is the four of us and 30 cops.

*"Just like a tree that's planted by the water, we shall not be moved."*

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Fred Martin and C.G. join us and our number swells to six. Fred is chanting "Jim Crow Must Go" with his piercing voice. Behind him is C.G. who (it has been whispered) is a black Communist. The old man says he doesn't care as long as C.G. stays away from the mimeograph machine. (This is the first of several conversations in which he explains why many blacks joined the Communists in the '30s and '40's. He describes the evils of McCarthyism but says he won't join any organization that takes orders from someplace else. He also says that the Party is really an instrument of Soviet foreign policy. I vaguely understand.)

Dad is approached by the timid manager of Woolworth's who asks if he would agree not to picket the side entrance to the store as his employees (all white) are afraid to cross the picket lines. The old man assents to the manager's request, telling him that he is "confident that by the time the picket line goes up next week that some of those employees will be Negroes." The manager smiles weakly and departs. The six of us keep walking in circles.

*"Jim Crow Must Go!"*

Over the weeks and months and years ahead, there are meetings, registration drives, a March on Washington, other picket lines. I learn about the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and meet movement folk from around the country as they come through Jersey City. That first picket line seems to go on forever. I discover that, contrary to some reports, Jim Crow doesn't go. He just builds a guerrilla movement.

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### III

#### **Justice, Fear and the Spirit**

Particularly gruesome was the attack on my aunt. She was late in her pregnancy and could not run away. A few of the attackers grabbed her and cut open her belly. They removed the fetus, stabbed it, and then stabbed my aunt, killing both of them. Their dead bodies were inhumanely tossed into a burning house.

Declaration under oath of Darfurian Genocide Survivor submitted by the authors as Victim's Counsel to the International Criminal Court in the Hague Netherlands

Ahimsa provides a bridge from Raymond's narrative of a demonstration in Jersey City in the 1960s' to Complaint by a Darfurian early in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century charging genocide against the leaders of her own country. In challenging Jim Crow, Raymond's dad highlighted the need to overcome the fear instilled in victim's of oppression in order to mount what Malcolm X called a "bloodless revolution". [The Ballot or the Bullet]. The Darfurians interviewed by the authors who represented them as victims at the International Criminal Court, are a prime example of overcoming fear to fight for justice.

The authors and our teams of lawyers and interpreters interviewed hundreds of Darfurians on 3 continents between 2005 and 2015. They were the survivors of an ethnically motivated Genocide in which as many as 400,000 Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa were slaughtered and a further 2.5 million became internally displaced persons with a quarter million more becoming refugees. These survivors of genocide, crimes against humanity and gender based violence showed extraordinary courage in choosing to participate in the Court process.

They came forward despite the gruesomely specific threat of the Sudanese Government to "decapitate" them. When that same government changed tactics the victims we represented and their families rejected offers of six figure settlements to forego their victim participation at the International Criminal Court. They universally said no. When asked why they withstood threats and blandishments to stand witness to the violence visited upon their people their answer was invariably the same: "We

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want justice.” This answer came not from legal scholars or political leaders or rebels but from sorghum farmers, camel herders, and market women.

These folks who had experienced unspeakable violence believed in the abstract idea of justice as a response to unconscionable use of force. International justice is an aggressively secular project. But as with the spiritually rooted concept of ahimsa, many scholars find the roots of humanitarian law (the law of armed conflict) and its cousin human rights, in the world’s sacred texts. The Quran, the Old Testament, the Laws of Manu, and even the work of St. Augustine one of the authors of Just War Theory reflect the notion of combatting violence with a different kind of force. They reflect the accumulated experience of mankind that the effort to destroy others with violence creates a larger cycle of violence.

These limitations and prohibitions on use of force and violence have been, against opposition, filtered through a legal crucible called “the Principle of Legality” which transforms ethical and moral precepts into prosecutable crimes. Human Rights, like ahimsa is an ethical idea which properly utilized, provides a path to justice.

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## IV

### “Practicing” Ahimsa

*“There are five yamas and the first of these is Ahimsa, which means ‘non-violence, or ‘reverence for life.’ (The yamas are sort of the ethical tenets of the practice....). When I make time for my practice each day, I feel as if I am consciously attempting to practice reverence for myself, which is a good place to start and definitely makes it easier to extend this practice of nonviolence to the rest of the planet’s inhabitants.” **Beryl Bender Birch** [Power Yoga]*

Our experience of ahimsa challenges us to actively manage the tensions, fears and contradictions surrounding inner and external struggle. In the morning during asana we renew our “daily” effort to manage the tensions between “being where we are” and deepening the experience of yoking mind to body. (This includes trying to overcome inertia when a mischievous voice says “I’m tired, let’s skip practice today.”)

As black Americans it means learning to manage what W.E.B. Du Bois called “double consciousness” addressing “...unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” [The Souls of Black Folks]. In the struggle for civil rights for black folks it means joining with heirs and recipients of unspeakable violence and terror in a complex, often unsuccessful attempt to employ nonviolent means to cash Dr. King’s tattered “promissory note”.

In the struggle for human rights it has meant setting ethics against massive misuse of violence and force. As Amartya Sen has told us of human rights “what is being articulated or ratified is an ethical assertion.” In a “project” which has been with the authors for a long time but taken wing since the murder of George Floyd, our work on implicit bias with potential white allies requires us to create a comfortable space for strangers only to lead them towards the uncomfortable self-interrogation of their role in battling racial injustice.

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We call on our collective project to employ ahimsa inspired strategies to confront the current dramatic manifestation of fear which is motivating opposition to racial justice. On January 6, 2021, a violent mob of insurrectionists stormed the Nations' Capitol. Some carried Confederate flags, others were cloaked in garments emblazoned with slogans endorsing the Final Solution of the Third Reich. They sought to overturn by a putsch election results from the urban districts of Atlanta, Detroit, Milwaukee and Philadelphia. An early study revealed that many advocated "replacement theory" the idea that people of color and other undesirables are seeking to replace them in the body politic. Their allies in the Congress refuse to support either meaningful police reform or protections for people of color at the ballot. This is an anti-democratic movement fueled by fear and stoked by leaders who like lynch mobs of old, foster or turn a blind eye to violence. (It should be noted that the majority party in Congress has not used parliamentary tools at its disposal to defeat these efforts.)

This is a group that labels the non-violent movement Black Lives Matter movement "a symbol of hate" and has demonized Critical Race Theory which advocates a historically, unflinchingly honest look at race, slavery and the American experiment. It presents us with the challenge of combining ahimsa with another yama, Satya, commitment to truth. Then to go forth with our voices, our feet and our resources to insist on racial justice as the only path forward. Dr. King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail offers us a formula for accomplishing this goal:

Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension."

We recognize that covering this critical ground of the role in ahimsa in pursuing justice in a genre bending pamphlet suggests hubris. All we can do is seek forgiveness in advance and hope

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that this offering will draw us into deeper dialogue with you about a key subject for our time. We view this as praxis. And we shy away from the alternative which is silence.

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This Note began as an informal exchange between the authors when they were honored by their teacher Beryl Bender Birch with a request to lecture on “Yoga and Right Action” to her Teacher Training Course. When Wanda was asked by Yoga Gives Back to participate in a panel on “Living Yamas & Niyamas” we did some editing and offered this to the organizers. Namaste.