

# Finding peace through forgiveness



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For so long, mankind has often used violence to resolve conflicts. But it's also possible to use non-violent direct action and civil disobedience. Many have tried this approach, and most of them have failed.

There were two countries where a non-violent movement was successful; countries in which violence could have erupted into a revolution as a result of racial segregation. Those countries are South Africa and the United States, two important nations on two different continents, Africa and North America. Both of the countries had three common conditions that made it possible for nonviolence to work and these are: the threat of violence which made the existing power willing to change, they were both colonies of England, who believed in rule by law, and the presence of an individual who could lead his followers to a violent victory. The two people who made this possible were Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela. They both valued the importance of carrying out a peaceful approach to reach their goal. King was the only son in the family to go to college. He also received his Doctorate in theology. Mandela was the first black South African to attend college. He received his degree from law school. As King became a minister in a church, it was a perfect place for him to initiate the civil rights struggle. Mandela started practicing law in Johannesburg, which was where he started seeing racism and discrimination intensified. King's inspiring speaking abilities could be owed to his background, since he was raised in a family of preachers. Mandela had to be great speaker, since he was born to a family of leaders and always wanted to become a lawyer. Even though these two people were from two different continents, their main goal was the fair treatment of black

people in each of their society and they were able to accomplish the goal through a nonviolent approach.

Martin Luther King was born into a wealthy family on 15th January, 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia. Nelson Mandela was born on 18th July 1918 in the village of Mvezo in the South African province now known as the Eastern Cape. King's father was a Baptist preacher, active in the human-rights movement while his mother was a schoolteacher. Mandela's father, Chief Henry Mandela, was a Principal councillor to the acting King of Thembu people and his mother, Nonqaphi Nosekeni was founder of the Methodist Church in Qunu. King always maintained a great admiration for his father. As he grew up, he developed his public speaking and debating skills; he even won the debating competition at the age of 13, at Booker T. Washington High School. Mandela was raised in the Thembu culture for six years and he was sent to a Methodist Missionary school where he was required to live under apartheid, the white south African system of racial Apartness. King was a model student and was two classes above his friends. He went to University at the age of 15, and completed his Bachelor's degree in Sociology. He was the only son in the family to attend college. In 1951, he gained his Bachelor's degree in Theology at the Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania. Mandela completed his certificate in two years. During his studies, he developed a strong interest in traditional African culture. Even though, it was rare for a black South African to attend college, he not only attended, he also graduated and got a degree from law school, and set up a practice in Johannesburg. At a young age, King once had to stand up on the bus to make a way for a white passenger, in spite of his refusal. He was told by his

teacher that it would be considered breaking the law. Afterwards, King described his emotions at that time as ' the angriest I have ever been in my life'. At school Mandela's teachers no longer called him by his Xhosa name (" Rolihlahla" literally means " pulling the branch of a tree," but it could also mean " trouble-maker"). Then he was given the more acceptable European name " Nelson." This was the first time that Mandela felt disrespected for his blackness. King decided to become a church minister because he saw it as the best way of satisfying ' an inner urge to serve humanity'. At that time southern blacks were facing humiliation due to the racially biased laws of the south called Jim Crow laws. As a student, Mandela met student activists and members of the African National Congress (ANC). While working at a law firm, he started studying law as the only black student at the University of the Witwatersrand. A tired woman, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give her bus seat to a white passenger, which set the modern struggle for civil rights in motion. King became involved in a Social Gospel movement which pursued Christian values in the fight against social inequality. After facing discrimination and racism, Mandela became increasingly involved in protests and joined the ANC. As a result of Rosa Park's arrest, King organized the first protest, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which lasted for 385 days and resulted in a court judgement outlawing racial segregation in buses. As the South African government began introducing more and more apartheid legislation following the Election, Mandela called on the ANC to intensify its protests by using boycotts and strikes. In 1957, King and several others established the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference). Through this organization, they brought together the benefit of black churches in America to fight in the struggle against inequality and discrimination. With

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the help of Mandela, the Joint Defiance Campaign was launched in 1952 and followed in the footsteps of Gandhi's ideals of nonviolence. Through this Campaign, they won United Nations' recognition that the South African racial policy was an international issue, as a result a UN Commission started investigating the situation. In 1959, King went to India to meet with friends and a man he'd long admired, Mahatma Gandhi. He returned home a few weeks later, more convinced than ever that non-violence was the most powerful way to fight oppression. Mandela addressed groups of tens of thousands of black Africans and became the face of the civil-rights movement in South Africa. Mandela has acknowledged that his own belief system was not based on a religious or spiritual foundation, but rather on the usefulness of nonviolence. According to Martin Luther King, Nonviolence is a more ethical and moral strategy that goes hand in hand with the principles of Christianity and found to be effective in Gandhi's struggle for independence. He also found nonviolence to be an effective way to get the public on his side, by showing them the government's violent reaction to his nonviolent protests. Most importantly, he believed that nonviolence could replace love where hatred and bitterness existed. On the other hand, Nelson Mandela believed that a non-violent strategy should be followed if it's found useful to the movement at a certain time. But then frustrated by its inability to effect change, he considered non-violence a tactic to be used when facing a non-violent opponent. He mentioned that challenge comes when facing a strong state apparatus ready to resort to violence to protect its position and in those circumstances following a path of non-violence can be very dangerous. Mandela deemed nonviolent protest as the only solution. He said, ...we should employ the method or tactic demanded by the conditions. If a

particular method or tactic enabled us to defeat the enemy, then it should be used ... This made nonviolence a practical necessity rather than an option.

(David J. Whittaker, *The Terrorism Reader*, 279) This shows that Mandela was only aiming for victory while King aimed for friendship and understanding instead of a victory; his approach could shortly be put as "whatever works."

If he had felt violence would solve the situation, he would have used it.

Mandela's fight was political and secular, which can partly be owed to his background as he was the son of a Xhosa Chief. He didn't have a place in his mind for Christian values by then. He only wanted to use nonviolence as a

tactic to be used as the situation demanded. His nonviolence resistance wasn't just based on the Christian values, but also Mohandas K. Gandhi's

actions. Gandhi's successful effort of using nonviolence to lead his people to independence from Great Britain, inspired him and as he said, it was exactly

what he had been seeking for. King was looking for a way that was both effective and goes along with his Christian values. When talking about his

decision to use nonviolent protest, King said, the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most

potent weapons available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom

the method for social reform that I had been seeking (King, *Stride*, 79;

*Papers 5*: 422). One thing to remember is that Martin Luther King and all the civil rights leaders at the time were Christians. This quote shows that the

primary reason King chose a nonviolent approach is to keep with the ethics of Christianity. As King came from a Christian background, listening to his

father preach and his mom sing and play piano, he always wanted to do

God's will. Even his nonviolence approach was developed directly from the

teachings of Jesus Christ. It was a mission for him to serve the lord. His love for Jesus was displayed in his teachings, especially by what he accomplished.

Bloody Sunday and Sharpeville Massacre were two important events which were the turning points in the struggle against segregation in the U. S. and South Africa respectively.. Bloody Sunday was an event that occurred on March 7, 1965 in Selma, Alabama, where over fifty people were hospitalized. Sharpeville Massacre was an event that occurred on 21 March 1960 at the Sharpeville Police station in South Africa, where 69 people were killed and 180 were injured. On Sunday, March 7 1965, six hundred marchers assembled in Selma, fighting for their right to carry out their protest. Led by John Lewis and other SNCC and SCLC activists, they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge over the Alabama River en route to Montgomery. Just short of the bridge, they found their way blocked by Alabama State troopers and local police who ordered them to turn around. When the protesters refused, the officers shot tear gas and waded into the crowd, beating the nonviolent protesters with billy clubs and ultimately hospitalizing over fifty people. On Wednesday, March 21 1960, a crowd of about 5000 to 10, 000 protesters gathered at the police station aiming to force the apartheid government to end pass-laws which required Africans to carry passes all the time. Some sources say the crowd was peaceful while others say the crowd started advancing toward the fence around the police station. There were 289 casualties in total, including 29 children. Many people sustained back injuries from being shot as they fled. Police reports in 1960 claimed that young and inexperienced police officers panicked and opened fire spontaneously, setting off a chain reaction that lasted about forty seconds. In two minutes,

police fired more than 1,300 bullets. King found this event to be a perfect way to get people on the side of the protestors [his side]. If the whites in the North saw pictures and films of blacks getting abused by the police while protesting peacefully, they would be more inclined to support the black's goals. Mandela and his supporters, however, used The Sharpeville Massacre as an excuse to implement violent methods in the struggle against the apartheid system. He said that the time for the passive resistance had ended, and that they could never overturn a white minority regime bent on retaining its power at any cost. Bloody Sunday was televised around the world. Everyone around the world was shocked and outraged at the sights and sounds of Bloody Sunday. This also prompted President Johnson to submit a proposal for a strong Voting Rights Act. In an interview with Life magazine's Flip Schulke, King said, "The world doesn't know this happened because you didn't photograph it but it is so much more important for you to take a picture of us getting beaten up, according to "The Race Beat," a history of media coverage of the civil rights movement. As he was told, Schulke filmed the entire assault and sent it to the television network headquarters in New York. When it aired that night, people all around the world, including Americans, were horrified to even look at the pictures taken that day. Schulke helped transform this local protest into a national civil rights event. King wanted everyone to see the brutal response of the police to their peaceful local protest, which aimed to fight for their right to carry out a protest and their right to vote. On the other hand, Sharpeville massacre brought international public opinion against apartheid South Africa to a boil. It stood out in the minds of people all over the world. As a result the government declared a state of emergency and banned ANC as an unlawful



organization. In his biography *A Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela wrote, The disturbance pointed clearly that violence was the only way out; it showed that a government which uses force to maintain its rule teaches the oppressed to use force to oppose it. This refers to the turning point where ANC and PAC realized that their peaceful approach had no effect and that they need to be more aggressive. When both the movements were declared unlawful, they shifted their approach to an armed struggle. As mentioned above, Mandela only advocated nonviolence just because it was believed that it would enable them to defeat the enemy. Once that was proven to be wrong, a new plan was set out to be implemented. Since fifty years of nonviolence had brought the African people nothing but more and more repressive legislation, and fewer and fewer rights, Mandela's followers believed violence was the only clear solution.

In the face of oppression, MLK and Mandela maintained a forgiving spirit. As MLK once said, Forgiveness is not an occasional act, rather a constant attitude. Despite Mandela's 27 years of imprisonment and MLK's several arrests, they kept drawing their strength from the power of love, nonviolence and forgiveness. According to MLK, Forgiveness doesn't mean ignoring what has been done or putting a false label on an evil act. Rather, it means that the evil act no longer remains as a barrier to the relationship, instead it becomes a catalyst for a fresh start. Similarly, Mandela said that Forgiveness liberates the soul; it removes fear. That's why it's such a powerful weapon. He also declared that if there are dreams about a beautiful South Africa, there are also roads that lead to their goal. Two of these roads could be named Goodness and Forgiveness. While MLK's philosophy of forgiveness

had its base in Christianity, Mandela did it because it's the right thing to do. South Africa was in desperate need of forgiveness, not more chaos. MLK taught that they must forgive their enemies even though everyone is faulted. He spoke about how one could find happiness through forgiveness in such a way that, if someone carries anger and not forgive the evildoer, it causes them to carry a burden which in turn brings disappointment and distrust of those around that person. Mandela said, We especially need to forgive each other, because when you intend to forgive, you heal part of the pain, but when you forgive you heal completely." This means that forgiving others isn't always making peace with others, it's also making peace with ourselves. As we forgive those who harmed us, we feel peace and relief within us. Despite the brutal treatment Mandela received from the guards in prison, he forgave them all. He only forgave them for his own sake; in order to have a happier and healthier future. Otherwise, another civil war would have broke out, causing more people to die and all his work would've been for nothing.

While MLK's words taught his people the idea of forgiveness before action, Mandela's actions taught the people, the importance of compassion and forgiveness. Mandela's utilization of peace as a means of liberation taught Africa that if they were to move beyond the divisiveness caused by the apartheid, compassion and forgiveness must play a role in governance. If Mandela can teach us one thing, it is for us to see humanity and dignity in the other. King said, We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. This

means that we have to acknowledge that there is always some good in all the evildoers and some evil in all good people. When we discover this, we are less likely to hate our enemies. If we look beneath the evil deed, we see some goodness and know that the evilness of their acts don't quite represent them. So we start to realize that hate just grows out of ignorance, misunderstanding, pride and fear.

Since MLK had been teaching black americans the importance and significant role that forgiveness can play in the civil rights movement, no one doubted the approach when they began applying it in a number of situations. They knew it was the right thing to do and believed they were doing God's will. On the contrary, there was speculation that Nelson Mandela wasted a great opportunity to deal with poverty, inequality, and uneven employment, by pursuing the reconciliation route without restitution. But as time went on, they realized that he knew what he was doing. One of the most memorable examples of MLK's forgiveness is him forgiving Izola Curry, who had stepped up to his table and stabbed him with a 7-inch, ivory-handled steel letter opener. He only hoped that she gets the help she needs and become a free and constructive member of society. In the same manner, Mandela invited a person named Percy Yutar, a state prosecutor at the 1963 Rivonia treason trial who demanded the death penalty for Mandela, to dinner where they enjoyed a kosher meal. Mandela said that it wasn't his fault and that he was just doing his job. Both MLK and mandela are now considered as two men who fought for peace and equality through love, reconciliation and more importantly forgiveness.

Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela were inspiring leaders who put the needs of their people first and used the method of nonviolence for equal treatment of colored people in each of their own countries. In spite of the hardships and unfair treatments, they maintained a forgiving spirit toward the oppressing government. Their success taught everyone not only how to approach conflicts but also how to avoid them.