HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL OVERVIEW OF NONVIOLENT SOCIAL CHANGE

Why do we obey?

To whom or to what do we owe our ultimate allegiance?

- How we answer those questions will determine to a large part how we live our lives and what forms our resistance to injustice will take.
- When considering civil disobedience it is important to understand the theory and rich history of direct action.

The following are a few brief points that help to put our present day actions into perspective.

1. All those who govern derive their power from the consent of the governed
Obedience is at the heart of political power. This is true whether the government is a dictatorship or a form of democracy. Those in power depend upon the submission or consent of the citizenry, which can be achieved through terror, subtle forms of manipulation, or agreement.

2. People can withdraw their consent. Obedience in not inevitable. History is filled with examples of people organizing to challenge the existing law and government, committing acts of civil disobedience for the sake of justice and the higher moral good. During the Second World War when the Nazi forces occupied Norway they told the Norwegian teachers that they had to teach Nazism in the schools. The teachers refused and the men were put into concentration camps in the brutally cold north where they endured starvation, cold and torture. They never gave in and their witness empowered the whole Norwegian population. The Nazi regime finally allowed them to return to their homes and teach whatever they wanted.

3. It is not punishment that keeps people obedient but fear of punishment.
Intimidation is often the first line of defense for those in power. Intimidation works to the extent that it invokes fear in the populace. Resistance to unjust law and authority depends upon overcoming-personal fears. The non-violent resister is more concerned about what will happen to the oppressed if the unjust situation continues than what will happen to her/him in the process of changing it. Thus, the non-violent resister becomes engaged in changing history by overcoming fear, apathy and neutrality. Even Nazi Germany, ruled with Gestapo forces in the streets, did not intimidate the wives of approximately 600 men who were arrested in one of the last round ups of Jews. The women refused to just remain in their homes and wait. They went to the square in front of where the men were being jailed. They protested and waved to the men calling upon the Gestapo to free them. Machine gun fire could have killed every protester in the square. They persisted and the Nazis released the men. This example is not to say that Hitler could have been overthrown by totally non-violent actions. It does point, though, to the importance of refusing to allow our fears to immobilize us in the face of greater physical power.

4. Humanity has only progressed through conflict and struggle. Most of the civil rights we enjoy today were not handed down by the founders of our country but were fought for and won through acts of protest and resistance. The eight-hour day, minimum wage, the right to organize and bargain collectively, worker's compensation, civil rights for blacks, voting rights for women were all won in the streets long before Congress enacted them into law. Frederick Douglas said, "The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of struggle. If
there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are those who want crops without plowing up the ground. The struggle may be a physical one or a moral one or both, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."

5. Law is a human construct. Those in power want us to consider law as sacred and inviolate. But law is human and subject to the race, class and sex biases prevalent in the culture. At their best laws seek to serve justice; at their worst they serve the narrow interests of wealthy elites. We only have to look at the composition of the U.S. Senate, which is all white and almost all male, many of whom are millionaires, to see that some groups are more represented than others.

To hold up law as sacred is idolatry. Justice is sacred but not law. When law does not serve justice, law should be disobeyed. Henry David wrote not only of the right of civil disobedience but its duty. His famous tax protest was occasioned by the Mexican War, one of the first U.S. wars of empire building.

At the Nuremburg Trials, the International Tribunal said that Adolf Eichmann and other Nazi war criminals could not use the defense that they were only obeying orders. They stated that individuals must use their own consciences in deciding whether to obey superiors.

Laws are constantly changing and being interpreted. Every day lawyers carry an armload of briefs into court to argue a favorable interpretation of a law for their client. Historically unjust laws have been changed through direct action not legislation.

— It was once legal to own slaves and those who harbored runaways were considered criminals prosecuted under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.
— It was once legal to keep women from voting.
— It was once perfectly legal to keep blacks in the back of the bus and refuse to serve them at lunch counters.

Organized resistance and civil disobedience changed those laws, even though those in authority arrested activist leaders and participants. Alice Paul and other leaders of the Women's Movement in the early 1900's picketed the White House (which was illegal at the time) were arrested, went on hunger strikes in Washington D.C. prisons and were forced fed by the jail guards. Soon after their militancy Congress passed the Constitutional Amendment granting women the right to vote. Some considered their actions too militant and that they would alienate those who they were trying to persuade but just the opposite happened.

There are many claims on our life — family, work, personal needs. What claims our life at its deepest level will determine who or what we obey and to whom or what we will ultimately pay allegiance. Moral claims may take a variety of forms — a commitment to justice, the common good, life, the people of Central America, God. How clear we are about those ideals and how we integrate them into our lives will determine what form our resistance will take.

People can claim history. We often believe it is the domain of presidents, kings and statesman because that is what we were taught. But there is a hidden history of people organizing and taking control of their lives and their culture. As Howard Zinn writes, "If history is to be creative, to anticipate a possible future without denying the past it should—emphasize new possibilities by disclosing hidden episodes of the past when, even in brief flashes, people showed their ability to resist, join together, occasionally to win.

This is again a time when people are showing their willingness to resist, join together and
make history.