

The Parking Lot Sutra

Ten Reasons Why It's Hard to Respond to Structural Violence

by Donald Rothberg

[The following article is based on a talk given at the interfaith vigil and retreat at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico in September 2000.]

This entire world is disturbed with insanity, due to the exertions of those who are confused about themselves.

—Santideva, *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Life*

We sit together at this parking lot at Los Alamos, as nuclear weapons continue to be researched, developed, and used as the background for foreign policy, even though the Cold War has long been over. Such weapons are the manifestations of our society's institutions, policies, and broad cultural assumptions. Particularly through their use as tools of threat and coercion, as well as through radioactive contamination, they represent a kind of ongoing violence. Yet the use of these weapons and the many effects of such use, including the vast expenditures that take resources away from meeting basic social needs, are largely hidden, or, when they are recognized, are seen as normal and acceptable rather than as examples of violence.

The concept of structural violence, developed by Johan Galtung and others, can help us identify clearly the violence of nuclear weapons. Galtung, a pioneer in the field of Peace Studies, claims that the opposite of peace is not war but violence. Yet we typically have a rather narrow view of violence as the direct and intentional infliction of physical harm on human beings. Galtung and others have proposed a much wider understanding of violence as that which violates basic human needs and rights, for instance, the rights enumerated in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948.

Galtung distinguishes three forms of violence: direct, structural, and cultural. Direct violence is the deliberate attempt to cause injury to a person's physical and psychological integrity through brutal treatment, homicide, imprisonment, forced labor, etc. Structural violence has to do with the everyday and "normal" functioning of institutions and policies. For example, when African American women are twice as likely to die from breast cancer as European American women because of inferior medical care, this is a form of structural violence. Indeed the "normal" workings

of our economic institutions cause many poor people to have significantly increased risks for cancer, heart disease, AIDS, depression, environmental threats, and premature death. Our use of automobiles, to give a third example, involves the "acceptable" deaths of 50,000 persons per year.

Cultural violence includes racism, sexism, and homophobia, and the devaluation of particular groups and cultures. It may justify and inform structural and direct violence.

Sulak Sivaraksa remarked, at the BPF Summer Institute of 1992, that responding to structural violence is at the core of socially engaged Buddhism. He pointed to how greed, hatred, and delusion—the roots of suffering—are manifest not just in individual attitudes and actions but also in our institutions, social structures, and policies.

Yet responding to structural violence as a spiritual activist is often difficult, for many reasons. I'd like to identify ten reasons, and particularly make connections with our experience here at Los Alamos.

1. Structural violence is usually hidden from us.

Structural violence is typically hidden, whether in the "normality" of automobile accidents or cigarette deaths, or the marginality of the suffering of the poor. Those who know of such violence usually have little voice; those with voice and access to public speech usually do not know.

The Los Alamos Laboratory, for example, was itself deliberately hidden from the view of the world during its founding period in World War II. The introductory film on Los Alamos that we saw at the Bradbury Science Museum (a museum used for new-employee orientation) is entitled, "The Town That Never Was." In fact, the original staff of the wartime Manhattan Project at Los Alamos had Santa Fe postal box addresses, and the city of Los Alamos was closed to the public until 1957. The violence of nuclear weapons has also been hidden, and even denied. The film strangely makes no mention at all of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but instead shows the end of the war in images of cheering crowds, kissing in the streets, and the newspaper headline, "Atom bombs drop." The museum exhibit shows nothing of the effects of the bombs on human beings, showing instead the bombs' power over army bases, factories, bridges, and mills!

The language at the lab is filled with euphemisms. The building where the first bombs were produced is called “Engineering Applications.” Nuclear wastes are “repackaged.” The bombs themselves have pleasant or humorous names like “Little Boy,” “Fat Man,” “Mike,” “Romeo,” “Priscilla,” “Oak,” and “Kingfish.”

Many of the “side effects” of developing nuclear weapons also remain hidden. Richard Rhodes, who received the Pulitzer Prize for his history of atomic weapons, believes that the high cost of our weapons is closely linked to the decay of our infrastructure and neglect of pressing social needs. Soviet costs were similar and were a key factor in the economic decline leading to the USSR’s collapse. Yet so often this collapse is presented as proof that the U.S. expenditures were worth it, and no mention is made of our own decline and its connection with our “defense” budget.

2. We have to cut through massive webs of ideology to see structural violence clearly.

Along with efforts to hide structural violence, there are also well-developed ideologies to support the view that a particular form of structural violence is normal (and hence not actually violence). We may now see through some of the ideologies that have supported institutionalized racism, sexism, and homophobia, for example, but this has taken much work over many years, just as it takes great effort in spiritual practice to cut through the conditioning around our sense of self and other.

Ideologies typically work in three basic ways to support relationships of domination, according to the work of John Thompson (see his *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*). The **legitimization** of existing states of affairs is accomplished through promoting supporting views and disparaging contesting views. **Dissimulation** prohibits conflicting views and conceals such prohibition through a kind of organized but unspoken logic; systemic problems, for example, may be recast as individual problems. **Reification** presents inherently changing states of affairs as eternal, the way things have to be.

During our retreat, we met such forms of ideology at Los Alamos, particularly in the public relations efforts of the museums and lab publications. We saw the selectivity of the Bradbury Museum in the exhibit on the “beneficial aspects of radiation.” There was, of course, no exhibit on the harmful effects of radiation. We saw the film chronicling the building of the first atomic bomb, with its initial alternating stark images of good (religious images from New Mexico churches of candles, prayer, Mary, and native pueblos) and evil (Nazi machine guns and fighting). Such images suggest the unambiguous role of the bomb as a tool of good



BPF-ers in our campground. Left to right: Trena Cleland, Maylie Scott, Greg Mello, Vilma Ruiz, Donald Rothberg, and Diana Winston

responding to evil. In a similar way, Steven Younger, the associate laboratory director for nuclear weapons at Los Alamos, appealed to the historical destiny of the United States as a selfless force for freedom in the world, in a 1999 talk before Los Alamos scientists:

[Nuclear weapons] are intended to prevent other countries, other states, other national entities from doing something that really isn’t in our national interest... Sometimes we forget how important the work that we do is. We have a critical role in history... We defend freedom on this planet... We try to help other countries. We’re a very generous country. So a strong defense is absolutely critical, not just for the United States, but for this country to accept the role that has been thrust upon us by history. We didn’t seek to have a major empire. We didn’t seek to be the most powerful country on the planet. It sort of happened to us.

In speaking with the different scientists with whom we had lunch every day during the retreat, I invariably found near the beginning of our conversations a quick move to speculative thinking justifying nuclear weapons. One spoke of how it is only the strong who succeed in evolution; another, of the way that nuclear weapons helped to win the Cold War; another, of the importance of nuclear weapons in order to deter the aggression of others; and another, of how the work at Los Alamos preserves the rights of demonstrators like us! My sense was that the scientists wanted us to view them as individuals living with integrity in support of a noble mission, and near the beginning of every conversation they summoned their best and surely timeworn rationalizations.

3. Responding to structural violence can be lonely work; one can feel marginal, crazy, and hopeless.

We sit here on hot asphalt next to our Cruise America RV, in a remote parking lot, mostly in silence, while more than 10,000 Los Alamos employees go about their business. I imagine that all of us have sometimes felt on this retreat as if we are acting strangely, and wondered whether we will have any effect at all on the nuclear weapons industry. Just as the everyday working of institutions and policies normalizes structural violence, so it renders abnormal those who contest such violence. We are susceptible both to the judgments of others and to our own internalization of these judgments.

4. We're all implicated in structural violence.

Although we may sometimes feel radically apart from the mainstream, it's also true that in many ways we are deeply embedded in the very institutions, ideologies, and policies that we question. We cannot so easily claim moral superiority. We benefit from living in a wealthy country, whose wealth depends in part on dominating and threatening others. Collectively we have permitted the continued existence of nuclear weapons.

5. We mirror internally the outer forms of structural violence.

Like the cold warriors and advocates of continued maintenance of nuclear stockpiles, we, too, have fear and ignorance, develop our own types of "armaments," seek in various ways to control others (and let ourselves be controlled) through threats and anger, and provide sometimes elaborate rationalizations in our own defense. Last night at our council circle, Diana Winston

spoke of observing her own fear and desire for control surfacing in the very context of our retreat here.

Yet it is the recognition of how we share some of the underlying fears and desire that actually provides a basis for deeper communication with the architects of structural violence. In our conversations with the Los Alamos scientists, I found myself watching (but generally not acting on) my own tendencies to think myself "right" and engage in the kind of polarized polemics with which the scientists were no doubt very familiar, from their encounters with anti-nuclear activists. Such awareness helps us go beneath ideological rhetoric.

6. It's hard work. To respond to structural violence is to be involved for the "long haul."

Addressing structural violence is like the work of traditional spiritual practice; we are attempting to respond to some of the deepest roots of suffering. To work on issues of racism or sexism or the existence of nuclear weapons is to take on a kind of lifetime koan, just as we do when we take the bodhisattva vow. There are not always quick results or sometimes even any apparent results. Furthermore, we have to make a living—job listings for those responding to structural violence are few. There are surely more jobs and grants to perpetuate structural violence! Hence, we often face difficult choices and need to make real sacrifices. Yet this is our practice. Rabbi Tarfon, a teacher in Israel in the second century C.E., said, "It is not upon you to finish the work. Neither are you free to desist from it."

7. We have to do our homework.

There can be a kind of naiveté in spiritually based activism, in which there are good intentions but not so much groundedness. We can "come from the heart" and still be quite naive. Somehow we have to combine competent analyses and effective strategies with spiritual insight. We have to be able, like the shaman, to act in different worlds. Here at Los Alamos, it's very clear that if we don't do our background homework, we won't be taken seriously by the scientists with whom we have lunch every day.

8. We tend to forget that the institutions supporting structure violence can collapse quickly when no one really believes in them.

We get taken in by the seeming solidity of institutions. We forget about impermanence in general, and also we forget how rapidly specific systems can change. Remembering the collapse of Soviet power in the USSR and Eastern Europe or the collapse of the apartheid in South Africa helps us to keep a "long view."

As for nuclear weapons, we can remember the poll (www.gracelinks.org/nuke/poll.html#text) in which 84

Facts about Los Alamos

- The U.S. has spent almost \$6 trillion on nuclear weapons since 1940. Today, we spend more to design, build, and test nuclear weapons than we did during the Cold War. The budget for the Los Alamos Lab alone exceeds the entire budget of the World Health Organization.
- The U.S. continues to design and deploy new kinds of nuclear weapons, such as the versatile B61-11 nuclear earth-penetrator bomb and new high-yield designs for our submarine fleet. Work on entirely new weapons is also underway.
- The U.S. maintains an arsenal of about 10,000 nuclear weapons, even though Russian negotiators recently asked if we would agree to strategic arsenals in the range of 1,000 weapons. We refused.
- Los Alamos has 24 nuclear and toxic waste landfills, containing at least 18 million cubic feet of waste. About 54,000 drums' worth is produced and buried at Los Alamos each year, mostly from nuclear weapons work.

From a brochure produced by Greg Mello and Vilma Ruiz, Los Alamos Study Group, www.lasg.org

percent of the U.S. population agreed that they would be safer if no country had nuclear weapons (1997). We can remember the potential of the present moment: the end of the Cold War and thus of most of the earlier rationales for nuclear weapons, and the UN support for a decade of nonviolence in this first decade of the new millennium. One scientist who has worked at Los Alamos since 1966 told me that most who work there would like to see nuclear weapons abolished—if they could feel safe without them.

9. In this culture, Buddhist teachings often focus on the more personal rather than the structural sources of suffering.

Often our concerns about structural violence are not supported by our spiritual communities. Even though Buddhists claim to be addressing suffering (or *dukkha*), there is typically an emphasis on *my* suffering rather than suffering as such. We need to make clearer the connections between structural violence and personal suffering. We also need to question the extent to which individualistic spiritual practice reinforces a sense of separate self. We can learn in this regard from our Christian and Jewish friends, especially from the prophetic tradition of concern for the “other” that passes from Isaiah through Jesus down to contemporaries like Abraham Joshua Heschel, Martin Luther King Jr., and liberation theologians.

10. We tend to forget that love, wisdom, and non-duality are deeper than violence and denial.

Being in the presence of entrenched structural violence certainly “tests” us. We may often think ourselves weak in comparison with the systems that we contest. We may feel isolated and forget the deeper love and wisdom that is at the heart of our beings.

This suggests the vital importance of both community and spiritual practice. We need to find refuge within the “beloved community.” And we need to return to our own lived experiences of love and wisdom. Such continual access to spiritual nourishment is what sustains us for the long haul. In 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. said:

Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism... This call for a world-wide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all human beings... When I speak of love... I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. ❖

Donald Rothberg is on the faculty at Saybrook Graduate School, where he has developed a program in Socially Engaged Spirituality. He has written and taught widely on socially engaged Buddhism, and is the co-editor (with Sean Kelly) of Ken Wilber in Dialogue: Conversations with Leading Transpersonal Thinkers. He has been a mentor for BPF's BASE program since its inception in 1995.

Some Resources on Structural Violence and Atomic Weapons

On structural violence:

Johan Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means* (1996)
 Donald Rothberg (ed.), *Responding to Violence* (special issue of the journal *ReVision*, Fall 1997)

On atomic weapons:

Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth* (1995)
 Praful Bidwai and Achin Vanaik, *New Nukes: India, Pakistan and Global Nuclear Disarmament* (2000)
 Richard Rhodes, *Dark Sun: The Making of the Hydrogen Bomb* (1995)
 Jonathan Schell, *The Gift of Time: The Case for Abolishing Nuclear Weapons* (1998)
 Steve Schwartz, *Atomic Audit: The Costs and Consequences of U.S. Nuclear Weapons Since 1940* (1998)

Web sites:

Los Alamos Study Group: www.lasg.org
 Alliance for Nuclear Accountability: www.ananuclear.org
 Natural Resources Defense Council: www.nrdc.org