Opinion
News

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On March 30, 1953, a scantly known 25-year-old author, who had recently earned a master's degree in sociology from Ohio State University, sent a typewritten letter from his apartment on 79 Douglas St., Brooklyn, New York, to Albert Einstein at his home on 112 Mercer St., Princeton, New Jersey.

"In about three weeks I shall be sent to prison because of my refusal to be inducted into the army," the letter began. "This I accept because according to my philosophy [of nonviolence] I must live and work for ideals in which I believe and their application in building a better world. Accompanying this letter is a manuscript of a book I have recently finished. It contains three historically moving accounts of Gandhi's advocation of this method in the political sphere, with the hope that it will offer the public some evidence that there is another way of opposing injustice rather than through the holocaust of atomic war. I felt that perhaps you would be willing to write an introduction to this book. Would you?"

The world's greatest physicist, then 74, replied that he would read the text immediately and carefully and write the introduction. "I admire you earnestly for your moral strengths," he wrote, "and I can only hope but not really know that I would have acted as you do if I would have found myself in the same situation.

There is a sphere of conflict between the written laws of one's country and the unwritten law the existence of which shows itself in what we call our conscience."

The object of Einstein's literary generosity and personal praise was Gene Sharp. At his death at his home in Boston at age 90 he was regarded as a major figure in the American and international peace movement. Through a shelfful of books that included the three-volume *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, *Civilian-Based Defense*, *From Dictatorship to Democracy* and *Gandhi Wields the Weapon of Moral Power*, Gene Sharp's research and analysis of nonviolence became the battery that energized the drives of activists who brought down some of the world's most ruthless dictators, strongmen and military supremos. They did it with no guns, tanks or bombs but with "alternative weapons systems" ranging from economic boycotts and strikes to civil disobedience.

Gene Sharp saw it as warmaking without violence, "a means of combat, as is war. It involves the matching of forces and the waging of 'battles,' requires wise strategy and tactics, employs numerous 'weapons' and demands of its 'soldiers' courage, discipline, and sacrifice."

The parallels bring to mind the admiration Gandhi had for soldiers, saying if only more of those involved in peacemaking could match the fervor of military people.

The unlikely overthrows of Slobodan Milosevic, "the butcher of the Balkans," and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, as well as successful uprisings in Burma, Ukraine, Poland, Georgia, Chile, Tunisia, the Philippines, Czechoslovakia and the Palestinian territories —to cite a few — exemplified Gene Sharp's belief that "a ruler's power is ultimately dependent on support from the people he would rule. His moral authority, economic resources, transport system, government bureaucracy, army and police … rest finally upon the cooperation and assistance of other people. If there is general conformity, the ruler is powerful. But people do not always do what their rules would like them to do. … When this happens, the man who been ruler becomes simply another man and his political power dissolves."

With a firm commitment to Gandhian nonviolence, Gene Sharp had little faith in fighting fire with fire but had total faith in fighting fire with water: "If you fight with violence, you are fighting with your enemy's best weapon, and you may be a brave but dead hero."

Among the foot soldiers in the Sharp Nonviolent Army, few achieved more than Srdja Popovic, a student leader in Yugoslavia in 1998. Sensing that organizing beats agonizing, he and others created the Serbian group Otpor ("Resistance"). The following year saw more than two months of massive bombing by American and NATO pilots, cheered on by President Bill Clinton and his hawkish Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. When told of the massive number of civilians, including children, being killed by ceaseless bombing runs and whether she thought the slaughter should stop, she flippantly said, "I think this is a very hard choice but the price, we think, the price is worth it." Where the killing spree failed in its goal to bring the downfall of Milosevic, Srdja Popovic and Otpor succeeded. In 2001 Milosevic was arrested on charges of war crimes and genocide. He died awaiting a verdict at a trial in the Hague.

It wasn't long after Otpor's victory that I came to know Srdja Popovic, inviting him to speak to one of my high school classes during the time he was in Washington. Well versed in Gene Sharp's strategies, and especially so after seeing how well it worked in his homeland, much of his offerings to my students were similar to what they had been taught about America's Otpor: the resistance of American civil rights and antiwar leaders of the 1960s that led to the downfall of Lyndon Johnson.

On one of his later trips to the United States, Srdja Popovic aligned himself with Waging Nonviolence, a Brooklyn-based nonprofit specializing in peace-based journalism and of a rare quality seldom found in the corporate media. Its co-founder is Eric Stoner. In 2001 he was a star student in one of my college courses on the methods, history and practitioners of nonviolence. "When I first came across Gene Sharp's writings," he recalls, "they shattered my conservative world view. I believed that violence was necessary to effectively confront brutal dictators and governments that had qualms about oppressing their own people. Had Gene Sharp not led the way and demonstrated the undeniable effectiveness of nonviolent struggle, even under the most extreme conditions, I would now be doing something very different with my life."

In addition to being a writer and editor at Waging Nonviolence, Stoner is an adjunct professor of peace studies at Rutgers University and St. Peter's University and St. Joseph's College.

I had a few special moments with Gene Sharp when he came to Washington in 2011 to receive the El-Hibri Foundation Peace Education Award. He was self-effacing,

gracious and totally modest about his singular place in contemporary politics — and at 83 certainly durable. Among other current issues, we talked about Occupy Wall Street which, by coincidence, was happening at much the same time as Gene was receiving his award. Discerningly, he had commented to a reporter that the gathering of thousands was "well-intentioned but occupying a small park in downtown New York is pure symbolism. It doesn't change the distribution of wealth."

In 1983 Gene Sharp founded the Albert Einstein Institution, housing it in a row house on Cottage Street in a low-income neighborhood near the Boston airport. For much of the time, the institution was a one-person operation. In 2005, Jamila Raqib, a well-educated Afghanistan refugee, assisted Gene by becoming the executive director. She appears in the 2011 documentary "How to Start a Revolution," about Gene Sharp and his works. Ruaridh Arrow, the film's director, told an interviewer: "Here was this old man sitting in a crumpled house in Boston and that is where revolutionaries go for advice. It was one of the world's great little secrets. It was a little bit of magic and I had to make a film about it."

Gene Sharp was nominated many times for, but never won, a Nobel Peace Prize. The Norwegian committee that once awarded the prize to violence addicts like Henry Kissinger and Yasser Arafat, along with war presidents Jimmy Carter and Barack Obama, apparently saw no merit in the work of a man whose writings and activism for six decades led to major decreases in violence and increases in peace throughout the world.

No matter. In 2012 Gene Sharp won The Right Livelihood Award, known as the Alternative Nobel. His memorable acceptance speech in Stockholm is available on YouTube. Much else is there, too, should anyone have missed out on learning from Gene Sharp all those years he was with us.

[Colman McCarthy, a former Washington Post columnist, directs the Center for Teaching Peace, a Washington nonprofit].