

# Nonviolence or Nonexistence? The Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.

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*Fifty years ago, on 4 April 1968, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.*

*The night before he died, King gave another of his many evocative speeches; this one at the packed Mason Temple in Memphis. The speech included these words:*

*'Men for years now have been talking about war and peace. Now no longer can they just talk about it. It is no longer a choice between violence and non-violence in this world, it is non-violence or non-existence. That is where we are today.'*

In clearly identifying this stark choice and having been inspired by Mohandas K. Gandhi's wide-ranging social concerns, King's concerns were also broad:

*'The Triple Evils of poverty, racism and militarism are forms of violence that exist in a vicious cycle. They are interrelated, all-inclusive, and stand as barriers to our living in the Beloved Community. When we work to remedy one evil, we affect all evils.'* See ['The King Philosophy'](#).

So what has changed in the past 50 years? The world has traveled a great deal further down the path of violence. So far, in fact, that nonexistence is now the most likely outcome for humanity. See ['On Track for Extinction: Can Humanity Survive?'](#)

Despite the vastly more perilous state of our planet, many people and organizations around the world are following in the footsteps of Gandhi, King and other nonviolent luminaries like Silo, and are engaged in what is effectively a last ditch stand to end the violence and put humanity on a path to peace, justice and sustainability.

Let me tell you about some of these people and organizations and invite you to join them.

In Bolivia, Nora Cabero works with the [Movimient Humanista](#). The Movement has many programs including the Convergence of Cultures which aims to facilitate and stimulate true dialogue – oriented towards the search for common points present in the hearts of different peoples and individuals – to promote the relationship between different cultures and to resist discrimination and violence. Another program, World Without Wars and Violence emerged in 1994 and was presented for the first time internationally in 1995 at the Open Meeting of Humanism held in Chile at the University of Santiago. It is active in about 40 countries. It carries out activities in the social base and also promotes international campaigns such as Education for Nonviolence and the World March for Peace and

Nonviolence.

Eddy Kalisa Nyarwaya Jr. is Executive Secretary of the Rwanda Institute for Conflict Transformation and Peace Building and also President of the Alternatives to Violence Program. For the past 18 years, he has been active in the fields of 'peace, reconciliation, nonviolence, healing of societies, building harmonious communities' in many countries including Burundi, Chad, eastern Congo, Darfur (western Sudan), Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan and northern Uganda. Late last year he was in New Zealand to deliver a paper on the Great Lakes conflict. In Rwanda, the Institute for Conflict Transformation particularly works on nonviolence education in schools, universities and refugee camps. Another initiative is the conduct of workshops on nonviolence and peace through sports for head teachers in the country but it also has programs to fight early marriages and pregnancies, as well as offering trauma counseling to refugees.

In Russia, Ella Polyakova is a key figure at the [Soldiers' Mothers of Saint-Petersburg](#). Ella and her colleagues work to defend the rights of servicemen and conscripts in the Russian military. Ella explains why:

'When we were creating our organization, we understood that people knew little about their rights, enshrined in Russia's Constitution, that the concept of "human dignity" had almost disappeared, that no one had been working with the problems of common people, let alone those of conscripts. We clearly understood what a soldier in the Russian army was a mere cog in the state machine, yet with an assault rifle. We felt how important hope, self-confidence and trust were for every person. At the beginning of our journey, we saw that people around us, as a rule, did not even know what it meant to feel free. It was obvious for us that the path towards freedom and the attainment of dignity was going through enlightenment. Therefore, our organization's mission is to enlighten people around us. Social work is all about showing, explaining, proving things to people, it is about convincing them. Having equipped ourselves with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Russia's Constitution, we started to demolish this dispossession belt between citizens and their rights. It was necessary to make sure that people clearly understood that, having a good knowledge of rights, laws, and situations at hand, they would be able to take responsibility and protect themselves from abuse.'

Bruce Gagnon, coordinator of the [Global Network Against Weapons & Nuclear Power in Space](#), was recently part of a committed effort to convince the Maine state legislature not to give warship-builder General Dynamics, which has already received more than \$200 million in state and local tax breaks for the Bath Iron Works (BIW), any more 'corporate welfare'. Bruce recently completed a fast, which lasted for more than a month, as one of the actions that Maine peace activists took to try to prevent this welfare payment to a company that has spent \$14.4 billion buying back its own stocks between 2013-2017 and whose CEO was paid \$21 million in 2016.

Despite their efforts, the Maine House of Representatives voted 117-31 in favor of the \$45million General Dynamics corporate welfare bill and the Senate supported it 25-9. The decision was announced on the same day that General Dynamics sacked 31 workers from the BIW. As Bruce noted: 'It was an honor to work alongside [those] who stood up for the 43,000 children living in poverty across Maine, for the tens of thousands without health care, for our starving public education system, and for the crumbling physical infrastructure as Maine joins Mississippi in the "race to the bottom"'. You can read more about this

ongoing campaign to convert the Bath Iron Works into a location for the production of socially useful and ecologically sustainable non-killing technologies on the website above. There are some great photos too.

Gaëlle Smedts and her partner Luz are the key figures at [Poetry Against Arms](#) based in Germany. 'The inspiration for this campaign is the life, work and legacy of the Latin American poet, philosopher and mystic: Mario Rodriguez Cobos, also known as Silo. His total commitment to active nonviolence, his denunciation of all forms of violence, his doctrine for overcoming pain and suffering and his magnificent poetry are a great affirmation of the meaning of life and transcendence.' Poetry Against Arms publishes poetry/songs of people around the world who take action to resist militarism.

Since the 1970s, the world's leading rainforest activist, John Seed, has devoted his life to saving the world's rainforests. Founder and Director of the [Rainforest Information Centre](#) in Australia, one of his latest projects is to save the tropical Andes of Ecuador, which is 'at the top of the world list of biodiversity hotspots in terms of vertebrate species, endemic vertebrates, and endemic plants'. From the cloud forests in the Andes to the indigenous territories in the headwaters of the Amazon, the Ecuadorean government has covertly granted mining concessions to over 1.7 million hectares (4.25 million acres) of forest reserves and indigenous territories to multinational mining companies in closed-door deals without public knowledge or consent. These concessions will decimate headwater ecosystems and biodiversity hotspots of global significance. If you would like to read more about this campaign and what you can do to help, you can do so in John's article '[Ecuador Endangered](#)'.

Apart from the individuals mentioned above, signatories and endorsing organizations are engaged in an incredibly diverse range of activities to end violence in one context or another. These include individuals and organizations working in many countries to end violence against women (including discriminatory practices against widows), to rehabilitate child soldiers and end sexual violence in the Congo, activists engaged in nonviolent defense or liberation struggles – see [Nonviolent Defense/Liberation Strategy](#) – in several countries and occupied territories, as well as campaigns on a vast range of environmental, climate and indigenous rights issues, campaigns to promote religious and racial harmony as well as campaigns for nuclear disarmament and to end war. See [Nonviolent Campaign Strategy](#).

But it also includes many individuals tackling violence at its source – see '[Why Violence?](#)' and '[Fearless Psychology and Fearful Psychology: Principles and Practice](#)' – by focusing on their own healing – see '[Putting Feelings First](#)' – and/or working on how they parent their children for a nonviolent world. See '[My Promise to Children](#)'.

Given the perilous state of the global environment and climate, still others are focusing their efforts on reducing their consumption and increasing their self-reliance in accordance with the fifteen-year strategy outlined in '[The Flame Tree Project to Save Life on Earth](#)'.

If you would like to be part of the worldwide movement to end violence that has drawn the six people and several organizations mentioned above together, along with many others in 103 countries around the world, you are welcome to sign the online pledge of '[The People's Charter to Create a Nonviolent World](#)'.

Reverend King posed the fundamental choice of our time: nonviolence or nonexistence. What is your choice?

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