

# We Can Work It Out

## Heart, Mind, and Action in the Struggle for Atonement

*Michael Nagler*

Yes, I have been a wretched person, but I have redeemed myself. And I say to you and all those who can listen and will listen that redemption is tailor-made for the wretched, and that's what I used to be. . . . That's how I would like my legacy to be remembered as: a redemptive transition, something that I believe is not exclusive just for the so-called sanctimonious, the elitists. . . . It's accessible for everybody. That's the beauty about it.

—“Tookie” Williams, radio interview, 2009

As former chairperson of the University of California's Peace and Conflict Studies program and one of the world's most respected scholars of peace and nonviolence, Michael Nagler is uniquely qualified to explore what it means for individuals and nations alike to move “beyond forgiveness.” In this far-reaching essay he describes the dynamics of the “spreading movement of reconciliation and atonement,” which he defines as a combination of apologizing and making concrete reparations. But Nagler goes beyond abstract collective concerns to the concrete and personal. “We can atone,” he writes, “by rooting out the attitude of disregard, not to say dehumanization, in our hearts and minds that permitted such crimes to happen.”

The Rev. Charles Freer Andrews, familiar to those who have seen Attenborough's *Gandhi* and known to Indians of Gandhi's era as “Deenabandhu,” the “kin of the poor,” once heard that an Indian policeman had been seriously

beaten by his superiors and was practically paralyzed, although not from the beating itself. Completely loyal to the British regime, he had been unjustly accused of cutting a telegraph wire as an act of sabotage. Andrews went to call on him, but the policeman at first refused to see him, saying he never wanted to talk to another Englishman. Nonetheless, Andrews did get in, and in an act of great power in India, prostrated himself before the stricken man and begged for forgiveness. The policeman got up from his bed, a cured man.

*That's* atonement. It shows that one can atone for an act one did not directly commit; but more than this, it reveals something of the dynamics of atonement. The emotional struggle Andrews must have gone through to prostrate himself before an Indian at that time—even today most Westerners would not be able to do it without some inner struggle—and the paralyzed man's dramatic reaction tell us something about the combination of inner state and outward action, of actual and symbolic gesture, that makes real atonement happen.<sup>2</sup> The point is often missed.

It only came home to me when I was traveling in Atlanta some years ago and heard that a black church had been burned to the ground by four racists. When I picked up the story, they were being duly sentenced—to rebuild the church. It struck me then, and I have often observed since, that in the spreading movement of reconciliation and atonement this is not always the case.<sup>3</sup>

In post-apartheid South Africa, whose Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) became the paradigm for more than twenty such efforts around the conflict-tormented world today, precisely this element of concrete action, of physical *restitution*, was missing. Offenders were simply asked to make a public admission of their “political” crimes during the apartheid era and, when they did so, were promptly pardoned. They were never asked to *do* anything to make amends, which in my opinion is the only way to satisfy both the victims *and* their offenders.

To be sure, the TRC process was preferable any day to exacting vengeance, which often only makes a conflict spiral out of control and always leaves behind more problems than it “resolves.” The process made it possible to rebuild a nation from that traumatic past. Nonetheless, the TRC experience was not uniformly successful, and at least part of the reason was that it sought reconciliation solely on the level of emotion—if that.

Those who have seen the documentary about the TRC called *Long Night's Journey into Day* will remember, alongside many truly heartwarming episodes of genuine repentance, offenders, both white and black who exploited the opportunity cynically, without any real change of heart. This is a difficulty accompanying any attempt to impose atonement by law: if such an emotional struggle is not easy to undertake, it is even harder to prove that it has been done in a genuine spirit. It is easy enough to fool even oneself, not to mention others. One can make every

effort to repent and still not be able to overcome a *reservatio mentalis* (mental reservation) deep within oneself. While the TRC must be given credit for a great deal, there is reason to think it could have done much more, for even when an emotional transformation is genuine, it is somehow only complete when it's expressed in action—ideally, as in Atlanta, in rebuilding what one has destroyed.

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## Collective Atonement

When it came to light in 1988 that the Cruiser Vincennes had shot down Iran Air Flight 655 over the Persian Gulf, killing all 290 civilian passengers onboard, including thirty-eight non-Iranians and sixty-six children, then—vice president Bush stated, “I don’t care what the facts are. I will never apologize for the American people.”

Elise Boulding, the Quaker sociologist and pioneer of peace and conflict studies, has written, “Failure to grieve over its shortcomings is a serious problem for the United States and contribute[s] to anti-American attitudes in the rest of the world.”<sup>4</sup> This is a soul-damaging failure; an explicit intention of this volume—or at least my main purpose for contributing to it—is to address just this problem. One does not have to read far into Howard Zinn’s *People’s History of the United States*, not to mention almost anything by Noam Chomsky, to understand that this nation has a large backload of negative karma (or in more native terms, the residue of the law that “As ye sow, so shall ye reap”). Even if one does not accept the operation of such a principle, it is a simple though often conveniently forgotten fact that victims don’t like being victimized and tend to fight back when they get the chance.<sup>5</sup> Especially if those who hurt them do not apologize.

There are millions of Americans today who though they may never read the likes of Zinn or Chomsky, are dimly aware that as a nation we have inherited a backlog of debt—toward Native Americans whom we found here, and the Native Africans we dragged here, just to mention two glaring examples. I among others strongly believe that America cannot go forward until we find some way to face and overcome this legacy; in a word, to atone for it.

Yet—and this is the key point—it is emotionally very difficult for nearly anyone to confront his or her guilt. Most modern reformers, in their understandable outrage, do not understand this. Gandhi understood it to the core. As the great British historian Arnold Toynbee said, “He made it impossible for us to go on ruling India, but he made it possible for us to leave *without rancor and without humiliation*” (emphasis added).

A large part of Gandhi’s power lay in his ability to see the wrongdoings of his opponents outside a moral framework, to take them out of the domain of

morality and “judgmentalism.”<sup>6</sup> It followed from his principle, fundamental to nonviolence, to separate the doer from the deed or, as we would say, the sinner from the sin. It enabled him to resist wrongdoing all the more effectively, for it made it possible, as Toynbee points out, for the wrongdoers themselves to own responsibility for their actions without stigmatizing themselves as wrongdoers—exactly what Vice President Bush and the Americans who followed him were not courageous enough to do.

Pride stands in the way of atonement; but, I will argue, shame is not the antidote to that pride. What is needed is restitution. The offender must be made aware that what he did or is doing is wrong, but simultaneously he must be helped to see that he can atone for it. A most dramatic case (to my knowledge not historical though certainly characteristic) is in one of the final scenes of *Gandhi*, where the Mahatma tells a guilt-stricken Hindu who has killed a Muslim child in revenge for the murder of his own son, “I know a way out of hell,” namely, to adopt an orphaned child about the same age as his own son, “but be sure that he is a Muslim, and that you raise him as such.”

To make something like this work, we must be able to see a torturer as a person who has carried out torture, not as a “torturer”—that is, torture must be something he *did*, not something he *is*. We who would nurse America or anyone else free from its hurtful past must always be aware of this.

As Ted Nordhaus and Michael Schellenberger have recently argued,<sup>7</sup> Americans today are on the whole so saturated with gloom and doom—the rising threat of terrorism, global climate change, collapsing economies—that more evidence of their guilt will only drive them deeper into the kind of denial that made George H.W. Bush popular—a denial that leads to counteraccusations and other conflict-exacerbating behaviors. All the more reason that bringing up the burden of moral guilt without simultaneously showing a path to concrete restitution for that guilt will be counterproductive.

As we have begun to see, behind the dynamic of atonement lies the fundamental question of who we think we are. Here it is relevant that recent work in psychology and in the neurosciences has given striking support to the declaration, made by the wisest humans for eons, that when we hurt others we hurt ourselves. Swami Vivekananda has said, “Western civilization has in vain endeavored to find a reason for altruism. Here it is. I am my brother, and his pain is mine. I cannot injure him without injuring myself, or do ill to other beings without bringing that ill upon my own soul.”<sup>8</sup> This is a law of nature, it would now seem, not a lofty, unrealistic sentiment.

Marco Iacoboni, the neuroscientist who has worked extensively on “mirror neurons,” writes, “We have evolved to connect deeply with other human beings.” This means, of course, that “although we commonly think of pain as a fundamentally private experience our brain actually treats it as an experience

shared with others,” a fact that has led psychologist Rachel Macnair to contribute a new concept which she has named Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress (PITS), the stress induced by injuring another in any context. The subjective complement of posttraumatic stress disorder, PITS has been documented extensively in soldiers, executioners, perpetrators of domestic violence, and yes, abortion practitioners.<sup>9</sup> We would not have it any other way. If it were possible for human beings to harm others without feeling hurt themselves, our regeneration would be impossible.

We can therefore take it that anyone who has knowingly caused another harm—be it in a domestic blowup or in the systematic damage done by an “economic hit man”; that is, whether physical or structural—is herself suffering, and should be approached with an intention to relieve that suffering rather than condemn. She may or may not be aware of her own hurt, and it is not always our job to make her so. For as I have been saying, to pull the protection away from another’s conscience without providing an emotional and pragmatic escape route is not only a kind of cruelty itself; it is usually counterproductive.

That being said, however, we must remember that it takes two to restore a relationship. While it is counterproductive to rouse an offender’s guilt feelings without giving him a concrete way to atone (that is to own the offense without being identified with it), the victim of an offense wants to be heard; he wants his suffering to be acknowledged.

Many years ago I attended one of the early meetings that would lead to the peace-building institution we know today as Unarmed Civilian Peacekeeping.<sup>10</sup> Mubarak Awad, an important player in the mostly nonviolent First Intifada of Palestine, was on hand for that meeting. I shall never forget his response when we asked him if they wanted us internationals around: “Yes. Do not tell us what to do, but be with us. We are not afraid to die; but we do not want to die alone, with no one watching.”

As a society, we are holding ourselves back by failing to understand this need. What we call “closure” in the criminal justice system, where the victims or relatives of victims are encouraged to believe that they will feel satisfied by the suffering of those who offended them, betrays a serious misunderstanding of human nature. What victims really want is acknowledgment of their pain and *restoration of the relationship with the one who hurt them.*

Jane Goodall, Frans de Waal, and others have reported that when, say, a female chimpanzee has been attacked by a male she will follow her attacker, importuning him for some gesture of affection. She does not want revenge; she wants to restore the relationship.

Similarly, when Helena Norbert-Hodge was in Ladakh, she reports, there would sometimes be a theft, say, of a sack of rice—no small matter in that spare

environment. The entire village would know who took it; yet, to Norbert-Hodge's surprise no one would try to confront the thief. What she came to understand was that in a small human circle like a Ladakhi village you cannot afford to alienate others with whom you live and on whose cooperation you depend. The *relationship* is paramount, not justice—whatever that is. The word *atonement* derives from “at-one-ment,” after all.

As Gandhi discovered when he was still practicing law in South Africa, the real point of the law is to “unite parties who have been riven asunder.” This is part of the reason that victims want recognition of their suffering rather than revenge for it: they want the reality of their feelings acknowledged so that the other can be in genuine rapport with them.

It can be extremely frustrating when a society is so ignorant of this principle, including its application to offenders. When twelve-year-old Polly Klaas was abducted from her home in my town, Petaluma, California, the entire nation was shocked and searched for her everywhere until her molester and, alas, killer finally stepped forward. I am not here concerned with the judicial punishment that was meted out to Richard Allen Davis, but with a smaller incident that occurred during the frantic search for Polly. The owner of a copy service in Petaluma had volunteered to furnish thousands of posters for the searchers, and was doing so—until someone dug up the fact that he had once been a sex offender himself. Yet he was the best person to have been allowed to perform that service. What was the good of denying him atonement?

Why, too, when the German government asked if they could build a museum of modern Germany near the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., were they not allowed to show that they do repudiate their past mistakes? Who is helped by keeping them locked in guilt? Do we not realize that such barriers to atonement, while bringing scant comfort to their victims, only lock the offenders into their offender identity, making it more likely that they will commit such acts again?

In their studies of trauma (this will apply to both offender and victim), John Wilson and Terence Keane argue that “sustained empathy, as part of any treatment modality, is essential to facilitate posttraumatic recovery.”<sup>11</sup> In Ann Wolbert Burgess and Lynda Lytle Holmstrom's follow-up study of rape survivors, “the women who had made the best recoveries were those who had become active in the anti-rape movement.”<sup>12</sup> Logically—though I have not run across studies of this—at least the same would be true of perpetrators; namely, that to help victims of crimes similar to what one has committed oneself could be a powerful form of restitution. There are anecdotal reports that what the copy service owner in Petaluma was trying to do was instinctively correct.

An interesting example of this is provided by the case of a German girl who at age fourteen had become obsessed by guilt and self-hatred over her

country's Nazi past. Her parents sent her finally to visit Auschwitz, where the following occurred:

After seeing the devastation I started crying and I couldn't stop. The kind guide . . . held me in her arms and gently stroked my hair and said that it was not my fault because the Jews who died didn't know who I was or even my grandfather [who had been a Nazi]. It took awhile, but I finally understood. The gift that finally took away my shame and guilt was the love that Marta showed me. She, who was of Jewish ancestry . . . was able to love me well. I felt that if she could overcome her hatred of Germans I could stop hating myself. I am now working in the tourist business as a guide here in Germany so that I may be an instrument of change.<sup>13</sup>

By contrast, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger refused to pardon Stanley "Tookie" Williams, who had been a founder of a violent gang; while in prison, Williams wrote children's books and became a strong voice to prevent other African American youth from following his erring footsteps. The governor may have done something politically strategic for himself (though in the long run I don't believe even this will be true), but he earned outrage from the civilized world for refusing to acknowledge that a man who offended had *already* atoned. All that the governor accomplished was to cheat society of Williams' extremely helpful services—and, of course, to send a message that atonement is not possible, **which is** a devastating lie. "Our God is a god of vengeance": that is as serious a heresy as one can entertain.

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## Four Principles of Atonement

What have we said so far? We have turned up several principles in the dynamic of atonement:

1. Think amorally. Abandon revenge and retribution. When the Hebrew Bible has God say, "vengeance is mine," it is implied that only God has the wisdom and the detachment to use it, when it must be used, as an educational tool.
2. The goal in atonement is to relieve offenders of their guilt *and* victims of their resentment.
3. Atonement is about the restoration of relationships. This holds true at whatever level we approach the healing process—interpersonal, international, or intrasocial, the latter being where the struggling restorative justice movement is based, and precisely on relationship work in opposition to the retributive work of the present system.
4. Action as well as emotion must be part of the healing process. As Shakespeare's Claudius reveals,

“Forgive me my foul murder”?  
That cannot be; since I am still possess’d  
Of those effects for which I did the murder,  
My crown, mine own ambition and my queen.  
May one be pardon’d and retain th’ offence?

A remarkable example took place in South India very recently, where a couple who had been active with Gandhi and his follower Vinoba Bhave worked for many years to get restitution for a horrible act: the burning to death of forty-four peasant men, women, and children in 1968 by angry landholders from whom the peasants had demanded higher wages. This is the story<sup>14</sup>:

In June, three cars pulled up to LAFTI’s [Land for Tillers Freedom’s] headquarters in Kuthur. . . . They came bearing garlands, and fruit, and papers. Lots of papers. They were here to gift their land—*all of it*—to Krishnammal and the people she serves, an act of restorative justice so surreal as to be almost unfathomable to people who have not followed the course of the struggle for these four decades. The beatings, the imprisonments, the hardships and deprivations, the days, month, years, and decades of “No conflict, no compromise” —Krishnammal’s motto—have now resulted in an act of contrition and atonement that is virtually beyond the imagination. To be sure, the landlords and their descendents are not now about to endure poverty. Most of them have gone off to India’s burgeoning cities, where the majority [is] sure to prosper. Others have gone to America and elsewhere to seek their fortune. “I don’t wish to deprive them,” says Krishnammal, “they too have marriages and births and occasions of their own to celebrate, and they must be allowed that privilege.” But the land, and the scene of horrific struggles, and the commitment of a very, very small band of Gandhian organizers identifying themselves completely with the condition of the people, now belongs to the people, and, specifically, the women who till it.

Note that the landowners came bearing garlands—a symbol of veneration—but also something very tangible: the deeds to large tracts of their land, given to the poor landless farmers of the region. The event emphasizes a final point that is quite relevant to our own situation: ideally, atonement takes place between offender and victim, but of course that is not always possible, especially if the crime in question is murder. Atonement is still necessary, and it is possible by means of restitution to the family of the victims, as in President Ronald Reagan’s official apology and reparation to Japanese Americans interned during World War II, or in cases of families of any victims who have suffered damages. Just as in Charles Freer Andrews’s case with which we began, the person atoning need not be directly guilty of the offense but may in some way represent it or be willing to take it on. Doing good relieves the burden of having



done harm. Andrews was not the one who had injured that Indian civil servant, but it was he who healed him

### What Is to Be Done?

My friend Marianne Williamson had been preaching every Sunday to her Unitarian congregation that reparation to the descendants of African slaves was a good thing. One of her parishioners came up to her and said, “You know, I love you, and I love most of what you say, but this reparation business doesn’t make any sense to me.” Marianne said, “Look, when you take over a business, it has certain assets and liabilities, and you take on both. It’s like that: America has many assets, but this tragic legacy of slavery is one of its liabilities.” He got it.

Apologizing and making concrete reparations to the descendants of Native Americans and African Americans may well be one way of setting our needed redemption in motion, but I want to suggest another, which can work more broadly for these and many other mistakes. We can atone by rooting out the attitude of disregard, not to say dehumanization, in our hearts and minds that permitted such crimes to happen.

I am writing these lines in Nicaragua, where I am visiting [IT WAS MY SON AND HIS WIFE & CHILD] family. When we watch the weather reports on television—or even more, the news reports—I am always startled to see that Nicaraguans think of themselves as part of the world. They’re as interested in the weather on Lake Ontario as they are in that of Lago de Managua; in disturbances in Cairo as well as León.

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## Conclusion

I am prepared to accept that (North) America has a special role to play in the world, which is why I have written this essay. But we can only play that role if “special” does not mean “separate.” Whatever “exception” we may enjoy, it is not an exemption from the assets and liabilities of being human. Barack Obama came to office—thankfully—on a platform of “change.” But with regard to this important matter of *attitude*, of self-definition, change has so far not been very deep. For example, while he offers more funding for education than his benighted predecessor, his avowed reasons for doing so are part of the tired old paradigm that says, “If we are going to out-compete others, we have to out-educate.” That’s not what education is for. That’s not what life is for.

I have so far been thinking of systematic crimes in the relatively remote past, but I cannot conclude without considering a tremendous crime that stares us in the face from a much more recent time. Indeed it continues in certain quarters,

and I hope it will have become a very live issue – if not a resolved one – by the time this volume appears.

Not to put too fine a face on it, the United States has adopted torture as an official policy sanctioned by the highest office in the land. “We cannot move forward,” writes David Cole in the *New York Review of Books*, “unless we are willing to account for what we did wrong in the past. . . . We may know many of the facts already, but absent a reckoning for those responsible for torture and cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment—our own federal government—the healing cannot begin.”<sup>15</sup>

With this I entirely agree. But as Cole himself implies, this reckoning would be only the essential beginning. Additionally, the healing must involve some kind of restitution for what we have done—“we” being slightly less than half of the voting population who voted for the George W. Bush administration, and the majority who let it take office and do its vile work in our name. Healing must include a deep examination of the prevailing American culture, which made all this possible. And most importantly, it must involve a sincere shift in attitude towards others and our role in the world with them.

There is a lot of evidence that this deep change would be accepted, gratefully and graciously, by our fellow inhabitants of the planet—in some cases even those who seem most intransigently wroth with us. It is hard to overestimate what a difference it would mean, this simple act of opening our minds and hearts to the reality of other people.

After extensive research done through his important peace-building organization TRANSCEND, Johan Galtung, probably the most distinguished peace researcher alive, was able to establish convincingly the real needs of the two great global antagonists, the United States and the Middle East. Very simple, really: we need oil; they need respect for their religion. How much grief we could have spared ourselves, not to mention the Iraqis and others, if we had had the generosity to give them what they need—the generosity of spirit. Imagine if we had heeded, for example, Gandhi’s call for “reverential study of all world religions” throughout our educational and media world.

And we still can.

## **Notes**

1. To convey a feeling for the power of this gesture in India...[RK & sweeper]
2. I have made a similar point about nonviolence in *The Search for a Nonviolent Future*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 2004, esp. pp. 166-1723. For my purposes, atonement sees the action from the viewpoint of the offender; reconciliation refers to the change of relationship between the offender and the victim. Individuals can make atonement

regardless of the response from their victims (though I believe that on some level victims always do respond).

4. [Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology](#), Volume 6, Issue 3 September 2000 , pages 193 - 215
5. For a grim message written by a prisoner on the wall of his cell, “I will act the way I am treated, so help me God,” see *Search for a Nonviolent Future* (op. cit.) 150
6. Not that he didn’t use moral vocabulary, but somehow moral vocabulary did not exclude scientific realities in that era.
7. *Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007.
8. From a lecture given in December, 1900 in Los Angeles; see Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries, Vol. 3: The World Teacher*. Mayavati, India: Advaita Ashrama, 1985, p. 359.
9. Cf. *Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress: the Psychological Consequences of Killing*. New York: Authors Choice Press, 2005
10. This important form of war abatement through nonviolence developed from Gandhi’s *Shanti Sena* or “peace army” and was earlier called Third Party Nonviolent Intervention. Nonviolent Peaceforce is the organization doing it today on the largest scale.
11. John P. Wilson, “Culture, Trauma, and the Treatment of Post-Traumatic Syndromes: A Global Perspective,” in Anthony J. Marsella, Ed. *Ethnocultural perspectives on disasters and trauma : foundations, issues, and applications*, New York: Springer, 2008, p. 363
12. “They became volunteer counselors at rape crisis centers, victim advocates in court, lobbyists for legislative reform.” A. W. Burgess and L. Holmstrom, “Adaptive Strategies and Recovery from Rape,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 136 (1979): 1278–82, quoted in Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, New York : Basic Books, 1997, p. 73
13. Laura Bushman, “Stolpersteine,” *Berkeley Daily Planet*, Dec. 23, 2008–Jan. 7, 2009, p. 4.
14. Communication from David Albert. Krishnammal and Jagannathan were awarded the Right Livelihood Award in 2008.
15. David Cole, “What to Do About the Torturers,” *New York Review of Books*, Jan. 15, 2009, p. 24.