

# Transforming Power and Freedom 21

## From Voluntary Servitude to Non-violent Resistance

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Certainly, in principle, we see a contradiction between the modern prince and the modern sage. But in any case we do not any longer ignore Count Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) and his tremendous impact on modern political science, philosophy and action. Without Tolstoy's heritage and inspiration we cannot understand and realise the meaning of Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) and Martin Luther King Jr (1929–68), whom I dedicate this chapter to because they are the authentic and obvious followers of the ancient sages and prophets: Socrates, Jesus, Buddha and Lao-Tzu. All of these sages and prophets pleaded for non-violent resistance and transformed their lives, thought and action into glorious and heroic examples of the living spirit—princes of the divine spirit: the Conscience.

Following the concept of Conscience as a universal challenge as it has been codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we can no longer resist the fact that all witnesses or martyrs of Conscience have been non-violent resisters. They inspired people during their lifetimes to follow their lifelines, and most of them will never be forgotten as long as humankind is searching for truth. But are we still longing and searching for truth? Or does the law of violence and greed prevail forever? This is the challenge for us today: not to give up hope and humanity. Where do we find good advice for ourselves, for our contemporaries and our followers? One example is in the writing of Tolstoy, the modern sage of Russia.

Let us take, as an example, Tolstoy's last major work, *A Calendar of Wisdom: Daily Thoughts to Nourish the Soul* (1904–07). Tolstoy's *Thoughts of Wise Men* appeared in 1904 in the first edition. Three editions followed during his lifetime—between 1904 and 1910—with different titles: *The Way of Life*, *Circle of Reading* and *A Wise Thought for Every Day*. *A Calendar of Wisdom* is now the first English translation of the enlarged and completely revised second edition of *Thoughts of Wise Men*, written between 1904 and 1907.

*A Calendar of Wisdom* is a compilation of thoughts grouped according to topics for a certain day, week and month, topics like God, Intellect, Law, Love, Divine Nature of Mankind, Faith, Temptations, Word, Self-Sacrifice, Eternity, Good, Kindness, Unification of People (with God), Prayer, Freedom, Perfection, Work, and so on, as Tolstoy wrote in his diary on 3 June 1904. He added about a hundred of his own thoughts, taken from previous diaries of his, starting each day with an opening thought of his own, followed by a quotation of another source and finishing each day with a closing thought of Tolstoy. At the end of the week, he added a short story or vignette, three to ten pages in length. All fifty-two stories, 'The Sunday Reading Stories' (adapting the writings of Plato, Buddha, Pascal and others), corresponded to each week's moral, philosophical and religious topic.

What is interesting for us now, re-reading this almost unknown *Calendar*, is that we find—among those quoted—some princes and kings. For example:

1. **Frederick II:** *If my soldiers started thinking, not a single soldier would remain in my army* (entry on 29 December [Tolstoy 1997: 376]).
2. **Marcus Aurelius:** *A small branch cut off from a big limb is separated from the whole tree. In the same way, when a person is in an argument with another person, he is separated from all humanity* (entry on 17 December [ibid.: 364]).

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*Why are you so afraid of change? Nothing in this world can be done without change. Only one rule should remain constant: do not do anything inhumane to others* (entry on 7 December [ibid.: 354]).

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*A person's soul may be compared to a transparent ball which is lit from the inside with its own light. This flame is not only the source of all light and truth, but it illuminates everything around you. In this state, the soul is*

*free and happy. Only if it becomes addicted to anything outside you, will it become troubled, darkened and impenetrable. Distractions obstruct the light which shows you the way* (entry on 27 November [ibid.: 344]).

Doubtless, these quotations refer to the Conscience, to the non-violent resistance of the conscientious objectors of the past, present and future. And how does it come that these thinkers were princes and kings? This has been a good question since the life of the Buddha or King Ashoka, since the truth-related solar origin of monotheism in ancient Egypt, followed, then, by Moses and the prophetic tradition until today. Sigmund Freud taught us as much in his last great work on Moses and monotheism.

But how can we learn to follow our Conscience being neither a prince nor a sage? There is one sure remedy for all of us: not the ambitious and greedy attitude of the parvenu who imitates the prince, but to listen and follow the voice of the Conscience. But how will we be able to listen to the still, small voice from within? How can we be sure of following the voice of humanity and not the seducing one of the beast of brute force. There is one basic condition. Let us remember the lessons of those who taught us the secret mechanisms of 'voluntary servitude'. For example, Ralph Waldo Emerson's friend Henry David Thoreau (1817–62) and Michel de la Montaigne's friend Etienne de la Boétie (1530–63).

Let us first find Tolstoy's quotes of Thoreau in the *Calendar*. Thoreau's wonderful image of the non-violent grassroots revolution is given here: 'The most tender plants can push their way through the hardest rocks, and it is the same with kindness. Nothing can stop a truly kind and sincere person' (entry on 12 December [ibid.: 359]). This seems to have become a motto for Gandhi and King, and for so many others without a name. And this quote reminds us of another sage's thought, that of Lao-Tzu (entry on 30 November [ibid.: 347]):

There is nothing in this world more tender and more pliable than water, yet hard and rigid things cannot resist it. Weakness defeats strength, tenderness defeats rigidity. Everyone knows this law but no one acts upon it. The weakest in the world gain victory over the strongest; therefore, there is a great advantage in humility and silence. Only a few people in this world are truly humble.

Silence and humility enable us to listen to our voice of Conscience, the alphabet of reason and thought—a good guide for us scientists and thinkers. This guide enables us to appreciate the value of meditation and

contemplation, to gain wisdom and insight in the secret mechanisms of 'voluntary servitude', which prevent us from emancipation. And Tolstoy adds in his own words: 'The more humble a person is, the freer and stronger he is' (entry on 30 November [ibid.: 347]). Freedom and strength are the outward attributes of sovereign princes, the inward attributes of true and real sages. Again, according to Lao-Tzu: 'In those countries where wise people are in power, their subjects do not notice the existence of their rulers' (entry on 13 October [ibid.: 299]). And Tolstoy added that 'people should conceive of a kind of future government in which violence will not be necessary', and as a basis, 'You should live in such a way that violence is not necessary for you' (entry 13 October [ibid.: 299]). Again, Thoreau said: 'When you feel the desire for power, you should stay in solitude for some time' (entry on 27 August [ibid.: 252]); and Lao-Tzu: 'He who is really skillful in communicating with people is usually a humble and quiet person. This is called the virtue of non-resistance. This is called harmony with Heaven' (entry on 17 July [ibid.: 211]).

This is really a good guide for scholars and scientists of the present; we could all learn from it. According to Lao-Tzu: 'In order not to pour out a vessel full of water, you should hold it evenly. In order to have a razor sharp, you should sharpen it. The same should happen with your soul if you are looking for real goodness' (entry on 27 June [ibid.: 191]).

The humility and silence of the real sage in us overcomes the pride and vanity of the idle prince in us. But how? Let us consult again Lao-Tzu in Tolstoy's *Calendar* (entry on 8 June [ibid.: 172]): 'Always respond to hatred with kindness. The most difficult enterprises are easiest at their inception, and the greatest of enterprises have humble origins. Confront difficulties while they are still easy, then, and tackle a big thing when it is still small.' And again: 'He who defeats others is strong; he who defeats himself is powerful, and he who knows when he dies that he will not be destroyed is eternal' (entry on 10 June [ibid.: 174]). Non-violence in heart and mind and the real knowledge of the immortality of the soul—these are two keys to transform power in freedom. But this real knowledge excludes pride and ambition according to Lao-Tzu, who says: 'A person who stands on his tiptoes cannot stand long and a person who is too proud of himself cannot set a good example' (entry on 2 June [ibid.: 166]). What a challenge for the academic community! Lao-Tzu explains (entry on 8 May [ibid.: 141]):

The rivers and seas are the masters of the valleys across which they flow. This is because they are lower than the valleys. In the same way, a person

who wants to be higher than other people should be lower than they; if he wants to guide people, he should be below them.

That is why true scholars and scientists should identify with those who have been excluded and marginalized, oppressed, repressed and suppressed, with the outcasts of society, the children of God who do the dirty jobs, work of impurity everywhere, untouchables, those who remain invisible, in the shadow of the political scenery, almost not-existent, victims of false pride and cruel prejudice. Empathy for the scapegoats of society brings together the modern sage and the modern prince, because princes and kings—as representatives of the community—frequently practice immorality in the name of the community. Again, Thoreau says: ‘The only way to tell the truth is to speak with kindness. Only the words of a loving man can be heard’ (entry on 24 February [ibid.: 67]). And: ‘The most powerful weapon known is the weapon of blessing. Therefore, a clever person relies on it. He wins with peace, not with war’ (entry on 9 February [ibid.: 52]).

Humility and silence as the virtues of the real sage are complemented by renunciation and abstention according to Lao-Tzu: ‘Abstention should be a habit in your life; it should support you in your virtues. For he who is resolute in goodness, there is nothing that he could not overcome’ (entry on 6 January [ibid.: 18]). Renunciation and abstention from greed, desire, jealousy, hatred, prejudice and resentment give us the basis to overcome the system of fear, suspicion and distrust that cages us, because we tend to surrender to those princes without enlightenment, misusing their sovereign power and liberty. Tolstoy’s opening thought in his 19 January entry is: ‘Society can be improved only by self-sacrifice’ (ibid.: 31). Then follows Lao-Tzu: ‘Heaven and earth are eternal. They are eternal because they do not exist for themselves. In the same way, a truly holy person does not live for himself and, therefore, he can become eternal, and can achieve anything’ (ibid.). And Tolstoy concludes: ‘There is only one law, both in your personal and social life: if you want to improve your soul, you should be ready to sacrifice it’ (ibid.).’ To gain more inner freedom—this is the improvement of man and real progress.

But where do we find our role model while striving to improve ourselves, to reconcile the prince and the sage? Let us listen to the advice of Lao-Tzu (entry on 10 February [ibid.: 53]):

To be strong, you have to be like water: if there are no obstacles, it flows; if there is an obstacle it stops; if a dam is broken, then it flows further; if a

vessel is square, then it has a square form; if a vessel is round, then it has a round form. Because it is so soft and flexible, it is the most necessary and the strongest thing

Tolstoy advises us to become humble and not to forget that we live for a short period of time in this world, but to live it according to the laws of eternal life: non-violence, Conscience and truth.

Let us finally remember the words of Michel de la Montaigne’s friend Etienne de la Boétie (1530–62) in his *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude* (1548), an appeal to us to expand our inner freedom, to follow our voice of conscience, to emancipate society from violence, greed, hubris, hypocrisy and untruth:

Everyone knows that the fire from a little spark will increase and blaze ever higher as long as it finds wood to burn; yet without being quenched by water but merely by finding no more fuel to feed on, it consumes itself, dies down and is no longer a flame. Similarly, the more tyrants pillage, the more they crave, the more they ruin and destroy; the more one yields to them and obeys them, by that much do they become mightier and more formidable, the readier to annihilate and destroy. But if not one thing is yielded to them, if, without any violence they are simply not obeyed, they become naked and undone and as nothing, just as, when the root receives no nourishment, the branch withers and dies.

Poor, wretched, and stupid peoples, nations determined on your own misfortune and blind to your own good! You let yourselves be deprived before your own eyes of the best part of your revenues; your fields are plundered, your homes robbed, your family heirlooms taken away. You live in such a way that you cannot claim a single thing as your own; and it would seem that you consider yourselves lucky to be loaned your property, your families and your very lives. All this havoc, this misfortune, this ruin, descends upon you not from alien foes, but from the one enemy whom you yourselves render as powerful as he is, for whom you go bravely to war, for whose greatness you do not refuse to offer your own bodies unto death. He who thus domineers over you has only two eyes, only two hands, only one body, no more than is possessed by the least man among the infinite numbers dwelling in your cities; he has indeed nothing more than the power that you confer upon him to destroy you. Where has he acquired enough eyes to spy upon you, if you do not provide them yourselves? How can he have so many arms to beat you with, if he does not borrow them from you? The feet that trample down your cities, where does he get them if they are not your own? How does he have any power over you except through you? How would he dare assail you if he had no cooperation from you? What could he do to you if you yourselves did not

connive with the thief who plunders you, if you were not an accomplice of the murderer who kills you, if you were not traitors to yourselves? You sow your crops in order that he may ravage them, you install and furnish your homes to give him goods to pillage; you rear your daughters that he may gratify his lust; you bring up your children in order that he may confer upon them the greatest privilege he knows—to be led into his battles, to be delivered to butchery, to be made the servants of his greed and the instruments of his vengeance; you yield your bodies unto hard labor in order that he may indulge in his delights and wallow in his filthy pleasures; you weaken yourselves in order to make him the stronger and the mightier to hold you in check. From all these indignities, such as the very beasts of the field would not endure, you can deliver yourselves if you try, not by taking action, but merely by willing to be free. Resolve to serve no more, and you are at once freed. I do not ask that you place hands upon the tyrant to topple him over, but simply that you support him no longer; then you will behold him, like a great Colossus whose pedestal has been pulled away, fall of his own weight and break in pieces.

Let us therefore learn while there is yet time, let us learn to do good. Let us raise our eyes to Heaven for the sake of our honor, for the very love of virtue, or to speak wisely, for the love and praise of God Almighty, who is the infallible witness of our deeds and the just judge of our faults. As for me, I truly believe I am right, since there is nothing so contrary to a generous and loving God as dictatorship—I believe He has reserved, in a separate spot in Hell, some very special punishment for tyrants and their accomplices.

## References

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