

4. It unifies diversity by creating work in which everyone can participate. Such work is ongoing, proactive, and builds community.

Michael: Some years ago Evan Ilitch, the well-known social critic wrote a stunning article called, “Delinking Peace and Development.” And in that article, he basically pointed out that for some reason oppression and oppressive regimes always drive towards uniformity. They always crush diversity. And reasserting diversity is an important element of winning, regaining your nonviolent freedom, regaining a nonviolent situation, winning your freedom nonviolently.

So, good constructive program, again, is not just a question of doing good works that happen to be constructive, but things that are really going to rebuild the vitality of a society based on the vitality of individuals within in. So, they will try to find a kind of work that awakens the creative capacity of the individual and restores indigenous resources of people or a culture. So, it’s a direct approach to cultural violence in that way. When one culture says, you know, “Your ways and means don’t work. You got to imitate us and do everything our way.”

So, a good constructive program would allow people to discover their individual capacities and contribute into the work of rebuilding the society. And what it’s really doing then, ultimately, is returning control to the people themselves.

I want to emphasize that because so often we, in protest movements and movements that arouse a lot of anger, there is quite legitimately a feeling that control has been taken away from us in the form of our votes or what have you. Direct infringement of freedom. So, because people are so deeply and quite correctly identified with the work that they do, allowing people to have constructive work is a powerful way of giving them back this dignity and their use, their meaning as people. It always comes to my mind that right after 9/11 here in the U.S., then President Bush said, “Take the kids to Disneyland. You know, go shopping. We’ll take care of this. You can’t defend yourself. You can’t build a country that would be strong from within.” So, this is the lie of oppression and dependency.

Constructive program is a direct visible way of counteracting that lie and substituting the truth of independence and creativity. And Gandhi went so far as to say, again in Hind Swaraj in 1909 that, “The British did not take India. We gave her to Britain.” They gave the country up because they were seduced by the glitter of Western civilization and cowed by the apparently overwhelming power of British military organization and technology.

And so, what he was doing 200 years later was giving people back – encouraging people to take back what they had given away. Now I think sociologists know that, for example, in situations where groups have been divided against one another and you want to reconcile them, you know, joint entertainment, joint meals, all of those things help a little. But the thing that does it much more powerfully and much more directly is working on a project together because of the deep sense in which we feel that we are defined by our work and our value is defined by what we can contribute.

So, you can see what a powerful restorative mechanism this is for people who have been convinced that they're helpless and they're no good. They've also been subjected to a kind of uniformity that inevitably follows with oppression. And they're reasserting both their meaning, their value on the one hand, and their appropriate diversity on the other hand.