

Experience of Integrity for Nonviolence

For eight (8) years I worked in the area of domestic violence and sexual assault when these issues were coming to the forefront in the United States. I was a crisis counselor, creator of programs, trainer of professionals and executive director of a 24 hour shelter. My doctoral thesis “Truth and Compassion: Faith Sharing Groups for Victims of Domestic Abuse” developed a spiritual process for healing from the wounds of abuse. The women were able to share their experiences of God, their suffering and how they moved to a sense of well-being.

It was during this time of involvement that it became important to change societal attitudes and legislation regarding abuse. We were directly in contact with the situations of the victims--immediate responses to the hospitals, to police calls and to victims requiring the safety of shelter service. We created a safe and welcoming home for the women and dependent children deeply bruised and broken from physical, mental and psychological wounds. Our offices were in the midst of this home environment so we were aware of the interactions of the residents. Connections were readily suggested for many needed services.

In a comprehensive response we developed a certified training program for counselors, police officers and volunteers for the agency. Teachers needed to be prepared to recognize and report abuse. Our “Better Safe than Sorry Program” about unsafe touch was adopted by the public school system.

There were many interviews—television, radio and newspapers—with clear messages to change societal attitudes. Government agencies asked our two statewide coalitions, of which I was an active member, for significant input that later changed legislation regarding abuse. Various levels of abusive behaviors were described and considered criminal acts and the “orders of protection” were made available.

We received many requests for speaking engagements. At one of the sessions with a parish group I spoke about the needs of the victims and the importance of a compassionate presence with them. As a result I was asked to develop a program to help persons become nonviolent in the midst of the many ways they were personally dealing with violence in their lives: be it at work, in the media, in relationships, etc. This became the *Integrity for Nonviolence Program* which has four basic values and behaviors associated with them:

Creating respect: acceptance of person; being a non-threatening place

Practicing honesty: open and truthful communication; freedom to discover the true self

Promoting justice: accountability and responsibility; negotiation and fairness

Nurturing wholesome relationships: demonstrate trust and support; have adequate resources

Many workshops were given to schools, social services, and parishes. After the sessions were provided to our corporate leadership in our healthcare and housing ministries, the behaviors were included in expected employee performance. I was a member of the Sponsor Board when the process for evaluation was accepted. The peace sign at the entrance to the campus attests to the commitment to practice nonviolence. Interestingly, when I was certified as a trainer by the Police Training Institute, it was in order that I could present the “Integrity for Nonviolence” program.

These values and behaviors have been foundational in my efforts to conduct advocacy meetings and to promote legislative actions. I had used the values to describe the heart of the actions of two Sisters who were recipients of peace awards. One was recognized by the diocese for her long time efforts to promote peace and nonviolence. The other was included as one of the UN 1000 Women for Peace because of her pioneering HIV/AIDS work even in the midst of the turbulent conflict time within Kenya.

The strengths and opportunities created by active nonviolence are many when it becomes a way of life. Because of my involvement in nonviolence and a compassionate response to abuse, personnel from two Catholic schools asked me to help them when they became aware that some children were abused by trusted leaders. I worked with the school and parish leadership to provide sessions for teachers, parents, and students. Connections were made to outside counseling services for assistance in this process. Both perpetrators were convicted.

When nonviolent values can be clearly described with certain behaviors, this helps in their realization in daily life. For example, my nonviolent sessions in the work place were accompanied by a request to anonymously answer a simple questionnaire regarding certain behaviors. These results were shared in a general way through graphs and most often the person rated themselves higher than the others. These observations led to a deeper clarification of the perceived relationships. Each behavior had related stories which encouraged discussions. Areas of courtesy and gossip were often explored.

I think we can invest energy in moving towards a deeper and wider practice of nonviolence by focusing on the practice of simple values which then prepare us to be attentive to larger issues. We can describe a nonviolent lifestyle as responding to what is happening around us and also our impact on the world. We can develop prayerful reflections which educate us to concerns and challenge us to be attentive to these needs. By consciously attending to being persons of nonviolence and compassion, we are preparing ourselves to be responsive to God's grace in the moments. Pope Francis' call to be persons of mercy is another way of being this compassionate presence and an instrument of peace in many difficult situations.

Sheila Kinsey, FCJM