The Wild Peace (not) of John Howard Yoder: Reflections on *Nonviolence – A Brief History*

Romand Coles

Wild peace, because the field must have it.
– Yehuda Amichai[1]

It's coming from the feel that this ain't exactly real -
Or it's real, but it ain't exactly there…
From the staggering account of the Sermon on the Mount
Which I don't pretend to understand at all.
– Leonard Cohen[2]

I

We know the fields. Some bear gifts of bounty; some bear gifts of austerity. Some have been fashioned by human projects attentive and grateful; others have been assaulted by the oblivious ambitions of corrupt principalities and powers that dwarf the delusions of Babel. No field is free from the specters of another field we know too well: a field drenched with rivers of blood which swell from a seemingly interminable source that threatens to drown our sense that "the field must have it."

John Howard Yoder's writing is a long and faithful meditation on how the field must have it – the Victory of the Lamb – and his 1983 lectures to the Polish Ecumenical Council, now presented in *Nonviolence – A Brief History*, are no exception. Like the Jews, who were "the first hearers of Jesus," Yoder "believed a history in which the impossible had happened. They [and he] could hear the promise without filtering it through a grid of their [and his] sense of the limits of the possible."[3] Jewish history, as Yoder hears it, is the narrative of a community hearing, straying from, discerningly recovering, and reforming itself in light of the meaning of God's promise of human flourishing through regenerative justice, love, and peacemaking.

This history reaches an epiphany in Jeremiah's redefinition of diaspora as a providential gift, wherein Jews are called to become a nation without kingship or sovereignty, seeking their good in, with, and for other nations. Yoder plainly states the paradox that it is precisely the Jews who did not see Jesus as the consummate image of divinity, who for nearly two thousand years best and most continuously incarnated the ecclesia of loving peace that Jesus lived and proclaimed – while most Christians betrayed this image with a kiss.

These impossibilities, too, have happened. And it is precisely in the complicated hollow between these multiple impossibilities (murderous violence, calls and incarnations of peace, betrayals through the call, approximations of peace that are greater perhaps because more modestly articulated) where I engage Yoder's reflections to discern grains of hope within the "crooked timber" of our being. In this essay I focus on a couple of themes that Yoder articulates in his Warsaw Lectures in ways that shed new, important light on his widely-received politics of Jesus. In particular, I am fascinated by his insights into what I will call "the intertwinement of resonant energies" of love, vengeance, and mimetic violence, as well as his emphasis that such energies are indispensable to the transformative power of nonviolent action. Indeed, nonviolent political creativity hinges upon cultivating a profoundly intimate, complicated relationship between energies of love and of mimetic violence. I believe this relationship is not only at the heart of Yoder's understanding of intercorporeal creativity but pivotal to his understanding of the "grain of the universe."

Through his articulation of entangled modes of resonant energy, Yoder illuminates what it might mean to have a mindful faith in "wild peace, because the fields must have it." Yoder's "wild peace" and what I have elsewhere called his "wild patience" are co-constitutive.[4] Neither can be understood in absence of the other. Because this thematic element also received illumination in Yoder's posthumous *The War of the Lamb: The Ethics of Nonviolence and Peacemaking*, I shall move freely between these two texts.[5] I conclude by drawing attention to less brief historical discussions of the ethical relationships between defensive violence and peacemaking, in ways that cause trouble both for pacifists and for those who are not quite so – or not so purely.

II

Yoder's reflections on the charged field of the victorious "impossibility" of Jesus' life, word, cross, and resurrection acquire distinctive insight and gravitas in the Warsaw lectures because he consistently tends to questions about the resonant energies enabling peacemaking and how they are intertwined with the resonant energies of violence propelling action in that other field of blood-drenched "impossibility." Indeed, work in the fields of nonviolence requires a visceral connection to work in the fields of murder.

Tolstoy's brilliant (if problematic) reduction of the Scriptures to the proclamation of love of the enemy and nonresistance to evil in the Sermon on the Mount informs Yoder's reflections in his Polish lectures. For Tolstoy, the key to Jesus' message is that "the cure for evil is suffering" (*Nonviolence – A Brief History,* 21). At the heart of this proclamation is Tolstoy's sense that the key to "what is wrong with the world is most fundamentally that people respond to evil with evil and thereby aggravate the spiral of violence . . . . By refusing to extend the chain of vengeance, we break into the world with good news. This one key opened the door to a restructuring of the entire universe of Christian life and thought." It is the "stubborn nerve" of Tolstoy's refusal to let the world's spiraling evil define "acceptable Christian behavior" – his courageous "countercosmology" and active strategy for nonviolent resistance – that impressed Gandhi (ibid., 22).

Yoder's lectures can be read as patient critical reflections on Christianity's uncourageous efforts to rearticulate the good news of the Sermon on the Mount within the confines of the world's chains and spirals of violence in ways that fall victim to, and perpetuate, those very cycles. One of Yoder's most perspicuous claims is that the deleterious effects of these spirals and chains can be witnessed not only in the problematic nature of myriad just war theories but in the fact that even the best of such theories tend with haunting inexorability to be unplugged and ignored during millennia of Christian violence and convenient silence. Yoder's own courageous effort to resist these chains and spirals is evident in his critique and the astonishingly charitable spirit with which he engages those he resists.

If Yoder's understanding of the wisdom of the Sermon on the Mount is intimately enmeshed with his sense of what is most "fundamentally wrong

with the world," we must explore the latter more fully. Here the language of spirals, cycles, and chains is not quite adequate for illuminating either the proliferative character of violence or the possibilities for seeing, thinking, and doing a new thing. To grasp the depth of Yoder's thinking, we must return with him to that barren field of the other impossibility, where Cain lifted his hand and struck his brother Abel dead.

Yoder's work in these difficult soils informs his Polish lectures, yet a fuller account is contained in *The War of the Lamb,* where he offers a powerful reading of Genesis 4 that focuses on the fact that, contrary to expectation, Yahweh acts not to protect others from the murderer in their midst but "to protect Cain from the primeval vengeance he has every reason to fear." In Genesis, says Yoder, "the rest of humanity is first alluded to not as a resource for affection or procreation or community, but as a threat. The very first reference to the rest of humanity is "whoever finds me will slay me." Here we arrive at the heart of the insight: "That is the primeval definition of *violence* . . . that there are people out there whose response to Cain's deed is *mimetic*. They will quasi-automatically, as by reflex, want to do to him what he had done to Abel. . . . It will seem self-evident." So Yahweh "*intervenes to protect Cain's life from the universally threatening vengeance*" and does so by threatening any who act thus with a massive vengeance that "shall be taken on him sevenfold" (*War of the Lamb,* 28). Yahweh seeks to out-resonate resonant violence.

This saves Cain, but not humanity. For Cain's distant descendant Lamech seems to have a multiplicative mimetic relation not only to violence but to the intensification of it – even to the shadow of a threat of it, when he brags that he retaliates seventy-sevenfold. Thus we see the resonant, (de)generative character of violent mimesis, which is not merely replicative in a way that could be employed mainly for a "preventive, protective function" but rather becomes an "engine of destruction" (*War of the Lamb,* 29). It is the resonance of human flesh with vengeance that is far more illuminating of our condition than terms like chains, yokes, and spirals. It is such "resonant causality"[6] – far more than the forces of Newtonian causality or the force of flawed reasons – that accounts for the overwhelming extent to which "evil means poison the social system and vitiate the very ends for the sake of which they were resorted to, by creating uncontrollable cause/

effect ripples beyond what was intended by or can be controlled by their authors" (ibid., 152). We cannot calculate or control such resonant causality, because it happens in our flesh before and more powerfully than we think, and thereby gives birth to a world that (de)generates into waves defying linear calculability.

For these reasons, Yoder writes: "But then if the phenomenon of violence is not rational in its causes, its functions, and its objectives, neither will its cure be rational. The cure will have to be something as primitive, as elemental, as the evil. It will have to act upon the deep levels of meaning and motivation, deeper than mental self-definition and self-control" (*War of the Lamb,* 30). Yoder's explorations of these deeper waters constitute the most valuable dimension of his gift in the Warsaw Lectures and *The War of the Lamb*. While René Girard is not mentioned in the lectures, he is an explicit presence in *The War of the Lamb* and the focus of Yoder's reflections in his 1986 review of Girard's *The Scapegoat* (published in French in 1982).[7] Entangled with his interpretation of Genesis 4, Girardian themes increasingly inform Yoder's sense of what is indispensable for creative nonviolent action anywhere, anytime – and especially today, when the resonance of vengeance everywhere receives amplification in the ubiquitous virtual "resonance machine."[8]

III

Yoder is famous for "changing the questions." Hence, for example, in his debates with just war theorists, he calls us away from the widespread focus on "rules and exceptions" and toward the ongoing cultivation of an alternative polis – an ecclesia – that engenders everyday practices, habits, processes, institutions, virtues, and receptive creative capacities. Through those capacities we may acquire rich orientations, imaginations, and powers for engaging in nonviolent conflict resolution, sharing wealth, practicing dialogical discernment, and worshiping the holy. Thus we might better learn to live in ways tending to avert crisis situations, on the one hand, and to act in relation to crises that nevertheless will occur with more powerfully cruciform imaginations and creative repertoires, on the other.

Given the registers in which Yoder's reflections tend to run, even

focusing on nonviolent direct action – as vital as such action is to the reflections on peacemaking in the Polish Lectures – is "only the tip of an iceberg" that more profoundly concerns building an alternative culture. "They are only the exceptionally visible part of a much larger unity. They are . . . as is the case with icebergs, only visible and effective in proportion to the size of the hidden block below the surface. The integrity, the credibility, the intelligibility, and the actual social impact of specific tactics or techniques or dramatic direct action . . . will be proportionate to the size and the solidity of the floe beneath the waves" (*War of the Lamb*, 157).

Anyone who reads Yoder should know this. Yet analogous to the "floe beneath the waves," I suggest that there is a flow beneath – or, rather, *in* – the floe that is similarly the indispensably intimate, deep co-condition of possibility toward which the Warsaw Lectures (and proximate works) are moving. Missing the flow in the floe is like missing the floe beneath the waves: Not only do the writing and the politics of nonviolence risk losing much of their "depth, credibility, intelligibility, and actual social impact," additionally we miss the registers in which we must work in order that peacemaking might become more possible and real. Yoder's engagements with specific interlocutors – in Poland and elsewhere – often prevented him from staying with this indispensable line of inquiry as persistently as we, and possibly Yoder himself, might wish. My task here is to gather and interweave these strands into a form that works the "deeper levels of meaning and motivation" that Yoder insists we must engage if we are to have a chance of subduing the proliferative resonance of vengeance that even in older times was boasting multiples of seventy-seven.

In a lecture on "The Changing Conversation between the Peace Churches and Mainstream Christianity," Yoder *ends* by noting how elements of ecumenical context inhibited crucial *beginnings*: "As the ecumenical conversation obligated me to do, I have reported on the ordinary stuff of the standard debate about political ethics" (*War of the Lamb*, 106). Yoder's receptivity to context is part of his brilliance. Yet one senses in his voice a certain weight – a certain acknowledgement of the contextual confinements of spirit. Indeed, it is precisely the resonance of spirit which is constrained, as he says in the next sentence: "That debate, however, ignores the way that other dimensions of human reality predispose the weighing of actions."

Yoder goes on to note how "Hugh Barbour's exposition in the subjective religious experience of radical Puritanism in England, under that 'Terror and Power of the Light,' interprets profoundly the rootage of the renunciation of the violence in the inner experience of overpowering grace." Whether thinking of Anabaptist *Gelassenheit* or Dunkard *perfecting love*, or humility, sanctification, or numerous other terms, Yoder notes that for all the differences, they evoke "the view of human dignity that frees the believer from temptations to feel called to set the world right by force." They speak to an intensity and quality of spiritual resonance that releases us to "do a new thing." "*Probably this commonality is more important subjectively for the peace churches' witness than any of the more standard ethical issues I was reviewing before*" (*War of the Lamb*, 106, my emphasis). If, without resubjectifying "religious experience" in ways that would lose everything else we have already learned from Yoder, we take a soulful reading of the Warsaw lectures, we gain insight into how nonviolent interaction might become a powerful world-transformative *movement* articulating the "grain of the universe."

The centrality of spiritual resonance is evident from the beginning of the first lecture[9]: "Tolstoy was first of all a convert," which is to say he was one who underwent a "profound change of . . . orientation . . . which took place at once from within and from without and made of him a different person than he had been before" (*Nonviolence – A Brief History,* 19-20). Tolstoy's conversion and his life's work, says Yoder, are rooted in "his ability to perceive the depths of human being and relating and to describe that perception dramatically." Tolstoy's resonance with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount allows him to "march against the stream of hostility drawn upon him by his new views" (ibid., 20). It reconfigures how the world appears and the self's relation to it.

The theme of conversion, power, and creativity appears repeatedly in the first three lectures. Gandhi underwent a resonant conversion when he read Tolstoy. Far more than specificities of Christian doctrine, Jesus, portraits of peasant life, or "even the notion of love of the enemy all by itself," it was "Tolstoy's readiness to hold . . . to a rejection of the dominant 'realistic worldview,' with its self-evident acceptance of the chain of violent causes and violent effects" that most held sway over Gandhi (*Nonviolence*

– *A Brief History*, 23). It was the resonance or energetic force of Tolstoy's movement beyond the multiplicative resonance of violence that most registered with Gandhi. This force provoked a conversion that moved him to articulate in word and deed a spiritual power he called "soul force" or, in Yoder's paraphrasing, the "power of truth as a force": "Gandhi's vision of the cosmos as a unity of spiritual powers, interwoven in an unbroken net of causation, made sense out of the notion that fasting or prayer or sexual continence, and above all the active renunciation of violence, could exert spiritual power . . . upon an adversary . . . to restore to a fuller community" (ibid., 24-25).

Gandhi underwent this force not as a single conversion to Jesus, but rather "in a pilgrimage of repeated conversion all through his life story" – "little conversions" provoked by readings, political events, and "living between cultures" (ibid., 24). Gandhi's power is the power of this repeatedly renewed resonance, to which he gave cosmological and political organizational expression – with Tolstoy, but far beyond him.

Just as the force of Tolstoy's conversion found resonance in Gandhi, Yoder points out that it was Martin Luther King, Jr.'s discovery of Gandhi that seems to have provoked a resonant "turning point" in King's "sense of mission." Before then, King was aware of neither the "theological power of [nonviolence's] rootage in the cross of Jesus Christ nor of the social power of organized resistance" (*Nonviolence – A Brief History,* 30). Yet King's conversion found resonance in a tradition and ecclesial body politics of the black Baptist church that was far different from Gandhi's majority culture Hinduism. In critical response to majority racism, the black Baptist polity "could find in every hamlet and on every city block a congregation" that engendered a whole way of life intertwining alternative modes of politics, economics, and worship "where countercultural consciousness and an alternative interpretation of social history could be maintained" (ibid., 32). Hence, the conversion to nonviolent action that passed from Gandhi to King found an extraordinarily rich context in which to proliferate.

However, this richness exceeds the more familiar "politics of Jesus" themes that are absolutely indispensable to it, and Yoder's account of this excess carefully emphasizes cultivated practices of resonant, frequently repeated conversion:

> As contrasted with other forms of Christianity, baptistic piety makes indispensable the personal, mature, and often dramatic religious decision of the individual. There is no cultic ritual which can be carried on around the altar independent of the believer's own participation. . . . Only personal conversion makes one a member of a community through adult baptism. The worship experience commemorates, renews, prolongs, and projects the drama of conversion into a series of renewed calls to decision and commitment. When the bus boycott movement broke out spontaneously[10] in Montgomery, the rallies held every evening in the churches were a simple transposition of the format of revival-preaching indigenous assemblies, which the participants were already accustomed to attending periodically, for the purpose of being newly awakened in their Christian commitment." (*Nonviolence – A Brief History,* 32)

King was a profoundly gifted speaker, and Yoder notes that such personal gifts are often indispensable aspects of powerful and creative nonviolent movements (see *War of the Lamb*, 159). Yet King's gift for resonance, rhetoric, and brilliant oratory were nurtured in the specific context of the black Baptist church, where many people practiced the arts of responding to and intensifying "the skills of the preacher, which are also a necessary part of Baptist leadership" (*Nonviolence – A Brief History,* 33). The preacher's resounding eloquence and the revival practice of the assemblies are co-constitutive and inextricably intertwined.[11]

IV

Yet, violence and vengeance are resonant too, and Baptist preaching and revivals often resound with both. How should we understand the relationships and differences between resonant affective energies that are constitutive aspects of Yoder's account of *both* the politics of Jesus *and* the politics of Lamech? And how does Yoder articulate a faith that one will reign over the other in a victory of the Lamb that expresses the "grain of the universe"? A key aspect of Yoder's response to this latter question concerns cultivating a *quality* of resonant energy that is a condition of the creative character and

overwhelming potential magnitude of peacemaking. The energetic spirit of peaceable love is crucial to this quality. Yet to understand Yoder here we must not jump too quickly into distinguishing between the energies of violence and those of peace, lest we miss one of Yoder's most remarkable ideas, namely that part of the distinctiveness of resonant peacemaking is born/e in relation to resonant vengeance.

Yoder's Jesus is repeatedly tempted: "The aura of reverence surrounding the passion story often keeps us from asking concretely what the temptation was in those last hours. Yet if we do ask, the answer is unavoidable: Jesus was still tempted to take the path of the Zealots, to use righteous revolutionary violence to drive the Romans from his country and renew the possibility for God's people to live according to God's law" (*Nonviolence – A Brief History,* 90). Such question-blocking reverence can blind us to the resonance between the energy of the peacemaker and the energy of mimetic violence. Such blindness in turn renders nonviolence innocuous:

> [We] . . . misunderstand the whole meaning of his work if [we] do not see the passion and zeal with which he saw himself to be called to proclaim the breaking in of God's sovereignty in matters of human justice and the beginning of a new order among men and women. If we are not tempted by the Zealot option as he was, then our renunciation of the Zealot means of revolutionary violence cannot mean what it meant for him. If we are passive, or quietist, or tired, or patient with the fallenness and oppressiveness of the world, we fail to see in him authentically the anointed one, the one who was to bring down the mighty from their thrones and exalt the lowly. (ibid., 91)

Consider this passage carefully. Jesus' nonviolent interaction will become *invisible* if his relationship to the Zealot temptation does not resonate with a similar temptation in each of us. When Yoder says that we will "misunderstand the whole meaning of [Jesus'] work," surely he has in mind the intensity, urgency, and activity of Jesus' life. Yet the most profound danger is that we will fail to understand the qualitative shift in resonant energy at the heart of the creative character of the peaceable kingdom – "the beginning of a new order among men and women" – its very possibility.

Many moderns construe creativity and genius in radically subjective fashion as a mysterious energy within a single self. While distinctive individual *charisms* – gifts – are crucial to Yoder's understanding of the world and political transformation, the possibility of such gifts coming into being, and being given, hinges upon the character of human interrelationships: they are born/e in the inter-world. Hence, in rejecting the Zealot temptation, at the most elemental level Jesus sought not atomistic, individual nonviolent gifts. Rather, the alternative was "the gathering of a new kind of people . . . a structured community best described by the name 'assembly' *(ecclesia)*," that articulates itself through dialogue, forgiveness, sharing, and de-stratifying hospitality (*Nonviolence – A Brief History,* 90). Such an assembly would be the bearer of manifold unique gifts capable of overcoming the multiplicative cycles of vengeance, and this would be achieved, paradoxically in part, by cultivating a distinctive relationship with the mimetic energies of violence.

To see and creatively become peacemakers, we must profoundly resonate until our last moments with mimetic temptations of violence. Hence, Yoder urges us not to be a culture "ashamed of its vengefulness" but rather to grant it "a deep anthropological legitimacy" (*War of the Lamb*, 33). Some elements of human aggressiveness are "fundamentally wholesome and ready to be used in giving power and structure to the reconstitutions of human community." Thus, "too much emphasis at the wrong time on giving in to others and loving your enemies is itself psychologically dangerous" for the development of individuals and communities (*Nonviolence – A Brief History*, 71).

Yet the proper uses, work, and place of this aggressive energy hinge upon an ecclesial context – an assembled people – that renounces violent action in order to create an ultimately far more resonant and thus more powerful form of holy engagement. "The firm renunciation of violence produces a context for creativity, whereas holding open the notion of violence as last resort [through merely tactical affirmations of nonviolence] removes that incentive" (*Nonviolence – A Brief History*, 47). Creative nonviolent interaction happens when the profound temptations to righteous violence are both deeply acknowledged and tapped, yet limited by energies and ethics of love as well as by institutions and practices of renouncing violent action. In cradling *both* these types of energy – and the conflict between them

– the assembly generates the politically energetic mixture and conditions for hyper-creative nonviolence. From one angle, Yoder conceives of this as a condition in which individuals and communities are fueled and driven toward creative responses to conflict, a kind of pressure cooker for political creativity capable of breaking out of the confines of a violent world. From another angle, he sees it as a condition of grace, a pressure cooker making us viscerally aware of cracks in the order of mimetic violence – cracks through which the in-breaking of grace happens.

However, the rhetoric of "cracks" may mislead us here. It may be better to imagine this assembly-engendered situation of "orchestrated conflict" (*Nonviolence – A Brief History*, 47) as one that is conducive to deep resonances through which newness is *both* immediately created in relationships within the pressure cooker *and* discerningly received from beyond in the form of grace. This articulates a vital, visceral, and often overlooked, dimension of what Yoder meant by "grain of the universe" – a grain powerfully realigned by resonant energies incarnated in the life and words of Jesus Christ. It adds sense to Yoder's claim, with Paul, that "Jesus chose the cross as an alternative social strategy of strength, not weakness" (*War of the Lamb*, 41). Such resonant grace is likely akin to what Yehuda Amichai evoked with the phrase "wild peace."

While Yoder was deeply attuned to the wild peacemaking energies of the call-and- response practices of the black Baptist church, such wild peace was inextricably linked in his view with a wild patience (ever-reforming itself in renewed receptivity to possibilities beyond violence) that carefully articulated a cruciform wild pragmatism (insofar as it wrought in-breaking newness into enduring institutionalized forms exemplified biblically in Jubilee). Yoder liked to distill historical narratives and lessons learned into lists of general import. On these lists were creative strategies from writing, sit-ins, boycotts, and marches to freedom rides, voter registration, anti-war actions, rituals of spiritual renewal, and more (see *Nonviolence – A Brief History*, 35-36; 46-48). Each event and the lessons drawn articulate vital aspects of the "politics of Jesus." The wild peace of acknowledged and tapped impulses and energies of violence that are ultimately renounced are, somewhat counter-intuitively, conditions for wild patience. Patience born/e otherwise is, Yoder suggests, too often akin to complacency and lacks the

intense resonant discernment of the ecclesia of wild patience through which the grace of unexpected gifts and possibilities for the politics of Jesus may be received. The vulnerable opening of wild patience draws significant power from the energies of vengeance that undergo qualitative transformation under conditions of the wild peace cultivated in relationship to them. These in turn give birth to pragmatic articulations of the body politic that are also wild, because they move beyond the domesticated assumptions of political life based on the necessity of violence.

V

Yoder writes repeatedly of how merely tactical nonviolence, which retains the prerogative of resorting to violence, greatly depletes the context for nonviolent creativity by holding open a pressure-releasing option that can be chosen at will. This is undoubtedly true, and it poses profoundly troubling questions for everyone who (like me) cannot quite imagine their way to lives unconditionally devoted to nonviolence. Yet a closer look at the history that Yoder draws upon to inform his views suggests an incredibly entangled relationship between nonviolent action and defensive violent practices that may complicate matters for an emerging politics of Jesus. Indeed, questions arising from this complex crystal of unwonted relations cast illuminations that should leave none untroubled.

If the Civil Rights Movement drew heavily on the image and practices of Christ's redemptive suffering, it equally drew on a rich, centuries-long tradition of self-defense in the black community. It is striking how matter-of-fact this recognition is, even among the most peaceful warriors such as Bob Moses, who years later wrote of how Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organizers in the early 1960s relied daily on the home bases of black folk across Mississippi who were heavily armed and, in keeping with a long tradition of survival, would shoot back when white vigilantes attacked.[12] The record across the American south is quite clear: every time the body of Christ tried to form its beloved community in any way that remotely sought to proclaim and practice a politics that would encroach upon white supremacy, a tradition involving intricate combinations of state-sanctioned and vigilante violence responded with lynchings, shootings,

burnings, bombings, beatings, rapes, drowning, and more. SNCC organizers and sympathizers would have been murdered upon arrival, had it not been for loaded guns in supporters' living rooms. These loaded guns had also played a role in holding open a modicum of trembling space in prior decades.[13]

Hence, though it is omitted from the narratives of many (including Yoder) who celebrate the nonviolent action of the US Civil Rights Movement, it is an inconvenient truth that – just as Yoder's articulation of resonant nonviolence is intertwined with energies of mimetic violence – the struggle for the Beloved Community was made possible by *both* the tradition of a politics of Jesus *and* the tradition of "negroes with guns" willing to use them in self-defense.[14] Paradoxically, the tradition of self-defense was indispensable for creating spaces where nonviolent interaction could be publically proclaimed, incarnated, and advanced. The successes of the Civil Rights Movement were due to an uneasy balancing act between these two traditions, and Jim Crow (state and local laws mandating racial segregation) would likely still be in place, were it not for the creative relational organizing made possible by this uneasy mixture that pushed back against a system of white supremacy ready to annihilate every trace of emergent resistance. And, strangely, it is doubtful that Yoder's resonant assembly of creative politics fueled by the conflict between temptations of the zealot and energetic commitments to nonviolence could have stitched itself together in Mississippi and Alabama otherwise.

In this context I don't know what it would mean – or how it could mean good news – to affirm that for many more generations, children should be born into the brutality of white supremacy in order to remain true to an image of nonviolence that would refuse this strange complicity with traditions of self-defense. I find Yoder compelling because in most cases he translates to and fro between "we do see Jesus" and arguments about worldly interaction that make sense to those, including me, who do not see Jesus in quite the same way. When I look at the history of the Civil Rights Movement, Yoder's arguments and efforts appear to be on more troubled ground.

Hence, looking into the tortured face of this difficult – even impossible – situation, how might people who are compelled by most of what Yoder writes, yet moved by a fuller reading of a history to question the

unconditional commitment to nonviolence, begin to articulate an alternative ethical-political movement by which nonviolence can appear, intensify, and expand the zones in which "the field must have it"? How might we envision an alternative with more capacity to resist the slippery slope toward unjust warfare that Yoder portrays? I have in mind a movement that advances creative practices of peacemaking and refuses to seek justice by violently reaching for what Yoder called the "handles of history." At the same time, however, this movement would not entirely refuse cultivating a tradition of defensive violence when impossible extremities of violent assault are the norm (I have in mind situations like Nazi Germany, where I find pacifist Dietrich Bonhoeffer's participation in a plot to assassinate Hitler exemplary).

A highly imperfect image of such a prophetic movement under severe conditions might be glimpsed from an instance in 1970 of a theatrical, prophetic, protest politics born of the tensely intertwining traditions of black gospel vision and self-defense. To the white folks in Oxford, North Carolina, who brutally murdered Henry Marrow under the pretext of a highly doubtful flirtatious comment to a white woman, he was just another worthless nigger. Yet to many black folks, his senseless murder and the usual lack of seriousness with which law enforcement responded was the straw that finally broke the back of all deference and ushered in a militant effort to bring down Jim Crow in all its forms (civil rights laws had made no difference in Oxford at the time).

One of the central events organized in response to the murder was a 50-mile march from Oxford into Raleigh, North Carolina. Tim Tyson, in *Blood Done Sign My Name*, describes the march as a product of negotiations amidst an ideologically fragmented movement ranging from pacifist preachers to militant youth and veterans from Vietnam who thought selective violence was part of what was necessary:

> About seventy marchers left Oxford . . . down the Jefferson Davis Highway behind a mule-drawn wagon. Atop the wagon sat Willie Mae Marrow, the bereaved widow, visibly pregnant with the dead man's third child, wearing a dark veil and holding one daughter on her lap while comforting another. "That was the symbolic part . . . ." The mule cart echoed the one that had

> hauled Dr. King's coffin through the streets of Atlanta two years earlier. The mule was a southern-inflected symbol of the fact that the humble Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey, and also of the menial labor that white supremacy had imposed upon black people; the black woman was "de mule uh de world", as Zora Neale Hurston once wrote . . . . A placard around the neck of the mule listed black uprisings that sounded the threat of retaliation: REMEMBER WATTS, DETROIT, NEWARK, OXFORD."[15]

Willie Mae Marrow had been receiving death threats; the openly-armed Ku Klux Klan had pledged to stop the march with violence; some whites circled the marchers in cars, firing pistols in the air; others leapt out of roadside trailers draped with Confederate flags, took up firing positions, yelled 'Hey niggers!" and let loose a few rounds. In no case did the marchers return fire, and the procession grew to nearly a thousand people by the time they arrived in Raleigh. Yet this is not to say that they did not feel the mighty temptation to resist, or that they were unprepared to do so if things became bloody:

> Despite the traditional songs and chants of the movement, which balanced the new Black Power anthems, the marchers were well armed. No one carried a weapon in plain view, but . . . marshal[s] kept their guns close at hand and out of sight. . . . "Ben[jamin Chavez] and them said it had to be nonviolent . . . but we all had our shit with us. That wagon with the mule had more guns on it than a damn army tank."[16]

There is no point in attempting to play out the many possible scenarios at this juncture, had things unfolded differently. The shape of the march itself was an amalgamation of differences – between those who were wedded to the gospel vision and those who cultivated varying degrees of militancy rooted in the tradition of self-defense – rather than the product of a deep consensus embodying one vision. Yet the image of the widow on the mule cart resonating with King's funeral resonating with Jesus moving into Jerusalem is worthy of serious reflection. It crystallizes the precarious and dangerous relationship between beloved community and defensive violence

to which I find myself called as a "least worse" response to situations of extreme violence.

In the image of this procession, the marchers performed an assembly that sought to mourn the dead, comfort the widow and children, seek restorative justice, and militantly transform the face of racist vengeful power toward beloved community. They incarnated a politics that embodied incredible restraint and wild patience. By hiding their guns in the wagon they led by taking life-threatening risks. By incarnating substantial vulnerability even as threats of retaliation hung from the head of the mule, they walked the talk of peacemaking. Yet the presence of guns reflects the long tradition of self-defense that was *also* crucial to the emergence of the movement in the preceding decade. The presence of guns reflects a limit that was necessary for the ecclesia to be more than a space of survival, consolation, and waiting through future centuries of bloody Jim and Jane Crow. The march suggests an ambition not to rule a world of force by force but to hold open a space to advance a radically democratic and pacific initiative without having one's children's, spouse's, and friends' skulls smashed and brains blown out for a misapprehended comment auguring the slightest transgression of apartheid. If the assembly was to become the insurgent body of Christ, it needed some respite from the endless murder which disassembled every hint of resistant organizing and relationship building. When in 1966 SNCC moved its voter registration campaign into arguably the most bloody bastion of racism in the US – Lowndes County, Alabama – they resonated with and extended the same tradition of tension between the gospel vision and self-defense in what became the beginning of the Black Panthers.[17]

We know how easy it is for this amalgam to spin itself insane. To one degree or another, it usually – probably always – does so. Yoder is right to argue that merely tactical nonviolence significantly attenuates the creative context through which the beloved community breaks in upon the violent cycles of history. While the march from Oxford to Raleigh was a profoundly creative incarnation of gospel vision, this creativity would have largely disappeared from the scene (at least on the part of those committed to firing back) had some of the bullets from white guns found the flesh of the marchers. Yoder is also right that this performance, a product of unstable compromise that I have temporarily crafted into a heuristic "position," greatly

risks being swept up in energies of resonant vengeance that overwhelm the best intentions of forbearance among its risk-taking leaders.

There is neither peace, comfort, nor confidence in the position toward which I lean, in the face of situations of most extreme violence, as the "least worse" response. Yet I am unable to discern these qualities in a politics of unconditional nonviolence in such situations either. Unconditional nonviolence risks being likely implicated in sustaining situations of extreme terror. What we have here is a mess.

Perhaps the best we can do is to act carefully with a profound awareness of the depth of the mess. The temptation to deny the underside of our politics is probably too much for any one – or any single type of politics – to bear. The impulse to elide tragedy – especially that in which we are implicated – is overwhelming for nearly all of us, as Iris Murdoch argued in such strong terms.[18]

Hence I would urge that we now *disaggregate* the position I constructed for heuristic purposes from an uneasy walk to Raleigh in order to salvage it. There are people unconditionally committed to nonviolence, and there are people strongly committed to nonviolence but not without limits. Perhaps we all need the difference, in order to wake each other up to the underside of our politics. Thus I am grateful for Yoder and Yoderians, not merely for what they may do that I may not, but for reminding me of how deep is the mess and how resonant are the risks of even highly restrained defensive violence. Perhaps in the tensions between the energies and risks of unconditional nonviolence, on the one hand, and those that come with acknowledging limits in the form of defense in extremity, on the other, we can maintain an agonistic engagement through which we might become less bad when faced with the worst. Perhaps?

> *Only the voice that rises at the end of a question*
> *still rises above the world and hangs there,*
> *even if it was made by mortar shells, like a ripped flag,*
> *like a mutilated cloud.*
>
> – Yehuda Amichai[19]

Notes

[1] Yehuda Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, ed. and trans. Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1996). Years ago, this poem was brought to my attention by Peter Dula.

[2] Leonard Cohen, "Democracy," on *The Future*, Stranger Music Inc. (BMI), 1992.

[3] John Howard Yoder, *Nonviolence – A Brief History: The Warsaw Lectures*, ed. Paul Martens, Matthew Porter, and Myles Werntz (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2010). 78. Hereafter cited in parentheses in the text as *Nonviolence – A Brief History.*

[4] See "The Wild Patience of John Howard Yoder" in Romand Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics: Reflections for the Possibility of Democracy* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2005).

[5] John Howard Yoder, *The War of the Lamb: The Ethics of Nonviolence and Peacemaking*, ed. Mark Thiessen Nation, Glen Stassen, and Matt Hamsher (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009). Hereafter cited in parentheses in the text as *War of the Lamb.*

[6] The concept of "resonant causality," which dates back to 19th-century theoretical physicist Henri Poincaré, is central to the views of Nobel Prize-winning theoretical chemist Ilya Prigogine, whose *The End of Certainty: Time, Chaos, and New Laws of Nature* (New York: The Free Press, 1996) is revolutionizing science theory. Political theorist William Connolly makes provocative use of the concept in *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2008), drawing on chaos theory, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and others. "Resonant causality," for Connolly, is a form of causality in which "diverse elements infiltrate each other, metabolizing into a moving complex." Elements "slide and blend into one another, though each also retains a modicum of independence from the others." It is causation as "resonance between elements that become fused to a considerable degree." See *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*, 39. For a fuller discussion of resonance and receptivity, see my "The Neuropolitical *Habitus* of Resonant Receptivity Democracy" in *Neuroscience and Political Theory*, ed. Frank VanderValk (New York: Routledge Press, forthcoming 2012).

[7] John Howard Yoder, review of *The Scapegoat* by René Girard in *Religion and Literature* 19.3 (Fall 1986): 89-92.

[8] The notion of "resonance machine" is developed throughout Connolly's *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*. It refers to multiplicative relationships of energetic spiritual affinity across numerous spheres of contemporary life, from capitalism and right-wing fundamentalism, to NASCAR and militarism – particularly amplified in right-wing media domains such as FOX News.

[9] Glen Stassen is absolutely right when he suggests, in his 'Introduction" to *War of the Lamb*, that the third chapter (nearly identical to the first lecture in *Nonviolence*) provides an "illuminating flash" in which we find that "much of the heart of Yoder's own faith and vision are here" (16).

[10] "Broke out spontaneously" is, of course, a myth that conceals many layers of preparation and long-term organizing.

[11] See, for example, Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Word that Moved America* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995).

[12] Robert P. Moses and Charles E. Cobb Jr., *Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).
[13] Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1995).
[14] Timothy B. Tyson, *Blood Done Sign My Name: A True Story* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).
[15] Ibid., 212.
[16] Ibid., 213.
[17] Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).
[18] Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), especially "Comic and Tragic."
[19] This poem was brought to my attention by Lia Haro. See Yehuda Amichai, "Look: Thoughts and Dreams" in *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, 7.

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