

Fourteenth Class
University Essays

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CLASS OF NONVIOLENCE

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What Would You Do if?

By Joan Baez

Fred: OK. So you're a pacifist. What would you do if someone were, say, attacking your grandmother?

Joan: Attacking my poor old grandmother?

Fred: Yeah, you're in a room with your grandmother and there's a guy about to attack her and you're standing there. What would you do?

Joan: I'd yell, "Three cheers for Grandma!" and leave the room."

Fred: No, seriously. Say he had a gun and he was about to shoot her. Would you shoot him first?

Joan: Do I have a gun?

Fred: Yes

Joan: No. I'm a pacifist, I don't have a gun.

Fred: Well, I say you do.

Joan: All right. Am I a good shot?

Fred: Yes.

Joan: I'd shoot the gun out of his hand.

Fred: No, then you're not a good shot.

Joan: I'd be afraid to shoot. Might kill Grandma.

Fred: Come on, OK, look. We'll take another example. Say, you're driving a truck. You're on a narrow road with a sheer cliff on your side. There's a little girl sitting in the middle of the road. You're going too fast to stop. What would you do?

Joan: I don't know. What would you do?

Fred: I'm asking you. You're the pacifist.

Joan: Yes, I know. All right, am I in control of the truck?

Fred: Yes

Joan: How about if I honk my horn so she can get out of the way?

Fred: She's too young to walk. And the horn doesn't work.

Joan: I swerve around to the left of her since she's not going anywhere.

Fred: No, there's been a landslide.

Joan: Oh. Well then, I would try to drive the truck over the cliff and save the little girl.

Silence

Fred: Well, say there's someone else in the truck with you. Then what?

Joan: What's my decision have to do with my being a pacifist?

Fred: There's two of you in the truck and only one little girl.

Joan: Someone once said if you have a choice between a real evil and a hypothetical evil, always take the real one.

Fred: Huh?

Joan: I said, why are you so anxious to kill off all the pacifists?

Fred: I'm not. I just want to know what you'd do if...

Joan: If I was in a truck with a friend driving very fast on a one-lane road approaching a dangerous impasse where a ten-month old girl is sitting in the middle of the road with a landslide on one side of her and a sheer drop-off on the other.

Fred: That's right.

Joan: I would probably slam on the brakes, thus sending my friend through the windscreen, skid into the landslide, run over the little girl, sail off the cliff and plunge to my own death. No doubt Grandma's house would be at the bottom of the ravine and the truck would crash through her roof and blow up in her living room where she was finally being attacked for the first, and last, time.

Fred: You haven't answered my question. You're just trying to get out of it...

Joan: I'm really trying to say a couple of things. One is that no one knows what they'll do in a moment of crisis and hypothetical questions get hypothetical answers. I'm also hinting that you've made it impossible for me to come out of the situation without having killed one or more people. Then you say, 'Pacifism is a nice idea, but it won't work'. But that's not what bothers me.

Fred: What bothers you?

Joan: Well, you might not like it because it's not hypothetical. It's real. And it makes the assault on Grandma look like a garden party.

Fred: What's that?

Joan: I'm thinking about how we put people through a training process so they'll find out the really good, efficient ways of killing. Nothing incidental like trucks and landslides. Just the opposite, really. You know, how to growl and yell, kill and crawl and jump out of airplanes. Real organized stuff. Hell, you have to be able to run a bayonet through Grandma's middle.

Fred: That's something entirely different.

Joan: Sure. And don't you see it's much harder to look at, because it's real, and it's going on right now? Look. A general sticks a pin into a map. A week later a bunch of young boys are sweating it out in a jungle somewhere, shooting each other's arms and legs off, crying, praying and losing control of their bowels. Doesn't it seem stupid to you?

Fred: Well, you're talking about war.

Joan: Yes, I know. Doesn't it seem stupid to you?

Fred: What do you do instead, then? Turn the other cheek, I suppose.

Joan: No. Love thine enemy but confront his

evil. Love thine enemy. Thou shalt not kill.

Fred: Yeah, and look what happened to him.

Joan: He grew up.

Fred: They hung him on a damn cross is what happened to him. I don't want to get hung on a damn cross.

Joan: You won't.

Fred: Huh?

Joan: I said you don't get to choose how you're going to die. Or when. You can only decide how you are going to live. Now.

Fred: Well, I'm not going to go letting everybody step all over me, that's for sure.

Joan: Jesus said, "Resist not evil." The pacifist says just the opposite. He says to resist evil with all your heart and with all your mind and body until it has been overcome.

Fred: I don't get it.

Joan: Organized nonviolent resistance. Gandhi. He organized the Indians for nonviolent resistance and waged nonviolent war against the British until he'd freed India from the British Empire. Not bad for a first try, don't you think?

Fred: Yeah, fine, but he was dealing with the British, a civilized people. We're not.

Joan: Not a civilized people?

Fred: Not dealing with a civilized people. You just try some of that stuff on the Russians.

Joan: You mean the Chinese, don't you?

Fred: Yeah, the Chinese, try it on the Chinese.

Joan: Oh, dear. War was going on long before anybody dreamed up communism. It's just the latest justification for self-righteousness. The problem isn't communism. The problem is consensus. There's a consensus out there that it's OK to kill when your government decides who to kill. If you kill inside the country, you get in trouble. If you kill outside the country, right time, right season, latest enemy, you get a medal. There are about 130 nation-states, and each of

them thinks it's a swell idea to bump off all the rest because he is more important. The pacifist thinks there is only one tribe. Three billion members. They come first. We think killing any member of the family is a dumb idea. We think there are more decent and intelligent ways of settling differences. And man had better start investigating these other possibilities because if he doesn't, then by mistake or by design, he will probably kill off the whole damn race.

Fred: It's human nature to kill. Something you can't change.

Joan: Is it? If it's natural to kill, why do men have to go into training to learn how? There's violence in human nature, but there's also decency, love, kindness. Man organizes, buys, sells, pushes violence. The nonviolent wants to organize the opposite side. That's all nonviolence is – organized love.

Fred: You're crazy.

Joan: No doubt. Would you care to tell me the rest of the world is sane? Tell me that violence has been a great success for the past five thousand years, that the world is in fine shape, that wars have brought peace, understanding, democracy, and freedom to humankind and that killing each other has created an atmosphere of trust and hope. That it's grand for one billion people to live off of the other two billion, or that even if it hadn't been smooth going all along, we are now at last beginning to see our way though to a better world for all, as soon as we get a few minor wars out of the way.

Fred: I'm doing OK

Joan: Consider it a lucky accident.

Fred: I believe I should defend America and all that she stands for. Don't you believe in self-defense?

Joan: No, that's how the mafia got started.

A little band of people who got together to protect peasants. I'll take Gandhi's nonviolent resistance.

Fred: I still don't get the point of nonviolence.

Joan: The point of nonviolence is to build a floor, a strong new floor, beneath which we can no longer sink. A platform which stands a few feet above napalm, torture, exploitation, poison gas, nuclear bombs, the works. Give man a decent place to stand. He's been wallowing around in human blood and vomit and burnt flesh, screaming how it's going to bring peace to the world. He sticks his head out of the hole for a minute and sees a bunch of people gathering together and trying to build a structure above ground in the fresh air. 'Nice idea, but not very practical', he shouts and slides back into the hole. It was the same kind of thing when man found out the world was round. He fought for years to have it remain flat, with every proof on hand that it was not flat at all. It had no edge to drop off or sea monsters to swallow up his little ship in their gaping jaws.

Fred: How are you going to build this practical structure?

Joan: From the ground up. By studying, experimenting with every possible alternative to violence on every level. By learning how to say no to the nation-state, 'NO' to war taxes, 'NO' to military conscription, 'NO' to killing in general, 'YES' to co-operation, by starting new institutions which are based on the assumption that murder in any form is ruled out, by making and keeping in touch with nonviolent contacts all over the world, by engaging ourselves at every possible chance in dialogue with people, groups, to try to change the consensus that it's OK to kill.

Fred: It sounds real nice, but I just don't think

it can work.

Joan: You are probably right. We probably don't have enough time. So far, we've been a glorious flop. The only thing that's been a worse flop than the organization of nonviolence has been the organization of violence.

A Question of Adhesion (Finding the Right Glue)

by Joan Baez

Last fall, during a two-month tour of the U.S., I called my good friend, Washington columnist, Colman McCarthy. Colman teaches a high school class on nonviolence, so we arranged an hour-long seminar with his students after my Washington concert. Looking back on it, I think that I got more out of that one-hour meeting than I did out of anything else I did during the tour.

The students in the group were racially, economically, and politically mixed, fairly knowledgeable, and very bright. Their discussion of social issues, viewed in the context of nonviolence (or otherwise), was honest, astute, intelligent, but most striking of all, characterized by a sort of dignified cynicism and resignation.

They were also refreshingly inquisitive. Some of the questions (theirs and mine) which arose:

What did I think were the real reasons that the administration sent troops to Lebanon, invaded Grenada, and meddles and manipulates events and affairs in Central and Latin America? Is it a real fear of communism? Or is President Reagan just looking for the best way to get votes? Does any member of the administration, State Department, or CIA really believe we are acting for the good of humankind?

Why is the perception of suffering, repression and torture so dramatically influenced by unrelated perceptions of geography and ideology? Why are the practices of some abusers tolerated while others are vehemently denounced?

Why is the Freeze, the only viable “movement” in the United States today, almost exclusively an adult movement? Why won’t kids

leave their classes, their computers and their video games and get involved? Is this apathy of Americans—kids and grown-ups—a result of a genuine fear that any political involvement comes at the risk of economic security, or are they simply too self-centered to care?

To most of these questions, there were no specific answers—just general (and inadequate) responses.

As we discussed the subject of the general lethargy within the United States, someone suggested that the overwhelming reaction of the European public against missiles in their “own backyard” was, in part, because the missiles belonged to somebody else and that one reason Americans weren’t outraged and terrified by our own missile-dotted terrain was that ours are “nice American missiles.”

It seemed that these kids were all coping, each in his or her own private way, with the fear of nuclear holocaust, which has to affect everyone’s behavior, whether they accept or deny the reality of the situation—and that the job of coping is taking up a lot of energy. One girl talked about her inability to read a newspaper or watch the news on television because it was too emotionally demanding. If she exhausted her feelings on the morning news, she feared she wouldn’t have enough left to react to those things that ought to matter to her. Even the death of a relative, she confided, might not stir her from the indifference that seemed to consume her after watching the news.

But of all that we talked about that evening, the one thought that struck me most, and which moved me to realize that it was time to reorganize my life once again, was a very simple one. It came from a sixteen-year-old boy

whose “punk” styles included blonde spikes in his hair, black jeans and a leather jacket; he sat casually near me on a couch, his motorcycle helmet in his lap. He called himself Dante, and he was clearly well-liked by the rest of the class. He had mused, participated, joked, and now seemed to sum things up. “You see,” he said, “you guys in the sixties had everything. You had the music, the issues, the symbols, the momentum. You had each other; you had glue. We are missing that. We don’t have any glue.”

There was unanimous agreement in the room and I saw instantly that this statement rang true not only for young people, but certainly for me, and, as I have found since that evening, for practically everyone I meet. We are all so caught up in our individual problems and struggles that we have no attachment to others whose problems and struggles are so very much like our own. We need some common bonding ingredient—some social and political “glue.” When I asked Dante if he’d be interested in taking risks if he felt that he were not alone, he said “sure.”

Following that conversation, at the remaining concerts on the tour, I began testing this notion. “I know that there are intelligent people all over the world,” I would say. “It’s just that we have to discover each other.” Audiences seemed to respond with enthusiasm, anticipation and relief.

This response brought to mind the ideas expressed by British historian, E.P. Thompson, whose “Letter to America” appeared in our last newsletter. Thompson wrote of the need for an international peace movement. Perhaps there is a way to develop real solidarity against violence, terror and oppression, which could cut across international borders. If the call and ensuing actions were strong enough, they would appeal to all ages.

Of course, there are many different kinds of glue. Perhaps the current wave of nationalistic frenzy in the United States can be interpreted in terms of instant glue—a sort of national Elmer’s Glue-All. But building a humane, nonviolent, life-supporting movement will take a much more permanent, stronger-bonding, more substantial kind of glue.

My head is spinning with ideas of how to approach this overwhelming task. As I write this, I am on my way to Germany, France, England, New York, Washington and elsewhere to speak with some of the people whose experience in and understanding of the process of nonviolent change I most respect. Hopefully, by the next newsletter, we — with any suggestions that you can offer to us — will have begun to formulate a plan to determine how I, with the help of Humanitas, can best play a part in the effort to find a moral equivalent, in the year 1984, to Gandhi’s spinning wheel.

The Courage of Conviction

by Joan Baez

It is not only the purity of her voice and the power of her songs, but her commitment to human rights, that have won Joan Baez an international following since she first burst upon the scene at the 1959 Newport (Rhode Island) Folk Festival. At the zenith of her popularity in the 1960s, she served as a role model for a generation of students who appreciated her idealism, sincerity and compassion. The Baez trademarks—long hair, informal dress, and guitar—became a uniform of the young rebel. For the student activists of the period who relied on violence, however, she had no sympathy. Her radicalism was firmly grounded in nonviolence, stemming from her traditional pacifistic beliefs. Over the years, she has experimented with every possible alternative to violence (including serving time in prison for civil disobedience) while lending her voice to the civil rights and the anti-war movements and the causes of American farm workers and prisoners, Cambodian refugees, Latin American desaparecidos, and disarmament. In 1979, she founded Humanitas International to address human-rights violations. Under its aegis, she continues to travel throughout the world, singing and advocating nonviolence like one of the warriors of the sun, “fighting postwar battles that somehow never got won.”

When my son, Gabriel, was about nine, and we were sitting on the back porch watching the sunset, he asked me if I believed in God. I went on a long spiel about how Quakers say that there is that of God in every man and maybe the best way to translate that is that of “good” —I said it sounds like God — and he said, “But do you believe in God?” So I asked him, “Do you mean the man in the long robe and the white beard?” and he said, “Yeah.” That’s what he understood to be God, and he wanted to

know if that is what I understood as well. “No,” I told him, “I don’t believe in that.” And I tried to explain to him that what I do believe in is a force, a spiritual force, something that guides me.

Now this force does permit me to make choices. I can choose whether I’m going to do a wise thing or something really stupid. But at some point, it doesn’t give me a choice. And, occasionally, I reach that point. I don’t think that the events of my life are preordained, but they’re definitely guided. Anyway, I hope they’re guided because I’d have a hell of a time trying to figure it out all by myself.

For me, there is no separation between my spiritual and metaphysical beliefs and my ideological and political beliefs. When I’m trying to decide what direction to take in my life, for example, I go to a Quaker meeting and wait for direction — or perhaps it would be better to say “search for direction.” And I do the same thing at home. I’ve taught myself to slow down enough in the mind, because the methodical process of thinking doesn’t get me there. Plotting and planning and thinking have never gotten me anywhere. If I’ve had a good idea, it’s been an inspiration that has come at the end of a great deal of plotting and planning and thinking, but usually the inspiration has had absolutely nothing to do with all the thoughts that I had. Whether it is political action or artistic creation, it must be the same process. It seems to me that of those songs that have been any good, I have not had much to do with the writing of them. The words have just crawled down my sleeve and come out on the page.

I really do think that if we can use

the word “God” to describe this source of inspiration, and I’d be happy to, it must be the power of love, it must have something to do with love and caring that wins out over all of our craziness and jumbled thoughts and ill intentions and neurosis and all the rest. If you can care on top of all that stuff or through that stuff, then that is what keeps you engaged in the outside world and not just turned in on yourself and unaware of other people. It has to do with passion for love and life.

What’s more important to me is maintaining a connection between myself and the things that I do to bring about a better world. That seems to be what I was put here for. For instance, at those times that I’ve tried doing music without politics — politics meaning my involvement with people and social change — the music has lost its glow. I’ve done lots of things in my lifetime, and I know that I am least happy when I am least involved in social action. But when I seem to be on the track that’s really mine, it has been because my activities were closest to pure Gandhian nonviolent action. I have rarely felt as content, as energized, as satisfied, or as fulfilled personally as when I marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Grenada, Mississippi, took the hands of little black kids and walked with them to their school, and confronted the white cops who viewed us hatefully as we tried to make contact with them as feeling, individual human beings.

The attachment to nonviolent action is spiritual—coming out of an old-fashioned Quaker heritage. What people do in a Quaker meeting is sit around as a group listening for the word of God to guide them. Alone, I am nothing. That’s why I can speak immodestly, but with total humility, about my voice, and about some of the things that I’ve done because I consider that when I achieved anything, it

was the result of something speaking through me. You could say that I’ve been a conduit, and that, most of the time, whatever I have done, it was not my idea at all; it was something that happened and it has to do with being inspired. That something could be called “God.”

Somebody recently asked me if I had ever had any doubts about how I had lived my life, if I had ever thought to myself, “I’m uncertain about everything that I’ve done before in my life; I don’t know about everything that I’ve believed before in my life.” I had never thought about that before, but when I reflected on it, I realized that I had never had any doubts because I don’t think I ever believed anything. I’ve just done it. I mean I haven’t had a belief system except for a faith in nonviolence. I’ve had faith in it, I’ve done it, and what I have done, I have seen work.

Of course, I have seen places where it was impossible for nonviolent action to “work” because the situation had gone beyond the point where it could work. It hasn’t made me turn against it, because I’m not about to take up armed struggle. It’s just been kind of disheartening, knowing that what we’ve created in this world is a situation in which nonviolence as a social and political tool barely has a chance even to be planted, let alone flower. But if, looking back over the years, I ask myself if I think that I should have done it another way, or if I did the wrong thing, or if maybe I’ve got it all wrong and that human life is not important after all and killing each other is all in the natural order of things, the answer is “no.” I’ve never had that sort of cataclysmic disillusionment. Sometimes I think whales are nicer and kinder and more tolerant and brighter than people, and I might wonder why I didn’t spend any time for the last twenty years trying to save the whales. But I have priorities. Anyway, whales sing better than

I do, so I'd probably be jealous.

I wish I belonged to a church. My life would be a whole lot easier if I had the pattern of an organized religion, which I could go through and have faith in and be sure of and something I could pray to with more certainty than I do now. I don't have enough faith. I wish that, somehow or other, it had been arranged that I had more of a structure to lean on. I mean, even symbols would be nice. It would be easier for me to ground myself. Of all the structures I've tried, the Quaker meeting makes the most sense to me. It's something resembling a structure. And I like what happens there. At a Quaker meeting, you can be and feel whatever you want. But I have had to discipline myself in whatever I've done all my life because I have not taken to other people's disciplines. I guess what I'm saying is that if something could force a discipline on me and I liked it, it would just make life easier —that's all.

As it is, I have to find the answers on my own. But as long as one keeps searching, the answers come. And to me that search has a great deal to do with nonviolence — with the things that are worth caring for: human life and respect for human life. This leads me automatically to the basic and most important rule: Thou shalt not kill. And so you spend your life looking for ways to work out conflict and to put that commandment into practice on a wide and practical scale.

Backstage With Joan Baez

by Colman McCarthy

I can't tell you how boring it would be for me," said Joan Baez, "to give a concert and not have it be connected with people's lives and people's suffering and real issues. There's no music for me outside of that."

For two hours, Joan had performed for 3,000 people at Constitution Hall, one of 27 singing dates in her seven-week tour just completed. Her soprano voice remains unaffectedly pure. Now, though, the concert was over, and Joan was in a backstage reception room with 25 high school students. Last spring, they were in my pacifism class at School Without Walls. We had studied an essay on peace that Joan wrote in 1966, when, as today, she was in a fierce hurry to get on with it.

A few weeks before she came to Washington, Joan, a woman of generosity, gave an emphatic "yes" when I asked if she would meet with my students. I had come to know her years before when she would pass on information about political prisoners. She had a moral firmness that I have known in few others.

Bring your kids to the concert, she said, and we can talk and relax after. That was a large gift in itself, but Joan then gave them \$240 worth of front-row tickets.

The students loved her singing, and backstage they connected quickly with her mind. She was not a star now. She was a constellation of ideas, questions, opinions, and reconsiderations. During the concert, Joan surprised many in the audience by dedicating a song, "Goodnight Saigon," to the Marines in Lebanon and their families: "That may sound strange coming from me, but I really am a person who is committed to the sanctity of all

human life, especially young men who need not have died in their prime."

In spirals of anecdotes and theories, she built a case that gradually peaked into the high ideal that radical nonviolence is the best and only answer worth offering to children. "I understand any kid who looks at the news in the morning and says, 'I wanna smoke dope for the rest of my life.' It's so huge what we're facing, so scary." Joan said it was her commitment to offer to young people alternatives to despair.

Briefly into her talk, Joan, who sat atop a dressing table, asked for questions. Draft registration was first. "The draft has no right to exist," she answered. "Nobody has the right to tell you how you are going to live your life. What they'll tell you is, you have to preserve democracy around the world. But you can't bring democracy into an undemocratic set-up. And the least democratic set-up I can think of, offhand, besides possibly the U.S.S.R., is an army." She advised the students to study the alternative options to the draft, including jail if that's what it comes to.

As a pacifist, was she ever afraid of violence? "The fear is always there," she said. She told stories of being in Hanoi during the Vietnam War and taking to the shelters to avoid being killed by American pilots dropping bombs on the city. She had had bomb threats in Belfast, police-state threats in Argentina and Chile, Billy club threats in Mississippi. "You learn to pray," she said.

One student wondered what Joan believed "U.S. interests" means, considering that the phrase is used repeatedly in foreign policy discussion. "What do you think they

are?” she asked the student. He said they were so “ambiguous and vague” that “I have no idea.” Joan replied, “I agree with you. I don’t know what they mean.”

On tax resistance as a way of protesting the government’s military policies, Joan said that she refused to cooperate with the IRS in the 1960s and that it may be time to say “no” again. “It may be much more of a risk this time. I also have to decide that if I end up in jail, is that worth it? Probably yes. It’s probably the best thing I can do.”

None of this was too heavy for the students. Joan’s radical nonviolence was not irrelevant to their lives. Some let her know that in their gut they felt the same revulsion to the world’s violence that Joan felt when she was a teenager going to Quaker meeting houses. She sensed then that only pacifism and organized resistance to violence was the answer. She has given her life, and her talent, to it.

When she was last in Washington, Joan had called. We met and spent time talking about her just completed trips to Latin America. There, she had been seeking to renew the energy of her folksinging with its only strength, the folk. In Argentina, she sang at a Mass for the mothers of citizens who had disappeared. In Brazil, she met with labor leaders who had been punished for striking. In Chile, she sang in a free concert for a Santiago human rights group.

The primitivist governments in each of these countries found Baez and her music too threatening. She was denied permission to give commercial concerts. Banned in public, she sang in private - in churches, homes, and anyplace else where people gathered to ease their anguish about the systematic violence that is crushing them daily. Joan sang their own songs of hope to them, as well as those that have risen up from the repressed in other countries.

Amid the torturing and silencing that is standard equipment in these countries, Joan, even if she weren’t a glowing artist of independent mind, would have still been a worrisome figure for the governments. She is the president of Humanitas International, a human rights organization. Based in Menlo Park, California, it already has 5,000 paying members. It is different from similar groups because Joan is an activist, not a theoretician. She will turn up in a Chile or a Northern Ireland, just as she went in 1979 to the refugee camps in southeast Asia. She has denounced the “Stalinist leadership” in Vietnam as vehemently as the oligarchy in El Salvador.

Humanitas International, she says, is “quite simply, for the right to life. We recognize that Somalian refugees, Salvadoran peasants, and Cambodian children are not concerned with the fine points of Marxism or capitalism—they are struggling for their survival. And if what we can do in our small way aids in that struggle, then all our efforts are worthwhile.”

Those words have meaning. Aside from her persistent idealism and her commitment to nonviolence, Joan is matched by few performing artists for using talent on behalf of the world’s poor.

Backstage at Constitution Hall, Joan spoke to the students not as children but as adults with crucial choices to make. They were grateful. They didn’t want prolix philosophizing or another there-are-no-easy-answers lecture. Joan gave them what they wanted: a call to action, a call to conscience.

from The Washington Post

