

PEACE IS THE WAY AND VIOLENCE IS A MANY-HEADED HYDRA

JO ANN OOIMAN ROBINSON



**AJ MUSTE FOUNDATION
FOR PEACE + JUSTICE**

Who was A.J. Muste?

Abraham Johannes Muste was born in Zierkzee, Zeeland, the Netherlands, in 1885. His family immigrated to America and settled in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1891. He was admitted to Hope Preparatory School in 1898, the youngest student at that time. He graduated from Hope College in 1902 after only three years at the age of 20.

In 1909, Muste graduated from the New Brunswick Theological Seminary, married Anna Huizenga in Rock Valley, Iowa, was ordained in the Reformed Church in America, and was installed as first minister of the Fort Washington Collegiate Church in New York City.

The ultimate pacifist, Muste protested against every major war waged during his lifetime. He joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an inter-faith pacifist organization, in 1916. In 1917, he resigned from the Central Congregational Church because of his pacifistic views, and the next year led the Lawrence, Massachusetts, textile workers strike. Among the many places where he protested are famous landmarks like Red Square in Moscow, the United Nations, Times Square, and the White House.

Muste has had an impact on major figures in the peace movement, and many called him the “American Gandhi.” The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. was a seminary student when he first heard Muste speak. The fact that the struggle for civil rights in this country has been so bloodless when compared to some other parts of the world is in large part attributable to Muste.

In 1948, Muste stopped paying federal income tax because they were financing the machineries of war. Each year he sent a package to the IRS containing a Bible, a copy of Henry Thoreau’s “Essay on Civil Disobedience,” and a three-page typewritten paper outlining the principles preventing him from contributing to the armaments of the United States. Although in 1961 the United States Tax Court ruled that the government had a right to back taxes, collection against Muste’s small retirement income was never attempted. A.J. Muste died in 1967 at age 82.

Several biographies have been produced detailing A.J.’s life including:

- Abraham Went Out: A Biography of A.J. Muste, by Jo Ann Ooiman Robinson (1981)
- Peace Agitator: The Story of A. J. Muste, by Nat Hentoff (1982)
- American Gandhi: A.J. Muste and the History of Radicalism in the Twentieth Century, by Leilah Danielson (2014)

A.J. Muste Foundation for Peace and Justice

The A.J. Muste Foundation for Peace and Justice (formerly the A.J. Muste Memorial Institute) was founded in 1974. The Foundation provides grants, fiscal sponsorships, and educational resources to hundreds of grassroots projects. We fund innovative organizing and nonviolent direct action for the liberation of all, often with seed funds that give a necessary boost to bold ideas.

Peace is the Way and Violence is a Many-Headed Hydra

Jo Ann Ooiman Robinson

A.J. MUSTE CONFERENCE, HOPE COLLEGE, MARCH 2024

I was one month and five days shy of my third birthday when Paul Tibbets, piloting the U.S. B-59 bomber Enola Gay, released the atomic bomb over Hiroshima. I was too young to have a conscious memory of how those around me responded to that, and the subsequent incineration of Nakasaki, but I can't remember a time growing up when I did not know that something terrible had come into the world.

The federal Office of Civil Defense contributed to this knowledge with pamphlets that showed up in the family mailbox. Their graphics were self-explanatory, and once I learned to read, my vocabulary included such terms as Ground Zero; firestorm; radiation poisoning. I listened to the radio a lot and heard many discussions of fall-out shelters and controversy over whether those who had them would be obligated to open them to those who didn't. And there were the absurd duck-and-cover drills in school. Nobody discussed these things with me, not my family, not my teachers, not other kids.

In high school, after books and movies like "On The Beach" came out, I tried, albeit with very limited success, to raise the topic a few times, and wrote a term paper for an English class about the insanity of the creators of human civilization creating the means of blowing it into oblivion. My teacher gave the paper an A but we never discussed it.

I had encountered the first layer of what A.J. Muste would later deplore as "the thick crust of indifference" with which most human beings distance themselves from the eventualities of nuclear destruction.

When I entered Knox College, in Galesburg Illinois, in 1960, I discovered the Student Peace Union and learned that the campus chapter was linked to a national group which was part of a worldwide network of organizations, some of which had been working to end war long before the atomic era. What a revelation! And, truly, such a relief to finally have an outlet for my feelings and questions about war and the bomb.

The SPU peace activists, with whom I joined, were relatively few in number, but bolstered by a few faculty, and even a couple of faculty wives. We tried to educate ourselves, others on campus, and people in the town about the pressing issue of U.S. and Soviet above-ground testing of nuclear weapons. In March of 1962 thirteen of us piled into cars, headed for Washington D.C. There we joined a three-day protest of some 5,000 students from across the country, augmented by a delegation of the anti-nuclear movement in Great Britain. We picketed the Kennedy White House and the Soviet Embassy. We visited elected officials in the U.S. House and Senate. We demanded an end to atmospheric nuclear testing.

When the U.S., Soviet Union and Great Britain signed the limited nuclear test ban treaty five months later, it felt good to have had a part, however small, in this historic first effort to reduce the nuclear threat.

During this time I was reading everything I could find about peace movements, including “Fellowship Magazine.” I found articles by and about A.J. Muste to be especially thought provoking and began looking for more information about him. In my senior year, when I needed a topic for an honors thesis, I focused on Muste and two other distinguished figures with histories in the peace and anti-nuclear movements – theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and British philosopher Bertrand Russell. I made a good faith effort to objectively assess the thought and roles of Niebuhr and Russell. But I was really drawn to Muste. He was free of bombast and made the case for pacifism in terms that were relatable. He often said that while he knew he was more right than those who dismissed his arguments for ending war and fighting for justice, that did not make him more righteous.

Even more compelling for me was his dogged pursuit of peace, a peace rooted in social justice and economic equality. No matter how morally complex, personally demanding and physically dangerous that pursuit became, he carried on. After withstanding the tumult and hardships of opposing the First World War, he waded into the labor wars of the 1920s and ‘30s. For a time, he stood shoulder to shoulder with violent revolutionaries.

However, he found their faith – that the ends justify the means – to be fatally flawed. So he shifted his revolutionary mission back onto pathways toward peace and the beloved community. Stony and steep as those paths became he stayed the course. His perseverance and depth of experience – having explored both violent and nonviolent ways of life – gave him unique credibility that inspired me as an undergraduate student. It made graduate studies, with the early years of his life’s work as a dissertation topic, extremely meaningful. And it made writing “Abraham Went Out” a personally fulfilling project. I met Muste once, in April of 1964, as I was finishing the honors thesis. The American Friends Service Committee hosted a conference at a center called Lake Villa in Northern Illinois to explore the question: Nonviolence: Tactic or Way of Life? They asked Muste to serve as the “Dean” of the gathering. When I saw the announcement I sent him a note asking if he would give me a few minutes to discuss my thesis with him. He replied in the affirmative and I signed up for the conference. A motherly faculty wife paid the registration fee and supplied bus fare. Muste was not at his best that weekend. He was some weeks away from cataract surgery and got crotchety when lights couldn’t be adjusted to remove glare that made it difficult for him to read his notes. Nonetheless, his conference-opening account of the labor campaigns to which he had contributed was spell-binding. History straight from the lived experience of the history maker.

When we met the next day, Muste was patient and kind. He managed to extract from my banal questions meaningful points of discussion without a hint of condescension. Muste almost always based his interactions with others on the premise that, as he told me that day, individuals must be free to “express what they are at” [any given moment] and should not be coerced or expected to be other than they are at that moment.

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He accepted me as I was, brimming with book learning and big ideas about “peace,” with only the shakiest foundation of real world experience on which to ground them. I perceived in his empathy a template for nonviolence as a way of life.

Between then and his death in February 1967, Muste soon entered upon a punishing pace of organizing, speaking, writing, marching, protesting, traveling – seeking an end to the war in Vietnam. Twice he made the grueling journey to Indochina, getting arrested and thrown out of South Vietnam, meeting, amid the destruction and chaos of unremitting warfare, with Ho Chi Minh in North Vietnam. “I cannot get it out of my head or my guts,” he declared, “that Americans are away over there not only shooting at people but dropping bombs on them, roasting them with napalm and all the rest.”

His anguish reverberates now as American leaders and American weapons bear heavy responsibility for the current slaughter in Gaza. Looking back through a lens of nearly six decades since Muste’s death, the anguish only deepens. The landscape is ravaged by human-made violence that just never abates.

Muste did extensive reading of, and outreach to, the thinkers and scholars of his day – including Hannah Arendt, Martin Buber, David Riesman, Albert Einstein. Recalling his practice, I have been trying to find sources to help me think about ongoing peril, including recent research on the nature of violence. I’ve perused articles in the Routledge “International Handbook of Violence Studies” and various on-line journals. I have found especially absorbing the textbook authored by Bandy X. Lee. Her name may be familiar for her publications on, and organizing efforts to raise alarm about, the mental health of Donald Trump. This led to banishment from the American Psychiatric Association and cost her the faculty position she held at Yale for 17 years. The August 2022 issue of “Mother Jones” offers details and perspective on these developments in an essay titled “The Psychiatrist Who Warned Us That Donald Trump Would Unleash Violence was Absolutely Right.” Her textbook, published pre-Trump, is titled, “Violence, An Interdisciplinary Approach to Causes, Consequences and Cures.” In this work Lee, a psychiatrist with a Masters Degree in Theology, reviews studies of violence by scholars in the fields of biology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science and environmental research, providing historical context in her synthesis of their findings. I am far from having mastered this material. I nonetheless dare to raise a few points for reflection.

Dr. Lee begins from the heartening premise that violence is “human generated” and therefore has “human solutions.” The much-hyped thesis associated with ethologist Konrad Lorenz and biologist E. O. Wilson that violence is an inescapable human trait appears, in the light of interdisciplinary research, to be an erroneous oversimplification. To fixate on ape origins and the supposedly iron laws of evolution is to denigrate human complexity, ignore the impact of social and cultural forces and miss the crucial difference between violence and aggression. “Aggression,” Lee observes, “is plentiful in other primates but violence is almost uniquely human.” Aggression, in addition to warding off threats, can be productive and creative. In non-human primate groups, when aggression is used to ward off a threat or resolve a conflict, once the purpose is achieved, aggressive behavior subsides, unlike in most human societies where, absent productive outlets, aggression degenerates into violence.

Another essential distinction – one that this audience knows well – is that between violence and power. Lee discusses violence as “a guise to ward off feelings of powerlessness.” Individuals and countries employ violence out of insecurity and fear. The hallmarks of power are freedom and wellbeing, which violence can never achieve. It only produces ever more deadly forms of peril in a futile quest for dominance and security. Yet most of our fellow humans buy into this quest and the complex culture of violence which it produces.

Lee discusses violence in terms of three forms that it takes: behavioral, structural and catastrophic. Most familiar is behavioral violence which manifests in our streets and various public and domestic areas on a daily basis. Its causes are rooted in the less obvious and more lethal labyrinth of structural violence, which she describes as “the avoidable limitations society places on groups of people through structures that prevent them from meeting their basic needs.” Put simply, structural violence refers to the discrimination and exploitation that trap vast numbers of people in poverty and despair.

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A.J. Muste did not use this language but he was clear that peace and justice are indivisible and that moralistic condemnation of violence without robust efforts to address the inequities and deprivations at its source will never create sustainable peace. During his tenure at the helm of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, more than a few traditional pacifists were alarmed that he identified such factors as economic inequality and racism as forms of violence. Today activists and scholars recognize the deadly impact of structural violence. Poverty, as the Poor People’s Campaign declares, is the fourth leading cause of death in the United States. James Gilligan, in a study titled “Violence: Our Deadly Epidemic and Its Causes” calculated its world wide impact, finding that “every fifteen years on average as many people have died because of relative poverty as would die in a nuclear war.”

This is not to say that the lethality of warfare, the defiling of planet earth, the continuing buildup and proliferation of nuclear weapons – what Dr. Lee labels catastrophic violence – pose a lesser threat to human survival. If peace and justice are indivisible, their advocates cannot afford to prioritize structural over catastrophic violence or vice versa. No justice, no peace. No peace, no sustainable justice. The challenge is to marshal the physical, mental, spiritual and financial resources to replace both with a society that is healthy for all living beings. This is not possible with limited resources. Despite reaching for common goals, organizations and campaigns involved in peace work compete for funding and members. It appears to me that for many years campaigns to raise awareness of and reverse the course of catastrophic violence have fared poorly in this competition. The unremitting suffering caused by structural violence demands attention on a daily basis. Making the case for urgent, persistent action to avert collective human suicide seems nearly impossible.

However naïve I may be, I cannot believe that there are not among those with great wealth a few individuals capable of grasping the costs and ultimate consequences of catastrophic violence. And that these high net worth individuals could not be motivated to endow nonviolent training academies and interdisciplinary nonviolent research centers on a scale that, while not matching the military institutions and think-tanks that now hold sway over the world, could empower and sustain nonviolent contingents for peace building, conflict resolution and service to humanity, building up those that have labored so long on a shoe-string and recruiting and preparing new troops. The notion of international peace brigades that originated with Gandhi, and that Muste and others attempted to carry forward in the early 1960s as the World Peace Brigade, might at last become realistic. Our own country may be too besotted with militaristic myths and performances to explore new options, but I bet that among the inhabitants of the 191 states that have joined the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons there are many who would welcome nonviolence training and opportunities to serve in nonviolent brigades and related initiatives.

Muste sometimes attributed failure to address catastrophic violence to a collective failure to value human life. After three Vietnam war protestors died by self-immolation in the United States in 1965 (acts repeated earlier this month by a member of the U.S. Airforce), Muste counseled others contemplating this course of action to practice civil disobedience instead, but he also framed the self-immolations as not abnormal in a “society composed of people who somehow feel that the death of millions in war is somehow normal...a society in which people contemplate, for the most part calmly, the self-immolation of the whole of mankind in a nuclear holocaust.”

From her vantage point as a psychiatrist, Bandy Lee identifies “psychic numbing” as a factor contributing to widespread avoidance of impending peril. The enormity of the threat prompts denial, or drives people to sooth themselves with deceptions such as deterrence theory, which she describes as “a gamble that we will never do what we are always ready to do,” and notes that deterrence theory “has little meaning to a terrorist.” Lee also deplores the penchant of researchers in every field to contain their efforts within silos of specialization, which permits each of them to label a massive problem like nuclear war as “not my question to answer.”

Movements and institutions can also cordon themselves off from dealing with possibilities like that of the “death spiral” that Lee believes our society has already fallen into. While the A.J. Muste Foundation for Peace and Justice, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Physicians for Social Responsibility and others carry forward the struggle against the madness of war, their work receives far less public support and understanding than organizations that target structural violence, and, of course those organizations also struggle to stay afloat. Few things frustrated Muste more than how religious institutions generally avoid confronting the blasphemy of war and probabilities of Armageddon. He founded and led from 1951 to 1962 a failed effort called the Church Peace Mission, to convince Christian clergy and governing bodies to denounce modern war. When it closed down, he observed that to expect churches to live up to their teachings and prophetic functions in relation to war “might lead to great disappointment.”

Nonetheless, such disappointment did not alter Muste's faith in a universe ruled by reason and love, any more than Bandy Lee's dismay at mounting evidence of a death spiral limits the case she makes for why a profound change in human consciousness is possible. "While human beings are unique in their capacity for violence, they are also," she insists, "unique in their capacity for greater good." Historical examples abound – though they rarely appear in history books – of how nonviolent methods, "far from being passive or ineffective," as they are commonly viewed, can "bring down empires, topple regimes, and effectuate long-lasting peace." Why do these examples, and the research of social scientists documenting the efficacy of nonviolent strategies remain all but invisible in social discourse? Because, Lee indicates, violence is the paradigm for the norms, rituals, and meanings that govern that discourse – in legislative bodies; police, court and prison systems; schools, churches; manufacturing and national security complexes, and all avenues of communication. I cannot do justice to her dissection of the violence paradigm. But I do want to think with you for a minute about amplifying nonviolence. When all is said and done, it seems to me that most people regard nonviolence to be, at best, a noble value practiced only by unusually idealistic individuals and applicable only under certain conditions and, at worst, a belief that is illusory and dangerous. When the collective consciousness is fed a steady stream of violence, nonviolence simply cannot garner attention, let alone adoption. "You have to imagine violence in order to practice it," Lee writes. The opportunities for doing so in our society are legion. Where are the opportunities for imagining nonviolence?"

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What if the stories of all kinds of peace builders played regularly in theaters and movie houses and on living room television screens? What if the aspirations and emotional lives of peace builders found regular expression throughout the domains of music and the visual arts? What if public monuments to, and celebrations of, peace builders occupied central spots in landscapes, museums and on national calendars around the world? What if peace building fueled discussion on blogs, podcasts, editorial pages, and other social media applications? Isn't it possible that such developments could begin to alter the collective consciousness and provide at least some impetus for a paradigm shift?

Scholars, including Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan; Gene Sharp; Peter Ackerman and Jack Duvall; several generations of historians in the Peace History Society; and documentary biographers, including David Schock, Nancy Kates and Bennett Singer, have amassed a wealth of evidence demonstrating the efficacy of nonviolent resistance and the salutary outcomes of organizing for justice by peaceful means. Within each instance of successful civilian resistance is not only data on training, strategy and decision-making, but also the human drama of the resisters' lives, waiting to be lifted up into social awareness. Embedded in these studies are the experiences of a multitude of individuals whose stories are surely as compelling as the stock characters of the dramas performed and streaming in our current culture.

Muste's biography, alone, encompasses so many stirring events: sea voyages into forbidden h-bomb testing sites; stand-offs against military testing enforcers in the Nevada and Saharan deserts; national and international peace walks encompassing amazing adventures; face to face encounter between the United States' "number one pacifist," and the United

States' great adversary, Ho Chi Minh. In the documentary, "A.J. Muste Radical Pacifist," David Schock has captured the resolute spirit and profound wisdom animating such events. Not yet recorded, but surely meriting the attention of present and future scholars are untold works of conflict resolution and healing performed decade after decade in communities large and small, nationally and across the globe, by organizations that include, just to name ones perhaps best known here, the A.J. Muste Foundation, the national and international Fellowship of Reconciliation and the American Friends Service Committee.

The time may be right to reach out to influential and accomplished communicators such as those who recently produced the film "Oppenheimer" and the New York Times's series on nuclear peril titled "At the Brink." Why not initiate conversations with folks like these about the rich hidden history of the power of nonviolence and the urgency of bringing it to light? And why not capitalize on the opportunity offered by the new American Women's History Museum, while it is still in the planning stages, to make the case for honoring peace work in U.S. History and the women whose contributions to it are so inspiring and instructive?

Of course such suggestions seem fanciful, but they are not incompatible with the emphasis Lee puts on symbolic and cultural factors, and they fit with A. J. Muste's view that creating the climate for peace is an essential step in getting to a nonviolent world. He never shied away from the possibility that humans might commit collective suicide. Just as Bandy Lee concludes from her deep study of violence that "the violence paradigm has reached its limits" and that our last hope is "a change of humanity," Muste proclaimed (in the gendered language of his generation), "Mankind has to find the way into a radically new world." Mankind has to become a 'new humanity' or perish." His steadfast faith in God, which he most often expressed as a source of hope, led him, in his most somber reflections, to draw on the words of Job: "Though He slay me yet will I trust Him."

Muste turned often to poetry. In an essay that he titled the Fall of Man, he quoted from Robinson Jeffers' poem, "Prescription of Painful Ends." Muste found its imagery, evoked by the era of World War II, resonant with the world of 1964, when he composed his essay. I conclude by reading the full poem now, feeling that the resonance has only deepened.

Prescription of Painful Ends

Robinson Jeffers

Lucretius felt the change of the world in his time, the great republic coming to the height

Whence no way leads but downward,

Plato in his time watched Athens

Dance the down path. The future is ever a

misted landscape, no man foreknows it;

but at cyclical turns

There is a change felt in the rhythm of

events: as when an exhausted horse

Falters and recovers, then the rhythm of

the running hoofbeats is altered, he will

run miles yet,

But he must fall: we have felt it again in

our own lifetime, slip, shift and speed-up

In the gallop of the world, and now

suspect that, come peace or war, the

progress of America and Europe

Becomes a long process of deterioration

-starred with famous Byzantiums and Alexandrias,

Surely, - but downward. One desires at

such times.

To gather the insights of the age summit

against future loss, against the

narrowing mind and the tyrants,

The pedants, the mystagogues, the

swarms of barbarians: time-conscious

poems, poems for treasuries: Lucretius

Sings his great theory of natural origins

and of wise conduct; Plato smiling

carves dreams, bright cells

Of incorruptible wax to hive the Greek honey.

Our own time, much greater and far less fortunate

Has acids for honey and for fine dreams

The immense vulgarities of misapplied

science and decaying Christianity:

therefore one christens each poem, in dutiful

Hope of burning off at least the top crust

of the time's uncleanness, from the acid

bottles.

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