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America Without Violence by Michael Nagler

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REVIEWS

Michael Nagler. *America Without Violence*. Covelo, California: Island Press, 1982. 156 pp. + notes, bibliography and index. \$8.00 paperback.

Violence is a beast so massive and ubiquitous in our world that even the valiant among us often shrink before it. The dinosaur is too large, we resignedly wimper; let us swat flies. Such resignation can stem in part from seeing what occurs when violence is combated in the same old violent ways: like a hydra-headed monster it grows new heads for every one violently lopped off. When resignation borders on despair, we begin to concoct rationalizations for why violence will never go away and, as with sleeping potions, we swallow them.

Michael Nagler has managed to stay awake. He has seen these rationalizations for what they are and, discarding them, has courageously turned to face the beast. Violence is indeed immense, but every immense thing is composed of smaller parts. Each of us, by deciding and willing to do something within our own personal spheres, can begin to rid America, and the planet, of violence. Nagler's whole book is a gentle, yet uncompromising, prod to awaken us to this fact. Arguing *against* the social forces, collective illusions and individual myopia that blind us to the real possibility of zero violence, he argues *for* certain points of view, attitudes and even practices that will strengthen our vision and our effectiveness. He is convincing throughout; hopeful, but never unrealistically so.

Nagler points out that some of our most disabling illusions result from uncritical readings of the evolutionary and historical past. In a chapter called "The Answer of Evolution," he examines the reasoning

that begins with the premise of universal violence in nature, proceeds to the premise of the unchangeability of human nature and concludes that human violence is natural and ineradicable. He finds such logic wanting. The first premise crumbles when we note the increasing attention given by contemporary natural historians to the roles played by sociability, cooperation, and even altruism, in the survival and development of species. As for the second premise, the alleged unchangeability of human nature, it is a commonplace in logic that such categorical statements are handily refuted by citing a single exception. Nagler asks us to look at modern relationships between men and women and then to ask ourselves if we can still seriously maintain that human nature cannot change. The syllogism falls apart.

In "Forgotten History" Nagler takes a similar contrarian tack. Human history does reveal that members of our species have an appalling capacity for mutual brutalization, but it is debilitating, not to mention wrong, to assume that this is the whole story. History, Nagler asserts, has unfortunately been an instrument used primarily for recording *breakdowns* in a relatively harmonious, life-furthering world process. It leaves us with unbalanced impressions. Electronic media, which Nagler criticizes heavily in more than one connection, exacerbates the problem. Good news is no news [sic] and daily we view images of violence and disintegration parading as history through television's narrow lens. To reduce such distortion, Nagler proffers neglected historical episodes, among them George Fox's Quakers and Gandhi's achievements, wherein the forces of rationality and nonviolence prevailed. Nagler does not attempt to obscure the very real evidence of violence in the natural and human historical orders, but he counters it with enough striking examples for hope to feed on.

As paralyzing presuppositions are laid aside, they must be replaced by constructive thinking, the root of effective action. And the *sine qua non* of right thought is the full acceptance of individual responsibility for violence. Though Nagler's analysis extends to large social and political issues such as handgun control, nuclear war and the strategy of deterrence, it always returns to how you and I contribute to such problems and to what you and I can do to solve them. Violence is born in the human heart, in deluded and confused ways of seeing the world. Prey to the dehumanizing forces at work in modern society, ravaged human sensibilities become indifferent to existing violence and breeding grounds for more of it. Each of us, Nagler teaches, can reduce our contribution to the maintenance of such forces. Each of us, too, can be infinitely more careful not to let our own behavior contribute to the delusion and alienation which allows violence to continue.

Enlightened and effective movement toward zero violence in all aspects of our lives is immeasurably aided when we come to profoundly feel and think in terms of the *interdependence* of all life. This perspective, so ancient and so new, pervades Nagler's book. Otherness is a lie, says the author. In reality, there is no "them." The more deeply we realize this, the more clearly will we see the utter futility of thinking that it is possible to be, or even to think, violently toward another without inflicting violence on ourselves.

Nagler's most insistent plea is for us to identify a central purpose in our lives. He clearly understands the crippling effect of what Kierkegaard called double-mindedness, the state of being little more than a field upon which a crowd of different desires shove each other around. Such fragmentation is accompanied by a kind of narcissistic cramp wherein we become unable to see beyond ourselves. Kierkegaard called the opposite pole "willing one thing," a state tantamount to spiritual maturity and full humanity. Nagler's version is that "everything we do should be guided by the main idea we have chosen as our polestar" (p. 135), and he quotes Einstein's "always order your life around a central goal" (p. 129) in support. With a central purpose, life becomes an indivisible whole in which each of our activities plays an integral part. No energy is wasted and the benefit derived is double-edged: we become more effective without while becoming more integrated within. Our livelihood, too, must conform to, or at least not conflict with, our central purpose. If it does conflict, we must have the courage to change it. Central purpose makes it possible to infuse all our actions with *wholehearted intention*, a tremendous source of energy for individual, and thus collective, change. There is, of course, no purpose more integral and life-nurturing than peace. To do everything nonviolently is to act in accord with the deepest rhythms of reality for the benefit of all human beings, living and as yet unborn.

In literature of this genre, it is common for authors to call for changes, especially changes of the heart. As fitting and inspirational as such calls are, authors rarely attempt to offer advice on *how* to bring these changes about, as if it were enough for someone to simply hear these ideas or like them in order to be able to live *by* them and *out* of them. But the task of transforming the human heart is harder than this. It is a slow and subtle one. Merely imbibing the ideas of others does not make the necessary changes deep in the folds of the psyche. Here, *America Without Violence* leaves the bounds of the ordinary. A book that has discussed Russia and America, history and evolution, media and sports (but has never strayed from its central emphasis on the role of the ordinary individual) ends not with some bugle call to a

vast-revolutionary effort, but with an affirmation of the importance, perhaps the necessity, of *meditation*. It is only two pages long, this affirmation, but it is clear that Nagler meant to crown the book with it. "Meditation," says Nagler, "is the most powerful of all tools for increasing our sensitivity to injustice, and at the same time learning to transform our anger into a constructive force. . . . It is where we make the most gratifying discovery of our relation to the whole" (p. 154). Nagler barely mentions religious traditions in the course of the book, but these final pages make it suddenly apparent how deeply the Contemplative Way has informed the entirety of it.

We may one day look back on this era of nuclear terror and understand it to have been one of mankind's greatest blessings. For there is now a movement afoot, the popular dimensions of which may come to dwarf anything we have previously known. Such a movement, rooted in individuals and proceeding toward the end of violence, toward the end of self-destructive ways, requires a constant supply of intelligent energy. *America Without Violence* offers itself as a source of such energy, a clear stream from which we may confidently draw.

Review by Philip Novak