

STANDING, SPEAKING UP

While demonstrating against ICE, someone I know was verbally and physically attacked. I'll call her "Joan," not her real name. Joan is 74 years old, about five feet tall, long white hair, a financially poor artist, and partially disabled. She was demonstrating along a major street near her home with four other people, all in their mid-70's to mid-80's, when the assault occurred.

I have known Joan for a long time. She was previously not very interested in political affairs. Last Spring, she started reading books on the American political system and history, trying to make sense of the news. She became convinced she had to do something, say something, to convey her concerns about human rights. She would sometimes join a small group of four demonstrators for an hour on Saturdays at Noon, holding signs saying things like "Abolish ICE" and "No Kings in America." Pretty clear, nonviolent messages. Nothing derogatory, or scurrilous.

A largish woman, mid-50's, stopped her car in the opposite lane and furiously strode toward Joan's little group, shouting, "This is a MAGA town," and "We're peaceful here, before you came," and "Who's paying you?" She then grabbed and broke Joan's glasses, stole her phone, threw it away, and pushed Joan to the ground. She also attacked two other women demonstrators the same way

before driving off. The police arrived, found everyone's phones, and arrested the alleged attacker, who actually doesn't live in that town. The last 30 seconds of this assault were videoed by a passerby. The video went viral and was given to the police. The alleged attacker was charged with two misdemeanors.

Joan subsequently suffered from the typical trauma symptoms. Since that time, Joan's symptoms have lessened and her resolve to demonstrate has strengthened. She refuses to be intimidated. People who know her rallied to her side and contributed money for her to get new glasses. The Republican state assemblyman for her district issued a public statement that freedom of speech is an American right for all and expressed sympathy to Joan directly, personally. He gave her the number of a reporter to whom she told her story. The next Saturday, in the middle of a snowstorm, over 60 people showed up in solidarity.

So, what do we do when violence enters the public arena? When intimidation becomes normalized? How do we speak up without becoming what we oppose? Today, I will reflect on how we can respond to violence without becoming violent ourselves—and why compassion, not retaliation, is the deepest form of resistance to oppression. When I learned what had happened, I was flooded with protective, angry feelings. I felt a lot of disturbing feelings about our country.

President Trump attempted a coup five years ago by urging his followers to storm the Capitol and many did. He disparages U.S. citizens, singers, actors, and politicians who disagree with his politics. He attempts to intimidate people with Department of Justice investigations and sweeping assertions of executive power. When Trump's violent rhetoric floods the media and justifies ICE's murder of Sara Good and Alex Pretti with lies, vigilantes may feel justified in violent enforcement of their prejudices.

Almost everyone would strongly disapprove of Joan's attacker. The attack on Joan questions a normal human belief that people should not be bullied. It is a situation ripe for self-righteousness, to forcefully meet such assaults with a corrective opposition. I was saddened, appalled, and angry. I empathized with Joan's feelings of helplessness and rage. I'll let you imagine my vindictive, protective fantasies, my impulses to attack her attacker. Outrage is a normal reaction. But I, like Joan, am committed to the nonviolent free and responsible search for truth and meaning. I talked myself down from the heights of disgust to understand what would be most peaceful for me and most effectively helpful. The feelings of outrage are normal, but that is why Gandhi preferred the participation of soldiers in his nonviolent struggle in India, because of their discipline. He needed people in the nonviolent struggle for independence from Britain who could regulate their emotions enough to keep on the path of searching for truth with an

attitude of compassion. He needed people to remain absolutely committed to nonviolence despite provocative setbacks.

Further, as Reggie Harris noted several weeks ago, mirroring the violence of others damages your cause of peace and freedom. Sure, there may be some short-term satisfaction if a violent soldier for autocracy is felled, but there will be many to take his or her place and it simply gives moral justification to oppressors for the brutal bludgeoning of protestors. We do not want Trump to be able to cite some violent event as justification for invoking the 1804 Insurrection Act which allows the president to call up the U.S. Army and deploy it on U.S. ground. But most important, the cause of peace is advanced by searching for truth in a climate of compassion.

We are engaged in a moral struggle for the very soul of America through persuasion, protest, and political drama. Nonviolent protest must be observed to be effective. Truth requires documentation. Gandhi needed the newspaper reports on violent beatings of Indian freedom marchers sent to British newspapers to mobilize support. Martin Luther King, Jr. needed TV coverage and newspaper reports about punching, kicking, shooting and firebombing of freedom marchers to areas outside the Deep South in order to mobilize federal intervention. Joan's attacker was identified due to a 30-second video documenting the violation of her human rights, which mobilized supporters to demonstrate. The shootings and murders in

Chicago and Minneapolis, as well as the unjust arrest of innocent people and 170 American citizens without a warrant were well-documented. The truth is powerful when it is not just your truth and/or my truth. Truth becomes powerful when it can be seen independently of our preferences. Most people have a concern for the truth, the objectively verifiable truth.

I have spoken repeatedly about Trump's lies, and those of his chosen delegates. But he tells lies because, as he himself has said, people believe them. IF we put that in a slightly wider perspective, we can see that he fears the truth, his hired soldiers fear the truth, and therefore they try to twist and manipulate the perceptions of others to obscure truth. Not everyone believes lies told by ICE personnel. The struggle to present viewpoints that are more comprehensive, more true, more reasonable, and more independently verifiable will continue.

More than simply truth, the attitude of compassion, as empathy in action, makes the truth acceptable to the populace at large. Compassion is the vehicle for speaking to those who wish desperately to believe hateful, prejudicial lies. Joan's attacker spoke several lies as she attacked and later denied the truth of the video recording. From what I have read of her words, she is deeply committed to her opinions despite their being contradicted by facts and justice. The sadistic attitudes of those ICE agents who murdered people speaks to their possibly having experienced too little compassion. Having had several murderers and a former

CIA assassin in my psychotherapy practice, I can attest to a lack of caring limits and loving encouragement in their childhoods. Generally, they were beaten as children, but they were also badly neglected and demeaned. Not everyone who has had a traumatic childhood becomes a murderer, but those who were subsequently trained and required to kill can be wounded by moral injury, which numbs them to others' pain. Drs. Sonya Norman and Shira Maguen wrote about "Moral Injury," (and I quote):

In traumatic or unusually stressful circumstances, people may perpetuate, fail to prevent, or witness events that contradict deeply held moral beliefs and expectations. . . .Moral injury is the distressing psychological, behavioral, social and sometimes spiritual aftermath of exposure to such events. A moral injury can occur in response to acting or witnessing behaviors that go against an individual's values and moral beliefs. (Sonya B. Norman and Shira Maguen, pg. 1, "Moral Injury" on the website, PTSD: National center for PTSD, 2/8/2026, pag.1)

It is a truism that "**hurt people hurt people.**" Guilt, shame, disgust, and an inability to self-forgive provoke people to self-sabotage, moral disregard to society's rules, and sadism toward others. I have seen the moral numbness that motivates a disregard for the rights of others and violent actions toward others. An acquaintance of mine described his huge exhilaration at his first kill in Vietnam and how puzzling and emotionally disturbing that had been. I think he told me as an effort at healing his moral injury. I think he was hoping he could heal a little by unburdening his conscience.

Several times, Trump has said publicly that he is unsure if he is going to heaven, and I quote:

“I want to try to get to heaven, if possible. I’m hearing I’m not doing well. I’m really at the bottom of the totem pole. I don’t think there’s anything that’s going to get me into heaven.” (Peter Baker, “After a lifetime of scandal, the president expresses doubt that he will be admitted to paradise. But he appears increasingly intent on finding other paths to eternity,” [nytimes.com/2025/10/30](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/30), pg.1)

That is a striking admission. It suggests some awareness of moral accountability but without the necessary corrective of mercy. For those who believe in God, mercy is God’s grace, which can be translated as “freely given love.” I do not pretend to know Trump’s inner life. None of us can. But when leaders speak frequently about power, winning, dominance and vengeance—and rarely about mercy—it tells us something about the moral imagination shaping their leadership. If Trump cannot imagine a loving, forgiving God, he may imagine only a punitive one. And if he can only imagine a strict, rule-giving God, then power becomes Trump’s primary virtue. I am appalled by the many violent and oppressive policies and actions we are witnessing. But I also believe that cruelty comes not from strength but from fear—fear of loss, fear of weakness, fear of being insignificant. Compassion does not mean agreement. It does not imply surrender. Compassion means we refuse to let contempt shape our feelings. We cannot become hardened ourselves if we are to effectively resist injustice. This is all about living into the highest possible spirituality.

You might easily draw the conclusion that I think you must demonstrate/protest/sit in, etc. to speak your truth. And that is fine, but speaking kindly with your neighbor about injustice is also a powerful piece of nonviolent resistance to autocracy. Nonviolent resistance is speaking truth to power by calling Congress (as 20 of you did recently). It is a piece of the search for truth to ask your elected representative what they are doing to promote justice and compassion on the part of ICE. It is a piece of freely and responsibly searching for truth and meaning when you meditate on compassion.

A part of making your highest values live in the world, according to values clarification, is to publicly affirm your values. There must be a thousand different ways to do so. Expressing your values with courtesy and courage, love and clarity, joy and directness is a high and fine art. Nobody can witness to their values perfectly, and the present political reality is traumatizing but need not determine your behavior. Some of you attended a multifaith event commemorating the murders in Minneapolis, as Geraldine Cunningham reported in her email to the FUSW board (and I quote): “with people of all ages, races, and religions gathered in community, concern, and solidarity, uniting around the acknowledgement that what we are currently witnessing in our country goes against our shared humanity.” (Geraldine Cunningham, 2-1-2026 email) That was taking a stand and speaking up. Remember Joan? She was pushed down, but she stood back up. Joan

strengthened her resolve to be heard. Sixty people stood in a blizzard with her the following Saturday. Disciplined compassion looks like Joan and the many people who now stand with her. Keep feeling and thinking carefully into your truth and you will be rewarded with a sense of peace in the midst of conflict. You will continue moving toward an elusive, beckoning, never fully achieved peace. We cannot control the direction of national rhetoric. But we can control the direction of our hearts and voices. The **direction** toward freedom and peace is what matters.