

“A Month of Living Non-Violently”
The United Church of Gainesville
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by Vince Amlin

For the first weekend of October I was away at a cabin in northern Georgia, one of those great places at the top of a hill, with a creek flowing by below, exposed beams everywhere you look, and, of course, a giant flat-screen TV in every room. At 10:30 on September 30th, with an hour and a half until I began my month of living non-violently, in which I would not knowingly watch, read, or listen to anything containing violence, I discovered the Nintendo Wii downstairs, and beside it the game *Call of Duty III*. If you don't know, *Call of Duty* is a game in which one plays an Allied soldier in France after D-Day. At least that's what I've read, because with only an hour and a half to play I didn't dare turn it on. Later, as I headed to bed I realized I still had one chapter left in my audio book, a spy novel that had me hanging in suspense. I would have to wait till November to hear the exciting conclusion. The month was off to a bad start, and I wondered why I had taken on this practice in the first place.

On one hand it made total sense. I have always had a strong pietistic streak in me, always been concerned with doing the right thing, always been intrigued by the concept of spiritual discipline. I once gave up gambling for a year because I feared I was enjoying off-track betting a little too much, and I am probably the only college sophomore to enjoy a book entitled *Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience* as pleasure reading. I am no stranger to the idea that our actions matter, that what we do is who we become, so abstaining from violence for a month was a natural fit for me.

On the other hand, I have never given much credence to the argument that violent movies or games breed real violence. As I have already confessed, I am a bit of a violence junkie. I like nothing better than a good shoot 'em up movie or zombie podcast, and I have been consuming violent media for most of my life. Growing up my dad would take me to whatever movies he couldn't get my mom to watch: the latest James Bond or Terminator flick. Yet, despite over two decades of consuming violent media, the only two fights I've ever been in were in the 4th grade with my best friend, Sean, once after he insulted my sisters and another time when he made a bad call in our one-on-one basketball game.

Yet, while I don't believe it affects me much, violence is certainly in polar opposition to my values as a Christian. Non-violence is at the core of my faith, and Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount are a piece of the bible I proudly read quite literally. His admonition to “turn the other cheek” seems straightforward to me even when considered in its historical context.

Some modern commentators have made this cheek turning into a political rebellion. In the Roman Empire, they say, the appropriate way to hit your lesser was a backhand with the right hand. To turn the other cheek, then, was to invite the hitter to use his left hand, which would have disgraced him, or to hit with his forehand, which would have acknowledged the one being hit as an equal. This is an important reading for many political activists, but I think it misses the point. In counseling his followers not to return violence for violence, Jesus is recommending something far more radical than political game-playing. Jesus' command is not meant simply to subvert the political

order but to subvert our very instincts of self-defense and self-preservation. This section of the Sermon on the Mount, known as the antitheses, is about a new way. Over and over again Jesus introduces his teachings with the words, "You have heard it said...but I say." Jesus is telling a new story, a non-violent story, and in my life I strive to follow, even imperfectly (always imperfectly) in that way.

So I decided, at long last, to take a break from violence, albeit a short one. And if I have one caveat to this sermon it is that: that taking on a practice for 30 days cannot possibly reveal the depth of gifts which forming a true habit might. To give up viewing violence for a month is one thing, but to give it up forever is a difference, not simply of degree, but of kind. I can't say anything about what a life without violence is like. On the morning of November 1st I woke up and immediately watched the action spoof and modern day classic, *MacGruber*.

Nevertheless, I think our 30-day experiments have yielded some good nuggets, so I will add mine, which is: it is very easy to give up violence for 30 days. While Sandy and Andy had to pray 3 or 4 times a day, and Larry had to wear the same shirt for a month and ask strangers about their faith stories, I skipped the annual October horror flicks and caught up on *The Office*, and in place of my spy novels, I downloaded Jonathan Franzen's new novel, *Freedom*.

Maybe you anticipated how easy this would be, but I really didn't. As I've shared, violence is a part of my daily life. It wasn't until listening to the 24+ hours of *Freedom* that I realized how pointless my practice really was. I won't ruin the book if I say that Franzen is known for creating deeply flawed characters, or more accurately, for revealing the deeply flawed sides of realistic characters, for putting their nastiness and selfishness on full display. In listening to *Freedom* I didn't miss the violence, because it was easily replaced by things like greed and dishonesty, infidelity, and cruelty, all of which seemed to me to be just as entertaining. The absence of physical violence didn't leave me with that pietistic feeling of self-righteousness; it just made me more aware of all the other unpleasant things there are to enjoy in books, and movies, and television.

In hindsight it seems foolish to have ever believed there might be some value in disallowing myself the new *Karate Kid* while still allowing myself things like *The Real Housewives of Orange County*; or prohibiting *CSI* in favor of *Hell's Kitchen*. What would the value be in swapping a penchant for violence in favor of a penchant for envy? Or theft? Or lying?

It was still early in the month, and it already appeared my practice had fallen apart; I scrambled to think about what I should have done differently. What more stringent rules could I have followed to really make this practice hard? Should I have limited myself to G movies and TV? What about books; should I have read the Cliff's notes first to scan for any objectionable actions? But what book, or movie, or TV show doesn't show someone doing something objectionable? Otherwise, where would the drama be? To stop at violence suddenly seemed so arbitrary to me. Should I have given up entertainment altogether? Given up stories of any kind?

In trying to reconcile my love of stories of all kinds with my desire to follow Jesus in non-violence and love of my enemies, I remembered an experience of violent media from earlier in my life which helped to refocus my month of living non-violently. When I entered middle school, my church gave me a confirmation mentor named Deb. Deb was one of the first people to treat me like an adult, valuing my ideas and opinions and

challenging them as well. She bought me a journal, which I still have, and she encouraged me to write down my thoughts and feelings; she bought me a kit for carving my spirit animal out of soapstone; (yes, I was already destined for UCG) and she took me to lots of good movies which we discussed and debated at great length afterward.

One of those debates, the one we had after seeing *Saving Private Ryan*, has stuck with me all these years. Deb loved the movie (partially because of Matt Damon) but I was adamantly against it. I remember walking toward Deb's car and righteously pronouncing, as teens are wont to do, that it was the most dangerous kind of movie. Deb drew me out on why I was so disturbed. *Saving Private Ryan* seemed dangerous to me, I said, because, in the dark of the theater, consumed by the big screen, and enveloped in the story I began to cheer for violence, to root for it. I found myself suddenly hoping that people would be killed. There was one point especially in which Spielberg plays with this tension in the viewer, a scene in which an American soldier gets the drop on one of his enemies but cannot pull the trigger. In the suspense of the moment, I found myself crying out inside for him to shoot, for him to kill. I found myself berating him as his fellow soldiers had the entire movie for being weak, for being a coward. And in the next moment something in me rebelled. I snapped out of the world of the movie, and something inside me reminded me, this story is not your story.

In recalling that moment in the midst of my month of non-violence, I realized that the important story was not the one I chose to watch or not watch, to read or not read. The important story was the one I brought with me to every movie and every book, to every experience. Rather than censor what I watch or read, what I needed was to tend to the story at my core, that faith story of following the one who says, "turn the other cheek," and "give to all who ask of you." In a sense, my practice took me to Larry's practice, reminded me that in telling and retelling the story of my faith, I shape the way I interact with all the other stories with which I come in contact. In a sense it led me to Sandy and Andy's practices as well, to the importance of cultivating an awareness of God throughout my days. If I tend to that core story, I believe I can read, or watch, or listen to anything, knowing that it will help me understand and value those other stories appropriately, because at its core my hope is that it is not only my story but also shares in the narrative of God.

Perhaps you're not a movie watcher or TV viewer, and perhaps you only read non-fiction which has been thoroughly vetted for anything negative and you only tune-in to the most inane easy listening with no hint of conflict or drama. Still, none of us can control the flow of powerful stories which surround us and call for our attention and allegiance. When we go to the grocery store, the food that is available and affordable tells a story about what we should value; the thousands of brightly colored boxes ask us to take their narratives as our own. The rules of our home owners' associations, the terms of our employment contracts, the laws of our city and of our nation tell a powerful story about what is right and wrong. Our friends and family and coworkers weave complicated webs of narrative for us to navigate, conflicting viewpoints each asking for our adherence. Even if we try to escape them, we are surrounded by stories, and we must ask, "Is this my story?"

A friend from seminary sent me one of her sermons this week. (No, this isn't it.) She sent me a sermon in which she told the story of our recent political season. What she heard, from every end of the political spectrum in ads and interviews and debates

was a story of black and white, of us and them, of people who were either all good or all bad. It is a story not unlike the story of many of the violent movies I watch, movies which exist in a world of good guys and bad guys. It is a story which, as in that dark theater, has sometimes overwhelmed me in the past months and years, sometimes set my teeth on edge, made me boil with anger, made me cry out for blood. And it is a story which, as my friend reminded me, is not my story, is not the gospel story, is not the story of the one who calls us to love our enemies or pray for those who persecute us.

For me it is one of those most dangerous stories which are capable of making me forget the story for which I was created, a story of unity, and faith, and peace. My story is that new story, that antithesis, that "you have heard it said...but I say" which reveals in the old,old stories of hatred and enmity the stale plot lines and cardboard characters of of falsehood. On Friday, the New York Times illustrated this well in an article about how, in our present political climate, the word "kumbaya" has become a dirty word, something to volley about in a round of mudslinging. No one, it seems, wants to be labeled as one who stands around singing "Kumbaya." But that's not my story, because two weeks ago today I was standing around with 32 other men from our church, holding hands and singing "Kumbaya," albeit a fairly tongue-in-cheek version. That is my story, and this community helps to remind me of that story. And the good news is, I still get to watch whatever trash I want. Amen.