The Chord of Conscience

Understanding the Eight Audiences of Nonviolent Protest

By Dennis Rivers (with the assistance of multiple AI systems)
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Rocks and Pebbles Stained Glass Window in the Cathedral of the Cosmos
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Dedicated to my teachers and fellow pilgrims on a long road:

Joanna Macy, Barnett Pearce, Marshall Rosenberg

and the many who have given their lives to make this new path.

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Prelude

In the summer of 1978 three transformative questions occurred to me. I had just been arrested for trying to interfere with the construction of the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant, a reactor planned to be built directly on top of an earthquake fault. After spending a Saturday night in a makeshift jail, I was being bussed with thirty or so other protesters to a release point in front of the San Luis Obispo county courthouse. Along the way, as the jail bus carried us back to town, we chanted "No Nukes!!!" at the top of our lungs. The windows of the bus were rolled up, and the Sunday morning streets were deserted, so I began wondering whether anyone but the bus driver could hear us. But over the years that followed, that momentary thought turned into three questions that have been with me ever since. We were quite sincere in our chanting. ***Who were we trying to reach? What were we trying to say to them? How were we trying to influence them?***

With these three questions in my mind, I became a nonviolent protest trainer, and spent a decade helping protesters find their inner resources of compassion and creativity in confronting changes that need to happen. In the mid-1990s, at a course on nonviolence taught by a Franciscan friar in Berkeley, an eight-fold answer to my three questions popped into my mind, which I wrote down and circulated for a long time as a one-page think piece.

It has now been almost fifty years since my ride in the jail bus chanting "No Nukes!!!". Many wars, social crises and giant ecological mistakes have happened during that time, and for all our heart-filled efforts, nonviolent activists have struggled with only limited success to exert a calming influence on these conflicts, sometimes dying in the process of trying. The need to go deeper is always with me. Hence, this article, written with the assistance of multiple artificial intelligence research assistants.

Introduction

The power of nonviolent protest lies not merely in its moral stance against injustice but in its profound communicative dimension. When we engage in nonviolent action, we are not simply expressing disapproval; we are participating in a complex, multi-layered dialogue with numerous audiences simultaneously. Each act of nonviolent protest strikes what might be called a "chord of conscience" that resonates differently with various listeners, creating a symphony of meanings rather than a single note of dissent.

This article expands upon the framework of "The Eight Audiences of Nonviolent Protest," originally conceptualized by Dennis Rivers in 1996, to explore how nonviolent protests function as a many-faceted form of communication with multiple stakeholders.

Deliberately drawing on the wisdom of a very wide range of scholars and activists — including Mahatma Gandhi, Joanna Macy, Rebecca Solnit, Carl Rogers, Gregory Bateson, Martin Luther King Jr., Thich Nhat Hanh (and others) — this article will explore how nonviolent protest speaks to different audiences and how these communications have evolved over time.

As our social and political landscapes transform, so too must our methods of nonviolent engagement. What worked effectively in Gandhi's India may need adaptation to resonate in today's digitally-connected world. Yet the fundamental principles remain: nonviolent protest invites people to “imagine the real”—to see beyond the comfortable falsehoods that sustain injustice and confront difficult truths. It functions as what King called a “creative tension,” compelling society to address what it would prefer to ignore.

In the following sections, we will explore each of the eight audiences of nonviolent protest, examining how activists in recent history have engaged them and how contemporary movements might speak to them effectively in our changing world.

1. To the Victims of Injustice: Breaking the Conspiracy of Silence

> "To the victims of injustice we say, 'we have not forgotten you, we will not be a part of the conspiracy of silence that ignores your oppression.' "

The first and perhaps most sacred audience of nonviolent protest is the victims of the injustice being challenged. Their suffering forms the moral center around which all protest activity revolves. When protesters stand in solidarity with victims, they refuse to participate in what Elie Wiesel called "the greatest sin of all—silence in the face of injustice."

Mahatma Gandhi understood this profoundly in his work with the untouchables of India, whom he renamed "Harijans" (children of God). "The test of our progress," Gandhi wrote, "is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little" (Gandhi, *Young India*, 1928). By acknowledging the humanity of those deemed untouchable by society, Gandhi's protests communicated directly to these victims: you matter, your suffering matters, and we stand with you.

Carl Rogers, known for his person-centered approach to psychology, would recognize this as "unconditional positive regard" — a fundamental acceptance of the other person's inherent worth. In the context of nonviolent protest, this manifests as what Rogers described as "being fully present" with those who suffer (Rogers, *On Becoming a Person*, 1961). This presence itself becomes a form of resistance against systems that render certain populations invisible.

In recent years, the Black Lives Matter movement has exemplified this communicative act by literally naming victims of police violence, ensuring they are not forgotten. By chanting names like George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless others, protesters refuse to allow these individuals to become mere statistics. Similarly, the #MeToo movement created space for victims of sexual violence to be acknowledged after years of institutional silence. These movements demonstrate how modern protest continues to fulfill this vital function of addressing victims directly, saying, "We see you. We hear you. Your experience matters."

Thich Nhat Hanh offers the concept of "interbeing" — the profound interconnection of all beings — as a basis for this solidarity. "When you see the suffering of others as your own suffering," he teaches, "you will naturally want to relieve it" (Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, 1998). This perspective transforms solidarity from an abstract political stance to a deeply felt spiritual practice of compassion.

2. To Fellow Protesters: Building the Beloved Community

> “To our fellow protesters we say, ‘I join you in speaking out, I honor your love of life, I join with you to share whatever suffering our speaking out may bring us.’ ”

Nonviolent protest is not merely an external communication to power; it is also an internal dialogue among those who choose to stand together. Martin Luther King Jr. referred to this community of protesters as the “beloved community” — a fellowship united by shared commitment to justice, peace and nonviolence, holding a vision of a “beloved community” to come that would include everyone.

"In the process of gaining our rightful place," King wrote, "we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds... We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline" (King, "I Have a Dream," 1963). This internal communication reinforces the moral discipline required for effective nonviolence while creating bonds of mutual support essential for sustaining long-term movements. In a society based on inflicting harm, the life of nonviolence is a transformational vision of joining with others with the deep purpose of preventing more harm without causing more harm.

Gregory Bateson's theories on communication and systems thinking offer insight into how this internal dialogue functions. Bateson observed that communication occurs on multiple levels simultaneously, including the "metacommunicative" level that comments on the relationship between communicators (Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 1972). When protesters join hands, kneel together, or engage in coordinated actions, they are not only protesting an external injustice but also metacommunicating about their relationship to one another—affirming solidarity, trust, and shared purpose.

The Women's March of 2017, one of the largest coordinated protests in U.S. history, demonstrated this powerfully. Beyond its explicit political messaging, the march created a space for mutual recognition and community-building among diverse participants. The pink "pussy hats" worn by many marchers served as visible symbols of belonging to this temporary community.

Joanna Macy, environmental activist and Buddhist scholar, speaks of this as “active hope” — a practice rather than a passive optimism. She writes, “Active Hope is a practice... It is a process we can apply to any situation, and it involves three key steps: first, a clear view of reality; second, identifying what we hope for; and third, taking steps to move in that direction” (Macy, *Active Hope*, 2012). This framework helps us understand how fellow protesters sustain each other through difficult struggles by co-creating a vision of what is possible.

The digital age has transformed how protesters communicate with one another, creating both new opportunities and challenges. Social media platforms enable rapid coordination and community-building across geographical boundaries, as seen in movements from the Arab Spring to Fridays for Future. Yet these virtual connections must be balanced with in-person relationship building to create the deep bonds necessary for sustained nonviolent action.

3. To Immediate Authorities: Illuminating the Problem

> “To the authorities immediately in charge of the offending process (toxic waste dump, nuclear power station, etc.) we say, ‘your mistakes are known by everyone, now, including the public and your supervisors. There is no sense in trying to hide or deny the problem any more. Now is the time to start working on a solution.’ ”

Nonviolent protest often directly confronts those with immediate authority over unjust situations. This communication is not merely accusatory but potentially transformative—offering authorities the opportunity to become part of the solution rather than remaining part of the problem.

Gandhi's satyagraha campaigns exemplified this approach. By publicly facing British authorities with the truth of colonial oppression, Gandhi created what he called "experiments with truth" that revealed injustice not only to observers but sometimes to the authorities themselves. "The goal," Gandhi wrote, "is not to defeat or humiliate the opponent but to win their friendship and understanding" (Gandhi, *Non-Violence in Peace and War*, 1942).

Carl Rogers' concept of empathic listening provides insight into this dynamic. Rogers noted that when people feel truly heard, they become more open to change (Rogers, *A Way of Being*, 1980). Effective nonviolent protests, by acting is a calm and dignified way, and removing the threat of riots, create conditions where authorities might genuinely listen to the concerns they would otherwise ignore in a panic of (real or pretended) security fears. By maintaining dignity and refusing to demonize opponents, protesters create space for authorities to respond constructively without losing face.

The Dakota Access Pipeline protests at Standing Rock in 2016-2017 exemplify this communication with immediate authorities. Water protectors directly confronted pipeline workers and security personnel, not merely to obstruct them but to help them see the moral dimensions of their work. By maintaining

nonviolent discipline even in the face of violent responses, protesters communicated: "We see you as capable of making different choices."

Thich Nhat Hanh offers the practice of "compassionate confrontation" for such situations. "When you communicate with another person," he teaches, "the first thing you should do is to help him or her to be present, to be really there with you" (Nhat Hanh, *The Art of Communicating*, 2013). This approach recognizes the humanity of those in authority positions while still firmly opposing unjust actions—a crucial distinction that separates nonviolence from mere passivity.

Recent climate protests targeting fossil fuel companies demonstrate evolving approaches to communicating with immediate authorities. Groups like Extinction Rebellion have staged die-ins at corporate headquarters, forcing employees and executives to physically encounter the human consequences of climate change. These theatrical interventions aim to pierce the bureaucratic distance that often shields decision-makers from the impacts of their choices.

4. To Regulatory Authorities: Appealing to Higher Mandates

> “To more distant regulatory authorities we say, ‘Look what's going on over here! Do your job (fulfill your mandate of office) and change this situation.’ or... ‘follow a higher mandate (of truth and justice) and change this situation.’ ”

Beyond those directly overseeing unjust situations lie regulatory authorities—governmental bodies, international organizations, or other institutions with oversight responsibilities. Nonviolent protest communicates to these entities by appealing to their official mandates or to higher moral principles they claim to uphold.

Martin Luther King Jr. masterfully employed this approach in the Civil Rights Movement. By staging nonviolent demonstrations that provoked violent responses from local authorities, King made visible the contradiction between America’s constitutional promises and its treatment of Black citizens. “We are here to remind America of the fierce urgency of now,” King declared, appealing not just to legal obligations but to the moral foundations of the nation itself (King, "I Have a Dream," 1963).

Gene Sharp, political scientist and theorist of nonviolent action, identified this as “political jiu-jitsu” — using the system’s proclaimed values against its actual practices (Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, 1973). When peaceful

protesters are met with violence, the moral contradiction becomes visible to all, creating pressure on higher authorities to intervene.

In recent years, climate activists have increasingly targeted regulatory bodies like the Environmental Protection Agency or international forums like UN Climate Conferences. Greta Thunberg's direct address to world leaders at the UN Climate Action Summit in 2019 — “How dare you?” — exemplifies this communication with regulatory authorities. By contrasting their stated commitments with their insufficient actions, Thunberg created a moral challenge that could not be easily dismissed.

Gregory Bateson's concept of “double bind” offers insight into why this approach can be effective. Regulatory authorities often face contradictory imperatives—upholding stated values while maintaining systems that violate those values. Nonviolent protest exposes this contradiction, creating what Bateson described as an “untenable situation” that demands resolution (Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 1972).

Indigenous movements worldwide have effectively communicated with regulatory authorities by appealing to national constitutions, treaties, and international law. The 2016 Standing Rock protests invoked both treaty rights and environmental regulations to challenge pipeline construction. Similarly, the Zapatista movement in Mexico has consistently appealed to the Mexican constitution and international human rights frameworks while challenging the government's economic policies.

5. To the Media: Creating Compelling Narratives

> “To representatives of the news media we say ‘Watch this act of conscience... this is really unusual and/or creative and/or symbolic... you've never seen this before... or you haven't seen this in a long time,’ with the hope of carrying the deeper message, ‘Pay attention to the problem that has caused us to demonstrate.’ ”

Media coverage amplifies protest messages far beyond those physically present. Effective nonviolent action transforms complex issues into compelling narratives that capture media attention while communicating substantive messages about injustice.

Gandhi understood this dynamic when planning the Salt March of 1930. By choosing a simple act — making salt in defiance of British monopoly laws — Gandhi created a powerful symbol that journalists could easily explain to their

audiences. He even arranged the timing of the march to accommodate newspaper deadlines, ensuring maximum coverage (Weber, *On the Salt March*, 1997).

Marshall McLuhan's insight that “the medium is the message” helps explain why the form of protest matters as much as its explicit content (McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 1964). When protesters choose creative, visual, or unexpected actions, they create media-friendly moments that can communicate on multiple levels. The visual imagery of protesters being attacked with fire hoses during the Birmingham Campaign spoke more powerfully than any written statement could have.

In today’s media landscape, social media has transformed this relationship. Protesters now document their own actions, creating countermeasures to mainstream media framing. The use of livestreaming during protests like those in Ferguson, Missouri following Michael Brown’s killing allowed activists to present unfiltered perspectives directly to audiences.

The theatrical elements of contemporary protest—from the massive puppets of the global justice movement to the red robes and white bonnets inspired by “The Handmaid's Tale” at abortion rights demonstrations — reflect an evolving understanding of how to create media-friendly visual narratives while conveying substantive messages.

Rebecca Solnit, in her analysis of social movements, notes that effective protests create what she calls “stories to live by” — narratives that help people imagine alternatives to the status quo (Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*, 2004). When nonviolent protests capture media attention, they have the opportunity to insert new narratives into public discourse, challenging dominant frames that normalize injustice.

6. To Ourselves: Preserving Integrity Through Action

> “To ourselves, we say, ‘I will not become a silent accomplice to this crime. I will assert my integrity as a person, against any and all powers that be, by saying “no” to the current way of doing things and “yes” to a better way.’ ”

Perhaps the most intimate audience of nonviolent protest is the protester themselves. The act of standing publicly against injustice is a profound statement of personal integrity — a refusal to be complicit through silence or inaction.

Vaclav Havel, Czech playwright and dissident who later became president, called this “living in truth” — the choice to act as if one were free even under oppressive conditions. “You do not become a ‘dissident’ just because you decide one day to take up this most unusual career,” Havel wrote. “You are thrown into it by your personal sense of responsibility” (Havel, *The Power of the Powerless*, 1978).

Carl Rogers recognized this aspect of protest as essential to what he called “becoming a person” — the process of aligning one’s actions with one’s deepest values. “The only person who is educated,” Rogers noted, “is the one who has learned how to learn and change” (Rogers, *Freedom to Learn*, 1969). Nonviolent protest represents a profound learning process through which individuals discover and articulate their own moral boundaries.

Thich Nhat Hanh's concept of “engaged Buddhism” speaks directly to this dimension of protest. “Meditation is not to escape from society, but to come back to ourselves and see what is going on,” he teaches. “Once we see, we must act” (Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step*, 1991). This perspective frames protest not as an external political act but as an internal spiritual necessity — a form of mindful engagement with suffering that preserves one’s integrity.

Contemporary movements like Extinction Rebellion incorporate this self-communication explicitly, with many protesters citing the need to act in accordance with their knowledge of climate crisis as a primary motivation. As one XR founder put it, “I was doing this as a way of dealing with my grief” (Bradbrook, interview, 2019). This acknowledgment of the emotional and spiritual dimensions of protest represents an important evolution in understanding nonviolent action.

Albert Camus captured this dimension eloquently: “I rebel — therefore we exist” (Camus, *The Rebel*, 1951). The act of protest affirms not only the protester’s own humanity but the possibility of a more humane society. This self-communication remains vital even when external success seems remote, sustaining the moral imagination necessary for long-term change.

7. To the Public: Inviting Wider Participation

> "To the general public/bystanders we say 'Join us and withdraw your consent from this crime. Communicate with legislators and regulators and let them know you don't agree with this offense against (human rights, God, nature, the constitution, etc.) and you want them to represent your views.' "

Nonviolent protest seeks to expand circles of concern, inviting previously uninvolved people to recognize their stake in addressing injustice. This communication with the general public aims not just to win sympathy but to transform bystanders into participants.

Martin Luther King Jr. addressed this audience consistently, appealing not only to Black Americans but to all Americans of conscience. "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," King wrote in his Letter from Birmingham Jail. "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny" (King, 1963). This framing invited white Americans to see civil rights not as a "Black issue" but as a matter of universal concern.

Hannah Arendt's analysis of power provides insight into why this public communication matters. Arendt observed that power ultimately rests not on violence but on consent—the willingness of many to accept the authority of the few (Arendt, *On Violence*, 1970). Nonviolent protest makes visible the possibility of withdrawing that consent, inviting wider participation in this withdrawal.

Contemporary movements increasingly focus on making abstract issues concrete for the general public. Climate activists, for example, connect global warming to local flooding or wildfire risks, helping people recognize their personal stake in addressing environmental degradation. Similarly, economic justice movements like Occupy Wall Street translated complex financial issues into simple slogans ("We are the 99%") that helped ordinary people locate themselves within larger systems of inequality.

The rise of social media has transformed how movements communicate with the public, creating opportunities for direct engagement unmediated by traditional news outlets. Hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter or #MeToo have enabled complex issues to spread virally, inviting public participation through simple acts of solidarity that can scale into meaningful involvement.

Paulo Freire's concept of "conscientization" — the development of critical consciousness — helps explain the educational function of this communication (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1970). Effective nonviolent protest doesn't merely tell the public what to think; it creates conditions for people to question assumptions they previously took for granted, enabling new perspectives on social reality.

8. To Ultimate Reality: Walking in Faith

> "To God, Jesus, Buddha, St. Francis and/or other understandings of ultimate reality, we say/vow/affirm 'I walk with You and keep faith with You as I struggle to follow Your way in a world full of greed, hatred, oppression and confusion.' "

The final audience of nonviolent protest transcends the immediate social and political context, addressing what might be called ultimate reality—whether conceived in religious terms or as universal moral principles. This dimension acknowledges that nonviolent resistance is not merely pragmatic strategy but spiritual practice.

For Gandhi, this audience was primary. "Truth (satya) implies love," he wrote, "and firmness (agraha) engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force... that is to say, the Force which is born of Truth and Love or non-violence" (Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, 1928). Gandhi's protests were explicitly framed as experiments in discovering truth, with God as the ultimate witness and judge of their integrity.

Martin Luther King Jr., as a Baptist minister, similarly grounded his activism in theological terms: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice" (King, quoting Theodore Parker). This faith that ultimate reality itself sided with justice sustained King through repeated setbacks and threats to his life.

Thich Nhat Hanh's concept of "interbeing" offers a Buddhist perspective on this dimension. By recognizing our fundamental interconnection with all life, nonviolent protesters align themselves with what Nhat Hanh describes as "the true nature of reality" (Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding*, 1988). This spiritual grounding transforms protest from mere political strategy to an expression of ultimate truth.

Contemporary movements continue this tradition while embracing more diverse spiritual and philosophical frameworks. Indigenous water protectors at Standing Rock drew explicitly on spiritual traditions that recognize water as sacred. Climate activists increasingly frame their work in terms of intergenerational ethics and responsibility to future beings. These diverse approaches share a common thread: locating protest within a moral universe that transcends immediate political circumstances.

Alice Walker's concept of "activism as a way of staying connected to the source" speaks to this dimension. Walker writes, "Activism is my rent for living on the planet" (Walker, *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For*, 2006). This perspective frames protest not as an extraordinary act but as the natural response of a being aligned with ultimate reality.

Conclusion: The Evolving Symphony of Nonviolent Protest

As we have seen, nonviolent protest functions as a complex form of communication, speaking simultaneously to multiple audiences through words, symbols, and actions. Each audience receives different aspects of the message, creating a rich tapestry of meaning that extends far beyond simple opposition to injustice.

The metaphor of a musical chord seems apt—multiple notes sounding together to create a harmony more powerful than any single tone. Effective nonviolent protest strikes this "chord of conscience" in ways that resonate with diverse listeners, from direct authorities to distant publics, from fellow activists to the protesters themselves.

As our social and media landscapes evolve, so too must the methods of nonviolent protest. Digital technologies have created new venues for resistance while also presenting new challenges. The accelerated pace of information flow, the fragmentation of media audiences, and the challenges of maintaining attention in a distracted culture all require innovative approaches to nonviolent action.

Yet the fundamental insights of Gandhi, King, Nhat Hanh, Rogers, and Bateson remain relevant. Nonviolent protest still functions as a form of "truth-telling" (Gandhi), "creative tension" (King), "mindful engagement" (Nhat Hanh), "authentic communication" (Rogers), and "metacommunication" (Bateson) that challenges unjust systems while affirming human dignity.

Perhaps most importantly, nonviolent protest continues to serve in helping people "imagine the real" — making visible what has been obscured, speaking what has been silenced, and revealing possibilities for transformation that seem impossible until they are enacted. In a world where powerful interests work constantly to narrow our sense of what is possible, this function of protest remains essential.

I invite you to walk beside me on a difficult road. I do not know of any straightforward method to plan a protest that speaks equally well to all of the eight audiences. Each one by itself is a big challenge. Inspiring protests seem to have an element of grace in them. But perhaps by studying each of the eight conversations more deeply, and living with the eight conversations as part of our life journey, we might engage deeper parts of our creative mind to help us.

Watering the roots. As I look at the lives of my nonviolence heroes, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Archbishop Romero of El Salvador, Sister Dorothy Stang, and many more, I also see a kind of garden of six virtues that emerges again and again. This garden includes amazing compassion, courage, wisdom, creativity, a deep truthfulness, and ongoing commitment/continuity of engagement.

If the eight conversations are showing me the visible branches on the tree of conscience, I have a strong feeling that the six virtues just named may be the hidden roots. This level of work may be beyond the reach of training as we know it, but it is not beyond the reach of friendship. May we help each other cultivate more of these radiant virtues. The roots of the kinder world we hope to build.

We make a path by walking.

Antonio Machado

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