
THE THEORIST, THE TACTICIAN, AND THE TRANSLATOR: FAITH-BASED PEACEMAKING AND LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

How do religious peacemakers lead people to connect their vision of a better world to the reality of conflict? A profile of three influential twentieth-century religious peacemakers reveals three important principles for the process of leadership. Mohandas Gandhi, the Theorist, demonstrates that peacemaking leaders articulate a worldview, an entire framework for action. Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the Tactician, shows that peacemaking leadership requires attention to both moral and effective practices for change, and that leaders are organically tied to those they lead. From Martin Luther King, Jr., the Translator, we see that peacemaking leaders seek a common language for justice and peace. Scholarship in both leadership and peacemaking theory confirm these three principles as integral to the process of leading people to connect voice and touch.

Introduction

Max De Pree writes, “At the core of becoming a leader is the need always to connect one’s voice and one’s touch.”¹ Connecting the vision of a better world to the everyday messiness of life, especially in situations of conflict and injustice, is one way to describe peacemaking. Peacemaking leadership, like leadership in general, is a process rather than a condition. In this sense the peacemaker is always on the way, seeking to narrow the gap between the peace-less reality and the peaceful possibilities.

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¹ Max De Pree, *Leadership* (New York: Dell, 1992), 3.

I contend that connecting voice and touch requires engaging the heart of what drives religious people to conflict or peace: their faith. Peacemaking does not demand leaving one's particular faith at the door in the quest for universal principles; on the contrary, peacemaking emerges from the deeply held beliefs that fundamentally shape the way people of faith view the world. Rather than appealing only to academic elites, peacemaking solutions must speak to the average person's sense of what is true.²

The question I am addressing is this: What sort of peacemaking leadership helps ordinary religious people, sometimes in great numbers, connect their visions of a more peaceful world to the difficult reality of conflict? A profile of three effective twentieth-century religious peacemakers reveals three important aspects of the process of connecting voice and touch: articulating a worldview, forming a strategy, and seeking a common language. My definition of a peacemaker is someone who a) brings together diverse or divided peoples b) for the cause of justice. Peacemakers are often radical in both their goals and tactics but are decidedly distinct from violent radicals in a crucial way: for religious peacemakers, reconciliation is the ultimate goal, while for the extremist the goal is victory over the enemy.³ Following De Pree, I define a leader as one who helps people to connect their voice—the deeply held values that shape their worldview—and their touch.

I begin with several assumptions. First, while faith can be and often is a source of division, in many cases religious traditions and their saints move toward peacemaking rather than against it. Second, following Paul in 2 Cor. 5 I take the ministry of reconciliation, both between humans and God and among humans, to be at the heart of Christian identity and mission in the world.

² Marc Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence, and Peacemaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 15.

³ R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 13.

Paul identifies Christians as ambassadors of reconciliation, which implies the negotiation of multiple identities and loyalties. The role of ambassador of the Reign of God in a violent world is necessarily a peacemaking one.

My objective in this paper is to apply the leadership theory of Max De Pree, the ongoing process of connecting voice and touch, to three examples of religious peacemakers. These three leaders are each of a different faith—a Hindu, a Muslim, and a Christian. All three demonstrate many qualities, but for the sake of this essay I examine one in particular for each person. Mohandas Gandhi I label the Theorist, and the principle I derive from his work is this: Peacemaking leaders articulate a worldview, an entire framework for action, that *seeks the best for everyone involved*. I call Abdul Ghaffar Khan the Tactician; the principle from his life is that peacemaking leadership requires attention to both *moral and effective practices for change*, and leaders are organically tied to those they lead. Martin Luther King, Jr. I describe as the Translator; from his life we see that peacemaking leaders seek a *common language* for justice and peace. The theorist, tactician, and translator offer hope to contemporary leaders for the movement to and participation in God's justice.

Mohandas Gandhi—the Theorist

Principle: Peacemaking leaders articulate a worldview—an entire framework for action—that seeks the best for everyone involved.

Mohandas Gandhi was born in 1869 in Gujarat, India. After training as a lawyer in London, in 1893 he took a job at an Indian law firm in South Africa. Gandhi was dismayed by the treatment of Indian immigrants there, and joined the struggle to obtain basic rights for them. During his two decades in South Africa he was imprisoned many times. Influenced by Hinduism, but also by Christianity through the Sermon on the Mount and the writings of Leo Tolstoy, Gandhi developed *satyagraha* (soul force), a nonviolent theory of social change. After experiencing some success in social reform

in South Africa, Gandhi returned to India. In 1919, British plans to intern people suspected of sedition prompted Gandhi to announce a new campaign of *satyagraha*, which attracted millions of followers. A mass demonstration against the British policies resulted in a brutal massacre by British troops. By 1920, Gandhi had become a key figure in Indian politics. His program of peaceful non-cooperation with the British included boycotts and strikes, leading to thousands of arrests. In 1930, Gandhi organized a new campaign of civil disobedience to protest a salt tax, leading thousands on a symbolic March to the Sea.

After several years in prison, Gandhi withdrew from politics and devoted himself to improving Hindu-Muslim relations, which had deteriorated significantly during the quest for independence. In 1945, when the British government began the plan to form the two new independent states of India and Pakistan, divided along religious lines, widespread violence broke out between the two communities. Gandhi was opposed to the partition, and engaged in an extended fast in an attempt to bring calm. On January 30, 1948, perceived as being too sympathetic to Muslim enemies, he was assassinated in Delhi by a Hindu fanatic.

Known as *Mahatma* (Great Soul), Gandhi articulated a doctrine of nonviolent protest to achieve political and social progress that has been hugely influential in the years since his death, serving as an inspiration and a guide for nonviolent social movements around the globe, including the US Civil Rights Movement. Commenting on Gandhi's leadership, biographer Judith Brown observes that "Few men have elicited such vitriolic opposition or such devoted service,"⁴ from the scoffing ignorance of Winston Churchill and the mistrust of both Muslims and Hindus, to the thousands who followed this frail figure and recognized his spiritual and moral authority.

⁴ Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 1.

What gave Gandhi such extraordinary power as a leader? As De Pree writes in *Leadership is an Art*, “The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality.”⁵ This Gandhi certainly did; as he wrestled with issues of nonviolence in conflict situations, and with the economic and social problems all around him in India, especially among the poorest and most vulnerable, “he questioned the assumptions of Hindu orthodoxy, Western capitalism, and varieties of socialism...ask[ing] questions which are still uncomfortable...he still inspires, aggravates and annoys.”⁶ Gandhi recognized the remarkable power of a unified people to challenge the dominant definitions of reality, which were the result of the ubiquitous ravages of colonialism and religious divisions. In the midst of these dominant realities he cast a vision of a better possible world, one that caught on with his people beyond all expectations.

Another powerful statement from De Pree that resonates with the life of Gandhi is that leaders do not inflict pain—they bear pain.⁷ This was the case in a most literal sense regarding Gandhi’s hunger strike against the violence between Muslims and Hindus. There were many voices pushing him toward resorting to violence as an efficient way to effect the change in leadership toward an independent India. What Gandhi recognized, however, is that violence is not a tool that people use; on the contrary, violence shapes people in ways beyond their control. Gandhi’s vision for a free India refused to usher in political change at the expense of the humanity of the Indians, the Pakistanis, or the British. In light of the person under discussion, De Pree’s phrasing is comical: leadership is characterized not by the strength of the head but by the tone of the body.⁸ What he means of course is that a leader is only as strong as the community she fosters. What the brilliant head on Gandhi’s frail

⁵ Max De Pree, *Leadership is an Art* (New York: Currency, 2004), 11.

⁶ Brown, *Gandhi*, 2.

⁷ De Pree, *Leadership is an Art*, 11.

⁸ De Pree, *Leadership is an Art*, 12.

body knew was that the people of India would only be free if they had the strength that comes from nonviolence, the *soul force* at the center of the universe.

De Pree writes that people follow leaders with a real vision, which is not just seeing the way things are but the way they can be. Paradoxically, however, fragility is part of the nature of a strong vision.⁹ Gandhi accepted that a nonviolent movement was risky business; the British reacted with violence, and many people were killed or injured. But behind the movement was an unshakeable faith that nonviolence is real strength. This is the meaning of Judith Brown's description of Gandhi as a "prisoner of hope;"¹⁰ he embraced the weakness of rejecting weapons of steel for the strength of *ahimsa* (nonviolence). The people who followed Gandhi in the independence movement saw what De Pree does: one recognizes a movement from the inside. A movement requires spirit-lifting, enabling leadership, and competence; "In movements, stories give life; in organizations, stories manipulate people."¹¹ Under Gandhi's leadership, nonviolence became less a rule than a mode of being, a guiding and life-giving principle that told a different story from the dominant narrative of redemptive violence.

A movement like that in India depends not only on a strong vision from leaders but on the extent to which that vision is shared. A team is not just a collection of individuals but an entity with a common cause. Effective teams are characterized by a shared vision (like a rope that binds rock climbers together for a common purpose) and shared values that result in interdependence.¹² When leaders and teams are on the same emotional wavelength,

⁹ De Pree, *Leadership Jazz*, 40.

¹⁰ Brown, *Gandhi*.

¹¹ Max De Pree, *Leading Without Power* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 25-30.

¹² Walter C. Wright, *Don't Step on the Rope!* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2005), 4-7, 146.

the result is “resonant leadership”¹³ that engages both the emotions and the intellect of the team. Toxic, dissonant leaders, in contrast, play on the fears of their followers and extend arbitrary rewards for loyalty. Eventually such a relationship turns into a control myth, a deeply held belief about what one can and cannot do to confront toxic leadership.¹⁴

This contrast between resonant and toxic leadership sheds some light on Gandhi’s effectiveness as a peacemaking leader. Rather than playing on the fears of his followers (such as the mutual fear of Hindus and Muslims that the transition into independence would result in inequality and violence from the other side), Gandhi instead took that pain upon himself in the form of a hunger strike. The underlying principle for him was the deep interdependence of all humanity, and that is what lent his vision such power for both Hindus and Muslims—and eventually for people all over the world.

Turning to peacemaking theory, John Paul Lederach asks the question: how do we transcend the cycles of violence that beleaguer our human community while still living in them? The answer, he surmises, is that both the skill and art of building peace are derived from the moral imagination, which is “the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist.”¹⁵ The moral imagination requires the ability to envisage a web of relationships with our enemies included. Social change is necessarily an act of reimagining the world. It is a messy process but has unlimited potential.

Marc Gopin frames the moral imagination in terms of myth, which he describes not just as ancient stories but as

¹³ Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 20-28.

¹⁴ Jean Lipman-Blumen, *The Allure of Toxic Leaders: Why We Follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians – And How We Can Survive Them* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 45, 137.

¹⁵ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), viii-x, 5.

the foundational narratives that shape our identity and practices. Myth matters because it can either be used to demonize and alienate, or become part of the process of reconciliation. Writing in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Gopin notes that it is crucial to address the reasonable rejectionists who are a majority on both sides but see peace as central to their faith. Peacemaking must take place at many levels, from government treaties to grassroots initiatives for peace, all of which require courageous leaders. One of the most important tasks for a leader is confronting the fear of the followers; says Gopin, “remove fear and everything else becomes possible.”¹⁶

Gopin observes that all religions begin with creativity, which becomes increasingly limited over time as innovation is discouraged and finally forbidden. A peacemaker, on the other hand, provides a vision that both resonates deeply with religious traditions and looks creatively at a conflict, always seeking those actions that will redress injustice without excluding the “enemy” from the imagined goals. Gopin writes:

It is our job to enter the damaged and strange world of enemies and enemy systems, to suspend judgment, to see truths on all sides, to see justice and injustice on all sides, to engage in a level of empathy that is enormously demanding, all to help evoke peace processes that resonate at the most profound level of human consciousness and experience.¹⁷

One way of imagining a just and peaceful future that is gaining traction is the theory and practices of just peacemaking, originally articulated by Christians but now also by Muslims and Christians in the volume *Interfaith Just Peacemaking*.¹⁸ Glen Stassen, one of the key developers

¹⁶ Marc Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 55-57, 198.

¹⁷ Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace*, 87, 228.

¹⁸ Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, ed., *Interfaith Just Peacemaking* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011).

of the movement, rejects the false choice between realism and idealism. Realism sees a world characterized by power struggles and conflicts of interest. Idealism urges us to focus on ideals and imagine how we can move the world toward them. What we need, Stassen states, is hope with realism, which consists of identifying what God is doing in the world. The practices of just peacemaking happen empirically in the world, in the context of real threats, power struggles, and drives for security, making power's expression in war less likely and peace more likely. The church has a special role of nurturing spirituality for peacemaking, as well as modeling that reconciliation is possible. One of the ten practices of just peacemaking is Cooperative Conflict Resolution, which is the shared enterprise of devising beneficial outcomes.¹⁹

Gandhi offered his followers, ordinary Hindus and Muslims with deep hostility for one another and for their British occupiers, a way to connect their religious images of a more peaceful and just world with the realities they faced. What we see in Gandhi as a peacemaking theorist and practitioner is an unwavering devotion to the vision of a just society that includes even enemies. Connecting voice and touch, Gandhi demonstrates, involves absorbing rather than inflicting pain. The path to justice is not domination but nonviolent (*ahimsa*) suffering, not the manipulation of fear but gathering around a shared vision.

Abdul Ghaffar Khan—the Tactician

Principle: Peacemaking leadership is strategic, drawing from the resources of those one leads.

Abdul Ghaffar Khan (1890-1988) was a Pashtun leader (a people group inhabiting present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan) and a close friend and disciple of Gandhi. Khan is known for his nonviolent opposition to British Rule in united India and his efforts for peace between Pakistan and India following independence. A

¹⁹ Glen Stassen, ed., *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2004), 30-33, 63.

lifelong pacifist and a devout Muslim, he was also known as *Badshah Khan* (King Khan). Khan witnessed the repeated failure of violent revolts against the British occupation. Seeking a better path, he led the formation of the *Khudai Khidmatgar* (Servants of God) movement, a nonviolent army of more than 100,000 soldiers.

The British army responded harshly to the success of the movement, with mass shootings, torture, the destruction of fields and homes, imprisonment, and exile. Khan himself spent fifteen years in British prisons, as well as time in exile. In the late 1920s he formed an alliance with Gandhi and the Indian National Congress. Along with Gandhi, Khan strongly opposed the Muslim League's demand for the partition of India. After partition in 1947, Ghaffar Khan was arrested frequently by the Pakistani government because of his association with India and his opposition to the government's authoritarianism. He spent much of the 1960s and 1970s either in jail or in exile. In 1985 he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

A few snapshots from the life of Khan give insight into his character. When he arrived in India in 1969 for the celebration of the centennial of Gandhi's birthday, he engaged in a fast to protest the violence between Muslims and Hindus. He was described by newspapers as "pulling no punches and speaking with touching sincerity reminiscent of his mentor."²⁰ Khan rejected the idea that religion was at the heart of the communal violence, stating that selfish people were rather exploiting communal violence for economic and political gain. According to his biographer Eknath Easwaran, Khan's fast "electrified India and the bloodshed stopped. 'I have considered myself a part of you and you a part of me,' he told his former countrymen."²¹ According to Gandhi, Khan's love and service of his people made him the ruler in "the undisputed kingdom of their hearts. There is

²⁰ Eknath Easwaran, *Nonviolent Soldier of Islam: Badshah Khan, a Man to Match His Mountains* (Tomales, California: Nilgiri, 1999), 205.

²¹ Easwaran, *Nonviolent Soldier of Islam*, 228.

no humbug about him. He is an utter stranger to affectation.”²²

Mohammed Abu-Nimer cites Khan’s nonviolent army as one of the best examples of nonviolent political movements in Islamic contexts. Khan was deeply rooted in Islamic values, but in the mystic spirituality of Sufism rather than in the theology and practice of the politically powerful mullahs. His description of *sabr* (patient endurance) as the weapon of the Prophet demonstrates an alternative reading of Islam than some of his fellow Muslim revolutionaries. Among the reasons for his success, Abu-Nimer observes, are his sense of minority identity, his devotion to a just cause that was widely shared, and his insistence on deliberate strategies in order to maintain the enemy-loving focus of the movement. Abu-Nimer notes that the first Palestinian Intifada, which was mostly nonviolent, drew heavily from Khan’s example and strategies.²³

Khan possessed a genius for organization, setting up a network of committees that were modeled after the traditional tribal councils that have maintained Pashtun law for centuries. He also set up volunteer brigades of nonviolent soldiers (including women), the *Khudai Khidmatgars* mentioned above, who established schools, did work projects in villages to improve the lives of the poor, and maintained order in public gatherings. They even performed long military-style marches in the hills of Pakistan, singing:

We are the army of God,
By death or wealth unmoved.
We march, our leader and we,
Ready to die.

We serve and we love
Our people and our cause.

²² Easwaran, *Nonviolent Soldier of Islam*, 230.

²³ Mohammed Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 88-90.

Freedom is our goal,
Our lives the price we pay.²⁴

The weapons wielded by this army were not physical but spiritual. Admonishing his followers to spread the movement and its commitment to Islamic nonviolence, Khan told his followers:

I am going to give you such a weapon that the police and the army will not be able to stand against it. It is the weapon of the Prophet, but you are not aware of it. That weapon is patience and righteousness. No power on earth can stand against it.... When you go back to your villages, tell your brethren that there is an army of God and its weapon is patience. Ask your brethren to join the army of God. Endure all hardships. If you exercise patience, victory will be yours.²⁵

One of the most striking features of the life of Abdul Ghaffar Khan is the power of mentoring. This is an emphasis shared by De Pree, who writes, "Mentoring has become, for me, one of the chief duties of any leader."²⁶ The mentor helps the mentee not only with difficult decisions, but with the skill of building important relationships. A true mentor develops keen insight into the giftedness of each person, and guides a group into becoming a community where people can thrive. Good leadership is "liberating people to do what is required of them in the most effective and humane way possible;"²⁷ it is about recognizing the diversity of gifts, polishing those gifts, and allowing sincere respect of each person to guide policy and practice. For De Pree, relationships and trust count more than structures.²⁸ An important characteristic of peacemaking leaders is a strong sense of identification with the people. Obery Hendricks notices this as a central

²⁴ Easwaran, *Nonviolent Soldier of Islam*, 112-113.

²⁵ Easwaran, *Nonviolent Soldier of Islam*, 117.

²⁶ De Pree, *Leadership is an Art*, vii.

²⁷ De Pree, *Leadership is an Art*, 1.

²⁸ De Pree, *Leadership is an Art*, 25-28.

trait of Jesus; “Jesus was an authentic leader because he was organically tied to the people he served. He was recognized as their leader for one reason and one reason only: because he treated them and their needs as holy.”²⁹ Both Gandhi and Khan were recognized as authorities by their people because they regarded the needs of the poor, the necessity of justice, and a peaceful future as sacrosanct.

The role of mentoring for Khan can be observed in two directions. First, the influence of Gandhi in his life cannot be overstated. From Gandhi he learned the power of nonviolence, the strategies of resistance, the sheer risk and audacity of neighbor love without boundaries. Remarkably, and a fact which should be both sobering and delightful for Christians, the Muslim Khan learned the way of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount not from the Christian British occupiers of his land but from his Hindu mentor. When Gandhi was assassinated in 1948 an aggrieved Khan stated, “He was the only ray of light to help us through these darkest days.”³⁰ With his mentor gone, Khan continued to wage his nonviolent campaign. He told his followers that their region could become a demonstration to the world of the constructive power that is released in returning love for hatred. But the mentorship of Gandhi in his life multiplied in the many thousands mentored by Khan. When confronted by a skeptic of nonviolence in the conflict-ridden days leading up to independence, Khan said, “Why do you despair of unity? No true effort is in vain. Look at the fields over there. The grain sown therein has to remain in the earth for a certain time, then it sprouts, and in due time yields hundreds of its kind. The same is the case with every effort in a good cause.”³¹ That Khan used an agricultural metaphor is appropriate to the effect of his life; his undying commitment to just causes with peaceful means returned a hundredfold through the people he mentored.

²⁹ Obery Hendricks, *The Politics of Jesus* (New York: Three Leaves, 2007), 109.

³⁰ Easwaran, *Nonviolent Soldier of Islam*, 223-224.

³¹ Easwaran, *Nonviolent Soldier of Islam*, 233.

Investing in people, as both Khan and De Pree understand, yields the only payoff worth having.

Part of the effectiveness of Khan's leadership can be seen in the above response to a skeptic. Rather than dismissing someone who failed to understand something so essential to Khan's entire worldview, he nurtured those whose faith was not the same as his own. Goleman et al. call this "emotional intelligence,"³² recognizing that teams fail for lack of harmony or the ability to cooperate, which largely depends on the collective emotional intelligence of the group. Good leaders can monitor the collective feelings of the group through difficult changes, such as those faced by Khan's people in the struggle for independence.

Peacemaking theorists describe the importance of what Khan knew intuitively: that peace must be built from the resources of the people it involves, rather than relying on solutions that are imported from the outside. Lederach describes this as an elicitive approach, which is "built on drawing out and using what people bring you, even when it is not understood by them as a resource."³³ Anyone involved in peacemaking across cultures must do their homework about what cultural assumptions are implicit in the models they are bringing, and must be intentional about including the shared knowledge of the participants. This means that peacemaking takes different forms in different contexts. According to Gopin, the best peacemakers have internal qualities of peace and patience, and not too strong a connection with immediate outcomes; that is, they do not feel the need to win arguments. Peacemaking involves evoking the peacemakers in each culture, who are people uniquely suited to the compassionate, active listening that can spark spontaneous outbursts of powerful reconciliation, putting a new face on the enemy. Compassionate actions are also crucial, such as demonstrations of awareness of

³² Goleman et al., *Primal Leadership*, 173-186.

³³ John Paul Lederach, *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 83, 121.

the other's pain and of our common humanity. We must fight violence with its own weapons, which are imagination and symbolic action.³⁴ Only people within the parties of a conflict know what those symbols are, and therefore hold the key to peacemaking action.

Khan's life affirms the principle that peacemaking by and among Muslims is always more effective when carried out by local parties themselves. Islam contains many resources for peacemaking, such as the emphasis on *adl* (justice), social empowerment, *ummah* (community), *bikmah* (wisdom, savvy action), as well as practices that can be conducive to collective nonviolent action, such as Friday gatherings, fasting, prayers, and chanting.³⁵ Khan drew from all of these as the basis for his work within his particular context.

The enduring challenge, however, is to draw the connection between strategies on the ground and these Islamic values. In other words, connecting the voice (the deeply held religious values of ordinary people) and touch (peacemaking action in the midst of conflict) requires the kind of leadership that is profoundly familiar with both the everyday struggles of the people and with the peacemaking resources of their faith. Khan's influence in connecting voice and touch for the Pashtun people was massive, but his life and teachings have further untapped potential to transform the practices of Muslims and others toward nonviolent peacemaking.

Martin Luther King, Jr.—the Translator

Principle: Peacemaking leaders seek a common language for justice and peace.

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) was a Baptist minister, activist, and prominent leader in the African-American Civil Rights Movement. He is well-known for his nonviolent methods modeled after the teachings of Gandhi. King became a civil rights activist early in his career. He led the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott and

³⁴ Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace*, 95, 166-170.

³⁵ Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 9-10, 82-84, 125-126.

served as the co-founder and first president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). King's efforts led to the 1963 March on Washington, and in 1964 he became the youngest person to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. He is widely recognized as one of the greatest orators in American history. By the time of his assassination in 1968, King had refocused his efforts on ending poverty through a living wage and other measures and on stopping the Vietnam War.

King's "I Have a Dream" speech is established as an icon of American history. He demonstrated an outstanding ability to blend hard-hitting prophetic speech with the best of American style liberalism. This skill is what I mean by translation: the aptitude to seek a common language for the cause of justice and peace, even within a society as diverse as the United States. Although King, like Gandhi and Khan, was both a theorist and an activist, I intend to focus on his skill as a communicator, drawing upon these aspects of his leadership.

De Pree writes in *Leadership is an Art*, "The best communication forces you to listen."³⁶ Since communication is a commitment to a convention, a culture, and based on respect for individuals, it is somewhat like learning a language. Elsewhere De Pree describes effective leadership as connecting one's voice and one's touch, which is another way of saying that communication springs from connecting the deepest part of who one is with the way one interacts in the world. Listening to one's voice comes more from mistakes than from achievement, from listening than from talking, and from one's teachers than from one's own understanding.³⁷ It is striking in reading King how often he references his teachers, to whom he owes the strength of his voice: Walter Rauschenbusch, Howard Thurman, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Mohandas Gandhi, among others.

³⁶ De Pree, *Leadership is an Art*, 102-103.

³⁷ De Pree, *Leadership Jazz*, 3, 112.

Another important aspect of King's role as a translator is the way he drew from communal memory for the strength of the movement. Building community is one of the main goals of a team; community creates the necessary social capital for team enterprise. Community is about belonging, contributing, being valued, and growing. An integral part of community is memory, which both learns from the past and creates momentum for the future. Remembering well keeps the shared vision alive and the shared values clear.³⁸ As an heir of a rich tradition of African American Christianity, King employed the resources of the black church as the fountain of strength for the Civil Rights Movement. The painful memories of slavery and violent oppression, and the entire history leading up to the brutal segregation of the American south under Jim Crow, paradoxically served as a reminder of God's sustaining and delivering power, a promise for the future that allowed King to appeal to nonviolent justice-seeking as the "arc of the universe."³⁹

King's spiritual background provided him with a wealth of prophetic resistance to evil, which he employed readily in many different contexts, referring with frequency to the Exodus, the Hebrew Prophets (especially Amos' famous image of righteousness and justice flowing down like a mighty stream), and the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and parables like the Good Samaritan. King did not stop, however, at what Scott Appleby calls the "dead end of 'first-order' religious language,"⁴⁰ but proceeded to articulate an ethic of justice in a public language. King was one of the specially-gifted translators of what the justice of Amos looks like in an American context, which is why the label of prophet so aptly applies. It is impossible to understand King apart from his conflicted view of the United States; he both saw the possibility for

³⁸ Wright, *Don't Step on the Rope*, 79-81, 91-101.

³⁹ James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 207.

⁴⁰ Appleby, *Ambivalence of the Sacred*, 279.

a nation to do good, moving toward the “beloved community,”⁴¹ and to do evil, which he so staunchly criticized in the actions of the United States toward its poor, its minorities, and its perceived enemies. James Washington writes, “He certainly was an Americanist, but not a nationalist ideologue...Some black leaders, such as Malcolm X, argued that King’s vision was only a tragic fantasy. If so, that fantasy was shared by many children of African slaves and a nation of voluntary European immigrants.”⁴² Many black leaders saw America as a hermeneutical situation, a context ripe either for a degree of healing or for further abuse. The ambivalence of King’s relationship to America is evident in the theme he gave to what turned out to be his final campaign: Repent, America! King focused his Poor People’s Campaign on low-cost housing, full employment, and the end of poverty in order to move what he called a “sick, neurotic nation”⁴³ toward a level of health. In so doing, he appealed to and reframed the American ideals of democracy, liberty, and human rights.

Peacemakers who are translators recognize that conflict resolution itself is a socially constructed phenomenon. According to Lederach, “Understanding conflict and developing appropriate models of handling it will necessarily be rooted in, and must respect and draw from, the cultural knowledge of a people.”⁴⁴ Elsewhere he writes, “Peacebuilding requires a vision of relationship. Stated bluntly, if there is no capacity to imagine the canvas of mutual relationships and situate oneself as part of that historic and ever-evolving web, peacebuilding collapses.”⁴⁵ King saw America as a School for the Moral Imagination of the kind described by Lederach: mixing people of different backgrounds together, trying to build something resembling the beloved community. America

⁴¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 56.

⁴² Washington, *A Testament of Hope*, xix.

⁴³ Marshall Frady, *Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Viking, 2002), 194.

⁴⁴ Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*, 6, 10.

⁴⁵ Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 35.

is not the primary subject or guide for the ethics of King. But it is a part of the historical situation in which King found himself, and as a peacemaker he saw it a part of his calling to articulate what that meant, and to imagine what good could possibly come of it.

As a peacemaking translator, King recognized and utilized the power of words. Words are severely limited, especially when they are not accompanied by promised action. But words can also be a tremendous source of healing, and can be peacemaking gestures in themselves. The most effective peacemakers focus on relationships bigger than just dialogue, while recognizing that the messages we send to one another are crucial. Words matter because they can help transform the attitudes of large numbers of people quickly.⁴⁶ One reason King's speeches, especially at the March on Washington, have had such an effect is because they served to diffuse white fears about the social changes occurring in the country. Assurance of a shared future serves to replace anxiety with hope.

King was so effective in communicating the vision of a just society from his African-American Christian tradition because he worked hard to draw connections to the values of even his opponents. For King, the task of connecting voice and touch in American society meant not glossing over injustice but confronting it with the ideals drawn directly from his Christian faith, which he shared with many Americans. The fact that King could imagine, along with millions of people of all colors, what it might mean to have a modern-day Exodus from oppression, or to be Good Samaritans in a highly racialized society, or to see justice flow down like a mighty stream, demonstrates the necessity of the act of translation in movements toward peace.

Conclusion

Connecting voice and touch is not simply a matter of integrity, in the sense that one's life should match what

⁴⁶ Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace*, 150-159.

one claims to value. Certainly each of the above peacemakers was described by those around him as possessing a deep well of spiritual energy from which to draw. This deep well was not a measure of the faith they could muster, but rather of the extent to which they encountered the divine and submitted utterly to God's will, as they discerned it through their tradition. Yet with respect to religious leadership, voice and touch are much bigger than the life of the individual; they refer to entire patterns of thought and practice stemming from the most profound beliefs that shape the way ordinary people see the world. The most successful leaders do not depend on a cadre of intellectual, economic, or political elites. Their authority stems rather from the fact that they show people how to connect their visions of the way the world should be to the reality of the way the world is. Good leaders pay close attention to the religious hopes and fears that shape behavior, as well as the experiences of their lives that produce suffering or joy. According to Max De Pree, one becomes a leader by doing the work of a leader.⁴⁷ In this sense, it is only through identifying with people's fears and hopes that one becomes a leader.

One of the primary ways in which we learn how to connect voice and touch is by observing the examples of effective and compelling leaders. We have seen that from Gandhi's example we can learn that peacemaking leaders articulate a worldview that seeks the good of all. From Khan we are taught that peacemaking leadership is strategic, drawing from the resources of those one is leading. King shows us that peacemaking leaders seek a common language for justice and peace. Contemporary religious peacemakers can appropriate each of these three leadership principles in their own specific contexts.

Those in pastoral leadership can draw wisdom from each of these leaders. An important aspect of pastoral leadership, for example, is articulating a mission and vision for the congregation. This process involves engaging both Scripture and the historical values of the

⁴⁷ De Pree, *Leadership* 13.

congregation and denomination. Just as Gandhi appealed both to the particular context of his followers and to the Hindu values they embraced, in articulating a mission and vision for a church a pastor must bring together the deepest convictions of Christian faith with the needs of the community. Learning from Khan, church leaders draw from the gifts and culture of the congregation rather than imposing external concepts of what shape the church's mission should take. This approach cultivates an organic tie between the congregation and the pastor.

In situations of church conflict, pastoral leadership must take care never to be dismissive of any perspective that is offered, no matter how absurd it seems. Even ugly and shameful beliefs or behavior should not be dismissed as relics of the past, a tendency that leads to demonization, the great enemy of peacemaking. Marc Gopin writes, "I do not dismiss any behavior as 'crazy,' which is our word for what we cannot comprehend. To me such behavior presents a golden opportunity to see an injury."⁴⁸ Particularly within a congregation, a community devoted explicitly to mutual care, it is crucial to learn from religious leaders who managed to embrace rather than dismiss, to love opponents rather than alienate them.

Finally, religious leaders, whether pastors or seminary professors or in some other capacity, are guides in the ever-changing task of relating to the other. This is perhaps the most critical aspect of connecting voice and touch, because otherness challenges one's deepest beliefs about what is true. Religions, and therefore religious otherness, are here to stay. The interface between religions, especially the most liberal adherents, is expanding. At the same time, radicalization within religions will likely continue as global inequalities grow and human needs remain unmet. In light of this challenge, we must avoid the temptation to retreat into safe enclaves of like-minded people.⁴⁹ All three of the

⁴⁸ Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon*, 122, 224.

⁴⁹ Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon*, 223-226.

leaders profiled above faced the challenge of religious radicalism in the form of Hindu, Muslim, and Christian militants. Their response was not to demonize or dismiss these groups, nor to concede to their arguments for the necessity of violence. Instead, they acknowledged the pain of their adversaries and included them in their visions of a better society, choosing to bear pain rather than inflict it, and helping each community face its own legacies of suffering.

The Abrahamic faiths share a vision of primordial goodness, and religious leaders must undertake to describe the Eden that we seek not as a world without scarcity or work, but one in which its struggles do not lead to bloodshed. Contemporary peacemaking leaders will face stern opposition from those who insist on an Eden free of otherness. Jesus' admonition to count the cost of discipleship (Luke 14:25-33) applies as well to peacemaking, demanding courage that none of us can find on our own. The language of cost, however, assumes a payoff that is worth the trouble. All people of faith can find strength in the hope that a shared future is worth whatever it demands of us. The calling to connect voice and touch is not only about building that shared future, but also creating the space for others to thrive. The contemporary heirs of the thought and practice of Gandhi, Khan, and King continue to receive the gift they bestowed on peacemakers for generations to come: their commitment to understanding both the suffering and joys of people and to the best hopes of their faith.