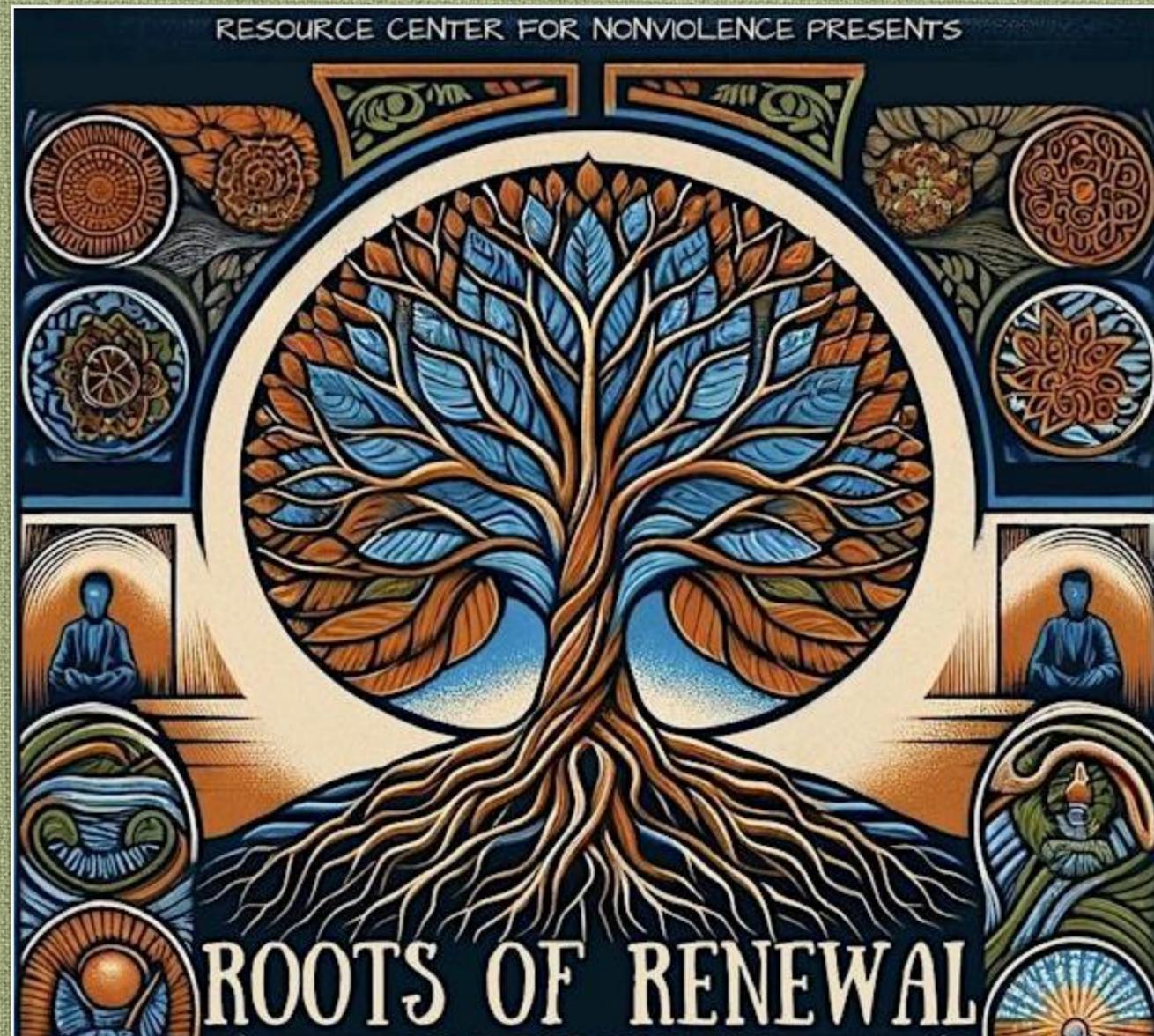


20th Century Roots & Branches of Nonviolence Theory



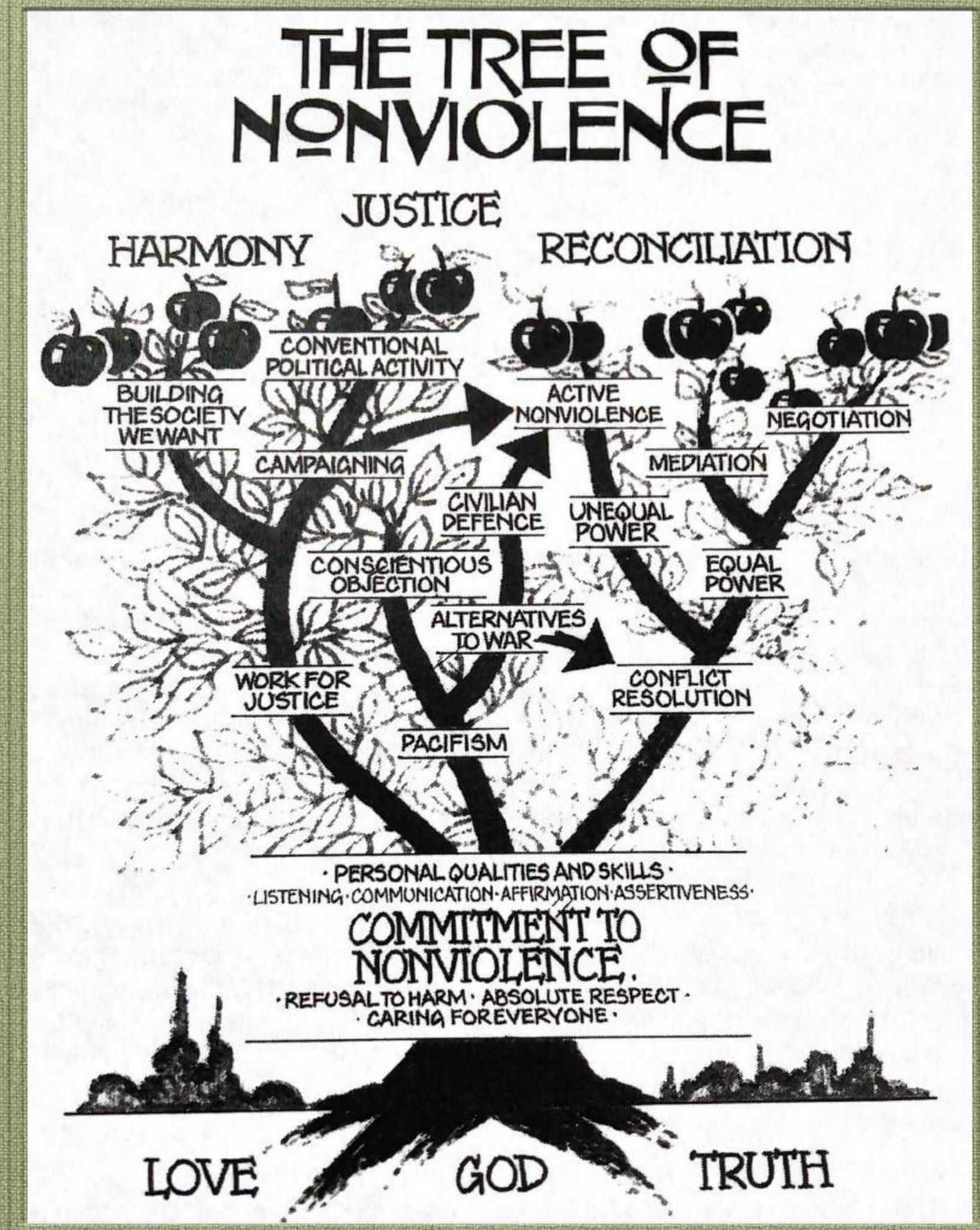
Presentation by **Bill Warters**
March 21, 2026

The Spirit of Peace Conference
hosted by
Ashland Center for Nonviolence

Image from Santa Cruz
Resource Center for Nonviolence

Nonviolence

Many definitions, many applications, a long history



Exploring “Local Cultures” of Nonviolence

- ❖ Nonviolence is developed via lived experience
- ❖ Different elements may be emphasized
- ❖ Religious and Spiritual Beliefs have an impact
- ❖ Working in Community Matters



Ionia Correctional Facility Inside Facilitation Team at AVP Michigan

<https://www.avpmichigan.org/>

Inspired by
Jo Vellacott
 Feminist
 Historian of
 Women and
 Women's efforts
 for Peace



Jo Vellacott focused on the role of women in the pacifist movement

Guest Editorial
**Thoughts on Quaker Women, Feminism,
 and Feminist Pacifism**

Jo Vellacott
 A talk delivered to the Annual Meeting, CFHA, 12 Sept. 1998

This year, 1998, is the sesquicentennial of the Women's Rights Convention held in Seneca Falls, New York, from which issued the Women's Declaration of Sentiments, based on the 1776 Declaration of Rights.

It is an appropriate time to reflect on the role played by Quaker women and their use and understanding of Friends' traditions and process in the background to this event. I shall also draw some parallels between how the Seneca Falls Convention came about in 1848 and the role played by Quaker women in the feminist pacifism of the 1970s and 1980s, in a story which makes another link with Seneca Falls.

would not have sufficed, and indeed might not have survived, had it not rested on the deeper belief of Friends that God still speaks to people, and that it is possible to discern God's will and act upon it. In theological terms, this is called the doctrine of continuing revelation. In social and practical terms it meant that Quaker women - who were mostly eminently respectable - found themselves challenged to fly in the face of what was considered right and proper for women.

The Grimké sisters, Sarah and Angelina, daughters of a southern slaveholding family who were aware from an early age of the evils of the system, moved to Philadelphia in the 1820s and became Quakers. A few years

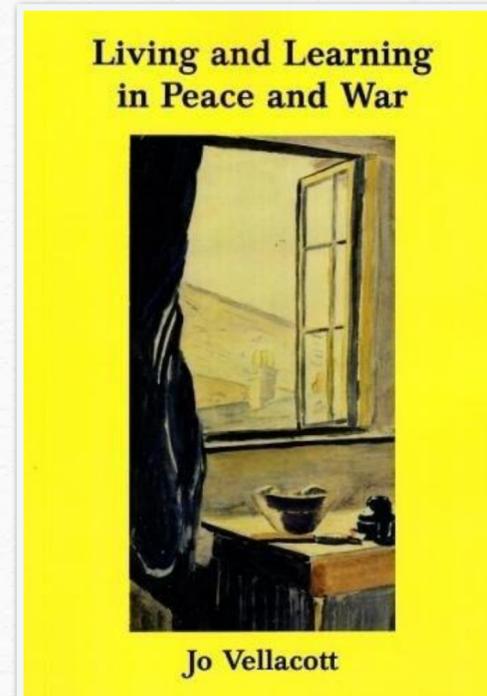
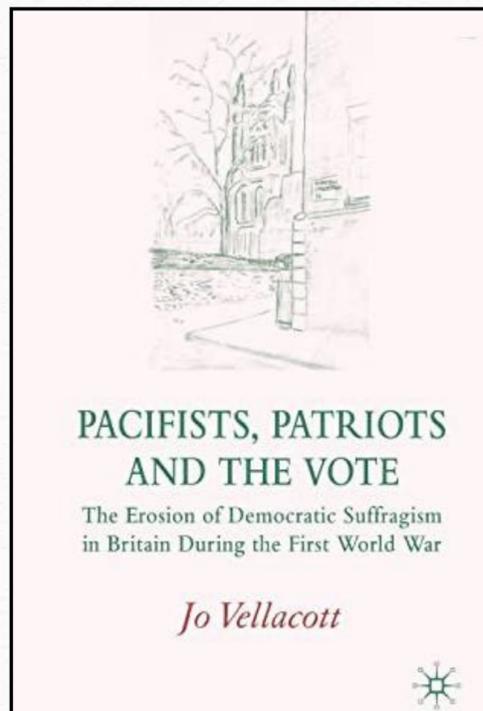
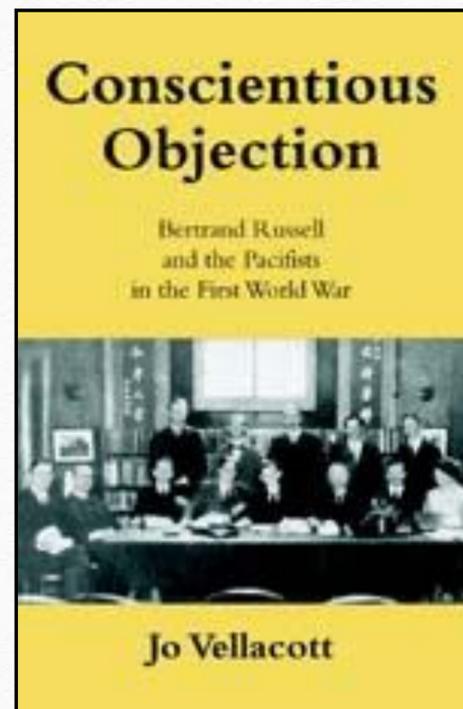
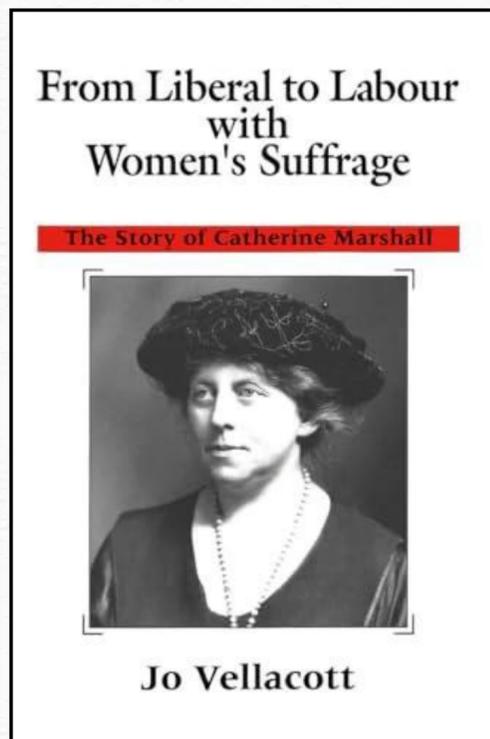
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Quaker women took an active role in the anti-slavery movement of the early nineteenth century, alongside Quaker men. Well, not quite alongside. Certainly Quakers were leaders in social reform, but they were not altogether immune from contemporary cultural influences. The tradition of gender equality played an immensely important part in the conviction of self-worth evinced by Quaker women, but its social application had been substantially eroded by the criteria of respectability which prevailed. Quaker women, like others of their gender, were expected to work for social causes quietly, among themselves, and as behind-the-scenes supporters of their husbands.

I would posit that the tradition of equality

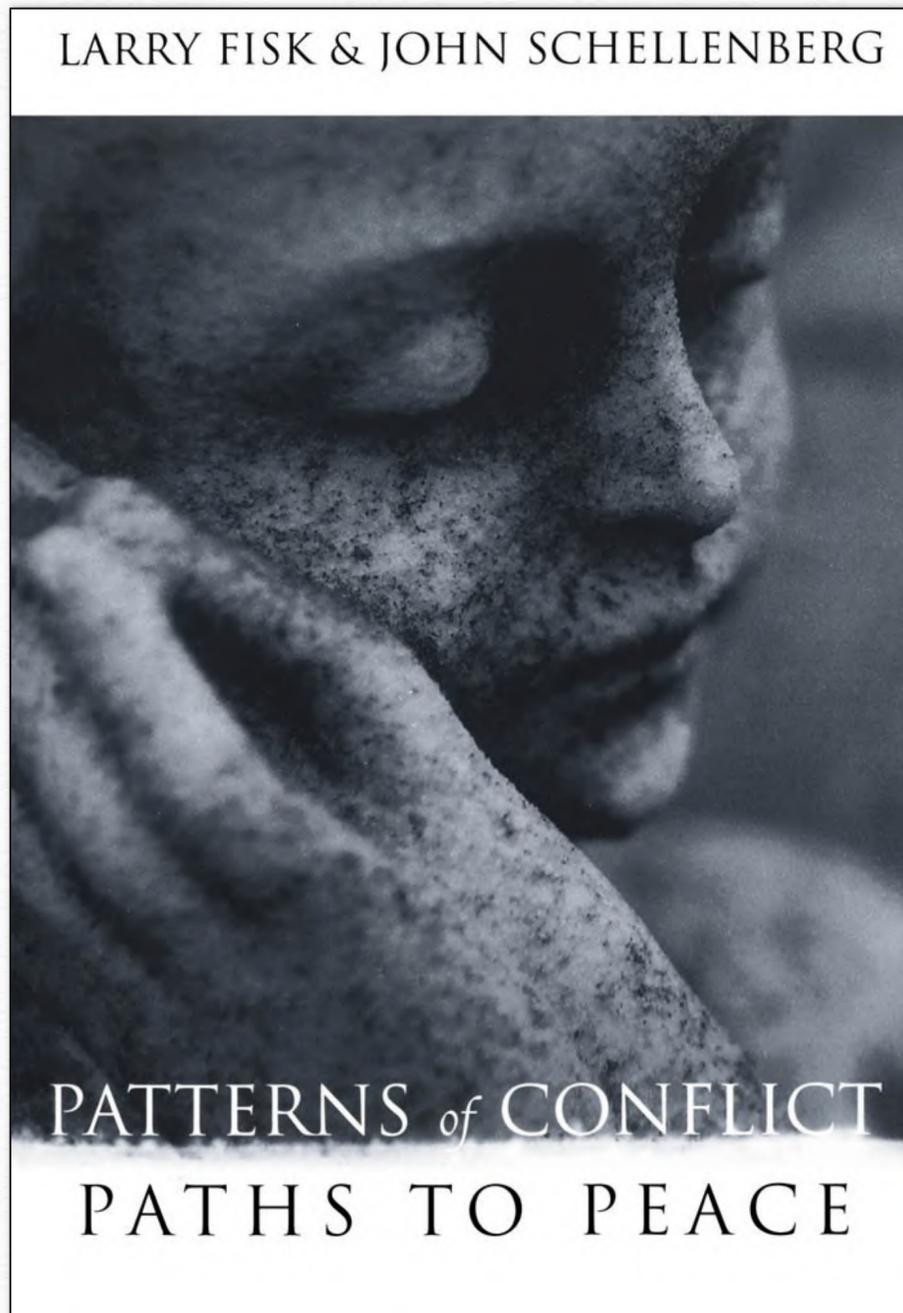


Lucretia Mott



Key Source for My Presentation

- ❖ Book *Patterns of Conflict, Paths to Peace* (2000, Broadview Press)
- ❖ This is a Canadian Peace and Conflict Studies textbook that my wife (a Canadian) and I have a chapter in. Ours is on *Conflict in Interpersonal Contexts*
- ➔ ❖ There is also a Chapter by British/Canadian Quaker Jo Vellacott entitled *Nonviolence: A Road Less Travelled*
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3138/j.ctt2ttvxw.7>
- ❖ Vellacott provides helpful snapshots of the use of nonviolence in different contexts



Some Roots & Branches of Nonviolence Theory

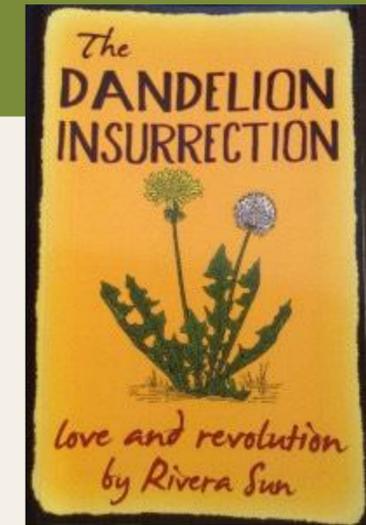
Quick Tour of Some
Approaches to
Nonviolence
by Different Writers and
Theorists



A Timeline of Roots & Branches

“The Quakers read the Bible the way Jesus intended, shared it with Tolstoy, who inspired Gandhi, who set the stage for Dr. King.”

From *The Dandelion Insurrection - Love and Revolution* by Rivera Sun



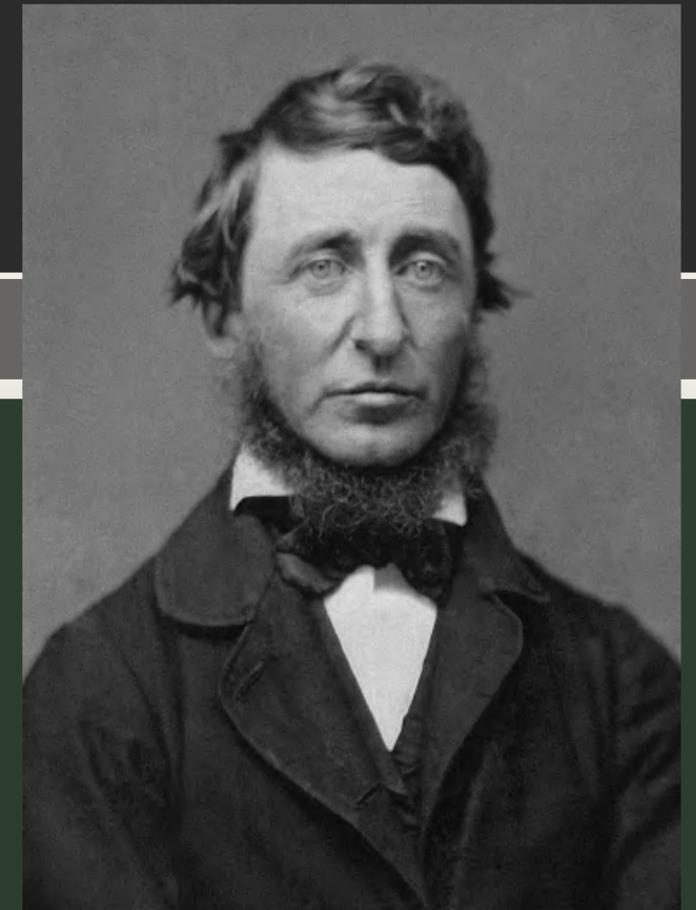
Ursula Franklin (1921–2016): Throughout the latter 20th century, bridging Quaker spirituality, feminist analysis, and systems thinking in peace scholarship

Henry David Thoreau • 1817–1862

United States • *The Duty of Conscientious Disobedience*

Core Approach to Nonviolent Action

- His one essential essay, "**Civil Disobedience**" (1848), became a classic of nonviolence literature in the 20th century
- Central point: **every person has an overriding obligation to act according to conscience — even when this means disobeying the law**
- Government is a convenience until we can do better; **majority decisions do not absolve individuals from following their conscience**
- His personal protest: tax refusal. He saw the government demanding he violate his conscience — to support Massachusetts slaveholding policy and the Mexican war
- Ownership of property makes us dependent on state protection, more reluctant to take risks, and less able to refuse complicity in wrong
- His advocacy of simple living and relationship with nature are inseparable from his nonviolence — less to lose, freer to resist
- Direct influence on Gandhi and King, both of whom cited Thoreau explicitly



“The only obligation which I have a right to assume, is to do at any time what I think right.”

— Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience* (1848)

Key Idea: Conscience outranks law. Individual moral refusal is not withdrawal from the world — it is the most powerful engagement with it.

Leo Tolstoy • 1828–1910

Russia • Christian Anarchism and Passive Non-resistance

Core Approach to Nonviolent Action

- Developed a radical philosophy of Christian anarchism while already a writer of renown and a wealthy man — over fifty years old
- **Rejected all institutions based on violence:** governments, law courts, police, armies, private property, and money
- Believed we are commanded NOT to resist even these evils by force — **passive non-resistance as the highest spiritual practice**
- The practice of non-resistance may mean non-cooperation, conscientious objection to military service, and refusal of force-based government functions
- His social philosophy strives toward a **society based on voluntary consent** — all would labor for necessities of life, without hierarchical compulsion
- Remembered for intellectual influence rather than personal action
- Gandhi deeply admired Tolstoy's condemnation of violence and social doctrines on poverty — but the two saw nonviolence very differently



Leo Tolstoy

Key Idea: Non-resistance as spiritual command: the refusal to meet evil with force, rooted not in passivity but in a vision of society reorganized on voluntary consent.

Global Influences

Who Coined The Term “Civil Resistance?”



“The resistance to authority in South Africa was well advanced before I got the essay of Thoreau on civil disobedience. But the movement was then known as passive resistance. This was incomplete.... When I saw the title of Thoreau’s great essay, I began the use of his phrase to explain our struggle to the English readers. But I found that even civil disobedience failed to convey the full meaning of the struggle. I therefore adopted the phrase civil resistance.”

From Gandhi’s letter to the “Servants of India Society” in 1935

Catherine E. Marshall • 1880–1961

Britain • *Feminist Nonviolence versus Militarism*

Core Approach to Nonviolent Action

- As Parliamentary Secretary to the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, she more than any other developed the NU into a remarkable political pressure group
- Well-educated and widely read, she developed nonviolence as not just the best strategy but a principle to live by
- She did not commonly use the term "nonviolence" but spoke of "**anti-militarism**" — encompassing patriarchy, hierarchical rule, colonialism, and perpetuation of social injustice
- Saw the **war as in large part the result of male monopoly of power**; believed women sharing power was essential to national and international peace
- Respected the humanity in all — **refused to demonize the opponent**, approached conflict as something to be negotiated with both sides' interests considered
- The term "**positive peace**" recurs in her thought: not merely the absence of war but a substance-filled peace where all people's dignity is respected
- Spent as much time during WWI working with male conscientious objectors as with women's peace groups — nonviolence for her crossed gender lines



CATHERINE E. MARSHALL (1880–1961)
Honorary Secretary of the No-Conscription
Fellowship

“Anti-militarism involves gender equality, social justice, and political power for the common people — an attitude which respects the humanity in all.”

— Vellacott summarizing Marshall's philosophy

Key Idea: Feminist nonviolence as anti-militarism: war is not an aberration but a symptom of patriarchy and domination. Peace requires transforming the structures, not just stopping the fighting.

Dorothy Day • 1897–1980

United States • Catholic Nonviolent Action for Social Justice

Core Approach to Nonviolent Action

- Began as a journalist for Marxist publications; later became a convinced Catholic — **combining Christian nonviolence with communist idealism**
- Founded the Catholic Worker, an influential paper expounding radical antiwar views and sparking a strong Catholic grassroots peace movement
- Like Thoreau, she believed citizens have the right and obligation to refuse cooperation with laws that conflict with conscience
- Her causes included women's suffrage, opposition to fascism, support for the unemployed in the Depression, conscientious objection to war service
- Her influence — exerted through journalism and personal example — significantly liberated Catholics to engage causes more radical than the Church had traditionally sanctioned
- Nonviolence for Day was inseparable from **voluntary poverty**: to truly refuse complicity with violent systems, one must also refuse the property and comfort those systems protect

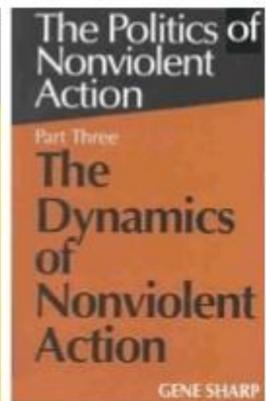
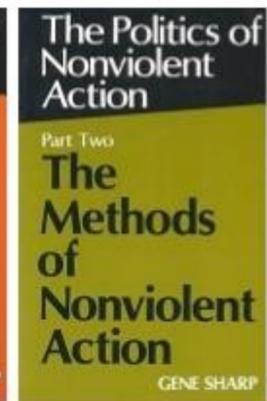
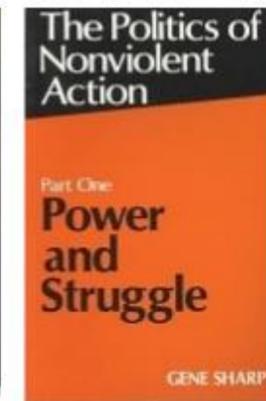
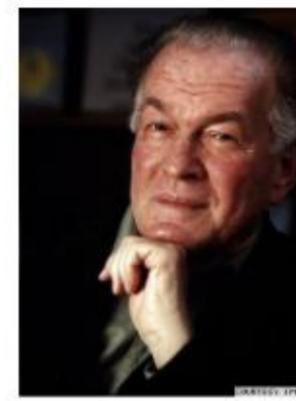


Dorothy Day

Key Idea: Catholic nonviolence as total witness: prayer, poverty, and protest are one seamless practice. The newspaper, the breadline, and the picket line are all acts of the same faith.

Gene Sharp • 1928–2018

United States • Nonviolent Action — Its Politics, Methods, Dynamics



Core Approach to Nonviolent Action

- The Politics of Nonviolent Action (3 vols., 1973) is probably the most comprehensive study of nonviolence in existence — covering theory, methods, and dynamics
- Core premise: **political power rests not on force but on cooperation**. Withdraw cooperation, and even an oppressive system cannot function
- Classifies nonviolent methods into three groups: **nonviolent protest & persuasion**; **non-cooperation** (social, economic, political); and **nonviolent intervention**
- Categorizes outcomes as: **conversion** (rare), **accommodation** (negotiated change), or **nonviolent coercion** — when the system cannot function without conceding
- **Deliberately downplays spiritual inspiration** — emphasizes that nonviolent action is the work of "ordinary people, not pacifists or saints, struggling imperfectly for their diverse causes"

“Nonviolent action may be a force for improvement of the human condition; the empowerment of people through its use can contribute to beneficial social change by redistributing power on a wider basis.”

— Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*

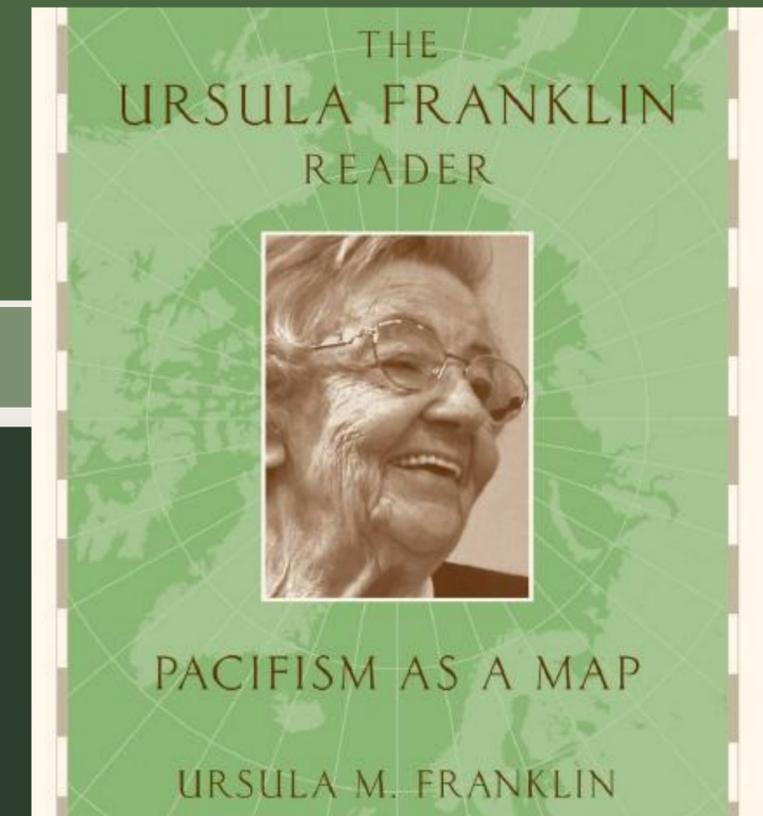
Key Idea: Secular power analysis: nonviolence works because power depends on obedience. Anyone can withdraw obedience. No spiritual prerequisite required — though the spiritual dimension may be what sustains it.

Ursula Franklin • 1921–2016

Canada • Violence as Resourcelessness

Core Approach to Nonviolent Action

- Professor emeritus of engineering at the University of Toronto; founding member of the Voice of Women; Quaker
- **Central to her thinking: violence is never acceptable, never the better solution to any conflict.** It is resourcelessness — the failure of imagination and care
- "When response to any situation starts from the premise of nonviolence, a nonviolent way will be found." Refusal to use violence is the obligation to find creative solutions
- She argues only the moral solution is truly practical: **"It is not the way of nonviolence, ecology, and caring that threatens the world; the evils are brought about by those who have rejected the moral way for what they have touted as the realistic way"**
- Her framework extends nonviolence to systems — technology, economic structures, and institutions can themselves be forms of violence when they deny people agency



"Violence is resourcelessness. Refusal to make use of violence does not imply inaction, but the obligation to look for creative solutions or ways to move forward."

— Ursula Franklin (as cited in Vellacott)

Key Idea: Holistic nonviolence: the personal, political, technological, and ecological are one. A society that embraces violence as "realistic" has simply abandoned the harder, more creative, more human work.

Approaches to Nonviolent Action

Principled Nonviolence

Key figures: Thoreau, Tolstoy, Marshall, Day, King

- **Grounded in moral or spiritual conviction** — violence is always wrong, regardless of outcome
- The practitioner's integrity and internal state are part of the witness itself
- Where most effective, participants often underwent transformative experience in training or during action
- The term "nonviolence" implies refraining from violence on grounds of principle — it is a way of being, not merely a tactic
- Training is crucial — not just tactics but internalization of ahimsa (complete courage free of any urge to violent response)

Pragmatic / Strategic Nonviolence

Key figures: Gene Sharp (primary), Franklin (partial)

- Nonviolence **chosen because it works** — no spiritual prerequisite required
- Sharp's premise: political power rests on cooperation, not force. Withdraw cooperation, the system cannot function
- Empowers movements that lack military capacity — applicable across cultures and political contexts
- Sharp downplays spiritual inspiration: the actions were those of "ordinary people, not pacifists or saints"
- Vellacott's critique: Sharp's analysis is comprehensive and essential — but underestimates what actually sustained participants through hardship

Most effective movements draw on BOTH — Sharp's strategic discipline sustains the action; principled depth sustains the people.

Spiritual Roots of Nonviolence

Quaker Testimony of Peace

Vellacott and Franklin ground nonviolence in lived Quaker tradition — the Inner Light, testimonies, and corporate discernment.

Tolstoy's Christian Anarchism

Resist evil without violence; the Sermon on the Mount as a practical guide to social transformation. Hierarchical power enables violence.

Gandhi's Satyagraha

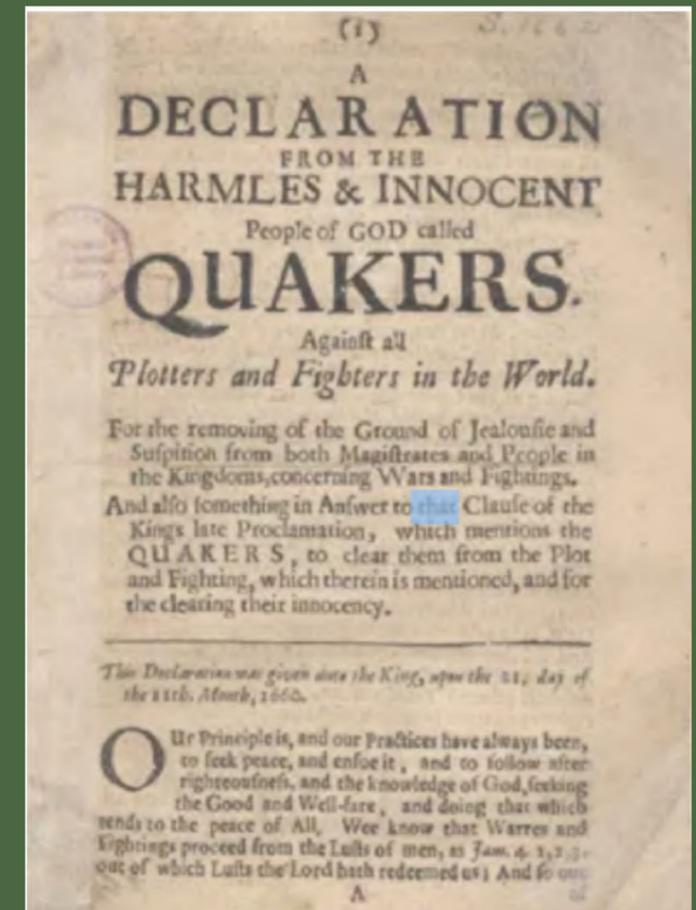
Truth-force as a spiritual power; nonviolence rooted in Hindu, Jain and Christian traditions simultaneously.

Dorothy Day & Catholic Worker

Combining prayer with direct action; serving the poor as a spiritual discipline inseparable from peacemaking.

King's Beloved Community

Rooted in *agape* - New Testament ideal of unconditional, self-giving love. Suffering is transformative, theology of the cross.



The Quaker Peace Testimony declared that they would not fight with outward weapons, for any end, under any authority.

Transformation: The Inner Dimension of Nonviolent Action

Training as Transformation

Both Gandhi and King's training involved the internalization of a commitment to nonviolence even in the face of extreme violence.

The salt march required participants to withstand beatings without a single blow returned — this took preparation of spirit, not only body.

The Spiritual Component

Where nonviolent action has been most effective, participants have often been aware of a strong spiritual component in their empowerment. This "spiritual" should not be confused with "religious" — it describes an **expansion of consciousness beyond the narrow confines of self.**

Nurturing Future Generations

If nonviolence can be a way of life — preempting causes of conflict rather than solving crises — then we must ask: how do we cultivate this? Through intentional community, experiential learning, honest reckoning with history, and attention to the inner formation of participants.

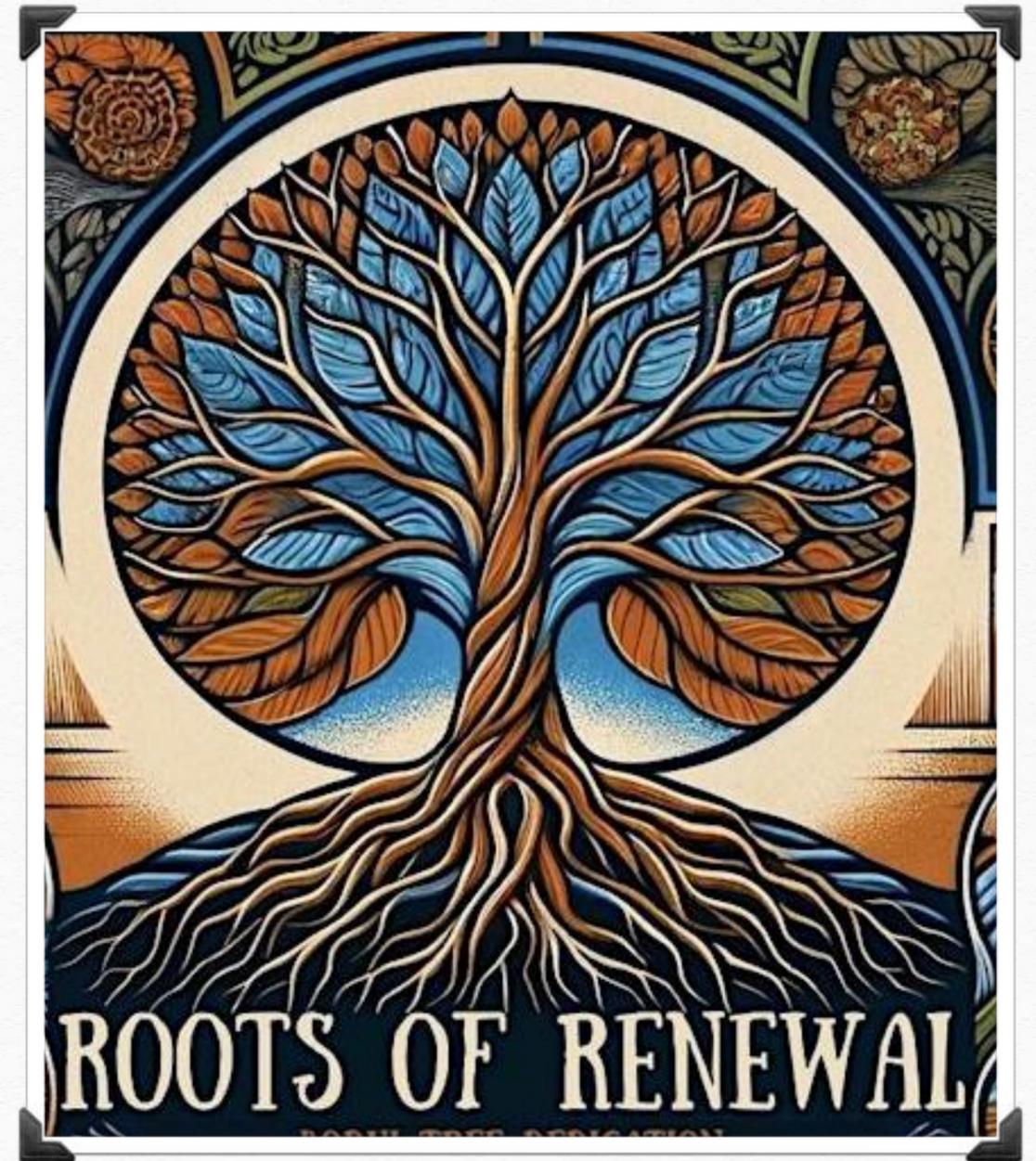
Practicing Nonviolence is Building Resourcefulness

- ❖ Vellacott, in an essay on "Women, Peace and Power", building on the ideas of Ursula Franklin, speaks of **VIOLENCE as "RESOURCELESSNESS"** - seeing few options, feeling like one's self or small group is alone against a hostile or at best indifferent universe.
- ❖ **NONVIOLENCE then becomes RESOURCEFULNESS** -- seeing the possibilities for change in oneself and in others, and having the power to act on those possibilities. Much of the task of becoming effectively nonviolent lies in removing the preconceptions that keep us from seeing those resources.
- ❖ **Undoing the violence within us involves challenging myths that we are not good enough, not smart enough or not skilled enough to act.** The best way to do this is to try it, working with friends or in small groups at first, and starting with roleplays or less intimidating activities. As confidence in our own resourcefulness grows, we become more able to support each other in maintaining our nonviolent actions.



Nurturing Nonviolence for Future Generations

- ❖ **Recover the roots** — Thoreau's conscience, Tolstoy's refusal, Marshall's anti-militarism, Day's witness, Sharp's strategy, Franklin's creative imagination are all waiting to be rediscovered.
- ❖ **Honor both the strategic and the spiritual** — Sharp's analysis is essential, but Vellacott is right: the inner dimension is what sustained people through the hardest moments of genuine nonviolent action.
- ❖ **Build communities of formation** — the transformative dimension grows through embodied practice, not information transfer. Preparation of spirit is as necessary as knowledge of tactics.





Thank You

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