Responding to Suffering in the World

“When you love someone, the best thing you can offer is your presence. How can you love if you’re not there?” Thich Nhat Hanh

Showing that we care by being present is what Nonviolent Peaceforce does.

A supporter recently told us that giving to Nonviolent Peaceforce is her “response to suffering in the world.” And there is way too much suffering. An astonishing 70.8 million people are displaced because of conflict. In 2018, 41 million people remained displaced in their own countries, while 26 million fled across borders and more than 3 million were seeking asylum in third countries. (NYT, June, 2019).

It’s nearly impossible to comprehend suffering on such a massive scale — suffering caused by plutocrats fighting for power, communities entrenched in racial and ethnic divisions, and scarce resources. It’s in these environments that violent conflict takes root. And it’s where Nonviolent Peaceforce shows up — to deter further violence and to protect people from greater suffering.

Yet, that isn’t the full story. People are more than the suffering they have endured. They’re determined to create communities wherever they are, so they can live and work in safety, their children can go to school, and they can create conditions for lasting peace.

That is resiliency. And Nonviolent Peaceforce is there to support it.

“Resiliency describes the capacity to forge solidarity, to sustain hope and purpose, and to adapt and negotiate creatively with the challenges presented...the local collective becomes pro-actively engaged in purposeful ways that help them recuperate a sense of place, at-homeness, and voice.” (Lederach, J. P. and Lederach A. J., 2010)

Nonviolent Peaceforce is present in communities as they face their collective challenges. That’s why our work looks different in each location; it’s driven by local community members and how they are recuperating their sense of place, at-homeness, and voice.

Relationships are at the root of all Nonviolent Peaceforce efforts. Our peacekeepers rely on one another — internationals who call “home” someplace
faraway and nationals whose home may be a stone’s throw away. They rely on one another for language and cultural understanding and to challenge powerful structures that perpetuate violence and conflict.

These relationships help sustain hope and purpose. It’s what keeps people going when things get tough.

“What helped me get through difficult times was the presence of humanitarian workers from different parts of the world. These humanitarian workers motivated me to work hard to support my community because they were working late, in dangerous situations and regularly visited us to find out the challenges facing the community. I asked myself if foreigners were doing such great work with love, what about me who was a local leader?” (Chief of Masna of Wau State, South Sudan)

We look forward to sharing more stories with you that speak to the resilience of people where we work and to the relationships forged by our presence, to sustain hope and purpose.

Thank you for making it possible for Nonviolent Peaceforce to respond to the suffering in the world by being present.

National and international peacekeepers training civilians about resiliency.

We inhabit an inferno fueled by dominate identities, unrestrained militaries, massive wealth accumulation, and climate disruption. Fear and violence are required to maintain these forces.

Yet at times of crisis, undreamt possibilities emerge. Many activists, inventers, artists, theologians, and philosophers agree with Buckminster Fuller that the most effective way to protest is to build a model that is so attractive as to make the old model obsolete. Fuller further advised that “we are called to be architects of the future, not its victims.”

Vibrant stories are unfolding far from the cameras or even the imaginations of most reporters and writers. Amazing things are happening at the fringes of possibility.

Through our Good Practices workshops, we have brought together people representing 47 organizations nonviolently protecting civilians in 22 countries. There stories are not being told. Few people know there are this many groups and the number keeps growing! We are learning how people are protecting: olive farmers in Palestine, civilians from gang violence in Brooklyn, First Nation Women in Winnipeg, and communities of peace in Colombia.

No one person set out to organize all of these groups. They are emerging from crises. We are documenting their methods that can be replicated and scaled up. Most
George and Lorie Halvorson are committed to creating peace. They believe in the power of people who have a shared understanding of their humanity. “The beginning of violence is ‘us’ and ‘them.’ When you define someone to be a ‘them,’ then it’s a slippery slope to violence,” says George. This idea of focusing on differences leads to “othering” people. Group-based differences shape armed conflicts and the responses to them.

And while it sounds like cognitive dissonance, something good happened in Washington last December. Unarmed civilian protection was specifically recognized in the report accompanying the 2020 Appropriations bill. The Secretary of State and USAID are advised to consider the use of UCP to protect civilians and strengthen local nonviolent peacekeeping capacities. While clearly an increment, recognizing unarmed civilian protection and nonviolent peacekeeping is a big deal.

In no way do I want to imply that creation should replace resistance or active electoral work in the U.S. They have to grow together. Nonviolent resistance without the simultaneous development of feasible alternatives can sometimes change regimes but will not lead to transformation unless accompanied by a constructive program.

The next time you’re notified of Breaking News on your phone, remember that there are more unarmed civilian protectors, conflict transformers, mediators, peacebuilders and civil resisters alive today than ever before and the number grows everyday. This dynamic is not inconsequential.

Committed to a Culture of Nonviolence

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George is the chair and CEO of the Institute for InterGroup Understanding and the chair of the First Five Commission for Children and Families for the State of California. The InterGroup Institute works on racism, prejudice, discrimination, misogyny, and intergroup instinct-related stress and conflict.

George and Lorie, who hosted an event for Nonviolent Peaceforce in 2019, support the organization’s methods of bringing different groups together to peacefully resolve conflict.

“Noviolent Peaceforce creates intergroup understanding and interaction by using a sense of ‘us,’” says George. “You do that in high risk, high danger settings. When you get 60 mothers walking together to confront soldiers to end gender-based violence, they do it because they think of “those” women as an ‘us.’”
If you would like to learn more about leaving a gift to Nonviolent Peaceforce through your will, trust, or retirement fund, please contact the U.S. Office at info@nonviolentpeaceforce.org or 612-871-0005.

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