

# Hope for Peace Embedded in the Ordinary— Peacewomen’s Teaching without Teaching

Lau Kin Chi

*Mahatma Gandhi says, “an eye for an eye,” and we all go blind. Hatred, greed, calculation and jealousy work like a plague, infecting more and more people with the curse of violent passions that reduce them to blindness and stupidity.*

Jose Saramago, 1998 Nobel Literary Prize Laureate, tells in his novel *Blindness* of how blindness induces further and greater blindness: an unknown virus spreads in the city, the affected suddenly suffer blindness, “seeing” only a thick whiteness. People in contact with the affected quickly contract the virus, and doctor, thief, policeman, family...one after another get sent into the isolation camp. There, the “equality” and “empathy” brought by the onslaught of the disease can only be transient. Robberies, bullies, lies and cruelties rule and oppress this space with greater force. After a while, no one watches over or cares for the camp anymore, because everyone in the

city has gone blind. Knowing that no one is watching, almost everyone loses discipline; robberies, bullies, lies and cruelties intolerable to the eye before now rule the hearts. Only, one single person does not go blind—the good wife of the doctor— and she sees how the violence of blind obsessions breeds more blind obsessions and violence, accumulating into a torrent flushing all sentiments of kindness, forgiveness and generosity down the drain.

Violence is a messenger from the kingdom of death. Driven by an obsession dominated by unknown fear and fathomless greed, violence gnaws

at the freedom of the heart, at the wisdom and courage that make possible kindness, forgiving and giving. In a world dominated by violence, “peace” becomes an axis for the system constructed by violence, enabling the game of destruction to be played until its underlying logic of ultimate self-destruction is caught in the showdown of self-confrontation. To break the curse of violence, “peace” must be freed from the violence-constructed system so that the perspectives and experiences repressed can come into play and bring hope to humanity.

### **The twentieth century ended in violence and blindness.**

The First World War used air-bombers invented only a decade before. The mushroom clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the Second World War proclaimed the victory of military science and technology. Wolfgang Sachs,

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ecologist, talks about the United Nations Charter adopted on 4 May 1945: “The project to banish violence and war from the face of the earth was clearly linked to the vision of mankind marching forward and upward along the road of progress...The utopian intention aimed at a world of individuals who follow only

the voice of reason...The utopia of mankind... was united... under the rule of science, market and the state... [T]he traditional notion that peace would be the fruit of justice had lost ground. It gave way to the expectation that peace would be the result of mankind reunited under the achievements of civilization.” This means that the multiplicity of cultures in space is interpreted as a succession of stages in time, and the “savage” (or so-called backward, underdeveloped, or developing) is to grow up and enter the stage of civilisation and peace with the guidance of the West. “And indissolubly linking the hope for peace to this world-shaking endeavour leads to a tragic dilemma—the pursuit of peace implies the annihilation of diversity, while seeking diversity implies the outburst of violence. The dilemma is unlikely to be resolved without delinking peace from progress and progress from peace.”<sup>1</sup>

E. F. Schumacher, economist renowned for his profound idea of “small is beautiful”, says in an essay “The Root of Violence” that “The Bomb is the symbol of modern civilisation. Unfortunately, it is not merely a symbol but an ever-present threat to all life on our planet, yet it is also a symbol of a civilisation that has bred readiness for violence without any limit whatsoever... Detached, objective thought, always liable to error, opens the door to unlimited violence because it eliminates the countervailing power of the heart. A civilisation which deprecates the heart, which idolizes objectivity in the forms of scientism, positivism, and rationalism, which bases its entire education on the notion that decisions must be taken without interference from the emotions, inevitably exposes itself to the dangers of unlimited violence...The concepts



*A “project to banish violence and war from the face of the earth” is urgently needed*

of non-violence would be Reverence for Life; religious ‘Praise’; humility; measure, in the sense of knowing where to stop; and an irresistible need for justice... [They] derive from hearts that are strong enough to control the mind.”<sup>22</sup>

### **The twenty-first century ended in violence and blindness.**

Visible and invisible violence assaults us head-on with the violence at once remote and near, real and virtual. We are almost dumbstruck for any response.

Televised images of the 9-11 plane crash into the twin towers in New York City and people jumping from top floors seem no different from Hollywood disaster thrillers; the film *Hotel Rwanda* re-presents the horror of 800,000 deaths in three months of ethnic strife in Rwanda; USA bombers on missions to Iraq take on board journalists who transmit city-bombed-mission-completed

images like virtual video games; on the internet one can witness “live broadcast” of Iraqi masked gunmen’s flick of the knife and the rolling head of a hostage. On the other hand, 30,000 children die daily from starvation and curable diseases but they are just statistics, a number devoid of shock or sorrow.

“Profound” experiences that evoke in us shock, fear, anxiety and trepidation are more and more founded on our ignorance about the evils shaping our lives. Our ignorance, however, is proportionate to the “knowing” constructed by the information era. The more we come to “know,” the more impoverished our experience is, and what is “profound” cannot be immediate to our experience.

An-eye-for-an-eye violence seems justified, yet unacceptable. The injustice of the powerful does not automatically endow the oppressed with greater justice. One does not embody justice simply because one’s opponent is evil. Violent revenge of the vulnerable more often than not offers the oppressor more pretexts for the abuse of violence, further tilting the balance of power against the vulnerable. Yet, does resisting violence mean resisting revolution and resisting change? Does this mean compelling the weak to muted tolerance and reluctant acceptance of the status quo? Does embracing violence mean promoting revolution and promoting change? Can one disarm the powerful and the strong? How can one come out of the vicious circle of violence, effectively promote social justice, deepen social revolution, and free the ordinary people from helplessness, hopelessness, cynicism and inferiority when confronted with apparently endless violence and catastrophe? How can

words like “development” and “progress” no longer camouflage exploitation and plunder?

Beyond the information based on ignorance that the mainstream media transmit, beyond the logic of the powerful propagated by dazzling violence, we should hear and touch the beatings of life nurtured by sympathy,

...whether it is in the devastation before and after wars, or in the strenuous torture of unending poverty, what helps communities to survive is not state leaders, political elites or rich businessmen (who are more often than not the culprits depriving the ordinary people of minimal living conditions), but unknown, ordinary women.

finds that the Europeans living in ease and comfort, instead of being proud of their aid to the refugees, have a lot to learn from the women who have demonstrated their strong will to live amidst disaster situations. She feels that whether it is in the devastation before and after wars, or in the strenuous torture of unending poverty, what helps communities to survive is not state leaders, political elites or rich businessmen (who are more often than not the culprits depriving the ordinary people of minimal living conditions), but unknown, ordinary women who have persisted in apparently weak but actually amazingly determined efforts.

Gaby thought the best way to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the 1995 World Conference on Women is to present to the world the extraordinary work of tens of thousands of ordinary women, so that the world can see where hope lies and can pay tribute to the women and their work. Let 1000 women represent tens of thousands of women across the globe to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize 2005!

mutuality and reciprocity. With these, we can dissipate the loneliness and obsession of modern rational monologue, and can see that in daily life, which is not glamorous or momentous, and even in apparently fathomless suffering, distress, and misery, there is amazing wisdom.

Ruth Gaby Vermot-Mangold, member of Swiss parliament and European Council, initiator of the project 1000 Women for the Nobel Peace Prize 2005, has visited war and conflict devastated areas such as Armenia, Bosnia and Kosovo and brought to these places humanitarian concerns. However, she

Thus, starting in 2003 there have been activities across the globe to search for and illuminate the extraordinary work of ordinary women. In most places, this project has not caught the eye of the mainstream media, has not lifted the eyebrows of the elite, has not found grace with foundations, sponsors or governmental or non-governmental organisations. Why? Because in the “modern” society mainstreamed with the mind and practice of currying favour with the powerful, gratifying the rich, revering the successful, and calculating every move by projecting the returns, even if there is an interest in Cinderella,

the interest is in one single person who has the right feet to put on the right pair of glass slippers and turn herself into a queen. There is no interest in the tens of thousands of ordinary women, clothed in grey, clad with straw sandals, working in remote areas, among marginalised groups, with AIDS patients, criminals, orphans, and victims of poverty and all sorts of violence, sweating and struggling, without calculating the results or returns. These women usually do not draw attention, but when they do, it is either ridicule for

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being remote from the affairs of the world that “matter” and for acting like a mantis trying to stop a chariot, or retaliation; their determined efforts are seen as stumbling blocks infringing on the big interests of the powerful.

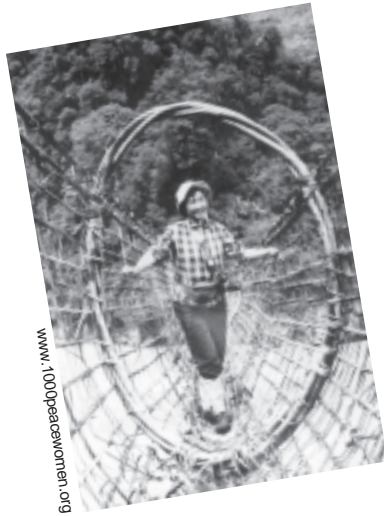
Nevertheless, the project has been taken on by practitioners on the ground as well as people in search of alternatives. Based on a simple dream and faith, the project has flowered despite a stringent budget and an immense difficulty in communication. After a process of nominations, cross checking of identity and information, screening and recommendation by local and regional advisory committees, and discussion and selection by an international committee,

finally, a list of 1000 women symbolizing the efforts of tens of thousands of women was submitted to the Oslo Nobel Peace Prize Committee in January 2005. The 1000 come from over 150 countries, aged from twenties to eighties, working in areas that range from community harmony to ethnic reconciliation, from self-reliant livelihood to ecological conservation, from gender equity to empowerment of vulnerable groups, from culture and art to education, religion and beliefs... In all areas, we find radiant ordinary women whose deeds are so inspiring that they teach without effort, with an inexhaustible energy, with uncontained love, sustained by an unyielding commitment to the protection of lives around them. It is impossible not to be affected by them, for vibrating through space and time, there is the knowing smile of fighting for dignity and happiness.

One hundred eight women are from China. On August 27, at the conference room of the Joint Publishers in Beijing, 21 peacewomen gathered. They told their own stories, heard others. At one time they shed tears at the wounds of injustice, at another time they broke into laughter at ludicrous situations, idiocies and mediocrities. The vibrations of compassion at the gathering cannot be conveyed with words, yet I dare to make a few quotes:



**Xie Lihua:** “In various awards activities, I often appeal for appreciation of the contributions of rural women in China which is a



www.1000peacewomen.org

country with the majority population still rural. Yet very few rural women ever get awards. This time, I am particularly delighted to see that 15 out of the 81 peacewomen from mainland China are rural women working on the ground. This shows the importance the project has given to the contributions of grassroots women.”

**Xu Fengxiang:** “I find this project remarkable. Globally, it is a conceptual breakthrough because in the past, the Nobel Peace Prize was limited to aspects against the war or in politics. We have however given a comprehensive and integrated interpretation to peace. What is peace? It is coexistence in genuine harmony between humans and nature, it is construction of harmony of various aspects of human society. I used to think that other people got the prize as an individual, but we have 1000 nominated as one, so are we just getting an advantage with the numbers? But on further thought, I feel that we are 1000, and we represent tens of thousands of women across the globe. We are not an individual, we are a collective, we are not one single mountain, we are a range of mountains. Hence, we must send in our nomination, we must get the award! We women defend peace across the globe, we are quiet and unknown but we are present everywhere. We must tell the stories of women from China, we must tell the stories of women in the whole world.”

**Dong Xiuyu:** “The significance of this project is not the outcome, but

the process. The process enables us women to boost our self esteem and self empowerment. It also offers a good opportunity for women to learn from each other and to continue learning themselves. In the Joint Publishers, people say I am an idealist, and an incurable one. Today, I have heard many of you speak, you are much more incurable idealists as I. Let us idealists stand fast to our ideals, and fight together for a beautiful, just, and ideal society.”

**Zhang Shuqin:** “I run homes for the uncared-for children of criminals. The kids call me Grandma Zhang, some people call me Director Zhang, but more people call me Beggar Queen. When I first started the children’s home, some people called me up and reprimanded me: why don’t you help children in the remote mountains or children of martyrs? Why do you help children of criminals? I retorted, China is so big, I can help whoever I want to help, what has it to do with you? I am a simple ordinary citizen, what we are trying to do is to help change the fate of the most vulnerable among vulnerable groups, to help the kids go through the most difficult years when they do not have their parents by their side. We have encountered all sorts of sweet, sour, bitter, spicy times. We are not only idealists, we are pragmatists, we engage in real, actual work. Many people condemn



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corruption, condemn this and condemn that, but few really undertake to get something done. We have contracted 13 hectares of farmland, we have grown 30,000 date trees; every morning, I take the kids to weeding, for our own survival. At 5 o'clock in the early morning, all kids above eight years old go to the fields. The food sent to them in the field is plain buns and pickled vegetables. I say to the kids, you have an ill fate, we are poor, and poor children learn to become mature at an early age. We have an infant who was a few months old when his father, a fugitive, was re-captured. For one month, the police could not find a home for the infant, and they sent the infant on to me. At 4am on November 4 last year, at the Fuzhou train station, the infant was handed over to me. On the platform of the train station, holding the 10-month old infant, I gave in to a good cry. Our society has lost kindness and love; what we must recover is the kindness and love of the Chinese people.”

Apparently weak and solitary stories of individuals converge by hundreds and thousands, and from the real tears and laughters of the real struggles of real people living in the real world, there can be nurtured profound, immediate experiences that poke at the violence of the powerful, and illuminate the immense

strength in the apparently insignificant deeds of ordinary people. With these, fear will be dispelled, the heart will be calmed, the sights will be lucid and discerning, and the curse of violence and blindness will be broken.

I do not have the lavish wish that the Nobel Peace Prize Committee would have the aura of the Nobel Peace Prize sprayed on to a thousand ordinary women, but I have a simple, humble wish: that everyone and anyone could learn, with a different mind, to look at the people around us who resist violence and build peace. They are not so exalted that we cannot look up to see them; on the contrary, they are so ordinary that they are just the people around us—our mothers, teachers, colleagues, neighbours, and ourselves, that we all have the capacity to undertake to do something, to add some warmth and hope to the world, and, like the good wife of the doctor in *Blindness*, to nurture the heart of kindness, forgiveness and generosity. ☺

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#### Endnotes

1 Wolfgang Sachs, “One World,” *The Development Dictionary, London and New York: Zed, 1992, pp.103-105.*

2 E. F. Schumacher, “The Roots of Violence,” *This I Believe and Other Essays, New Delhi: Viveka, 2003, pp. 189-193.*