

Conscience, Civil Disobedience, and Holy Obedience

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In 1973, Gene Sharp, who is now in his 80s, published a trilogy of book on *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. Volume 2 includes a list of “[198 Methods of Nonviolent Action](#),” outlines each method, and gives information about its historical use. The intent is to inspire the imaginations of future activists seeking to use nonviolence to transform our world for the better.

The New York Times, writing about Sharp’s influence, has [said](#):

Few Americans have heard of Mr. Sharp. But for decades, his practical writings on nonviolent revolution — most notably “[From Dictatorship to Democracy](#),” a 93-page guide to toppling autocrats, available for download in 24 languages — have inspired dissidents around the world, including in Burma, Bosnia, Estonia and Zimbabwe, and now Tunisia and Egypt.¹

In the following list of a few major categories from Sharp’s list of nonviolent methods, I invite you to reflect on any times in your life that either you personally have used some of these methods or any times that you have witnessed others doing do. In these cases, what inspired these individuals or groups to follow their conscience and seek to change the status quo?

- **Formal Statements:** Public Speeches, Letters of opposition or support, Declarations by organizations and institutions, Signed public statements, Declarations of indictment and intention, Group or mass petitions
- **Communications with a Wider Audience:** Slogans, caricatures, and symbols; Banners, posters, and displayed communications; Leaflets, pamphlets, and books; Newspapers and journals; Records, radio, and television....
- **Group Representations:** Deputations; Mock awards, Group lobbying, Picketing.

¹ “Shy U.S. Intellectual Created Playbook Used in a Revolution,” available at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/17/world/middleeast/17sharp.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0. See also, “The Quiet American,” available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/09/t-magazine/gene-sharp-theorist-of-power.html?ref=genessharp>.

- **Symbolic Public Acts:** Displays of flags and symbolic colors, Wearing of symbols, Prayer and worship, Delivering symbolic objects, Protest disrobings, Destruction of own property, Symbolic lights
- [Other major categories include] Pressures on Individuals, Drama and Music, Processions, Honoring the Dead, Public Assemblies, Withdrawal and Renunciation, Ostracism of Persons; Noncooperation with Social Events, Customs, and Institutions; Withdrawal from the Social System; Economic Boycotts, The Strike, Rejection of Authority, and Citizens' Noncooperation with Government²

What has inspired you or others to follow your conscience and seek to change an unjust *status quo* through the use of these or other methods of nonviolent activism?

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Last week's sermon was a response to a new Unitarian Universalist Association report titled, [*Who's in Charge Here?: The Complex Relationship Between Ministry and Authority*](#).³ And everything I said last week about that dance between authority and accountability, cooperation and control remains relevant for this week's exploration of civil disobedience, nonviolent activism, and when to follow your conscience instead of an unjust *status quo*. In particular, last week I quoted Thomas Jefferson's words in the Declaration of Independence that, "Governments...[derive] their just powers from the consent of the governed." **By grounding the formation of this country on the *consent of the governed*, Jefferson was rejecting the "divine right of kings":** the idea that a monarch's right to rule is ordained by God and cannot be justly questioned. Jefferson was asserting the revolutionary Enlightenment idea that if the people do not like the way things are, then "We the People" can demand change at even the highest levels of society.

In Henry David Thoreau's 1849 essay "Civil Disobedience" (originally titled "Resistance to Civil Government"), I hear a similarly radical declaration of independence to Jefferson's

² "198 Methods of Nonviolent Action," available at <http://www.aeinstein.org/organizations103a.html>.

³ My sermon on "'Who's In Charge Here?' The Dance between Shared Ministry and Authority" is available at http://www.frederickuu.org/sermons/Charge_Here.pdf.

writings from 73 years earlier. But Thoreau's essay is more *libertarian* than liberal. Indeed, the opening words of Thoreau's essay are:

I HEARTILY ACCEPT the motto, — “That government is best which governs least”; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically.

Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe, — “That government is best which governs not at all”; and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have.

That sounds like the politics of Ron Paul or of the anti-tax lobbyist Grover Norquist, who famously said that, “I don't want to abolish government. I simply want to reduce it to the size where I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub.”

And paralleling Jefferson's words “That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends [of Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness], it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government.” Thoreau wrote later in his essay that, “This American government — what is it but a tradition, though a recent one, endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each instant losing some of its integrity?” My point is that **Jefferson, Thoreau, and many others of our Unitarian, Universalist, and American forebears were not afraid of writing transgressive, inflammatory words against sources of civil authority, especially civil authority they viewed as corrupt or undeserved.** Both Jefferson and Thoreau are discouraging blind, unquestioning allegiance to *any* government, even the government of this “grand experiment” that we call the United States of America.

As some of you may remember, Thoreau's *personal* act of civil disobedience was being a tax resister as a form of protest for how those tax dollars were used to support both slavery and the Mexican-American War. **More than 150 years ago, in a sentence that could easily have been written about the Iraq War, Thoreau wrote, “Witness the present Mexican war, the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for, in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure.”** (As George Santayana said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”) And when a tax collector confronted Thoreau in 1846 about his *six years* of delinquent taxes, he was arrested for

still refusing to pay. He was released, however, after being held overnight, when an unnamed friend or family member paid the tax against his wishes.

We Unitarian Universalists like to claim Thoreau as one of our Unitarian forebears, and although Thoreau did have strong Unitarian influences in his life, the caveat should be added that he was perhaps more interested in *Transcendentalism* personally than in institutionalized religion. He would, however, have strongly supported our UU Fifth Principle of “The right of conscience.” And **a strong theme in Thoreau’s essay is the importance following your conscience.** He writes:

Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience then? . . . The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right.” And “if [an injustice] is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine.

Thoreau’s contention that, “The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right” seems overstated to be. Nonetheless, it is striking to hear Thoreau in the mid-nineteenth century essentially saying, “Rage against the machine!”

Said differently, Thoreau believed in Augustine’s ancient adage that, “**An unjust law is no law at all.**” And Thoreau’s essay has influenced many other nonviolent activists from Tolstoy to Gandhi, to Martin Luther King, Jr., who wrote in his autobiography that as a student he read Thoreau’s essay and “was so deeply moved that I reread the work several times. I became convinced that **noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good.**”

As Unitarian Universalists, another important piece of our history is the courage of the UU associated publishing house Beacon Press to be the first to publish the complete 7,000 pages of the Pentagon Papers about the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. And as *Democracy Now* has [reported](#), the civil disobedience of “Their publication led the Beacon Press into a spiral of two-

and-a-half years of harassment, intimidation, near bankruptcy and the possibility of criminal prosecution.”⁴

Daniel Ellsberg is the name of the person who leaked the Pentagon Papers, and history has, for the most part, judged Ellsberg’s civil disobedience — and Beacon Press’s help — to be right, courageous, and heroic. But **judging whether an act of civil disobedience is right — and whether we may personally want to defend it or join in — is much harder in the moment.** Take, for example, the much more controversial case of Edward Snowden, who is seeking asylum in another country in the wake of his act of civil disobedience: leaking information to the press about the U.S. government’s mass surveillance program.

From talking with some of you about Snowden’s actions, I know that there are nuanced and conflicting views in this congregation about whether Snowden’s civil disobedience was wise and worthy of support. For what it is worth, Daniel Ellsberg published an opinion piece in the *Washington Post* on July 7 that [said](#),

Snowden believes that he has done nothing wrong. I agree wholeheartedly. More than 40 years after my unauthorized disclosure of the Pentagon Papers, **such leaks remain the lifeblood of a free press and our republic.** One lesson of the Pentagon Papers and Snowden’s leaks is simple: **secrecy corrupts**, just as power corrupts. In my case, my authorized access in the Pentagon and the Rand Corp. to top-secret documents — which became known as the Pentagon Papers after I disclosed them — taught me that **Congress and the American people had been lied to by successive presidents and dragged into a hopelessly stalemated war that was illegitimate from the start.**⁵

You may or may not agree with that assessment. As the old saying goes, **“Where one person sees a ‘freedom fighter,’ another may see a ‘terrorist.’”**

⁴ “How the Pentagon Papers Came to be Published By the Beacon Press Told by Daniel Ellsberg & Others,” available at http://www.democracynow.org/2013/7/4/how_the_pentagon_papers_came_to#.Uda7bqqU3gA.

⁵ Daniel Ellsberg, “Snowden made the right call when he fled the U.S.,” available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/daniel-ellsberg-nsa-leaker-snowden-made-the-right-call/2013/07/07/0b46d96c-e5b7-11e2-aef3-339619eab080_story.html.

To explore this dynamic further, I would like to share a story about one of my first close encounters with civil disobedience. It was the summer of 2002, and I was spending two weeks as a volunteer member of an intentional community called [Koinonia Farms](#) in Americus, Georgia. Koinonia Farms was founded back in 1942 with the intention of providing a place where blacks and whites could live and work together. Notice that date: 1942. **Koinonia Farms attempted to form an interracial community in the deep south more than a decade before the Civil Rights Movement** really got underway in 1955 with Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. (The landmark desegregation Supreme Court case of “Brown v. Board of Education” wasn’t until 1954.) The history of Koinonia Farms deserves its own sermon someday (including how it led to the start of Habitat for Humanity), but the reason I’m bringing it up now is that about halfway through the two weeks I spent there as a volunteer almost a decade ago, the director at the time approached me unexpectedly and asked if I would be willing to drive him about an hour to the courthouse where his nephew was going to be on trial for an act of civil disobedience.

We ended up attending three days of the weeklong trial of protesters arrested for illegally crossing the line onto the property of Fort Benning, a U.S. Army post outside Columbus, Georgia. They were part of a **nonviolent activist movement seeking to call attention to the U.S. Army School of the Americas** or SOA for short. Founded in 1946, the SOA is a U.S. training facility for Latin American soldiers and military personnel, funded by U.S. tax dollars. (Perhaps some parallels come to mind here of Thoreau’s refusal to pay taxes that would support the Mexican-American war that could bring slavery to Mexico.)

Human rights activists have for many years criticized the SOA’s graduates for contributing to human rights violation in Latin America. As *The New York Times* [wrote](#) in 1996, Americans can now read for themselves some of the noxious lessons the United States Army taught to thousands of Latin American military and police officers at the School of the Americas during the 1980's. A training manual recently released by the Pentagon recommended interrogation techniques like torture, execution, blackmail and arresting the relatives of those being questioned. Such practices, which some of the school's graduates enthusiastically applied once they returned

home, **violate basic human rights and the Army's own rules of procedure.**

They also defy the professed goals of American foreign policy and foreign military training programs. Though the manual was taken out of use in 1991 and the school's curriculum modified to include some instruction in human rights standards, the school does little to advance American interests and should be closed down.⁶

In 2001, the SOA was renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation and allegedly reformed, but when I asked some of the protesters about this change, they maintained that this name change was only a surface change meant as a distraction. They carried placards that said, "Different name, same shame."

Thousands gather at Fort Benning annually to protest outside the gate, carrying crosses and coffins in memory of victims of SOA graduates. (You can learn more about the protesters' perspectives on the [School of the Americas Watch](http://www.soaw.org) website: <http://www.soaw.org>.) In the trials I watched, 43 people had taken the next step from *legal* protest to the *civil disobedience* of crossing the line onto Fort Benning property. The U.S. government chose to press charges against 37 of the 43 trespassers. Those who crossed the line did so for many different reasons, but the most common I heard was to give voice to the voiceless in Latin America and to shine a spotlight on the atrocities begun committed by those trained in the U.S. and funded by U.S. tax dollars. To echo MLK's words after reading Thoreau, those 43 protesters "became convinced that noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good."

I was particularly struck by the wide age range of those arrested for civil disobedience. Among those 37 who engaged in civil disobedience was an elderly Franciscan monk wearing a traditional brown robe, a few older members of Catholic Worker houses, and quite a few men and women in their 20s. I'd like to tell you about two of those young people: Richard and Palmer.

Richard had worked in Guatemala, and witnessed the violence of SOA graduates firsthand. On the stand he said,

⁶ "School of the Dictators," available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/09/28/opinion/school-of-the-dictators.html>.

I will return to Guatemala, but **I can't go back and tell the people that I wrote a letter to my congressional representative or that I picketed with a sign. Those are fine measure, but the disappearances, the torturing, the military oppression has to stop now!** Something must be done. For me, that was crossing the line, being on trial to be able to talk to you, Judge, the media, and all the others here today. The word must be spread. The SOA must be closed. After being in Guatemala, I have a burned of knowledge. Now you [Judge] have that same burden.

All his relatives and friends also became more aware of this issue through Richard's act of civil disobedience.

Here's a similar testimony from Palmer:

As a teenager, I didn't care much that my clothes were made in sweatshops and that my taxpayer dollars were going to terrorize, torture, and kill those who attempted to organize union in those sweatshops. As I began to find out more, I told others about what I had learned. I was naive at first and thought that what was missing was knowledge. Then came a time, a moment of knowing, that if I don't act, then this person or group of people will die. I wasn't going to be a hypocrite anymore. Sometimes you have to speak the truth to power. Sometimes you have to do what is right despite the consequences. **Generally the law guides us in what is right, but sometimes something inside us — some call it Love, others call it God — tells us that the law is not right.** You can't reform slavery. You can't reform the School of the Assassins. You [Judge] have a choice now. During the Holocaust, Hitler's Willing Executioners were complicit in his crimes even though there were within the law. Hitler didn't kill all the Jews, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the homosexuals, the handicapped, but he killed many. The SOA graduates haven't killed all the union organizers, peace protesters, all the people working for human rights and fair wages, and work environments, but they'e killed many in order to intimidate the rest. We will close the SOA, but you [Judge] can slow down the process. When you find me guilty, I want you to look

me in the eyes. You are complicit in allowing those atrocities to continue. You are oppressing them, but you're also oppressing yourself.

The maximum sentence for illegally crossing onto Fort Benning property is six months in jail and a \$5,000 fine, but, **if convicted, the defendants see themselves as prisoners of conscience.**

During the proceedings, the judge argued that, “a breach of the law is a breach of peace,” but many defendants responded that, “an unjust law is no law at all.” Ironically, the courtroom had a large quote embossed on the side wall from President Jimmy Carter that said, “**There is one law for all — the law of humanity and justice.**” But the judge specifically rejected any arguments grounded in International Law or a higher Moral Law.

I had come to Koinonia Farms because I admired the groundbreaking anti-racism work that community's founder had done decades earlier. But I stumbled into a contemporary act of civil disobedience — or what some might call “Holy Obedience” to your conscience or to the “Spirit of Life.” And the consequences for nonviolence activism can be severe.

After the service today, we are screening the documentary *Bidder 70* about Tim DeChristopher, a University of Utah student and member of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Salt Lake City, Utah, who in 2008, in an act of civil disobedience, became “Bidder 70” in an oil and gas auction. He bid 1.8 million dollars to win 22,000 acres around Utah's National Parks. The problem, of course, is that he didn't have anywhere near 1.8 million dollars. Eventually the auction was invalidated, but **if Tim hadn't acted, that invalidation likely would have come too late. The formerly pristine land would likely have already been drilled. But despite the eventual invalidation of the auction, Tim served 21 months in prison.** He was released on a three-year probation in April 2013, and will be attending Harvard Divinity School this fall and to become a Unitarian Universalist minister. *Bidder 70* tells his story of sacrifice and civil disobedience on behalf of the UU Seventh Principle: “The interdependent web of all existence.”⁷

After the vital First Source of UUism, “Direct Experience” (what you know to be true

⁷ The following are **links to two recent *UU World* articles about DeChristopher:**

- “Tim DeChristopher's Path: How an undergraduate's activism led him to prison, and to plans to become a UU minister,” available at <http://www.uuworld.org/life/articles/280828.shtml>.
- “Activism Is an Act of Faith: Our interconnectedness makes the powerless powerful, says a young UU activist in prison for interrupting an oil and gas lease auction,” available at <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/280831.shtml>.

because you have experienced it firsthand for yourself), **the Second Source of our liberal religious tradition is “Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.”** But the challenge is not only to study and admire those prophetic men and women (Thoreau, King, Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Tim DeChristopher, and so many others), but to **discern when and if your conscience might call you to follow in their footsteps of civil disobedience to protest an unjust law or call attention to an injustice.**

Addressing how difficult it can be for those of us who live relatively comfortable lives to choose civil disobedience, Sharon Welch, in her important book *[A Feminist Ethic of Risk](#)*, writes that,

It is easier to give up on long-term social change when one is comfortable in the present — when it is possible to have challenging work, excellent health care and housing, and access to the fine arts. When the good life is present or within reach, it is tempting to despair of its ever being in reach for others and resort merely to enjoying it for oneself and one’s family.... **Becoming so easily discouraged is the privilege of those accustomed to too much power, accustomed to having needs met without negotiation and work, accustomed to having a political and economic system that responds to their needs.** (41)

The work of antiracism, anti-oppression, and cultivating the multiculturalism of the Beloved Community is hard work, but we must not become discouraged. And in the wake of the Trayvon Martin verdict, the chorus of “Ella’s Song” — named after the Civil Rights activist Ella Baker — come to mind: **“Until the killing of black men, black mothers' sons, is as important as the killing of white men, white mothers' sons, we who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes.”** (Listen to *Sweet Honey in the Rock* perform this song here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U6Uus--gFrc>.)

Ultimately neither myself nor any other person can answer the question for you of if or when your conscience may call you to engage in an act of civil disobedience or “holy obedience,” if you prefer. But I can tell you that **you are part of a religious tradition that encourages you to listen to your conscience and to pay attention when what your conscience**

tells you that the right, good, beautiful, and true way is different from what everyone else — even the government — tells you is right. As Jefferson and Thoreau taught us, if we the people do not like the way things are, then we the people can demand change at even the highest levels of society.

In a few moments, we are going to sing together hymn number 170, “We are a Gentle Angry People”: “This song was written in response to the 1978 murder of Harvey Milk, a gay member of the San Francisco city council.”⁸ As we sing together, I invite you to continue to reflect on the places where your conscience may be calling you to challenge injustice “with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.” I’ll say that one more time, **is there a place where your conscience is calling you to challenge injustice “with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love?”**

⁸ [*Between the Lines: Sources for Singing the Living Tradition*](#), 45.