

Self-Giving Love

*From an Address on
Justice, Peace
and the
Integrity of Creation*



Susumu Ishitani

I feel it necessary for me to start this talk by asking for forgiveness to us Japanese for what Japan and Japanese people have done or are doing wrongly or inhumanely to anyone among you. I do this act of my asking for forgiveness because it is essential to cultivate the field of mutual communication and understanding before any sharing process begins. . . .

As human beings, we are confronted on this small planet by new and interwoven threats. While a few of the Earth's citizens enjoy unprecedented affluence and power, millions languish in crushing poverty, hunger, and oppression. Violence can be seen almost universally, if we pay attention to it: extrajudicial killings and genocide, torture, violation of fundamental human rights in open and hidden conflicts and wars. Rapid degradation of the environment is undermining the process of life, even exterminating many species of animals and plants.

What are we going to do in these circumstances? It must be right to say that consistency between faith and action is one of the most characteristic features of Quaker faith. When George Fox, in his youth, sought for a genuine way to find God, he looked in vain for such witnesses among the Christians he visited, and he realized that he had to live it by himself, rather than expecting it from others.

The hindrance of faith in action is fear. How are we able to overcome fears? In the history of Friends, there were many courageous ones who dared to go to jail. We are often impressed by the courageous acts of early Quakers like Fox and James Nayler, who spoke truth even when they were surrounded by people who would persecute them severely.

Victor Frankel, the German psychotherapist who survived the horrifying experiences of Auschwitz during the Nazi time, pointed out the freedom for us to choose with determination this or that, as something that nothing and no one can take away from us human beings, even in any existential, extreme condition. He said something like this: For us, rich possibility is open to form our life to be meaningful, even at the very end of our life.

If we seek meaning for our life, our life always has meaning, under any circumstance. By finding the meaning, we are able to view things differently than before. Not that we expect something from our life, but the expectation comes out of our life, addressed to us, to draw something from us. This question addressed to us may be interpreted as the question from our Creator. For us, the crucial incidents—matters of life and death, unbearable pains and sorrows—are important for what they mean in the program of God, rather than in the unhappiness and failure they hold for us.

I would like to introduce one of the good examples of nonviolence, or the power of self-giving love. During . . . World War II in the Japanese military concentration camp near the Kwai River in Thailand, after the hard work of the day, a shovel was missing and one of the Japanese soldiers in charge was in a rage, saying, "If anyone who hid the shovel does not come out to confess, I will shoot all you prisoners here." The atmosphere was such that this outrageous soldier would do what he said he would do. At the instant he almost started to shoot, one of the prisoners of war came out from the lineup and said quietly, "I did hide it." The Japanese soldier, in rage, gave him severe, cruel violence, and the prisoner stood in silence without any resistance—and finally, he was hit with the gun-stock and died. After a while, when they searched again at the entrance of the camp, they found the missing shovel. When this news spread in the camp, even the Japanese soldiers were shocked at the voluntary sacrifice the dead man had taken. The hatred the survivors felt toward the Japanese soldiers was overwhelmed by feelings of admiration of the sacrificial act of their comrade. This is an extreme example of nonviolent living and dying. But we need to be prepared ourselves for this kind of commitment. We really need God's help and guidance to be prepared for such an incident.

We look back at George Fox and other early Quakers who had similar experiences by living hard lives, yet with joy. We all know well that we are weak, but our encouragement is that when we are weak, the weakness we have can be the point of opportunity for God to reveal God's strength in us and through us. We can be a precious tool or a vessel for God to use.

So we are able to face our fears to overcome with faith in God and because of God's love and blessing. We need to channel out the power of the blessing we have received or will receive from God.

. . . . It is never easy to overcome fear. Many people say only saints such as Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr. can do nonviolence . . . not ordinary people like themselves. Here we can ask questions. Were Gandhi and King so special? Did they act nonvio-

lently without fears? Not at all! They were just like us, full of fears when they had not trained themselves or before they became able to trust God, depending with their destinies on God.

Avoiding [violence], we come to realize that there is so much room for nonviolence, time to try or experiment to find its possibilities. People are apt to think if we stick to nonviolence we limit ourselves and get confined and lose room to choose for survival. But this is wrong.

Quite recently, I encountered an incident at home in Japan. At midnight we had telephone calls to threaten us from a rightist. I don't know if there is a big organization behind the person calling or not. Since I am involved in peace activities I get such threatening calls from ultranationalists from time to time. I heard our national anthem and Japanese militaristic music on the line, and a man said, "I will kill you. Get out of Japan. Do you think you are qualified to be a Japanese even when you behave as you do?" He did not speak much but cut the line. The recent calls were rather often and bothered us by interrupting our sleep We discussed among our family what we should do with the calls. This was a very precious opportunity for my children to have peace education at home. I consulted with the telephone company, but I could not get a solid solution. As our family discussed how to cope with the calls, it took us a considerably long time before I proposed, "Why not say to the man on the phone, in a low, calm voice, 'Do you believe in life after death?'"

My intention was, first, to remind our caller that we believe in eternal life after death, and therefore, threatening words he said such as "I will kill you" do not really threaten us into silence; and second, to remind the man calling us at midnight to think of what he was doing and of his own life and life after death. If he is a typical Japanese, he must have seen pictures of paradise and hell somewhere, at home or in the temples of Buddhism. He must know how we are warned to be good and live right, because of the final judgment none of us can evade after we die. This man was apt to speak nasty things to my wife and daughter on the line. He must have been prejudiced against females—a typical nationalist. I prepared a sheet of paper right near the phone at home on which I had written down what I should say as soon as I received the unwelcome call. My daughter suggested that I should start with "life after death" instead of "Do you believe?" because the man might cut off . . . immediately as I appeared on the line. His intention [was] only to disturb our sleep and not to talk with us.

So we decided to say, "Life after death, do you believe it?" calmly, in a low voice. We waited for his call not by sitting up, but in sleep. At 4 a.m. the next morning the phone rang. I jumped out of bed to take up the call and said what I had planned to say. The line was cut off almost before I finished the first sentence. But amazing! After that he stopped calling me in the dark hour when we were asleep. It has worked very well so far.

Nonviolence does not work if it is a shaky commitment. It must be well-focused. It requires at times self-sacrifice, but it is done lovingly and voluntarily. We are born to be loved by parents or someone who takes care of us in the place of parents. All creatures are born to be loved in the same way. Birds and animals are. All parts of creation are created to show love before they become aware of it. We are given life in this way to be able to love our babies even at the sacrifice of ourselves, their parents. We have an inborn potential to love positively and willingly. I was struck on reading in the Bible when I was in college that God loved me before I knew him. I was also struck to find out how much love parents have given to each of us at the sacrifice of themselves. We have potential to expand this capacity for loving to other people and other parts of creation.

I have witnessed and experienced nonviolent actions carried on individually and collectively in many parts of the world. We have been doing a small action of nonviolence in the Yokosuka Japan-U.S. Navy Yard to blockade the U.S. war vessels coming into the crowded water areas of Tokyo Bay without announcing whether they bring the nuclear warheads or not. In Atsugi Air Base, we organized a wedding of an international couple, a Japanese woman and a North American man—both of them nonviolent activists—at the park next to the gate of the air base. The couple went over the fence to be captured by military police in order to show their concerns about life and the right relationship Japan and the U.S. should have to create peace in the world. Every spring in Japan we carry out a tax resistance campaign against military expenditures. We apply nonviolence in such positive ways as to create good human relations with the people who are not on our side—like tax officers and those who come to pay their taxes.

I have visited and taken part in nonviolent actions in many places outside of Japan: Washington, D.C. at the time of the Vietnam war in the 1960s; Greenham Common in England; Faslane Peace Camp in Scotland in 1982-83; Mutlangen U.S. Air Base, with 15 French people—including two Quaker women—near Stuttgart, Germany, in 1986.

It is important that each of us as Quakers become aware of one's potential, given by God, to work for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation. Each one has individuality and has one's own way to serve for God's purposes. We need to grow and become a George Fox, a Gandhi, a Martin Luther King, Jr., or a Stephen who died before Paul's repentance, each in our own given ways.

Jesus showed God's love on the cross, asking God for God's forgiveness to those who thrust him with spears, to those who rebuked him and spit on him. This sacrificial love is the real power to make people renew their lives to live in love. When Jesus says, "Follow me, carrying your own cross," he is assuring happiness, joy, blessing and comfort for those who carry the cross and follow him—trusting him along the way. . . .

We need to speak "yes" or "no" clearly to the world and act accordingly with sacrificial love. We live at a critical time of human existence. May we grow in faith and in action to witness to the love of God on this planet.

God comes to enter even the house of our death to guide us out of the place and into his arms. We are now in the age of choice in which we need to decide what values we seek to attain in our life. Do we value power and money more than the spirit of love and fall into feelings of superiority over others? Or do we cherish cooperative joy to enjoy love, sharing life together? How much convenience do we seek with high technological development of electronics and computers? Where do we need to stop? We have to decide to live with will and discernment in faith.

Susumu Ishitani grew up in a Japanese Christian family, and was a child in Nagasaki when the atomic bomb was dropped there on August 9, 1945. He is a longtime member of Japan Yearly Meeting of Friends, and is deeply involved in Japan's Fellowship of Reconciliation.

Susumu has been at the forefront of the movement to refuse payment of that percentage of the Japanese income tax used for defense and military funding. With his family, he has acted on the concern they share about the historic legacy of Japan in Korea. He teaches ethics and English at Hosei University. His interest in the English language was fostered in part by his acquaintance with U.S. soldiers invited to his home during the Occupation of Japan after World War II.

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The text of this and other addresses, along with reactions of Friends to the experience of the World Conference, can be found in the report Faith in Action: Encounters with Friends, available from the FWCC, Section of the Americas office for \$20 postpaid.

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