webs of power

Notes from the Global Uprising

Starhawk
In the ancient Scottish ballad “Thomas the Rhymer,” True Thomas is stolen away by the Queen of Elfland who shows him a vision of three roads. The narrow, thorny road of righteousness leads to heaven. The broad, broad road leads to hell. But the third road, the green road, leads to Fair Elfland, the unexpected place that breaks through all the categories, the place of magic, poetry, and inspiration.

During the heated and oft-repeated discussions about violence and nonviolence that arise in the movement, I often think of that ballad. Nonviolence might be called the thorny road of righteousness. The broad road, the road of violence, sometimes seems the only alternative.

But neither violence nor classical nonviolence will win this struggle. To truly transform this system, we need to move beyond the violence/nonviolence dichotomy.

If, for a moment, we set aside the moral and spiritual reasons for why we might reject violence, we must realize that a strategy based on violence can’t win simply because we are outclassed. The weaponry gap has increased a thousandfold since the days when the peasants of the French revolution rose up against their overlords or the Russian proletariat overthrew the Czar. Throwing rocks, even Molotov cocktails, against the heavily padded, armored, shielded, tear gas-wielding and rubber bullet-firing riot cops may feel like a strong act, but it is essentially symbolic more than effective in countering their violence.

Moreover, to organize in the way we would need to use violence effectively, we would have to become what we are fighting against. We would need a hierarchy, a chain of command, leaders, and troops. Armies have been organized in just this way for thousands of years.
because it is the most effective way to solve the problems of armed warfare: the sheer logistical problems of moving masses of people from point A to point B without the enemy knowing what you’re doing, of co-ordinating attacks and elaborate strategies, of motivating people not just to fight, but to kill.

When a movement embraces armed struggle, it loses its ability to organize openly. There are many places in the world in which open organization is not an option, and armed struggle is already a daily reality. But in the U.S., Canada, Europe, in the privileged North, the base of support for violent revolution does not currently exist.

And after 9-11, the base of support for any kind of action is shaky. At the moment, the police look like heroes, and many of them did act heroically, giving their lives to help others escape the burning towers. Heavy confrontation, in this climate of fear and shock, is more likely to win support for the system than to galvanize opposition.

But beyond the strategic reasons listed above, there is a deeper reason for being extremely wary of violence as a political tool. If we wage this fight on the terms of violence, we risk a hardening of the spirit that will taint whatever world we create once we’ve won. We risk replacing one brutal system with another in which the most ruthless ultimately rise to power.

But classical nonviolence — the nonviolence of Gandhi and King as it has evolved over the last thirty years in North America in the antinuclear, post-Civil Rights, peace, environmental, and solidarity movements — is not capturing the imaginations of many of the more radical and dedicated activists, who challenge a lot of cherished assumptions and sacred icons of the movement. They are worth listening to because they are smart, committed, and courageous and because they provide the driving energy and radical edge of the movement for global justice.

Who are the challengers? Of course, they represent a broad range of age, experience, and political philosophy, but on the whole they tend to be young, to be aligned with anti-authoritarian and anarchist visions, and to challenge not just a particular trade agreement or unjust war, but the whole structure of capitalism itself. They mostly work outside of formal organizations. In North America, the groups they do form are direct action oriented. They include CLAC, the
Anti-Capitalist Convergence that came together for the Quebec City action in April of ’01, and the ACC — the Anti-Capitalist Convergence formed in Washington, D.C., for the September ’01 actions. And they don’t advocate violence, but rather a diversity of tactics.

Diversity of tactics, in part, means flexibility, not being locked into strict guidelines. It means support for every group to make their own decisions about what to do tactically and strategically. It acknowledges the struggles of groups in the Third World, where armed struggle is a current reality. And at times, it means tacit support for property destruction or for clashes with the police that would generally not be supported by strictly nonviolent groups.

The more extreme tactics are generally identified with the much-maligned black bloc, the masked, black-clad bands that can cause both the police and the pacifists to tremble. They have perfected the art of looking like archetypal Anarchists: dressed in black, hooded, faces concealed, gas masks at the hip, they look dangerous and menacing — mindless violence personified. But in reality, they have clear principles for their actions, and most often consider themselves to be acting protectively toward other demonstrators.

An anonymous woman, calling herself Mary Black, explains her approach to action: “At demonstrations I attempt to use black bloc actions to protect nonviolent protesters or to draw police attention away from them. When this is not possible, I try to just stay out of the way of other protesters.”

The black bloc is not a group or an organization, but a tactic, an approach to an action, that stresses group unity, mobility, and confrontation. The masks are, in part, a way of protecting activists who are possibly going to engage in illegal activity. But they may also be worn by those who simply want to express solidarity with other activists. The anonymity they embody is also a principle.

Here is Mary Black again: “The black bloc maintains an ideal of putting the group before the individual. We act as a group because safety is in numbers and more can be accomplished by a group than by individuals, but also because we do not believe in this struggle for the advancement of any one individual. We don’t want stars or spokespeople. I think the anonymity of the black bloc is in part a response to the problems that young activists see when we look back at the Civil
Rights, antiwar, feminist and antinuclear movements. Dependence on charismatic leaders has not only led to infighting and hierarchy within the Left, but has given the FBI and police easy targets who, if killed or arrested, leave their movements without direction. Anarchists resist hierarchy and hope to create a movement that is difficult for police to infiltrate or destroy.”

Generally speaking, the North American militants are more likely to consider themselves essentially nonviolent or to act in support of nonviolent demonstrators. In Europe, with its different history and political culture, militants more strongly support fighting the police as a political tool. Sven Glueckspilz, a German activist, reports on his experience of the militants in Genoa:

“The political goal of the militants was reached already on Friday. It had been proved that only by military force could a summit of the people in power be done and defended, and that the GNPO [global justice] movement has a strong militant option. An opposing movement only then has a chance of getting political strength when the people in power have to fear this option of militancy. No politician and no big banker will be impressed by five hundred thousand peace demonstrators as long as there is no doubt they are going to stay nonviolent all the time. Only the possibility of radicalization makes a movement dangerous and by that strong.”

We could argue that hundreds of thousands of people in the streets do make a difference, even when they are entirely pacific. Daniel Ellsberg, former government official and later antiwar activist, tells the story of how the Fall ’69 mobilizations against the Vietnam War made Nixon change his plans to use nuclear weapons against Hanoi and Haiphong because “there were too many people in the streets.” The people in the streets, of course, never knew of their impact.

But no one who has marched, blockaded, vigiled, organized, and otherwise been politically active for decades can deny the sense of frustration and powerlessness that often follows a mobilization that receives little public attention and seems to have little impact. Mary Black describes why she sees property destruction as a viable tactic:

“I started my activist work during the Gulf War and learned early that sheer numbers of people at demonstrations are rarely enough to bring the media out. During the war I spent weeks organizing demon-
strations against the war. In one case, thousands showed up to demonstrate. But again and again, the newspapers and television ignored us. It was a major contrast the first time I saw someone break a window at a demonstration and suddenly we were all on the six o’clock news.

“As a protest tactic, the usefulness of property destruction is limited but important. It brings the media to the scene and it sends a message that seemingly impervious corporations are not impervious. People at the protest, and those at home watching on TV, can see that a little brick, in the hands of a motivated individual, can break down a symbolic wall.”

When dissent is ignored, when peaceful protest seems ineffective, when critics of the system are marginalized and ignored, escalation of the level of conflict can seem like the only alternative.

The issue of property destruction is a complex one. What property, where, and in what context? The window of a corporate chain store, or of a local corner store? A police car, or a private car? A battered old VW, or a Mercedes? Tearing down a fence erected to contain protesters, or burning a bank? Strict pacifists have been known to hammer on the nose cones of missiles and pour blood on draft files.

How do we define “violence?” From twenty years of preparing people for direct action and facilitating discussions, I can tell you that no two people define “violence” and “nonviolence” in exactly the same way. Is it violent to attack inanimate objects? Who is responsible if attacks on property stimulate or justify police brutality against protesters?

When People’s Global Action, an umbrella group that links global justice actions around the world, met in Bolivia in September of ’01, they changed one of their hallmarks of unity from “PGA supports nonviolent direct action” to “PGA supports actions that maximize respect for life.” “Nonviolence” meant too many different things. In Europe, it mostly meant not attacking people. In the U.S., it was often interpreted to mean not attacking property. In Chiapas, the Zapatista rebellion began as an armed struggle that attempted to minimize the use of violence, and then turned itself into a political struggle.

Nowhere can the lines between violence and nonviolence be drawn absolutely. My intention here is not to provide definitions and answers, but to outline a different framework in which to think about the questions. To do that, the full critique of nonviolence must be examined.
CRITIQUES OF NONVIOLENCE

Some critiques of nonviolence arise from misunderstandings or misrepresentations. Jaggi Singh, himself a strong proponent of a diversity of tactics, nevertheless takes issue with a black bloc recruiting poster that “shows a Gandhi figure getting run over by a D.C. cop’s motorbike. The caption reads ‘Gandhi is dead, because he didn’t strike back! Support your local black bloc!’”

“You can disagree with King and civil rights pacifists of the 50s and 60s on many fronts, but they were our comrades, and they were for the most part courageous,” Jaggi counters. “Cheney, Goodman and Schwerner, and hundreds of others, including Martin Luther King, are not dead because they ‘didn’t strike back,’ but because of racism and white supremacy. Martin Luther King or Gandhi are not the problem, but the people who mystify them today. Pardon the history lesson, but Gandhi is not dead ‘because he didn’t strike back,’ but because he was murdered by fascist Hindus. The political descendants of those same fascists are alive-and-well in today’s India.”

If King and Gandhi died by violence, so did Malcolm X, Che Guevara, many of the Black Panthers, and thousands of other revolutionaries who waged armed struggles. Violence does not necessarily add to a revolutionary’s life expectancy, and physical survival is not the measure of success of a movement.

Nonviolence is also accused of being safe, passive, middle-class. Poor and working class people and people of color, it is said, don’t have the luxury of avoiding violence.

But nonviolence is not about avoiding violence; rather, it’s the refusal to inflict violence. In reality, nonviolence has been the tool of choice of precisely those people who face overwhelming violence in their daily lives. King and Gandhi were both people of color, mobilizing their own communities. Organizing in the segregated South, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference chose to use nonviolence because any violent resistance would have immediately been suicidal.

Ward Churchill, in his influential essay Pacifism as Pathology, describes as pacifism “Jewish passivity in the face of genocide … grounded in a profound desire for ‘business as usual’, the following of rules, the need to not accept reality or to act upon it.” Aside from
being a distortion of the historical reality of Jewish resistance, this argument confuses compliance and nonaction with pacifism.

Pacifism is not passivity, nor does it mean avoiding violence or risk. “Nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people” was one of Martin Luther King’s key points. The essence of passive resistance is the refusal to obey unjust laws, the willingness to act and to risk, to disrupt business as usual, not through violence but through noncompliance. Pacifism also does not imply an unwillingness to defend oneself or one’s family from a violent attack. Pacifism is the refusal to use violence for political ends.

Pacifism is a life philosophy, a deep, personal commitment. But many people who are not pacifists engage in nonviolence strategically.

Strategic nonviolence is definitely not passive. Gandhi’s basic strategy was to stay on the offensive. The art of structuring a nonviolent campaign is to constantly create dilemmas for the opposition. As George Lakey describes it, “This form of direct action puts the power holders in a dilemma: if they allow us to go ahead and do what we intend to do, we accomplish something worthwhile related to our issue. If they repress us, they put themselves in a bad light, and the public is educated about our message.”

The lunch counter sit-ins practiced during the Civil Rights campaigns against segregation are a classic example of a tactic that creates a dilemma for the opposition. “If they were served, racism took a hit. If they were either attacked by civilians or arrested, racism also took a hit. The sit-inners didn’t even need the signs they brought in order to make their point. The power holders were repeatedly put in a dilemma: whatever they did resulted in lost ground for the status quo,” Lakey explains.

Strategic nonviolence withdraws consent from the structures of oppression, refuses compliance, and eventually delegitimizes them. It involves not obedience but civil disobedience, the conscious and public breaking of an unjust law.

But it is also true that what nonviolence has become in practice is often something much less inspiring than the Civil Rights campaigns. Too often, nonviolence has come to mean stale, static tactics and orchestrated arrests, often prenegotiated with the police. Such actions may have their place: they can be a step into another level of risk for
some people. But for those who challenge the authority of the police and the state, such actions are not deeply empowering.

Moreover, nonviolent actions are often characterized by strict guidelines that focus on telling people what not to do and on controlling the behavior of the activists. Monitors, marshals, or "peacekeepers" control the crowd, on the theory that "we have to police ourselves, or the police will do it for us." But those who question the very concept of policing and control in society are likely to resent the "movement police."

Part of the way nonviolence functions is by heightening the contrast between protesters and police, between the movement and the larger society. The violence inherent in the unjust social structure is dramatized and brought to light. The calm, pacific demonstrators are contrasted to the brutal police. Ideally, the protesters look enough like the general public that the public can identify with them. They appear to be good, noble people, who claim the moral high ground.

Again, in the Civil Rights movement the contrast was clear. The public saw brutal, racist cops beating neatly dressed, nonresistant, black youth and their white supporters.

But many of today’s younger activists are not going to look like the Good Guys, no matter what they do. Their hair is in dreadlocks, their eyebrows, tongues, chins, and private parts are pierced, they’re covered with spikes, studs, and tattoos, and their clothes are unwashed and torn. They’ve chosen the look to express their utter rejection of society as it stands, and they aren’t going to change it for a demonstration. Even if they did, if one of them put on a suit and tie, he would simply look like an extremely uncomfortable shaved punk in a suit and tie. The look, the posture of rejection, is part of who they are at this point in their lives, and part of what gives them their strength, energy, and commitment as activists.

The Civil Rights movement drew a lot of its strength from the church. King and many of the leaders were ministers, and many of the activists drew on a deep religious faith. They could appeal to a public steeped in Christian values and predisposed to see martyrdom and sacrifice as admirable.

But the activists of today, especially the more radical anarchists, are not Christians. They are mostly devout secularists, raising the cry, “No
Gods, no masters!” Or they are active or intuitive Pagans, believing in the sacredness of the earth, of nature, of the erotic, with a sprinkling of other religions and spiritualities. A drama that echoes that of the noble Christian martyrs thrown to the lions is much harder to pull off when the suffering is being done by those who challenge traditional values rather than proclaim their adherence to God.

Certainly many Christians and other religious groups are deeply involved in the movement. Religious groups have staked out their own campaigns: the School of the Americas Watch, for example, is heavily supported by radical Catholics. Activists at the School of the Americas have built a strong movement in spite of heavy jail sentences for completely pacific demonstrations, to focus attention on the military school where the U.S. government trains torturers and state terrorists for Third World countries. In the anti-globalization movement, traditional religious groups have supported the marches for debt reduction of Jubilee 2000 and most of the legal protests, but, aside from the Pagans, not been a strongly visible presence in organizing the direct actions.

The Civil Rights movement in the South also had a broader audience to appeal to in the liberals of the rest of the country, who could distance themselves from the overt racism of the white segregationists and feel identified with a noble struggle for justice. When the Black Liberation movement moved north, and white liberals were challenged to look at the more subtle racism of their own communities, the moral drama was not so clearly delineated.

MORALITY PLAYS

In today’s world, morality plays are harder to stage and tend to ring false and unconvincing. The activists, as I’ve noted, don’t necessarily look like the good guys. The media tend to ignore peaceful protests or pick out the one moment of conflict or violence to highlight. And the public is less likely to view arrest numbers as evidence of commitment and dedication, and more likely to accept the police and media view that they are evidence of troublemakers needing to be corralled.

In fact, the classic dramas of nonviolence begin to seem as overly simplistic as the melodramas of the early silent screen. They play now to a post-modern world where the Right Wing attempts to frame issues in terms of clearly drawn lines between good and evil, and the work of
progressives is to address complexities and ambiguities. Moreover, they play to an audience that is less likely to see suffering and sacrifice as marks of character and worth. For people to stand quietly while being beaten, it helps to be motivated by a deep religious faith, a belief that the suffering itself has a transcendent value, or a belief that your act is about to accomplish something, that people will see it and be moved to your cause. You have to have, in the back of your mind, the thought that people seeing the video of your action or hearing about it will say to themselves, “What brave and noble and moral people — I should join their cause.”

The act loses its appeal, however, if you suspect that what they will really be thinking is more along the lines of “That was a stupid thing to do — are they suicidal?” In a culture where profit has become the true God, self-sacrifice can seem incomprehensible rather than noble.

Critics of nonviolence also take issue with the self-righteousness of many advocates of pacifism. “Some of the most authoritarian people I’ve come across in activist circles are pacifists,” Jaggi Singh says.29 To be fair, I’ve met plenty of authoritarian leftists and self-righteous advocates of militant revolution. But it is true that some of the staunchest adherents of nonviolence are often Not Real Fun People. They’re too good. You want a little bit of the devil in a person — you want to think that they might sometimes get enrged, throw things, get so overcome with passion and fervor that they might do something really unwise and unstrategic. Overpowering goodness becomes insufferable.

When nonviolence becomes a morality play, the assumption is that “our goodness and suffering will attract people to our cause.” The reality may be quite different. People who are angry at the system may not be attracted to a movement that suppresses rage. It may be that the “general public” can actually see themselves mirrored more in an angry protester who throws a rock at a cop than in an overly earnest figure who responds to every assault with an unearthly calm.

But anger and rage are not the only emotions left out of the morality play. Rowan, a nonviolence trainer I worked with in London, talked about the split between the “worthy” pacifists and the “sexy” anarchists. This worthy/sexy dichotomy may go deeper, may touch on the roots of the Gandhi/King formulation of nonviolent philosophy.
DOES GANDHI’S SEX LIFE MATTER?

Gandhi and King were not the only influences on the development of movements grounded in nonviolence. In the United States and in England, Quakers have long been in the forefront of struggles for social justice. Their religious pacifism influenced the course of liberation movements from the antislavery campaigns of the 1800s to the antinuclear campaigns of the 1980s.

Women pioneered many of the tactics used by Gandhi and King. Alice Paul revitalized the suffrage movement in the U.S. when she brought back from England the tactics of direct action. In England, suffragists demanding women’s right to vote chained themselves to lampposts and broke shop windows in an earlier version of the property-damage controversy. They filled the jails and went on hunger strikes, withstanding enormous suffering when they were forceably fed. In the U.S., women marched, chained themselves to the White House fence, and challenged President Wilson over the hypocrisy of fighting for democracy abroad while denying it to women at home.

Nevertheless, it is Gandhi and King who again and again are cited as the authors of the nonviolent philosophy, whose pictures are carried in demonstrations, whose works are quoted. Many pacifists call themselves Gandhians; I know of no one, not even any woman, who calls herself a Paulian or Pankhurstian or Ella Bakerian or Rosa Parksian. It may be a measure of the internalized sexism even among people in the movement that we still look to men as moral authorities and erase the contributions of women. But for that very reason, we need to examine their legends and legacies.

For Gandhi nonviolence was not just strategic, it was deeply moral, and it went far beyond eschewing violence. *Satyagraha*, truth force or soul force, was an energetic force that could only be marshaled by long and deep preparation, much as certain yogis employ special techniques and diets in order to command special powers. It was part of a way of life that required forms of self-discipline few of today’s activists are interested in undertaking: most notably, giving up sex altogether. While no one I know of is proposing abstinence as a requirement for joining a direct action campaign, for Gandhi it was indispensable. *Satyagraha* could not be mobilized without *brahmacharya*, a comprehensive self-discipline that included sexual abstinence. And not just
abstinence outside of marriage. Gandhi actually went beyond the Pope in viewing even marital sex as a sign of lack of self-control. A man’s progeny were living proof of his inability to control his lusts.

Satyagraha, for Gandhi, was also not about low-risk cross-the-line actions. He waged satyagraha campaigns infrequently, and each campaign required a pledge from his followers to be willing to die before giving up. Gandhi used all his moral authority and the weapons of guilt and shame on his followers to get them to live up to his ideals.

And Gandhi was no antiauthoritarian. He was a Mahatma, a religious leader in an authoritarian religious tradition that included a level of veneration and obedience unlikely to appeal to most of us today. His near deification by many pacifists lies firmly within that tradition. Jaggi Singh describes seeing “some protesters smugly [carrying] portraits of Gandhi above their heads. The portrait was accompanied by a quote that I can’t exactly remember, but it was a Gandhian platitude about not following his personality, but his deeds.” He notes “the irony of them holding the portraits while the quote exhorts the opposite kind of behavior ….”

King was also a religious leader, a minister, functioning in a milieu in which ministers were venerated and strong leadership was expected. King held a deeply religious, Christian moral commitment to nonviolence. In the Birmingham campaign of 1963, the very first pledge required of activists was to meditate on the life of Jesus every day and to pray. Three of the ten pledges involved Christ.

But King was also a fallible mortal being who, we now know, carried on a long-standing secret extramarital affair. We can’t begrudge him the comfort and solace he must have needed to sustain the tensions and dangers of his work. But we can point out that he follows the pattern of male spiritual and political leaders from New Age gurus to Jim Baker to Clinton, who publicly preach a strict sexual morality while privately indulging their own needs and desires.

Does Gandhi’s sex life matter? Does King’s? On the one hand, no, their flaws shouldn’t undercut our respect for their philosophy, their courage, their real contributions to human liberation and political struggle.

But from a woman’s point of view, from an anarchist viewpoint, and from the perspective of earth-based spirituality, yes, it does.
Gandhi’s rejection of sexuality, of the body, leaves us firmly in the world view of patriarchy, split between body and spirit, venerating Gods that transcend the flesh, and suffering the inevitable degradation of those of us who bring that flesh into the world. That world view is a comfortable fit with Christianity as well (although certainly within both Christianity and Hinduism, strands can be found that do value nature, the erotic, and women).

The revolution we need to make includes a profound change in relationship to our experience of being a body. One of the insights of ecofeminism, the convergence of the feminist and ecology movements, is that our destruction of the environment is allowable because of the deep devaluation of nature and the body in the underlying religious and philosophical systems that shape our worldviews. And the devaluation of women — the violence, rape, and destruction perpetrated on female bodies around the globe — is also supported by the same philosophical and religious systems that identify women with nature and the body, and assign them both low value. The devaluing of the earth also supports the devaluing of indigenous peoples and cultures. Subcommandante Marcos, spokesperson for the Zapatistas who fight for the rights of the indigenous cultures of Mexico, consistently refers to his compañeros as “people the color of earth.” Oppressed groups are also identified with sexuality, darkness, lowness, and “animal drives”; those associations are used to show that they “deserve” their state as slaves, servants, colonized people.

That essential mind/body split is the basis of all systems of domination, which function by splitting us off from a confidence in our inherent worth and by making integral parts of ourselves — our emotions, our sexuality, our desires — bad and wrong.

When we are bad, we deserve to be punished and controlled. Punishment systems lie at the root of violence. Marshall Rosenberg, a teacher of nonviolent communication, describes how violence is justified by the split between the deserving and undeserving: “You have to make violence enjoyable for domination systems to work ... You can get young people to enjoy cutting off the arms of other young people in Sierra Leone because of the thinking that you are giving people what they deserve. Those people supported that government. When you can really justify why people are bad, you can enjoy their suffering.”³² And
so we see people who deplore the violence of the attacks on the World Trade Towers, who empathize and suffer with the victims, gleefully demanding that we bomb Afghanistan back to the stone age because the Afghans have been defined as deserving of punishment.

As human beings, we always have a somewhat problematic relationship to our body. The body is the source of pleasure — it is life itself. But it is also the source of pain, need, discomfort, and deprivation, and ultimately it suffers death. A liberated world, a world that could come into balance with the natural systems that sustain life, a world that values women, must also value life, embodiment, physicality, flesh, sex.

**Nonviolence and Suffering**

Both King and Gandhi believed in the transcendent value of suffering. Now, a certain asceticism is helpful if you are asking people to risk physical discomfort, injury, imprisonment, or even death. A belief in the value of suffering is a useful thing to have when you are voluntarily putting yourself in a position in which you are likely to suffer.

But embracing suffering is problematic for women, who have always been taught to suffer and sacrifice for others. Conditioned to swallow our anger, to not strike back, we have not had a choice about accepting blows without retaliation. Nonviolence puts a high moral value on those behaviors, encourages men to practice them, and develops them as a political strategy. Yet women’s empowerment involves acknowledging our anger, owning our rage, allowing ourselves to be powerful and dangerous as well as accommodating and understanding.

And from the perspective of an earth-based spirituality, which values pleasure, the erotic, the beauty and joy of this life, suffering is sometimes inevitable but never desirable. We can learn from it; if we are truly going to change the world, we probably can’t avoid it — but we don’t seek it or venerate it. Instead, we share it as much as possible through solidarity with each other.

One of Gandhi’s strong principles was that we accept the suffering and the consequences of our actions, that we don’t try to avoid or evade punishment but welcome it. That position creates a powerful sense of freedom and fearlessness. If we accept the inevitability of punishment, if part of the power of our action is to voluntarily go to
jail, we move beyond fear and beyond the system’s ability to use our fear to control us.

But often the way this principle plays out is that the focus becomes the arrest rather than the action. And few of us do what Gandhi would have done: demand the highest possible penalty for the action. If we did, our acceptance of the punishment would not have the same political impact it did for Gandhi.

Filling the jails can be a powerful political statement, and a jail witness can be an important political tool, inspiring and challenging others to take more risks. But when the jails have expanded to become a prison industrial complex hungry for more human fodder, a strategy of going to jail can also be seen as feeding the system rather than challenging it.

There’s something to be said for doing a strong action and getting away with it. There’s even more to be said for conceiving of an action that does not derive its impact from an arrest, but from what it actually is and does. And if we do choose an arrest strategy, let’s do it for a purpose we’ve thought about and clearly defined, not just by default.

**Authority and Virtue**

The underlying moralism in Gandhi’s formulation of nonviolence is a subtle thread, but it encourages other moralisms that contribute to the worthy/sexy dichotomy. If we hold a punitive relationship to the body’s needs, we assume a posture of internal violence toward the self that extends to other strong emotions and passions. And we become judgmental toward others, rigid in our thinking and viewpoints. Any behavior that does not fit our model is seen as “violent,” and violent people are seen as deserving of punishment. So our very “nonviolence” puts us into an authoritarian, dominating mode.

Gandhi and King both exemplified religious authority and top-down styles of leadership. They were good, benevolent father figures (although how good they were to their own children is another issue), but dependence on any sort of father figure is not a route to empowerment for women, nor for anyone who wants to function as a liberated, full human being. Anti-authoritarians rightly criticize that model of leadership as keeping us all childlike, released from true responsibility for our lives.
Nonviolence does not have to be practiced in an authoritarian manner. The Quaker tradition of consensus and nonhierarchical organization is a counterbalancing force in nonviolent movements. The Quaker-influenced Movement for a New Society, which introduced affinity groups, consensus, and horizontal power structures to the antinuclear movement in the seventies and eighties, pioneered an open and empowering model of organizing.

But at times the Quaker influence in the nonviolence movement also contributed to the drift toward morality plays. Quaker pacifism involves a process of deep discernment, of constant self-questioning, of asking, “Are my actions in alignment with my values? Does my conscience allow me to participate in this act or comply with this procedure?” This process of deep self-examination imparts a clarity and purity to actions, and can serve as an important inner compass.

But if the main measure of an action’s success becomes how closely it allows us to conform to our personal moral values, we can lose sight of whether or not it is actually effective. When our actions again and again are ignored or seem to have little immediate impact on the wrongs we protest, we can unconsciously give up hope of actually winning.

There are many different modes of a politics of despair. We usually associate that phrase with the secret, militant cells of the seventies that carried out political bombings and robberies in a last desperate hope that the extremity of their acts would spark a revolution. But it could equally be applied to those who act simply to be virtuous in the face of doom and lose sight of the possibility of victory. Such actions may be admirable and inspirational. But our time and attention can become focused on the minutia of moral choices in an action: Should I stand up or sit down when the police come? Should I walk with them or go limp? Should I voluntarily place my hand on the pad to be fingerprinted or make them pick it up and place it there? It’s not that those questions shouldn’t be asked, they can be valuable in helping us define our goals and limits. But when we don’t go beyond them to ask, “What is the objective of this action? How does each of my choices further that objective?” then we undercut our chances of being effective. And they reinforce the system’s focus on individuals as isolated actors instead of encouraging us to ask, “How do we collectively take power?”
DIALOGUE

“Nonviolence seeks to win friendship and understanding” was another of King’s key principles, along with “Nonviolence seeks to defeat injustice, not people. Nonviolence chooses love instead of hate.” Each of these speaks of the importance of contesting a system as opposed to targeting individuals, of leaving people room to change. King did expect to win, and in part he chose nonviolence because he looked ahead to a time when segregation would be ended, when blacks and whites would need to live together peacefully. An armed struggle, even if successful, would have left a legacy of bitterness and renewed hate.

For King, negotiation was key to the success of a nonviolent direct action campaign, and one of its goals. As he wrote in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”: “Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue … the purpose of the direct action is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation.”

But extending the hand of friendship and dialogue can also undercut the effectiveness of an action. Institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank routinely use “dialogue” to establish their legitimacy, to make them look like they are open to criticism when in fact they are not. At times, negotiation can resolve a wrong and open a new direction. But such negotiations incorporate mechanisms for accountability on both sides. Sham dialogue, “win-win” solutions that do not redress real wrongs, can simply reinforce the power and legitimacy of the system.

Systems are maintained by individuals making choices, and to undermine those systems we ultimately need to win the support of individuals. Nonviolence encourages us to speak to the person, not the role, to hold out the hope of real communication even with an enemy. But winning friendship and understanding can be interpreted as “making nice,” spending more time chatting up the prison guards than talking to your fellow activists, giving flowers to the police chief who has just made himself look good by “negotiating” a voluntary arrest while in the meantime protesters are being beaten and brutalized behind the scenes. Individuals in roles that serve certain structures behave very differently than they might outside of those roles. King
was actually quite realistic about the possibility of changing the system by winning over individuals: “History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and give up their unjust posture, but ... groups are more immoral than individuals.” For individual change to result in systemic change, pressure must continue on the groups those individuals represent.

**The Price of Violence**

Nonviolence, at its worst, can indeed be a thorny road of righteousness, venerating martyrs, idealizing suffering, repressing real anger and passion in favor of a sugary sweet pseudo-niceness. But to end our critique here would be a shame because nonviolent direct action at its best can also be powerful, confrontational, courageous, and effective. If we can remove nonviolence from the domain of the morality play, we find insights and tools that are desperately needed.

For even before 9-11, the path of increasing militancy, confrontation, and police brutality was beginning to look more like the broad, broad road to hell. In Sven Glueckspilz’s words:

“The price [of militancy] is the splitting within the movement ... The moderate and the radical wings are too far apart from each other, there is no way of doing their own thing side to side on the same streets. Militants are naive if they claim the possibility of reciprocal respect. Our militancy has very concrete effects on other ones. It is true that police encroachments happen even without street fighting. But it is also true that police violence increases heavily after street fighting and doesn’t hit only the militants. Police take brutal revenge, often on spectators and the inexperienced (while the militants know best when to retreat).”

The tension between the pacific and the militant wings of the movement is, in some ways, what gives it its strength, edge, and staying power. But it can also be manipulated to tear the movement apart. Here is Sven again:

“The GNPO (global justice) movement can only then get stronger (or survive) if it stands this tension. Otherwise it will inevitably be split in a radical wing, going to be isolated, dragged down and smashed, and a reformistic wing, going to be fobbed off by lip services, corrup-
tion and lies. To stand the tension it is necessary that every faction has
the chance to do its own actions. This also means that non-violent
groups should have the possibility to demonstrate the way they want
without being hindered by our militant actions and the following
police actions. Militant actions, if organized, have to take care that
other people are not affected seriously. If police attack, they should
have no chance to blame us for it.”

HOW SYSTEMS OF VIOLENCE FUNCTION

To hold that tension, to find our way to actions that can be empow-
ering, effective, and survivable, we need to find that third road. And
we need ways to restrain the violence of the system, which is poten-
tially ruthless and lethal.

To understand how violence functions, we need to step out of a
moral framework and look systemically at how systems of domination
function. Such systems are characterized by the concentration of
resources and the fruits of labor to benefit the few. They involve top-
down decision-making: bosses who give orders and issue directives
that others must obey. And they require a philosophical underpinning
that accords some people more value than others.

I define “violence” as the capacity to inflict physical pain, harm, or
death, the capacity to punish by restricting freedom and limiting
choices, the capacity to withhold vital resources or rewards, and the
capacity to inflict emotional and psychological damage, to shame and
humiliate.

Systems of domination, no matter how powerful they seem, are
unstable. They are inherently unsustainable, because to be sustainable
any system or organism must be based on balanced, cycling flows of
energy and resources.

Domination systems maintain themselves by the actual and threat-
ened use of force and violence. They require enforcers willing to inflict
violence. No gun shoots by itself — a human hand pulls the trigger, a
human mind makes the choice to do so.

The use of force, however, is costly. No system of domination can
afford to use force to control every aspect of its functioning. Instead,
it engages our fear and our hope. We comply with its decrees because
we fear punishment or retaliation if we resist. Or because we hope for
some reward, some benefit. We might win the lottery, after all.

Systems of domination limit our imagination. They present us with restricted choices, and then make us believe that those are the only choices available.

Violence is unleashed by several factors. Dehumanization is key in encouraging and justifying violence. When we see our opponent as a category rather than a full human being, when she or he is defined as deserving of punishment, we lose our sense of restraint. This is how racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, etc. maintain systems of domination. People of color, punks, anarchists in dreadlocks, visibly poor people, all who fit a stereotype of prejudice are at greater physical and legal risk in an action as well as in daily life.

When we feel we are being attacked, when we perceive a threat to our well-being, we are more likely to strike first. A global strategy to counter our movement, even before 9-11, has been to portray us as threatening terrorists and the police as “saviors” of the people.

Other factors can also remove inhibitions to violence. Approval for an act of violence by figures of respect — teachers, church leaders, politicians — approval by the authorities, and the perception of the legitimacy of the act by the public make violence acceptable. A lack of potential witnesses or of repercussions loosens the web of restraint. Drugs, alcohol, and other substances that relieve inhibitions also remove restraints to violence. And group pressure can be a powerful force. Men who alone would never molest a woman can be pressured into joining a gang rape. Once a group consciousness sees brutality or atrocity as acceptable, it becomes easier for individuals to participate and harder to resist.

Nonviolent direct action, indeed, any action, depends on a subtle web of restraint to keep the violence of the system at bay. That web includes basic human empathy and reluctance to kill or harm. Many studies have shown that even in wartime, the average soldier must be specifically trained to overcome inhibitions against killing. Although some police are brutal, many are not, and some can be swayed even in the tension of an action to act humanely.

Fear of repercussions — personal, political, and legal — is another restraint on violence. So is the presence of witnesses and media. We often see the police using restraint on the street during the action, and then brutalizing and intimidating prisoners in jail where they cannot
be seen. Public opinion, fear of censure, law, and the structures of accountability that are built into the system also can restrain abuses of power.

**Nonviolence and Self-Defense**

Militant activists often talk about the right to self-defence. They may be unwilling to agree to nonviolence guidelines, for example, because they wish to reserve the right to defend themselves against brutal police.

Again, there is no absolute line that separates self defence from aggressive violence. Is throwing a tear gas canister back into a line of police violence, or does that simply mean returning it to the people best equipped to withstand its toxic fumes? Is it violent to kick out at a cop who is attacking you with a billy club? To grab a comrade out of the police’s grip and escape down an alley?

But a systemic understanding of violence tells us that real self-defense involves tightening the web of restraint. To understand whether a defensive move will work, we need to look at the entire context.

A helmet, for example, may provide physical protection against police clubs. But if a helmet makes a protester appear to be looking for trouble, it may loosen the web of restraint. A barricade is a barrier to a police charge, but if the police fear that attackers are sheltering behind it, it may actually increase the overall tension and danger.

In some actions, guidelines forbid the wearing of helmets or the building of barricades. But an empowering approach to an action would encourage people to make their own choices, rather than legislate their behavior. Situations change, and effective actions are often unscripted and unpredictable. I would once not have considered bringing a gas mask to an action; after Quebec City, it was tops on my wish list for a fiftieth birthday present.

In preparation for one action, a group called Masquerade creatively addressed the tension between self-protection and an increasing image of militarism by buying up hundreds of gas masks to decorate with rhinestones, sequins, and color. In their communique, they stated: “We at the Masquerade Project want to make sure that our sisters and brothers have the protection they need — and we also think it’s time for an aesthetic intervention on the front lines of the movement.
for global justice. So we’re organizing the D.C. Masquerade: raising money to buy and fabulously decorate hundreds of gas masks for free distribution at the IMF/World Bank protests in Washington.

“Black may be timelessly chic. But we long for more color, more élan. We believe our movements should reflect the world we want to create. And for us, that’s a world with loads of color, sparkle, variety, and individual creativity … Wearing a gas mask doesn’t have to mean adopting a grim paramilitary uniform: Leave that to the police who will be defending the institutions of the global elite.

“We’re using bright paints, rhinestones, sequins, glitter, and trim to transform the masks we’ll be giving away into splendid and sassy creations.”

After 9-11, they donated the masks to the volunteer rescue workers at the World Trade Towers.

**Tightening the Web of Restraint**

Identifying the web of restraint should not lead us to blame protesters for police violence. It does mean acknowledging that we can in many but not all circumstances have some impact on how the police behave. Police violence has been high since the very first morning in Seattle, escalating to the use of live ammunition against protesters in Goteburg, Papua New Guinea, Genoa, and Argentina. But even in the midst of the battle zones of Quebec City, Prague, or Genoa, demonstrators were at times able to de-escalate the level of conflict and win concessions from the police. And, at other times, police brutally beat and arrested completely nonviolent demonstrators.

We can also work to tighten the web of restraint long before the day of the action itself. We can do effective outreach and education so that the public understands the goals and tactics of our action. We can make alliances and build coalitions with groups that can increase public pressure and potential political repercussions for the authorities.

Legal actions and media campaigns can hold public officials accountable for past acts of violence. In the wake of 9-11, laws have been passed that remove restraints on police power. We can work to repeal those laws and we can contest their implementation in court. Group solidarity during and after actions can also assure that brutality costs the authorities politically.
WHAT IS DIRECT ACTION?

Along with restraining the violence of the state, to be effective we need to understand what direct action is and what it does. Direct action is not any particular tactic or activity, nor does it necessarily involve breaking a law. It’s anything that directly confronts oppressive power, prevents a wrong or interferes with an unjust institution, or that directly provides for a need or offers an alternative. Feeding the hungry can be a direct action, as can providing clean needles for drug users to prevent the spread of AIDS or providing shelter for battered women. Blockading the WTO, disrupting the financial district to protest laws that target the poor, or Rosa Parks refusing to sit in the back of the bus — these are all examples of direct actions that interfere with or refuse to comply with a wrong. When direct action involves openly breaking an unjust law, it becomes civil disobedience.

Direct action is an important political tool, but like with any tool there are certain jobs it does especially well. It can be a powerful spotlight, illuminating problems or injustices that have been secret or unnoticed. It raises the social and political costs to those in power of continuing their practices. It can help build a movement; it can empower, radicalize, and educate people. And it ultimately can delegitimize an unjust system by withdrawing our consent and participation.

Of course, it can also polarize and antagonize people, raise the costs of activism, disempower, discourage, and terrify people who take part, and confuse everybody else. Like a crowbar, it’s an extremely useful tool that can be destructive if used at the wrong moment or in the wrong way.

Direct action is a tool that needs to be used together with other tools, with a whole campaign that might include research, education, the building of organizations and coalitions, attempts to use the legislative or court systems to address a problem, negotiations, and symbolic actions.

Direct action can be used to pry apart the subtle ties holding the system together. Those who organize and who take the risks of action are the tip of the crowbar that inserts itself into a crack in the system. But the weight, the heft that pries the nails loose, is the larger base of support we’ve created.
Through direct action, we can destabilize the systems of control and undermine the mechanisms that maintain them. We can achieve this by doing the following:

**Raising the costs.** When we cease complying out of fear, we force the system to actually enforce its decrees. This is costly in terms of money, materials, and the undermining of public support. We force the system to reveal the underlying violence that supports it.

**Undermining compliance.** The police, the army, the prison guards are not generally of the class that actually benefits from the current economic and political system. When their willingness to serve as enforcers is undermined, the system falls. And their compliance in turn rests on the cooperation of masses of other people whose labor, creativity, and time are commandeered to serve the system.

**Creating a crisis of legitimacy.** Ultimately, unjust systems fall when they lose their legitimacy. When the overall tacit and overt support for a system is lost, it cannot stand. When people become hopeless about improving their condition, they can become despairing and apathetic. But when they are no longer invested in the status quo, they can also be moved to take action against it. When the system goes too far, it sows the seeds of its own collapse.

**A Crisis of Legitimacy**

If we define our strategy as aiming to create a crisis of legitimacy for the system, we take a step along that third road. We can also see more clearly the immense challenge that lies ahead of us in the wake of the 9-11 attacks.

People in fear are likely to run for the nearest shelter, for what seems familiar, safe, controlled — and that is generally the structures that support the status quo. So after 9-11 it has been extremely easy for governments to shore up their power, to institute restrictions to freedom that would have been unthinkable six months ago, and to implement key pieces of their agenda of hegemony. And it is enormously more difficult to delegitimize a system that people are clinging to for some small sense of security.
But the system carries within it its own instabilities. For nothing undermines the legitimacy of a system like failure. At the moment, ongoing anthrax scares are being used to keep people scared, distracted, and compliant. But in the long run, if the state is unable to assure people’s basic security, it starts to lose its authority.

The attacks of 9-11 both coincided with and exacerbated an economic downturn. The downturn had to come because the prosperity of the Clinton years was based in part on false premises. Yes, technological innovations and the Internet did spur some real growth and productivity, but they set off a bubble of speculation that was entirely removed from reality and had to crash. And that was on top of an economic system that is inherently unsustainable because it is based on a premise of unlimited growth in a world of limited resources.

When the current economic system can no longer deliver the goods, when people no longer feel confidence in their economic future, the legitimacy of the system is also called into question. A smart progressive movement would begin now to build alternative structures, strengthen community, seek ways to provide true security, and develop alternatives ready to be put into place when parts of the current system crumble. Imagine if we had networks of self-managed enterprises that could absorb laid-off airline workers, for example.

**A NEW ROAD**

We can lovingly critique Gandhi and King, and still acknowledge the many valuable insights and aspects of their work along with their immense contributions, courage, and gifts. But it is time to move out of their shadow. They would be the first to agree that social movements need to constantly change and evolve.

We also need to move out of the other 19th-and 20th-century shadows: revolutionaries armed and unarmed, Great Men (and one or two women) and Great Books and Revolutionary Martyrs, Marx and Mao and Bakunin and all the rest of them. Again, all have made contributions we can learn from and acknowledge, but we cannot let them confine our thinking to their categories and assumptions.

We need to turn away from both the narrow, thorny road and the broad road and look for that hidden green path that leads somewhere else. To find it, we need a *satyagraha*, a truth force that speaks for the
truth of the body as well as the soul, that does not assume a punitive relationship to the body’s needs, that openly proclaims the inherent value of the body’s drives and desires.

That form of action goes beyond the dichotomy of violence and nonviolence. The word “nonviolence” keeps us still thinking in terms of violence. For the moment, I’ll speak of that third-road activism as empowered or empowering direct action, for it contains within it a critique of power. Here are ten principles upon which it might be based:

1. **Empowerment.** Empowering direct action aims to transform the structures of domination and control and to radically change the way power is conceived of and operates. We say that domination, control, and violence represent only one sort of power. But another type of power exists as well: power-from-within, empowerment, our ability to create, to imagine, to feel, to make choices. When we act together in an empowered way, we develop collective power. Through personal and collective empowerment, we can fight against, dismantle, and transform the systems of domination that perpetuate oppression. Empowerment implies courage. The more we can move beyond fear, the less control the system has over us. Courage can be found through individual faith — not necessarily in a God or religious tradition, but faith in human capacities for change or in nature’s infinite creativity.

2. **Life, body, and connectedness.** Empowering direct action maximizes respect for life. We embrace life, the body and its needs and desires, our strong emotions and passions. We understand that all of life is interconnected and that empowerment arises from our connections to the web of life. Every act we take affects the whole. All systems of oppression are also interconnected. We might choose to focus on one issue at a given time, but we must ultimately dismantle the whole system of domination.

3. **Radical imagination and prefigurement.** Empowering direct action envisions and prefigures the world we want to create. We don’t locate the revolution in some mythical future — we are the revolution, now. Our means must be consistent with our ends because the end is present in the moment, along with the begin-
ning and the sustaining middle. Our strategies, tactics, and organizations are the foundation of our new social structure. We value creativity, bringing art, music, dance, drums, magic, ritual, masks, puppets, drama, and song into action. We refuse to be boring, tedious, dreary, or doctrinaire. Instead we embody the joy of liberation. We refuse to accept the dominators’ picture of the world. Instead, we dare to dream what has never been before, to think the unthinkable, and then to create it.

4. **Hope.** We replace the false hope of individual advancement offered by the system with a vision of a free, just, and abundant world. We embody that vision in how we organize, how we treat each other, in the symbols we choose and the actions we take. Part of our work as activists is to develop the skills, tools, and resources to make that vision real, and to make it so desirable, so inspiring, that the pale hopes the system offers cannot compare.

5. **Solidarity.** We know that the structures of domination cannot be undermined without risk. Through solidarity, we share the price of our resistance and attempt to mediate the violence of the systems of oppression. While we may incur suffering as a result of our actions, we don’t embrace suffering for its own sake. Our goal is to alleviate suffering, and our solidarity extends to all who suffer under political and economic repression.

6. **Choice and intention.** Empowering direct action understands that every situation offers choices to be made. We do not let structures of force limit our choices, nor do we let fear control us. Instead, we know what our own true intention is and remain focused on it. We learn to stay centered in the midst of chaos and to retain our ability to make conscious choices in any situation. We pose new choices and craft dilemmas for our opponents. We learn how to de-escalate tension and potential conflict in order to expand our options in any situation. We fight against institutions, structures, and acts of domination, but we hold open the possibility that the individuals caught in those systems can change. We craft our strategies and tactics to make change easier for our opponents.

7. **Inclusiveness and diversity.** Empowering direct action values diversity and seeks to expand our movement and to increase opportunities for people of diverse backgrounds, needs, and life
situations to take part. We respect our own differences, needs, cultures, life circumstances, politics, and views as well as differences of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age, physical challenges, and others. The patterns of oppression also exist within us and within our movement, and we are willing to transform ourselves as well as the structures we oppose.

8. Direct democracy and horizontal organizing. Empowering direct action creates ways of organizing and acting that allow all people involved to have a voice in decisions that affect them. We create the minimum structures necessary for our actions and organizations. Decisions are made from the bottom up, not from the top down. We encourage everyone to take leadership in the sense of stepping forth and proposing directions for the group, but we allow no one to direct or control the group.

9. Dialogue. Empowered people will not all think alike. Our movement contains a great diversity of ideas, visions, strategies, and principles. We honor these tensions and engage in ongoing discussion and dialogue to further our collective growth. We recognize that decisions made without adequate discussion will not hold.

10. Freedom and passion. Empowering direct action values passion, emotion, freedom, spontaneity, and surprise. We honor rage as a sane response to oppression and as a potential creative power. We embrace the erotic, the life of the body, the sensual, the earthy, the dark. We are willing to love deeply and fearlessly, and we fight not just against what we hate but also for what we love.

A Different Voice

Empowering direct action understands the power of language and symbols. We are conscious of what voice we speak in. There is a power and clarity in defining what we’re against, but there is another sort of power in naming what we’re for, what we want.

The voice of what Doris Lessing calls the “Self-Hater” — the shamming, blaming, judgmental voice of authority — cannot move people to freedom because it is the voice of our internalization of the systems of domination. We need to recognize it, on the Right and on the Left and when it echoes in our own minds, and avoid using it. Instead of
telling people what not to do in an action, we clearly formulate our intentions and ask for support. Instead of blaming the middle class for its love of comfort and lack of revolutionary zeal, we need to undertake the much harder task of awakening our mall-prowling, SUV-driving compatriots to a possibility so liberatory that it will compensate for the loss of all that feels familiar and safe. If we want to move people to empowerment, we need to find a different voice, to speak in poetry, not in rhetoric or blame. We might listen to Subcommandante Marcos, trickster poet of the Zapatista insurgence:

Indigenous brother, sister —
Non-indigenous brother, sister:
We are here to say that we are here. And when we say “we are here,” we are also naming the other. Brother, sister, who is Mexican or not. With you we say “we are here” and we are here with you.

Brother, sister, indigenous or not:
We are a mirror. We are here to see and be seen, for you to see us, for you to see yourself, for the other to see himself in our image. We are here and we are a mirror. Not reality, just a reflection. Not light, but just reflected light. Not the road, but just a few steps. Not the guide, but just one of many paths which lead to the morning.38

An empowering direct action understands both the power of symbols and the need for confrontation. Every action tells a story, and we carefully craft the tale we want to tell. We steer away from the old tales of martyrdom and virtue. What we’re saying is “Look! A new force is rising up in the world, so creative, so vital, so full of life and passion and freedom that no system of control can withstand it. And you can be a part of it. Yes, you’ll face great risks and danger, but you will have friends with you, amazing, wonderful, mythical, magical comrades all around the globe. And you will be part of creating the most amazing transformation the world has ever seen.”

We find every way we can to enact that story. At times, we may literally create the alternative: the medical clinic, the school, the garden. At times, we may stage a symbolic or real confrontation.
George Monbiot wrote in the *London Guardian* after Genoa:

It is simply not true to say that Carlo Giuliani died in vain.

By contrast to the hundreds of thousands of people who, like me, spent their working lives making polite representations, he was acknowledged by the eight men closeted in the ducal palace. They were forced, as never before, to defend themselves against the charge of illegitimacy.

This discovery is hardly new. I have simply stumbled once more upon the fundamental political reality which all those of us who lead moderately comfortable lives tend occasionally to forget: that confrontation is an essential prerequisite for change.39

Empowering direct action looks for ways to embody our vision in the face of power, to get in the way of its workings, to interrupt its consolidation with our embodied alternatives. This requires great creativity. Symbols are powerful, and symbolic actions can also be effective. But empowering direct action aims at being more than symbolic; it looks for ways to interfere with and delegitimize the operations of injustice.

For an action to be empowering, we need to know clearly what our intentions and objectives are, long-range and short-range. We choose our tactics to support our objectives.

Monbiot goes on to quote “the great Islamic activist Hamza Yusuf Hanson [who] distinguishes between two forms of political action. He defines the Arabic word ‘hamas’ as enthusiastic, but intelligent anger. ‘Hamoq’ means uncontrolled, stupid anger.”

We honor anger, but attempt to act with intelligent rage that communicates a message and stays focused on our intention. We don’t let our rage control us, but rather make conscious choices on how to use the tremendous source of energy it represents.

The movement has already been experimenting with new forms and formulations that may be the first steps along that path that leads to the morning. Reclaim the Streets throws a party in an intersection and takes back urban space. The fence at Quebec City is contested with a carnival: a catapult lobs teddy bears over the chain links. The White
Overalls create moving barricades of inner tubes and balloons, padding themselves up to walk through police lines. The Pagan Cluster moves as a Living River through the streets. The pink bloc dances through the tear gas of Genoa. The Zapatistas deplore the necessity of carrying arms and issue mystic communiques. Protestors snake march through the streets of Toronto, outflanking the police while avoiding clashes. Gas masks are covered with glitter and rhinestones.

All of these actions embody some of the principles outlined above. They change the categories and challenge our expectations. They favor mobility, surprise, and creativity over static, predictable tactics. They may involve the risk of arrest, but getting arrested is not the goal and protesters may actively seek to avoid it. They maximize respect for life in its fullness: erotic, angry, joyful, loving, wild, and free. And they are only the beginning of the experiment.

For we don’t need to be limited to the thorny road nor to see the broad road to hell as the only alternative. Even the third road is only one of the many paths that, as Marcos says, lead to the morning. No matter how we stumble in the cold of the night, the sun must eventually illuminate a new way that we can walk with joy and courage in our bodies of earth and flesh and desire.