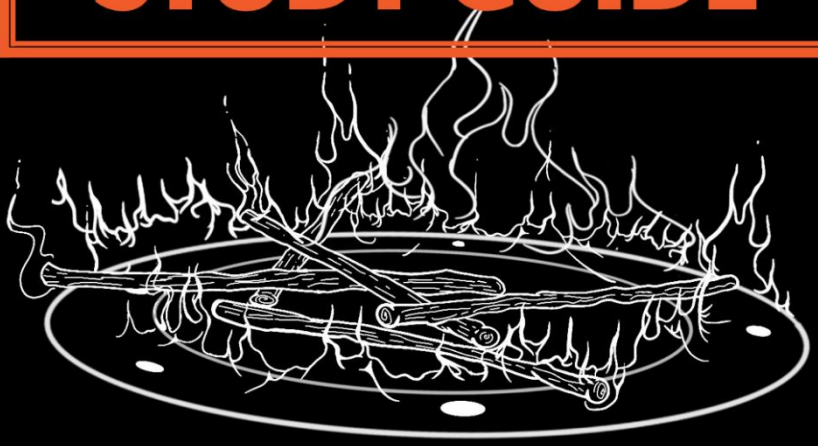
Struggling with (Non)violence

STUDY GUIDE



Julie Marie Todd

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Author: Julie Marie Todd

Struggling with (Non)violence
is available for purchase at https://justjulie.me/publications

The following guide offers questions for reflection for each section/chapter of the book.

You may use the questions ahead of time to prepare for encountering the content and as prompts for personal reflection, journaling, or group discussion.

I highly recommend this book be read in a group in order to digest the concepts and to embody the book's emphasis on collective transformation.

The individuals interviewed for the book are:

Rita "Bo" Brown (B♀)	Ward Churchill	John Dear	Vincent Harding
Dolores Huerta	Derrick Jensen	Kathy Kelly	Alice Lynd
Staughton Lynd	Katherine Power	Sarah Schulman	Akinyele Umoja

Information about these scholar-activists can be found in the Appendix, pp. 223-228. The bibliography provides a good starting point for references by each individual. There is a world of information about them in video format on the internet. Such extended research will enhance your comprehension of their viewpoints, which are far beyond the presenting matter of the book: (non)violence.

Here are some additional practices for reading and/or discussing this book:

- Dr. Vincent Harding started his classes, lectures, and conversations with music from the Southern movement for Black freedom. Find some protest and freedom songs from inside or outside of your tradition. Listen to this music before you begin your reading, writing, and conversation.
- Take time to name and honor individuals and movements that have influenced you and your community as practitioners of change for a just world and liberated planet.
- The guide provides one quotation per chapter for special consideration. Consider highlighting additional quotations from the author and interviewees as points of reflection and discussion.
- Review your daily life for acts of violence and (non)violence, on an individual and/or collective basis. Write them down or share them in some form as an act of accountability.

If you find the book meaningful and helpful to you as an individual or group, please consider writing a book review and forward it to the author at justjulietodd@gmail.com.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS/PREFACE/OVERVIEW

- As you start reading the book, how do you describe your belief about violence and (non)violence for social change?
- As you begin reading, what are the assumptions you bring about violence and (non)violence?
- As you begin, what is your position for or against violence for social change? Is violence ever warranted? When, and why?
- What were you raised to believe about violence and (non)violence? What are some of the factors that have shaped your views over time (upbringing, religion, regional or national history and culture, life experiences, mentors, military training)?
- Why does Todd mark off the prefix "non" with parentheses in writing the word (non)violence?
- What kinds of questions did the opening material in the book bring up for you?
- What is one of the ideas from the first part of the book that stands out to you?
- If a commitment to (non)violence is important to you, what is one way that you can practice (non)violence that takes you out of your comfort zone (p. 7)?
- How do you respond to Todd's ideas in the following quotation (pp. 6-7):

> Beverly Harrison provocatively suggests there is no such thing as (non)violence. It is not my intention to argue against (non)violence. Certainly (non)violence in practice not only exists but has arguably been a powerful force of positive, progressive social change in modern historical memory. Some argue that the problem is not white, Christian (non)violence but white, Christian violence. The particular suspicion I bring is that the white, liberal Christian discourse and practice of (non)violence has to some extent served to obscure the operation of political and economic power and violence. Keeping these processes hidden maintains the violence and privilege of those in power, thereby undermining fundamental social transformation. Therefore, both the practice and the outcome of (non)violence constitute a kind of comfort zone where we demand change, but rarely have to reckon with the profound consequences of the change we seek, should we achieve it. I have desired to discover the ways in which my suspicion was both true and false, as well as any ways it is true or false. From my perspective as a white, middle-class, Christian woman in the U.S. whose own commitment to (non)violence was shaped by this social location, in practice Christian (non)violence has been neither sufficiently self-critical nor sufficiently revolutionary.

CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS VIOLENCE?

- How do you understand the terms direct violence and structural violence?
- What examples do the interviewees give that help you to understand what structural violence is?
- What is social location? What is your social location? How does your social location influence your understanding of the nature of violence and (non)violence?
- How does comprehending violence help us to understand (non)violence?
- How are the mechanisms of violence – denial, reversal, and entitlement – defined? How do you see these three mechanisms operating today?
- How does white racism, classism, or heterosexism show up as direct and/or structural violence in your family, workplace, community, social movement efforts?
- What is the dominant cultural historical narrative of the United States and how is it challenged by the analysis in Chapter 1?
- What is a new or different way that Chapter 1 helped you to think about violence and/or (non)violence?
- Did you learn anything new about U.S. history in this chapter?
- Is using violence for self-defense and/or social justice justifiable in your mind? How does one's community social location impact the answer to that question?
- What does this quotation from Sarah Schulman (pp. 33-34) cause you to reflect upon in relation to the mechanisms of violence Todd defines – denial, reversal, and entitlement?

  You have a nonhomogenous neighborhood, which is what urbanity is. Urbanity is the realization that other people are different than you. Then, through city policy, through AIDS, through a number of concurrent social events, certain people are removed from that neighborhood and they are replaced by a homogenous group of people who basically grew up in the suburbs and are brought back into the city. Their parents were city dwellers who left on the G.I. Bill to the suburbs. They are children who grew up in gated communities, and racially and class stratified privatized suburbs [who] are now being invited to move back into the city, so the city can expand its tax base. That's what gentrification is. So you take a neighborhood that has become dangerous to its inhabitants, because they are losing their homes. And it's described as a neighborhood that's getting better. And it's exactly that same flip. The threat becomes the people who live there, who are being displaced. They are being seen as dangerous to people who have a gated community mentality and are willing to trade freedom for security. And that's again people seeing their own actions as benign and not taking place and seeing the reaction as the assault. It's the false neutrality of the self…. So the way that it affects the way people think is that people think of themselves and conceptualize themselves falsely, they see themselves as benign and neutral, and objective, value-free, and natural and regular and just the way things are. When actually their position has been highly constructed and imposed by force. Of which they have no awareness.… You take four rent controlled apartments and you throw out all those people and you knock down

all the walls and you make a luxury loft. That becomes a desirable place to live, when actually it should be a very stigmatized, very anti-social place to live, because four families have been displaced so that you can have this loft. But its actual meaning is obscured by a false value so that the people who live there think of themselves as elevated, when, actually what they are doing is debased. So there's a false sense of self. That's what gentrification of the mind is. Because the people you've displaced are not there to tell you what you've done to them. You never see them. You never know them. You never know what happened to them.

CHAPTER 2: CHRISTIANITY, VIOLENCE & (NON)VIOLENCE

- What is cultural violence? What is the relationship between cultural violence, direct violence, and structural violence?
- How does Galtung's theory of cultural violence play out in his description of the traditional theology of Christianity?
- In relation to violence, why is it important to understand how hierarchy works in Christian tradition and theology?
- How do denial, reversal and entitlement play out as mechanisms of violence in the Christian tradition in both theology and practice?
- Have you ever witnessed Christian pacification of social justice practice?
- In your own experience, how has (non)violence as an inner disposition or theological principle manifested itself concretely in you/your community's social justice and ecological justice practice?
- Do you think Christianity is fundamentally violent? (Non)violent? How do we negotiate the difference between the opposing viewpoints presented of Christianity as a fundamentally violent or fundamentally (non)violent tradition – both historically and theologically?
- How does our own religious/non-religious social location influence, form, and inform our perspectives on the Christian tradition as violent and/or (non)violent?
- Todd describes four unique cultural underpinnings of Christianity that she suggests must be dismantled if Christians intend to hold positions and practices of (non)violence: human supremacism, progress, individualism, and theological abstraction. Do any of these critiques of the cultural underpinnings of the Christian tradition make sense to you? Bother you? How do they manifest in your theology and community practice?
- Do you agree that human supremacism is a unique feature of the Christian worldview? In your way of thinking and acting, does the practice of (non)violence extend concretely to the other-than-human inhabitants of the world? What would a (non)violent practice in relation to the other-than-human look like for you and your community?
- How does Dr. Tink Tinker's description of violence and the mitigation of violence (pp. 76-78) challenge your own assumptions about (non)violence?

- Quotation for Reflection (pp. 72-73):

  This view of the Christian tradition throws into question whether the tradition itself can actively redeem its way out of violence if its fundamental disposition toward the earth and the earth's creatures is domination and death. The anti-nature worldview of a dominant Christianity renders the tradition fundamentally culturally violent, justifying structural and direct violence through its basic theological claims to *imago dei* and natural dominion. Churchill acknowledged there have been many good Christians motivated by a liberationist understanding of their tradition who have contributed meaningfully to liberation struggles. Yet the dominant alienated, hierarchical, anti-nature worldview remains in place. In my analysis of the interviews, there was nothing that served to counter the violently anthropocentric focus of the Christian tradition as portrayed by the preceding analysis. Two interviewees who advocated (non)violence alone mentioned the horrible destruction of the earth. Yet in literature related specifically to (non)violence, there is almost no material which suggests that the structural and cultural (non)violent transformation of inequality and injustice would include any subject for consideration other than human. From my research and experience in (non)violence thought and practice, there is little to nothing to address this critique. There may be many good Christians who, within a rubric of (non)violence are engaging in earth-friendly practices and resisting the structures of environmental destruction to varying degrees. But until the anti-nature, Western, progress worldview is addressed, much less dismantled, (non)violence has little to say or do with addressing such culturally embedded violence within the U.S. Christian tradition. To fully engage such culturally embedded violence would expose the material entitlements which come to members of the dominant culture, including advocates of (non)violence, as a result of the destruction of the earth.

CHAPTER 3: LOVING-THE-ENEMY

- How do you interpret the "love your enemies" scripture passage? (Matthew 5:38-48)
- What are some of the arguments for and against the claim that Jesus' commands to love demand Christians to practice (non)violence?
- Where do you stake your own claim, within or outside of a religious tradition, related to the matter of love as an individual/collective disposition as it relates to social change tactics? Is love relevant to struggles for justice? How? What does love look like concretely and collectively in a struggle for social transformation?
- What is your perspective on human nature (your anthropology) and how does that impact how you think about (non)violence and loving-the-enemy?
- What is the problem with individualism when it comes to trying to understand violence and (non)violence?
- Why might it be important to discuss "the enemy" in social change? Do you or your communities have enemies? If the command to "love the enemy" is a valid claim, what practices are implied by that love of enemy?

- What is meant by the following statement (p. 106): "Not all violence is morally equivalent, and (non)violence is not necessarily a more moral choice?"
- How might the idea of loving-the-enemy privilege power and enable violence? Can you see that operating anywhere in your community or the current political context?
- What is the problem with theological abstractions such as "God is Love," when it comes to creating socio-political change?
- How does Todd reconstruct the meaning of "loving the enemy" (pp. 113-124) How would you reconstruct it? What elements would an ethic of "loving the enemy" in conditions of injustice necessarily include?
- Quotation for Reflection (pp.103-104):

  What causes someone to believe that when a victim of violence asserts his or her dignity by offering the other cheek, this action will register with the offender and so "create enormous difficulties for the striker?" (Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 176) Is it not just as likely, as B♀ suggests, that the one who turns the cheek (and is already considered less than human) will be struck again? This result comes not as an abstraction, but from the social location of one who has experienced the structural and direct violence of poverty. Wink admits that a "nonviolent orientation is premised on a power seldom recognized by oppressor and oppressed alike." (127) It is a form of power that "those inured to violence cannot comprehend." (55) Yet Wink still hopes that a violent offender, who is backed by and benefits from a system of denial, reversal, and entitlements, will be awakened to the oppressive nature of the structure and the humanity of the one he violates. How does this happen? B♀ suggests that it does not – that the victim's revolutionary subordination proves mutual human dignity to the enemy may or may not be accurate. Non-retaliation may do little more than reinforce the superiority of the one in power. The very structure is invested in preventing agents of violence from accepting its true nature.

CHAPTER 4: TACTICS

- How might the statement "we are called to be faithful, not effective" be both helpful and problematic when we talk about social justice activism?
- What are the tensions between effectiveness and faithfulness when it comes to advocating and practicing (non)violence for social change?
- Within the four tactics of effective practice that Todd identifies – consciousness-raising, organizing for people power, building alternative communities, sustained direct action – where are your own strengths, weaknesses, and areas of ignorance?
- Why does Todd delineate a difference between the practice of consciousness-raising among privileged and oppressed communities?
- From Todd's list of barriers or something else you can identify, what is the most significant barrier to your effective participation in social transformation?

- How do you understand the difference between "liberal" and "radical" in terms of tactics? What is the tension between liberal and radical ideals and practices when it comes to social change; and why is there such tension?
- What are some of your assumptions and inclinations about the ways in which different people approach making social change along the so-called liberal-to-radical spectrum?
- How do activists work together across their tactical differences?
- What is the difference between "organizing" and "organizations"? Why does Todd caution readers to grasp this difference?
- What is lifestyle activism? What is Todd's caution around lifestyle activism?
- What is your general feeling about participating in disruptive tactics of change? Do you relish them? Fear them? Are you unsure? Why is this?
- What are your thoughts around the use of property destruction, ecotage/sabotage as a tactic of social change? Does property destruction address structural economic violence?
- In your own assessment of the materials to this point in the book, what are the main points of contention between the use of violent and (non)violent tactics for social change?
- Where do you stand in terms of your comfort level with more coercive tactics of social change, be they violent or (non)violent?
- Quotation for Reflection (p. 168):

  Neither an orthodox theology of Christian (non)violence or any other practice of either (non)violence or violence is adequate to deal with the vast complexities and all-encompassing, inter-related nature of direct, structural, and cultural violence in any given context. There is a vast territory of what might be considered both faithful and effective, even if limited to (non)violence. Staughton Lynd made the following point. "People oriented to nonviolence sometimes think of a circle with a very defined border." For these people, certain things seem very clear-cut, "If you refuse to serve in any war, you're still within the circle. If you transgress in this way or that way, then you're outside it. There are really two kinds of people. There are the nonviolent people and the people who are into violence to some degree." He went on to say, "I think that's the wrong way to think about it. I think the circle is not precisely circumscribed. I think the circle is a center which radiates and that there's all sorts of contested terrain further out. And so many things go with that, like not being so damned self-righteous." … It seems possible to faithfully claim, strategize, and act within a paradigm of Christian (non)violence while admitting that there may be an effective role for violence, and a commitment to solidarity with communities of struggle across differences.

CHAPTER 5: SOLIDARITY

- What did you take from Todd's discussion of solidarity as (non)violence?
- What are some of the ways and what factors make it possible for allies from dominant groups to be involved in marginalized communities' struggles for justice?

- What does it mean to "bring dominance into movements"? How do you bring your dominance and privileged social location into the spaces in which you live and work?
- What are some practices of undoing dominance? Todd lists asking, listening, and awareness of social location as baseline commitments in undoing dominance. Do you have any experience with these or other practices in your communities, workplace, family, social change efforts? If you are white, do you have an active anti-racist practice in relationship with other white people?
- What might it mean to work in solidarity with people who do not share your views of (non)violence in social change, even when you are working towards the same ends?
- In what arenas and in what concrete ways do you see yourself practicing solidarity as (non)violence in your current life, work, ministry context? With whom are you actively relational and in solidarity with in your endeavors for social transformation?
- What are your barriers to solidarity? What are some of the main emotions that you contend with as you think of yourself as a (non)violent social change agent?
- How can actively practicing solidarity be a part of your (non)violent resistance?
- Of the seven interrelated practices of solidarity as (non)violence – showing up, material support, turning over privilege, suffering powerlessness with, doing your work with your own people, accompanying as a reciprocal relationship, mutual accountability practices – which of these do you have experience with? Which ones seem like a particular kind of challenge to you and your community?
- Do you have a community of struggle? Do you have people in your life who are holding you accountable for the ways you move in community, both in the context of social struggle and on a more mundane, daily basis? Can you actively cultivate that community, whether you currently have it or not?
- With whom are you in solidarity in your community? Are there dimensions of dominance and privilege operating in your relationships of solidarity? How so? Is there a way to deepen and shape that practice of solidarity to be more just? How so?
- What is self-critical solidarity?
- How do you answer Todd's questions at the beginning of the chapter (p. 171): "How do I and how can I hold a commitment to Christian (non)violence with conviction in the context of such deep and abiding violence? How do I act with integrity with persons who are most impacted by structures of violence, whose oppression is a result of my own people's perpetration of violence and from which I continue to benefit?"
- Quotation for Reflection (p. 180):

  What (non)violent allyship from a dominant social location looks like is not telling people, whose identity and basic life experience you do not share or whose oppression results from your own people's violence, what to do or how to think.

CONCLUSION

- Why is it important to know history as a part of a commitment to (non)violence?
- How do privileged people reckon with their relative distance from the daily experience of violence and oppression that so many people face? What does this mean for scholars and church people in particular?
- What would it look like for you and your community if you decided to experiment with a new form, strategy, or tactic of creating social change in your context?
- Why is it important to push ourselves to more radical, disruptive means of change?
- Why is individualism such a problem when it comes to social change?
- What one step could 1) you individually and 2) a community you belong to, take towards (non)violence in your church/family/city/workplace?
- Why is a singular vision of a uniquely Christian salvation violent? How can you/your Christian community disrupt the dominance of a unified Christian discourse of domination?
- Why and how must Christian theology be transformed towards (non)violence?
- What would it take for your faith community to take steps towards being a more counter-cultural community of resistance?
- What counter-disciplines or parts of Christian practices, tradition and scriptures are usefully appealed to in order to support (non)violent practice? Do you find resonance with the four practices that Todd identifies (transformative historiography, contextual experimentation with diverse forms of action, disrupting a unified Christian discourse, creating communities of counter-cultural resistance) to support your work? What other practices might move you out of your own comfort zone in terms of your commitment to justice?
- What are your major takeaways from the book? Have you changed your mind or your practice as a result of reading the book?
- Quotation for Reflection (p. 218):

  If justice is defined as the end of violence and the liberation of the oppressed, then social change is change for the sake of achieving a new order. Establishing a just order will require a disruption of any current illusion of peace through collective practice, only, and will also require a disruption of theologies of pacification and subordination. Christian (non)violence brings to light the history of Christian individuals, institutions, and theologies that have perpetrated all forms of violence in this country and in the world. Therefore, Christian practical theologizing for social change can no longer claim a unique, moral high ground in the struggle for social transformation. Christian (non)violence should not be conceived of as a fixed, theological, or ideological point or practice but, to use Staughton Lynd's words, "a contested terrain of action."