the THIRD HARMONY

NONVIOLENCE

and

THE NEW STORY
OF HUMAN NATURE

MICHAEL N. NAGLER

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Chapter One

The Power of Story

On television, the internet, in schools, and everywhere in the cultural apparatus people are encouraged to consume, enjoy, think primarily of themselves, and remain obedient to the ongoing order.

—Henry Targ

Tell me who writes the stories of a society and I don't need to know who makes the laws.

—George Gerbner

n the day she will never forget, Antoinette Tuff was sitting in for the receptionist, who was out sick, at the front desk of Ronald E. McNair Discovery Learning Academy in Decatur, Georgia. She hadn't been on the job very long when a young man, obviously distraught, slipped past the security gate brandishing an assault rifle and a backpack stuffed with five hundred rounds of ammunition.

"This is real," he announced to the terrified staff. "Call 911; we are all going to die today."

It was just fourteen months since Adam Lanza had gotten into Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, and killed twenty children.

Tuff was terrified. But not just for herself; she was thinking about her "babies"—McNair's 870 young students. The young man, Michael Brandon Hill, age twenty, soon barricaded himself in the front office, with Tuff and a coworker—essentially hostages. He fired off one shot into the floor and several more at the police officers who had turned up outside. They returned fire. No one was hurt—so far. Mastering her terror, Tuff started talking to Hill, reassuring him, sharing his pain. Slowly, she began to reach him, coaxing him to give up: "It's going to be all right, sweetie," she tells Hill at one point in the 911 recording. "I just want you to know I love you, though, OK? And I'm proud of you. That's a good thing that you're just giving up, and don't worry about it. We all go through something in life."

She kept reassuring him, sharing that she, too, was going through a hard time, and—an important move in dealing with distraught people—giving him agency: "Tell me when you're ready for me to call in the police."

After an extremely tense hour (which must have seemed much longer), she got Hill to put his assault rifle down on her desk, lie face down on the floor, and give her permission to call in the police. And in they stormed, screaming orders at the young man who was already lying face down on the floor with his hands behind his back, waiting to be taken.

"Let me tell you something, babe," she tells the 911 dispatcher when it's all over. "I've never been so scared all the days of my life. Oh, Jesus." But she saved 870 children—and

Hill, and herself, and others, doubtless including some police officers.

There was a fair amount of coverage of her heroic action, including her own book, Prepared for a Purpose: The Inspiring True Story of How One Woman Saved an Atlanta School Under Siege, and a Lifetime movie, Faith Under Fire, though at the time one channel pulled the story because "no one was killed"! But to my knowledge no one, journalist or other, got the critical lesson from this incident. I'm not referring to the fact that our country is flooded with horrific weapons and that they're readily available to anyone bent on using them, of whom we have more than our share. It's an even more important, more fundamental lesson: there were, in effect, two different systems in place to protect McNair, based on two different concepts of humanity. One system consisted of the emergency phone line, a metal-detecting security door, and SWAT teams. That system completely failed. Hill slipped in behind a teacher who was cleared to enter; the police were actually, in this case, worse than useless. When they showed up, Hill panicked and started shooting at them, almost wrecking everything Tuff was trying to do. Happily, she did regain control of the situation.

So the other system, if you will, was Antoinette Tuff. A good name; but who was she? Not a saint, not a seasoned or in any way a trained nonviolence activist. An ordinary person; though it almost seems, as she explains in her book, that life had been preparing her for that moment. She had recently been through her own adversities, which gave her something she could share with Hill to break through his terrible isolation. Most importantly, her minister had taught her something called grounding that she was relying on intensely, along with praying silently the whole time of the incident (including

praying for Hill!). She had the practice of taking fifteen minutes a day to try to still her mind—a simple, unstructured form of meditation. And of course, she was passionately concerned about the children.

All this enabled her to stay calm enough not only to try to understand the gunman, but also to get him to relate to her. "I just started telling him stories," she said—especially a story about a tragedy in her own life. "I let him know what was going on with me and that it would be OK."

A very similar incident had taken place fifteen years earlier, when an ER nurse named Joan Black was suddenly confronted by a distraught woman with a gun who burst into her emergency room gunning for another nurse she thought was having an affair with her husband. That situation also ended without bloodshed, and once again, the remarkable thing is that without either of the persuaders having any particular training for such emergencies—acting instinctively, it would seem—they seem to be following the same script:

- You see the distraught person as a suffering person, not a threat or a monster: Tuff: "He was really a hurtin' young man; I started praying for him. I just told him that I love him." This is almost exactly what Joan Black said: "I saw a sick person and had to take care of her."
- You show him he is not alone in his grief: Black: "Everybody has pain in their life"; Tuff: "I almost committed suicide when my husband left me last year." What you're doing here is the crucial part: overcoming the distraught person's alienation.

- You offer "this too shall pass": "You don't have to die today,"
 Tuff said. "Life will still bring about turns, but we can learn from it."
- You buck him up. In both cases, the person is desperate for self-esteem and dignity. Tuff (probably crucially):
 "You're a good person, I love you. I'm proud of you."
 Giving the person agency, not threatening or trying to control him or her, is also critical.

And then:

You deliver the exhortation: Black: "We can work it out"; Tuff: "You'll be OK; put the guns down and tell me when I can buzz in the police."

As I pointed out in *Search*, this repeated pattern is not a coincidence. It was recognized long ago as an innate pattern of human behavior, something that you could reinforce through training and institutionalize by encoding it in your culture. It was in fact codified thousands of years ago, by the Greeks and after them the Romans, who called it a consolatio and taught it to budding orators. But alas, the two cases of Antoinette Tuff and Joan Black have another feature in common: there was no recognition, no institutionalization; nothing changed. And the killings go on. In Tuff's case, as we've seen, one network actually spiked the story because no one was killed—which you might have thought was the whole point! In Black's case, journalists quoted her as saying (as I suspect they got her to say) "That was the stupidest thing I've done in my life." In neither case did we hear anyone say, "Wow, what just happened? Is there something here we could use in other similar situations?"

Countless people have found themselves using a technique more or less like this one, again more or less spontaneously. Maybe you are among them. Neither Antoinette Tuff nor Joan Black was all that extraordinary. They represent a human potential, a potential that could be developed, institutionalized, educated for—and put to work saving us from the plague of violence. And hardly anyone got it.

STORY AND CULTURE

My struggle to start a peace studies program at Berkeley was long and often frustrating, but in the course of it I got to know a number of interesting colleagues from departments other than my own fields of comparative literature and classics. One of them, whom I still think of with fondness and admiration, was Ernie Haas. Ernie, a holocaust refugee, had become one of the most distinguished figures we had in political science and international relations (IR). He was one of the few doing IR at Berkeley, and I was told he was the go-to person for a peace project like what I had in mind. I assumed it was because of what he had been through, and because he had a strong enough reputation that he could risk being associated with such a quaint issue as peace. He had a gruff exterior and was a bit startled—not to say brusque—when I called him up and broached the idea of a program in peace studies, but he came around soon enough, and we became friends. So it was with no small excitement that I invited him out for lunch one day to share with him what I thought then, and still think today, was the hottest idea in peace development: Third Party Nonviolent Intervention (TPNI, recently renamed Unarmed Civilian Peacekeeping, or UCP). We had had a lot of good talks before, and I must admit I felt no small pride that I'd be

the one to tell the famous Ernie Haas about this new development, which I thought he'd find nothing short of amazing. And he did.

There are several groups doing it, I explained. Peace Brigades International, Christian Peacemaker Teams, and now the big push for a worldwide service, Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP). They give people some basic training in nonviolence and in local skills and send them into some of the world's most dangerous conflicts (think Sri Lanka, South Sudan, even Syria!). When on the ground, working with local organizations, one of the things they commonly do is simple but effective: round-the-clock accompaniment of threatened people, often human rights workers. They also do rumor abatement, serve as go-betweens, and provide other good offices. NP has helped broker a peace agreement in Mindanao and rescued child soldiers in Sri Lanka.

"They're saving lives," I explained, "and so far—knock wood—no one's been hurt doing it." (Incidentally, there are still only one or two casualties, twenty years on.)

In no time Ernie began to grasp the possibility I was hinting at: that if taken to scale, this practice could plausibly be a substitute for war. "That's fascinating, Mike, just fascinating."

Pleased to no end, I proposed the next logical step: "Ernie, let's get some of your colleagues together for a symposium and I can fill them in, too."

"No," he said.

"Excuse me?" I was so nonplussed that it took a few days for me to call and ask him why not. He paused for a moment, and then gave me a very straight and telling answer that I remember to this day: "It's not their culture."

I knew he was absolutely right, and that it was not good news. How on earth do you get people to change their culture?

It turns out I was not the only one asking that question. Here and there, in academia and elsewhere, people were saying, as I was, this has to change. If our culture is killing us, we can't simply shrug it off and hope for the best. But again, how do you change a culture? Fortunately, there's a way to focus the question that makes it more doable, albeit still with some interesting challenges. While a culture is made up of many habits and practices, every culture has at its core a *defining narrative*. A story, as we've been saying, about the universe and human nature. Nowadays we are beginning to recognize that our story may be the biggest problem of our time.

"We live by story—and the story we live by today is driving our species to extinction." ¹⁴

The British philosopher Mary Midgley—one of the best thinkers of our generation, for my money—explains perfectly why my colleagues, or journalists, or anyone for that matter, are asleep at the switch: "Most people who follow current events at all do now grasp ... that there is a danger and they want to do something about it. But we don't have the concepts ready to express this need"15 (my emphasis). Midgley is referring here to the danger of environmental collapse, but the same observation would apply to any dimension of the crisis. A given culture's defining narrative, or story, is built on a particular set of concepts. Together they make up a coherent narrative—and exclude others. The controlling narrative still in place today has it that we are separate material beings in a random material universe. How are we to grasp the enormous tragedy of throwing off the natural balance of the earth we're living on? If power grows out of the barrel of a gun, how can

we understand people overcoming violence precisely because they *don't* have guns? As Midgley says, we simply don't have the concepts—the conceptual grammar, if you will—to grasp these things.

The problem, in other words, is by no means confined to Ernie's colleagues. Being political science professionals did not exempt them from being constrained by a finite set of assumptions about reality that has now become dangerously inadequate. For the human project to regain its forward momentum—and without that, its very survival is in doubt—those assumptions need to be challenged, maybe discarded, and replaced with new ones.

In America and other industrial countries we have seen the emergence of groups—some large, some small; some benign, but some quite dangerous—with strange, often pathetic belief systems that play on the human need for meaning that is not met by the old story. Followers of extremist religious sects present threatening examples. Bill Moyers referred to one during his acceptance speech for the Global Environment Citizen Award: "These true believers subscribe to a fantastical theology concocted in the nineteenth century by a couple of immigrant preachers who took disparate passages from the Bible and wove them into a narrative that has captivated the imagination of millions of Americans. One of the biggest changes in politics in my lifetime is that the delusional is no longer marginal."¹⁶

Now, these true believers are of course outliers, a lunatic fringe, like people who go into a school with an automatic rifle or randomly shoot into a crowd at a concert; but sometimes extremists can tell us something we all need to think about. Do they not tell us something about the far larger number

who believe—despite growing evidence, scientific and observable by anyone—that global warming is either not happening or not caused by the burning up of fossil fuels that had lain untouched in the earth for millions of years? Or who believe, in the face of growing scientific evidence, ancient tradition, and personal experience, that we are mere objects in a world without spirit or meaning?

FLIPPING EVERYTHING

Nonviolent advocates today have a colorful term for the kind of transformation Antoinette Tuff pulled off at McNair on that fateful day: *flipping the script*. Michael Hill walked in harboring the scenario "I am a deranged killer and I'm going to massacre children." Tuff held up a completely different one: "No, you are a valued human being who needs help, and you're going to turn yourself in." Hill's opening gambit said, "You are terrified." Tuff countered, "No, I see the human being in you underneath that mask." We'll meet more examples as we go on, and many more can be made to happen far earlier in the conflict process, long before the resisters have to face such a life-or-death emergency.

Arno Michaelis was an extremely violent leader of white supremacist organizations that terrorized people of color, among others, in his native Wisconsin. A member of one of the organizations he'd founded went into a Sikh temple, or gurudwara, in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, and shot ten people, six fatally, in August 2012. But by that time Arno himself had completely turned around, thanks to the birth of his daughter and his encounter with a series of people he was supposed to hate who returned his hatred with understanding, compassion, respect—and a refusal to be cowed. At a talk in Santa Rosa

seven years after the Wisconsin massacre—when he'd become friends for life with Pardeep Kaleka, who lost his father in that crime—Michaelis said these people had "treated me as a human being even though I refused to acknowledge their humanity. They refused to comply with my hostility."

What we want to do now, individually and together, is refuse to comply with the underlying story that told Arno Michaelis, Michael Hill, and so many others they were separate, isolated, fragments whose only outlet for their anger was violence. We will no longer comply with the underlying story of materialism, separateness, and helpless resignation; we will change it to one of evolving spirituality, creativity, and unity. We have to flip the culture.

When you look at virtually any of the major dysfunctions in our current world—not to blame but to understand and, having understood, to cure—one clue we can pick up from Gandhi, among others, is how he regarded truth and nonviolence as practically synonymous, as two aspects of the same reality. We have so much violence because we have so little truth. And this insight points us to a very practical way we can get our hands on the wheel and start to turn this cultural paradigm around. Here's what I mean.

I was as surprised as anyone to learn that those of us who live in cities of any size, which means the great majority of us, are being exposed to somewhere between three and five thousand commercial messages *a day*. ¹⁷ (In most of the studies that produce these findings, the presenters use them as a reason the reader should advertise with them!) That means we're being subjected to a relentless pounding by messages not aimed at helping us think critically—quite the contrary. Advertisers would quickly go out of business if they

said "We'd love you to buy our product, but have no idea how it stacks up with the others on the market, and after all, it may not be right for you." Among those thousands it must be several times a week that we read or hear "scientific studies show" or "dentists agree," or "voted best" whatever, and we know perfectly well there is no such study or no such survey. We pay no conscious attention to the contradiction, but unfortunately that doesn't mean these messages don't land somewhere in our consciousness. If they did not, advertising would not be a multi-billion-dollar-a-year industry.

I'll mention just two of the many historical studies of how we got here: Neil Postman's 1985 book Amusing Ourselves to Death, describing how journalism shifted its focus from instructing to entertaining over the last century through the availability of long-distance technologies, and the BBC's six-part documentary Century of the Self—devastating, but essential viewing. It describes how Sigmund Freud's nephew Edward Bernays promoted his famous uncle's discovery of unconscious drives. Recognizing how powerful they would be for manipulating people (and not recognizing that this is a terrible thing to do), Bernays became rich selling the idea to corporations, giving us the kind of advertising we're subjected to today. The film shows another group that quickly caught on: the budding Nazi movement in Germany. (Both Freud and Bernays were Jewish.) Our connection to reality has been compromised by this advertising barrage, and that has had a harmful impact on everything from our personal to our political freedom.

With Antoinette Tuff and Joan Black we caught a glimpse of nonviolent power that probably surprised even the women who wielded it, as it escaped the understanding of the few media reporting them. You'd think that when nonviolence surfaces on a large scale it's harder to ignore, but a wrong lens is a wrong lens. I've mentioned mass incarceration; the United States, with roughly 5 percent of the world's population, confines 25 percent of the world's prisoners: 2.3 million people, disproportionately people of color. Aside from its cruelty, expense, and incalculable damage to the human spirit, the signal feature of this retributive justice is that *it doesn't work*; whereas the alternative (restorative justice) works beautifully. How? Because it's based on sound principles and a realistic image of the human being. Nurse Joan Black, in the episode I just cited, saw not a distraught woman but a patient who needed help, just as in restorative justice you try to see the offender as, to cite David Downes again, a thinking and feeling fellow human being. What you see determines what you do.

Restorative practices are catching on in communities and schools across the country and more so in Europe. Indigenous cultures have been using them forever. If we could pull off this great shift in vision and story, they would indeed become the norm here as well.

Once you realize that nonviolence is a kind of pervasive energy, a fundamental principle, it's not hard to also see how it could be extended beyond the domestic world to the larger and now equally distressed world of international conflict. For example, Russia has been dealing with a worsening situation in Chechnya that's been dragging on since 1994. To deal with the Chechen insurrection on Chechnya's eastern border, the Russians have taken to going after the families of insurgents (aka freedom fighters). With this tactic, there can be short-term results, but I wouldn't call it success. You can prevent some episodes of violence at the moment, but, according

to Ekaterina Sokirianskaia, an analyst at the International Crisis Group, this is radicalizing whole communities. As a senior military person observed about our war in Iraq in the mid-2000's, we're making terrorists faster than we can kill them. Both Russians and Americans who support this are caught by the same mistake: seeing people as not people. (These are the exact words one military person used when I asked him—rather unfairly, I admit—"How do you feel about killing people?") It is not Russians' culture to see Chechens, insurgents, terrorists, or what have you as people with a grievance that we could address by the proven means of conflict resolution—only as enemies.

While we're at it, let's go on to the climactic folly of our time: the progressive degradation of our planet's ability to sustain life. (I purposely avoid the term "environment"; it is weak and uninspiring, and it posits a gulf between us and nature that is part of the problem, not the solution.) In the face of the fires and floods happening worldwide, the already-disappeared island nations and monster storms, there are people, even some governments, coming up with a raft of alternative practices we need to adopt in the fields of energy, transportation, and lifestyle. My friend and neighbor Albert Straus, who operates the first fully organic dairy west of the Mississippi right here in Marin County, uses an anaerobic methane digester to convert animal waste (which otherwise generates dangerous levels of methane) into electricity. Straus and a local mechanic developed the first completely electric truck to be run on manure power!¹⁹ We need innovations like this to oversweep the world.

A recent observation by journalist Scott Gilmore sheds some light on just how the prevailing story inhibits our imaginations.

Gilmore was reporting on a remarkable moment in April 2018 when a Toronto policeman confronted a man who had just deliberately driven his van into a crowd, killing and injuring several people. The man made as if to draw a gun on the officer and shouted "I have a gun!" (It later emerged that he wanted to get himself killed.) But the officer calmly said "I don't care," and walked up to him and took him in without incident. Gilmore explained his perspective: "I am paid to explain things and sound confident doing so. But I honestly don't know what to make of this terrifying, remarkable moment. We kill each other out of hate, or fear, or ignorance, or duty. Sadly, we understand this instinct well. This is the dark side of humanity . . ." Interestingly, Gilmore actually *does* know what to say and goes on to say it: "But there is light inside us too. We also possess the instinct to keep each other alive."20 The journalist in Gilmore made him pretend not to know we have positive drives. It forced him to stay within the confines of the official story of who we are, separate beings in a basically meaningless, competitive universe beset by scarcity, and there is little or nothing we can do about this. But Gilmore does add, "This part of us can be more difficult to understand. But it deserves our devotion much more than the act of killing does."

Thinking that we're material objects burdens us with anxiety to consume more than we need of the earth's (and one another's) material resources. Thinking that we're separate from one another condemns us to live in competition, and ultimately to violence in its many forms, despite the proven alternatives. Thinking that we don't have inner resources prevents us from dealing with the former two.

In what I've called the new story community, we frequently encounter these words from one of our pioneers, Thomas

Berry, who coined the term "new story": "The deepest crises experienced by any society are those moments of change when the story becomes inadequate for meeting the survival demands of a present situation."²¹

The old story completely fails to account for the most characteristic, most important, and most precious parts of who we are: love, faith, trust, and the desire for community, peace, and well-being. Some, abhorring this vacuum, grasp at fantastical beliefs to give them at least some sense of meaning and purpose—including those extremists who have done to Islam what rapturists, white supremacists, and others have done to Christianity. A false sense of meaning is preferable to none at all. That is why our working model of the world and what or who we are within it is much more than a philosophical choice. In a revealing documentary on the global arms trade called The Shadow World, director Johan Grimonprez juxtaposes three brief, compelling interviews. Prince M. ibn Salman of Saudi Arabia, closely followed by economist Milton Friedman both say, in their own language, well, that's just human nature. The prince even projects his inhuman behavior onto heaven! Aware at some level of consciousness that what we're doing is wrong, we project our iniquities onto the universe in an attempt to justify them, which ultimately doesn't work (somewhere in our minds we know what we're doing) and makes the world to that extent a more demoralizing place for everyone. But then, as the film goes on, an Indian journalist resoundingly says no. We are called to something much higher. The system is beginning to crack.

It's said that when Harriet Tubman woke up one morning in nineteenth-century Maryland and said to herself, *I* am not a slave, it changed history. Fleeing to freedom in

Pennsylvania, she returned to the slave states thirteen times to free many other individuals and families through the underground railroad. By rejecting the identity her "owners" tried to impose on her and claiming her ultimate identity as a thinking and feeling human being, she lifted the human image for all of us. This undoubtedly influenced the civil rights movement, and it can influence *us* to reject what Emerson called the "master idea still reigning in the minds of many persons" that we are separate from one another and the rest of life, a plaything of blind forces, bound to seek fulfillment in the physical world, independently of—if not in opposition to—the fulfillment of others. This is where we can most effectively apply the levers of change.

About the Author

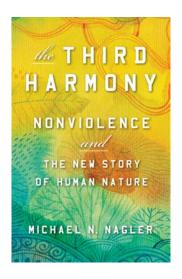


Michael N. Nagler, PhD, is professor emeritus of classics and comparative literature at UC Berkeley, where he founded the Peace and Conflict Studies Program and taught courses on non-violence and meditation and a seminar on the meaning

of life. He is president of the Metta Center for Nonviolence and also author of *The Search for a Nonviolent Future* (Island Press, 2004) and *The Nonviolence Handbook* (Berrett-Koehler, 2014). Among other awards, in 2007 Michael received the Jamnalal Bajaj International Award for Promoting Gandhian Values Outside India. He has spoken for the UN, the U.S. Institute of Peace, and many academic and public venues for over thirty years. His latest effort, the four-part Third Harmony Project, consists of this book, a documentary film, a board game, and a multiyear cross-media campaign all designed to get nonviolence and the new story into public awareness. He has lived at the Blue Mountain Center of Meditation's ashram in Northern California since 1970.

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