The Alternatives to Violence Project’s Work for Peace Behind Bars

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A young man wearing a khaki prison uniform perches nervously on the edge of a plastic chair. He is one of twenty inmates who will spend the weekend learning how to overcome hostility in the Alternatives to Violence Project. By the end of three days in a musty chapel or an echoing gymnasium, he will have a group of new allies and a clearly identified set of skills for approaching conflict in a peaceful way. If he practices these skills, he will do nothing less than transform the relationships and interactions that make up his life. Men and women in prisons and community settings across the United States and Rwanda, Colombia, Bosnia, Mexico, South Africa, the West Bank, the Sudan, and many other nations are doing the same thing: listening, talking, laughing together, and learning to reach inside themselves for new solutions to an ancient problem.

Following in the footsteps of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a number of organizations around the world devote themselves to spreading peace and the techniques of nonviolence. Their work may involve sending peace witness teams to intervene in war-torn states, training local peacekeepers, providing humanitarian service, fostering dialogue between groups in conflict, promoting national and international policies of peace, or empowering subjugated populations who struggle with ongoing systemic oppression. In recent decades, activists also have begun targeting prisons as important sites for peace work, particularly in the United States, where high rates of racially discriminatory mass incarceration, overcrowding, and brutality are recognized globally as human rights issues.

The prison-born Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) is a national and international volunteer network that uses experience-based workshops to develop people’s natural abilities to resolve conflicts without resorting to violence. The workshops introduce methods for reaching consensus and compromise, resolving conflicts rather than simply reacting to them, and learning communication skills that can de-escalate potentially violent and dangerous confrontations. This essay offers a detailed look at the organization’s
philosophy and methods, illuminating the value of an approach to nonviolence that costs little or nothing to share and is widely adaptable to conditions and customs anywhere—even those in the most brutal prisons.

After the deadly 1971 riots at Attica Prison in Attica, New York, prisoners involved in the uprising were transferred to other prisons in the region, and some wound up at Green Haven, a poorly supervised, dangerous prison. According to the organization’s creation story, a group of these incarcerated men contacted Quakers hosting a worship group at the prison and sought their support in helping to make the facility safer. Drawing on the nonviolence tactics of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the inside and outsider participants devised a three-day program and, in the fall of 1975, offered it at Green Haven. The program soon expanded, first to other prisons, then to communities in the United States, and then to other nations. Today, AVP workshops are held in prisons in 35 states, as well as in more than 50 nations and conflict zones around the world. Last year, more than 14,000 people participated in the program. Although the majority of workshops operate in prisons, they are also held in schools, businesses, churches, community associations, women’s shelters, displaced persons camps, and other locations.

An AVP gathering is an intensive experience, usually held over the course of three days. Games, exercises, and role plays allow participants to learn and practice interpersonal communication skills. Through small group sharing and one-to-one interaction, the workshops build a sense of community and trust. Exercises focus on building self-esteem, improving listening skills and self-expression, replacing competition with cooperation, and learning to be open to the inner goodness people possess. Participants work on learning habits of mind that accept the possibility of change and forgiveness. The attitudes that reduce antagonism are simple but profound: affirmation, respect, empathy. These states of mind help people learn how to respond to serious conflicts in their lives without resorting to abuse, assault, or worse.

Workshops are led by small teams of facilitators, usually made up of a combination of inmate and outside community members. All facilitators of prison AVP workshops, both inmates and civilians, are unpaid volunteers. Imprisoned and free people participate in workshops together as equals, talking, playing, and eating meals together. If they enjoy the entry-level program, people from both groups can take advanced training and eventually become facilitators who help direct workshops.

I first encountered AVP in the spring of 2006 as a workshop participant. Now a program leader myself, I can attest that this approach to nonviolence benefits facilitators as much as participants and civilians, as well as inmates. No matter how many sessions one takes part in, and in no matter what role, the experience generates the self-awareness and compassion that are pivotal
to the deep personal and social change that true nonviolence requires of every individual.

The guiding philosophy of AVP, called “transforming power,” is akin to the concept of selfless love described by Dr. King and Gandhi’s concept of satyagraha, the soul force that people can apply to the joint pursuit of truth. Larry Aspey and Karen Eppler describe transforming power as an attitude of mind in which a person values and identifies deeply with all of humanity, even someone who seems hostile or threatening. When approaching a stranger, no matter how antagonistic, they say:

If we revere their potential, we can break down the barriers which prevent us and them from influencing each other. Are we willing to learn . . . to relate ourselves sympathetically to those of whose actions we disapprove—militarists, bigots, materialists, delinquents, and those whose race, religion, or ideology differ from our own? Until we do this, their minds are closed to us.

Participants in AVP workshops are asked to reach inside themselves for the embracing energy that builds genuine regard for others and precludes the use of violence.

The experiential workshops offered by AVP are grounded in the egalitarian understanding that human beings learn best from each other and from direct experience. The organization’s policies state:

We encourage each other to search for solutions within ourselves, drawing on our own experiences and those of our communities. Workshops endeavor to break down barriers that prevent people from revealing their inner selves, thus enabling them to form friendships with other individuals, and to build a community.

Workshops follow a set of basic principles that have been developed and revised over time, but facilitators are encouraged to adapt them to cultures and conditions wherever they are. Sessions are structured around hands-on exercises, discussions, games, and role-plays that help participants discover and practice new, nonviolent ways of dealing with conflict.

As an example: I am sitting with twenty-three other people, mostly young men of color in their early 20s. Our chairs are arranged in a circle facing out, so that our backs are to each other. This exercise will help us explore the roots of our own anger. We are asked to close our eyes and then call out any expressions we can remember hearing from parents or authority figures when we were children. The room is silent for a few minutes. Then the voices begin: “Dummy.” “Bastard.” “Just like your father, you’ll never be no good.” “I wish you were dead.” “You have shit for brains.” “Stop crying or I’ll give you something to really cry about.” “I should have had an abortion instead of having you.” “Get the belt.” “Get out.” The pain in the room is real, but participants realize that it is shared; we are not alone in our experiences.
In a paired discussion exercise that explores forgiveness, an inmate named Tariq looks at me, struggling with the idea. When he was an adolescent, he says, his father rejected him. “I don’t have time for you. You’re not good enough to be my son,” his father said. But now that Tariq is serving a long sentence, the man is trying to make contact. “Why should I open my heart now?” he asks. “When I was really needed him, he wasn’t there. I don’t want to open my heart again just to have it hurt.” Another day, a small group of men sit in a circle of plastic chairs while a prisoner named George shakes his head and strokes the neatly trimmed beard on his chin. “When I was on the street, my cousin and I were tight—we did everything together. That was my boy. But now I’m up in here, he don’t send me no money, no kite (letter)—nothing. He just hung me out to dry. I can’t forgive that.” He shakes his head again and blinks his eyes. Another man in the group shares a similar experience of abandonment by his family, but describes how he has let go of his anger: “I feel free, you know? Relieved. I didn’t do it for them. I did it for me.” Other prisoners nod their heads; if he can let go of his resentment, maybe they can, too.

Role-plays give participants opportunities to practice solving problems and confrontations without using violence. Two men stage an encounter in front of an audience. “Hey man, watch where you’re going—you just made me spill my drink.” “Don’t get on my case because you were clumsy—I had nothin’ to do with it.” “Yes you did. You bumped into me and you’re going to pay for it.” “Who’s going to make me pay? You?” The audience watches attentively, trying to think of ways the men can resolve the situation peacefully. Hands go up, and suggestions begin to fly. Saying the words, taking the time to breathe and move in a non-threatening way, they practice what the situation would look and feel like if it were moving toward a tactful end instead of a fight.

One exercise offers physical evidence of the variety of ways in which people respond to conflict. Two rows of men and women line up facing each other across an imaginary line. Each grabs the hand of the person facing them, and, at a signal, tries somehow to get their partner over to their side of the imaginary line. Pandemonium ensues until, after ten seconds, a leader calls, “Freeze.” The group looks around: Some people have used brute strength to pull their partners across to their side. Some have given up and walked to the other side without a struggle. Some have let go of a partner’s hand and crossed their arms over their chests, refusing to move or to be moved. And some straddle both sides of the imaginary line. These embodiments of conflict may include avoidance, competition, or cooperation; in our own lives, we realize, some situations may call for one approach, while other contexts demand a different action.

A workshop facilitator, a very elderly man, climbs up on a folding table and crosses his arms over his chest. In this exercise about trust, he
asks for volunteers, and then steps to the very edge of the platform. Turning around, he closes his eyes and flings himself backward off the table. Seven young men in khaki prison uniforms lunge forward to catch him as he falls, steadying his body carefully, and then slowly lowering him to the floor like a precious porcelain vase. Later, incarcerated men are paired up; one closes his eyes while the other leads him around a room filled with chairs, steps, uneven surfaces and other people milling about. Although they were strangers to each other not twenty-four hours ago, the men now trust their partners to lead them to safety, and no one runs into a wall, falls down, or gets hurt. Later, they ponder: Whose task is more difficult, the person who must learn to trust someone else or the person responsible for the care of another?

Some games break the seriousness of the mood with play. In a circle, a group of young men throw a ball back and forth in an intricate pattern. A facilitator adds another ball, then another. Soon half a dozen balls are whipping across the circle. Suddenly the facilitator tosses in a beanbag teddy bear too. Then a floppy kitty. The first man to catch one of these drops it in confusion—“What’s this?” The circle erupts in laughter.

Thus, an AVP workshop offers a tangible encounter with a nonviolent society—not a theoretical abstraction, but an embodied, lived experience. During the approximately twenty-two-hour duration of a workshop, participants build and maintain a different kind of community. For some, it is the first time in their lives that community means trust and acceptance, not struggle. On the street, men may see each other as competitors locked in desperate conflict, with violence the only possible means of overcoming their disadvantage. But in the AVP workshop, they see the similarity of their own struggles to those of others, and they learn that trust and cooperation are possible. A spirit of cooperation and non-aggression emerges.

AVP structures draw from the principles of nonviolence, as well. As described previously, workshop sessions are led by teams of facilitators consisting of both civilians and prisoners. There is no hierarchy of leaders and followers; all participants, including facilitators, are present to learn from each other. Where possible, decisions are made by consensus, and all feedback and suggestions from the group are welcome. And while a national AVP group helps determine overall policy, the organization is locally based. AVP operates in this manner because, as Newton Garver and Eric Reitan observe:

> When members of a group respect and care for one another, they are more apt to cooperate in solving problems, and to deal with conflicts in a nonviolent way; when individuals feel they belong to a group, they are more likely to work cooperatively with other members of the group; when they feel safe, they are less likely to lash out with violence.

The concentrated atmosphere of a workshop allows participants to model the relationships that they hope to create in their communities outside.
Similarly, the organization’s essential principles and structure parallel those of the workshops; within the organization, facilitators, coordinators, and local, regional, national, and international representatives model the egalitarian relationships of nonviolence they espouse.

The survival of the nonviolent mind-set modeled by AVP depends on participants’ willingness to apply the attitudes and techniques they have learned once the program has ended. Some AVP chapters offer information and support for formerly incarcerated people as they go through the transition back into society, providing a place where the challenges of re-entry can be shared openly and understood by those who have faced the same challenges. When AVP operates in war zones, organizers have added additional programs in mediation, trauma healing, and other services needed to teach and maintain peace. The organization recognizes that the skills of conflict transformation must be practiced over time.

AVP offers peace activists and the larger society a genuine paradigm shift for empowering incarcerated people and others, both victimizers and victims, whose lives have been touched by violence. If incarcerated men and women can learn to see one another as valued members of a community whose needs can and should be met along with their own, then so can the people outside who condemn them. If men and women who have feared and harmed each other can learn to forgive and trust one another, then so can all of us. Whether applied in places in the world where violent conflict has torn populations asunder—like Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Colombia, Guatemala, or the West Bank—or in the United States, where conflict between groups defined by race and social class is most often framed as crime, the Alternatives to Violence Project offers an inclusive vision of community safety based not on punishment or revenge, but on love. It teaches peacemaking that supports healthy communities through an unswerving commitment to human equality, inclusion, and reconciliation.

RECOMMENDED READINGS


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