

*King's Productive Way*  
Natasha Williams

*Introduction*

In this paper, I will argue that Martin Luther King's Way of addressing conflicts is by seeking the truth through rethinking, reframing, and redirecting. In order to seek the truth and use those techniques, King believed a person has to adopt a nonviolent approach. Advocates of nonviolence have been mainly criticized as being weak and cowardly because they choose not to fight back with physical force. In order to truly understand the advantages of nonviolence over violence, however, a person must look at the effects of nonviolence.

King's ultimate goal was to seek the truth, which was finding a way to bring both sides of a conflict to a compromise where they can both equally win and understand each other to work together for a greater common goal. For King, seeking the truth was necessary because "our minds are constantly being invaded by legions of half truths, prejudices, and false facts; and few people realize that even authentic channels of information do not give us objective and unbiased truth" (King, 1963:2.) Few people recognize that conflicts occur because of a failure to understand the truth to both sides. In our society, most people would prefer to fight and have closed minds rather than work together to understand each other. Instead of physically fighting back against his enemies, King used nonviolence to solve his conflicts. Nonviolence is not about revenge or hatred; instead, nonviolence is about finding the truth to both sides. King and Gandhi both used nonviolence because they knew that, "even though one position may have more truth than another, each side has some portion of truth in its possession" (Juergensmeyer, 5.)

In order to find the truth to both sides, King could not be biased towards his own race; therefore he not only brought attention to unjust issues hurting blacks, but he also criticized people of his own race for unjust acts. King openly criticized the white liberals and at the same time criticized the Black Power movement for their unjust principles. "The weakness of the Black Power movement is its failure to see that the black man needs the white man and the white man needs the black man." He also speaks to the white liberals when he says; "they are more devoted to "order" than to justice, who prefers tranquility to equality" (King, 1968:54 and 93.)

To fully understand how to use a nonviolent approach to seek the truth, King believed there were certain concepts a person must understand. People must be able to rethink, reframe, and redirect a conflict. In order to rethink a conflict, a person has to practice having an open mind. People become so deeply rooted in their thoughts and values that they are unable to see different perspectives, and this blindness makes it difficult to resolve conflicts. Just as Gandhi, King believed that instead of having a closed mind or being stubborn, an open mind allows people to hear the other side of the story and not become offended. When people are willing to hear the other side, this makes compromise a more possible solution that benefits both parties. By having an open mind to solve conflicts, people can begin to reframe their attention from each other to the principle, as I will explain below.

Gandhi, just as King, believed reframing a conflict was important because, conflicts are better solved if people are able to shift the focus from persons to principles (Juergensmeyer, 1.) Both believed this was effective because people have to understand the underlying reasons for a conflict. King did not want blacks and whites to think of each other as enemies, rather he wanted them to think of themselves as a single community who needed each other to survive. Because he

wanted both groups to depend on each other, King reframed the conflict from equal rights for blacks to the war on poverty. King understood that he could not focus solely on one group, but rather he needed a bigger problem to bring both sides together. King decided to focus on the war on poverty because everyone is affected no matter what race, and people have to set aside their differences to come together for a common goal. By reframing a person's perspective and emotions, enemies can learn to become allies.

The last concept in King's Way was having the ability to redirect a conflict. The ability to redirect a conflict was important to King because it called for people to challenge common sense. By challenging majority opinion or everyday common sense, people can learn to become nonconformist. They have to learn not to conform and that not agreeing with the majority does not mean you are wrong. During his time, redirecting was important to King because racism was the view of the majority. King called for people to be nonconformist and to challenge an unjust and oppressed system.

Through the understanding and practice of rethinking, reframing and redirecting, people can learn to understand why King's approach to conflict was productive. The ultimate goal of King's Way is to seek the truth out of any conflict or difference.

#### *Fighting a Tough-Minded Fight*

In order to use nonviolence over violence, King believed it was necessary to have a tough mind rather than a soft mind. According to King, "nothing pains people more than having to think" (King, 1963:2.) In a sense, soft minded people take comfort in being told what to do and not having the pressure of making decisions. These people tend to believe that what is routine is normal and begin to take comfort in the status quo and fear changes. For example, during King's era many scientists claimed whites were superior to blacks and were biologically better people. Soft minded people believe that one race can be superior over the other because of biological lies that are spread, and these lies then lead to racial prejudices and false judgments.

In contrast to soft minded people, King believed people must have a tough mind. Having a tough mind was important to King because, they are able to determine fact from fiction. King realized that, "few people have the toughness of mind to judge critically and to discern the true from false, the fact from fiction" (King, 1963:2.) Having a tough mind does not mean ignoring all opposing views, but it means having the capacity to make sound judgments. One important thing about tough minded people is that they cannot be easily manipulated because they do not make prejudgments, which are easier yet weaker, and they are not prejudice.

King also believed that while having a tough mind is important, a person must also have a tender heart. In King's book *Strength to Love*, he expands on Jesus' thoughts on having a tough mind and tender heart.

*"Jesus reminds us that the good life combines the toughness of the serpent and the tenderness of the dove. To have serpentlike qualities devoid of dovelike qualities is to be passionless, mean, and selfish. To have dovelike without serpentlike qualities is to be sentimental, anemic, and aimless. We must combine strongly marked antithesis"* (King, 1963:5.)

King, like Jesus was asking for people to be strong enough to be tough minded, but they also need a compassionate, loving side. This compassionate, selfless side is necessary in order to solve conflicts

productively. Tenderhearted people do not see people as objects, but they see people as human beings with significance. Once an equal balance of tough mindedness and tender heartedness is obtained, people will then begin to solve conflicts nonviolently, and productively.

Many critics of nonviolence think violence is the right solution because it is strong and manly. In a sense, violence is cowardly and weak because it takes more energy to not retaliate than to retaliate. Using violence is taking the easy way out of a conflict because people do not take the time to understand the unknown and their enemies. Violence is weak and ineffective because it does not solve problems it temporarily relieves the conflict. Violence creates enemies, hatred, hostility, and it also kills innocent people. According to King, hate multiplies hate and violence becomes a revolving door to conflict (King, 1963:37.) Violence does not take the time to understand the unknown and enemies.

Because violence does not seek the truth, to King, nonviolence is the best approach to solving conflicts. In the eyes of King, nonviolence is viewed as powerful and strong because it takes more strength and mental capacity to resolve a conflict. By taking the time to understand the opposing sides, people can come to a better understanding of both perspectives. It is not necessary for both sides to agree but it is necessary for both sides to understand each other. From this mutual understanding, both sides can settle on a solution that is beneficial to both sides and work to preserving peace.

#### *Why Fight At All*

Are there times when it's necessary to avoid the confrontation all together instead of fighting? During King's movement, there were probably many times when he asked himself why fight at all? The first thing to clarify is fighting does not mean with force or with violence. To King, he viewed fighting as standing for what you believe in a nonviolent way and not succumbing to an unjust system. King believed that "to ignore evil is to become an accomplice to it," this means that even though a person was not physically apart of the crimes, they are still part of an unjust system because they chose not to fight back (King, 1968:91.)

Fighting against an unjust system can come from two groups, the oppressed group and the group in power. During King's time, he wanted to unite the middle class blacks and white liberals with the Black Panthers. This was important for bringing true justice because King was calling for both groups to engage in the conflict. In this aspect King drew from Gandhi's approach to decide which conflicts to fight. Gandhi, "believed cowardice and power should not be reasons to avoid a fight rather, a nation's freedom and integrity should be a reason to fight" (Juergensmeyer, 13.) King's approach was strengthened by Gandhi's success with his approach to conflict.

If King viewed people who did not fight back as part of an unjust system, then this means King was calling for us to engage in conflicts. By engaging in conflicts, people can get a better understanding of the opposing side and work to seek the truth. When both sides engage with each other, only then will they begin to discuss their truths to the conflict. Fighting back is a way to restore justice to a once unjust system and to unite people through compromise.

Along with calling the whites and blacks to unite and fight back, King believed the most productive way to fight back is through nonviolence. When people do choose to fight back, they should not fight back in a violent way or respond with retaliation. As previously discussed, King did not think violence is the most productive form of fighting back. Nonviolence to King is the only

way a conflict will truly be solved. Gandhi would also agree with King because he too claims that fighting, if it is nonviolent, is never demoralizing. Fighting with nonviolence is a way to bring about a solution so that both sides can equally win in a conflict.

King called on people to fight back in a nonviolent way, but he also held himself to the same standards. In order for King's movement to be productive and to actually work, King had to not only preach what he believed in but actually practice it too. King truly believed that nonviolence is the way to fight back and solve conflicts; he also demonstrated this many times when faced with controversy. In the video *Citizen's King*, Dr. King was faced with real life conflicts that many people face today. During some of King's marches, he was punched in the face and had bricks thrown at him. The question to ask is how many people would have the strength to not retaliate or respond with hate and violence? Well, King was not only able to respond with nonviolence but he also did not let the man who punched him be harmed (*Citizen King*, 1963.) King was tested everyday of his life and his constant response would be with nonviolence. King stood for something, he stood for nonviolence and truly practiced what he believed in. He not only preached nonviolence, but he also demonstrated that not fighting back at all is an injustice and that it is possible for people not to use violence to solve problems.

### *Love Your Neighbor as Yourself*

Dr. King modeled and grounded his approach to solving conflicts after the gospels and Jesus. In some ways, taking the religious approach can backfire because not all people are religious and some do not want to rely on religious texts. King, on the other hand, was able to creatively implement religious stories and beliefs to explain why he approached conflicts a certain way. From a religious view, King believed in loving your enemies or loving your neighbor as yourself. Now many people have said, "I will forgive you but I will never forget." To King, this did not capture the true essence of loving your enemies or neighbors; he wanted people to go a step further and not just speak about forgiveness but truly offer and commit to forgiving their enemies.

In *Strength to Love*, King is not only able to clarify his concept of loving your enemies by explaining why and how we should love our enemies, but also strengthen his approach by providing examples from religious texts. In his book, King gives three main reasons to love our enemies. "The three reasons are to develop and maintain the capacity to forgive, the evil deed never quite expresses all that he is, and do not try to defeat or humiliate your enemy but win his friendship and understanding" (King, 1963:35 and 36.) These three reasons are important because many people do not practice the act of forgiveness. People need to understand that we all have parts of good and evil within us, and that no one is necessarily all evil or all good.

Along with understanding how to love our enemies, King gives reason why we should love our enemies. King first argued that darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can and that hate scars the soul and distorts the personality (King, 1963:37.) King was trying to prove that building up hate against an enemy will not solve anything and that hatred also hurts the person doing the harm. For example, hatred and fear is one of the reasons for people being discriminated against and killed. In the end, replacing nonviolence with violence will not solve problems, but it will create enemies.

By using the example of fallen empires compared to the remaining empire of Jesus, King was able to strengthen his approach to conflict. King explained, at some point in time, the great empires and their leaders have fallen because they were built from force, hatred, and violence, while the one that remains is the empire of Jesus (King, 1963:41.) Jesus' empire still remains today, with

millions of followers, because he used love instead of force and hatred. From this example, King was able to show that many empires have been built on violence and because of this violence they have ultimately failed. Using violence to solve conflicts proves that it does not solve anything, it may temporarily relieve the conflict but it will never bring a solution.

Along with loving our enemies, King believed it was also essential to be a good neighbor. In order to truly love your neighbor, King believed you have to be an altruistic person. It is important to love your neighbor because you should have a genuine concern for other people. King described this as altruism, which is defined as a regard for or devotion to interest of others. Being altruistic was important to King because, too many people make prejudgments based on a person's appearance and race. A person who is not altruistic would judge people based on their race and not even realize that race was a socially constructed concept created by people in power with a certain interest (*Race: The Power of Illusion*, 2003.) An altruistic person has the capacity to treat others as brothers no matter the race, class, or background. He stated that, "the good neighbor looks beyond the external accidents and discerns those inner qualities that make all men human and therefore brothers" (King, 1963:19.) In *Strength to Love*, King was able to relate being a good neighbor with the story of a Good Samaritan.

In the story of the Good Samaritan, there was a man robbed, beaten, and left to die for by the men who beat him. The man was left on a road and there was a priest and a Levite that passed him without stopping to help. The only man who stopped to help him was a Samaritan. The question asked is why did the other two men not stop to help the dying man? It could have been the fear of getting robbed and beaten or because he wasn't the same race as them. No matter what the reasoning, King believed that the two men should have stopped to help him. This story can be viewed as an example of how people are worried more about themselves than helping out their neighbors. King saw this as a downfall to society and to man, because he believed Jesus wanted us to be neighborly and altruistic. Along with Jesus himself calling on us to be good neighbors, King also believed that we have a duty to be good neighbors. King states that, "the ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of controversy and challenge" (King, 1963:20.)

#### *Redirect, Rethink, Reframe*

If the ultimate measure of man is where he stands at times of controversy, then that means a person's original thoughts or perspectives may have to change in order to solve a conflict. Many people have their own views and opinions and some may have a difficult time changing their views. During his time, King realized that one of the downfalls to society was people lacking the ability to rethink, reframe, and redirect.

On a general level, rethinking, reframing, and redirecting are very similar since they are all used to find the truth in conflict. These three concepts are related, but they can also be distinguished on a more defined level. Rethinking requires people to problem solve, reframing is asking for someone to focus on the principles or the underlying meaning of the conflict, and redirecting is calling on people to be a nonconformist.

Rethinking a conflict requires a person to have an open mind to opposing views and also to have the ability to problem solve. Problem solving is necessary because both groups are trying to compromise between their two views, which may require many suggestions and solutions. Because people do not always agree on the first solution to the problem, rethinking is important to come up

with several solutions. Rethinking requires time and proposing many solutions to actually reach an agreement. If people are to truly understand an opposing view and want to solve a problem productively, then they will take the time to have an open mind and rethink a conflict.

Open mindedness, or rethinking, can help lead to understanding the underlying meaning of a conflict. In order to get to the meaning of a conflict, a person must be able to reframe the struggle from persons to principles. Once people understand the real reason for a conflict, then they begin to realize that it is not one opposing view against the other but rather what is causing the two groups to disagree in the first place. During King's time, many people failed to realize there was no difference between blacks, whites, or any other race. The real problem was the elites who created the word race. In order to understand the true problems of racism, people have to be willing to shift the focus from persons to the real meaning of the conflict.

Once the shift focuses to the real meaning of a conflict, then people are able to redirect their focus and challenge common sense. During King's time, in order to solve the true problem of racism, people had to be willing to challenge common sense. When people challenge common sense, they learn not to believe everything the media displays and they also learn to not only read facts but to build their own opinion. By challenging common sense, they would not conform to believe in the concept of race; instead they would challenge the unjust system and majority opinion.

An example where rethinking, reframing, and redirecting is used to find the truth but in different forms is in the tort reform debate. Many people believe the tort system is not as effective as it should be and that plaintiffs, such as Stella Liebeck who sued McDonald's for the hot coffee burns, are money hungry. In reality, this was not the case at all but this is what the general public thinks about the tort system. Tort reformers have been able to spread the idea that "disputants are morally if not legally blameworthy individuals," and manipulate the ideas of the general public (Haltom & McCann, 62.) By using King's approach to conflict, people would have an open mind to read not only statistical information but also the facts of the case. Instead of believing the mass media and majority, King's Way calls for people to challenge common sense. Lastly, he would call upon people to realize the underlying problem is not the tort system, but the government. Not only is the government at fault but the tort reformers and the media's expanding the scope of conflict allowing the audience and general public to influence people's opinions about the tort system (Schattschneider, 2.) This is why rethinking, reframing, and redirecting are important, because it cannot only be used for King's movement but it can also be used for everyday conflicts in life.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

After comparing my thoughts from the beginning of the class to today, I would say I have more of an open mind and a better understanding of not only King's Way but conflicts in general. I have grown in many ways but the main way I have grown is to have an open mind. I like King's and Gandhi's approach to conflict not only because it works but also because it challenges people. King is asking people to challenge conflicts and situations that are naturally accepted. Even before the class I did not always accept everything the media displayed or majority opinion. After taking this class, it made me think even deeper and go beyond what the surface reveals. It made me question and realize that not everything we are told is naturally the truth. As I stated before, the Liebeck McDonald's case and the tort system really surprised me. I did believe the general idea of the exploitation of the tort system and that plaintiffs are just suing to get rich. After reading statistical information and actually discussing interest groups, it made me realize that too many things are accepted as common sense. It is not to say that everything is evil and out to corrupt our minds, but

it shows that not everything we see we should believe. Instead of making judgments based on what other people say, we as individuals should take the time out to understand the situation for ourselves. Even when we talked about criminals and the view people have on them it made me rethink popular opinion. Many people think criminals, especially murders are evil people and that they should not be forgiven for their crimes. After discussing being a good neighbor and forgiveness, I began to understand that not one person is all evil or all good. The same should be applied to criminals and they should be given a fair chance to tell their story. This part of the class even inspired me and reassured me in what type of career I want to pursue. I would like to work with criminals, especially murders, and try to understand why they commit evil acts. I would like to give these people a fair chance to tell their stories and not just outcast them because public opinion says so. After taking this class, I have taken a step back and tried to view conflicts differently. I have also realized that it is not only the words we speak but also the actions we show that make a difference.

My opinion on King's approach has grown tremendously. I think this paper has truly helped me to understand and put into words King's approach to conflict. This project allowed me to compare King's approach to other nonviolent advocates such as Gandhi and Jesus. It has also allowed me to demonstrate how King's approach can be seen from issues such as tort cases and politics. I now understand that King's approach cannot only be used for issues on poverty and racism but also every day issues or conflicts. King's approach is a formula or guideline to solve many conflicts that people are faced with everyday. After studying King and watching videos, it has also made me realize the commitment and energy it takes to adopt King's Way. King's Way was never easy nor a quick way to solve a conflict, rather his approach has many steps and is very hard for people to accomplish. By understanding King's Way, it made me understand that sometimes we look for the easy and quick solutions. The easy and quick solutions, such as violence, are not always the right choice. Instead we need to step back and try to understand things we fear and people we don't understand. This is what King wanted from us, to have an open mind to different perspectives and to not automatically oppose different views. Yes, King's ultimate goal to conflict is nonviolence, but the essential steps to solving the conflict come from redirecting, reframing, and refocusing what we believe in.

#### Works Cited

- Citizen King* (1963). American Experience, PBS Home Video.
- Haltom, W., & McCann, M. (2004). *Distorting the Law: Politics, Media, and the Litigation Crisis*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Juergensmeyer, M. (1984). *Gandhi's Way: A Handbook to Conflict Resolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- King Jr., M. L. (1968). *Where Do We Go From Here*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- King, M. L. (1963). *Strength to Love*. Cleveland: First Fortress Press.
- Race: The Power of Illusion*, Ford Foundation, CPB Video.
- Schattschneider, E. (1975). *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America*. Dryden Press.