

Profs and Prophets of Non-Violence

Laughter is one way to become one

By AIMIE WILLHOITE
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What is violence? Surprisingly, today most would define violence solely as a physical action or force that causes bodily harm. We cannot ignore evidence, though, that violence is more than just brute force.

Mental, emotional and spiritual violence exist as counterparts to this physical expression. And if we devote more time understanding the complex layers of violence, it will ultimately lead to deeper discussions, which can be dedicated to the idea of non-violence. What is non-violence, and how might we actually be able to practice it within our own lives?

I am a student at Northern Kentucky University (NKU) where I recently finished an intense course, "Prophets of Non-Violence," taught by Professor Patrick Murphy Welage. I have been a part-time student for many years and I truly feel that no other course has affected me as strongly as this one. The content was gripping and the overall experience life-changing.

At Xavier University and NKU, Welage teaches theology and philosophy with an emphasis on social justice and non-violence. He is also a certified laughter yoga teacher.

We found out what laughter yoga is when one of our classes was turned into a laughter-yoga-body-mind experience. It was definitely awkward at first, forcing ourselves to laugh without any prompting, without any comedy. It was a matter of faking the laughter until it finally became real and natural. By the end of the class, hilarity was echoing from person to person.

The lesson was to use laughter as a practice of non-violence, because laughter is non-political, non-religious, non-racial and non-threatening. Like music and art, laughter is a universal language that can transcend many barriers: language, age, gender, race and social class. It enhances our personal relationships and connections with one another. Laughter can suspend or remove divisions between people, showing a way to a more peaceful existence together.

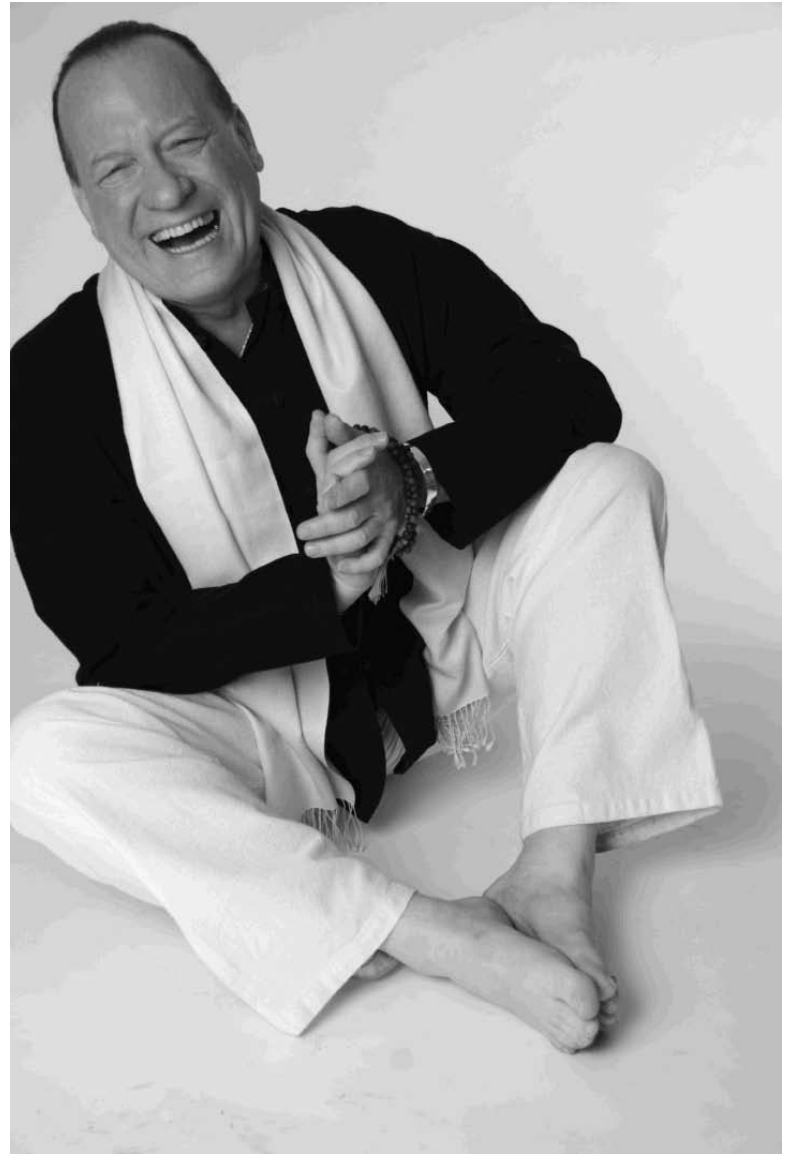
Welage is the type of teacher who makes things interesting and witty, although his objective through it all is to have his students thoughtfully examine theories and practices associated with violence and non-violence.

We spent a significant amount of time trying to understand apartheid in South Africa. We were inundated with facts about unspeakable acts of oppression, torture and violence perpetrated toward blacks at the hands of a white supremacist government. Many turned a blind eye to what was going on. Apathy is an all too familiar response to horrendous violations against human freedoms.

We read *A Human Being Died That Night: A Story of Forgiveness* by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela and *Priest and Partisan* by Michael Worsnip, hoping to gain some insight into some of the root causes of this violence in South Africa and how the country would ever recover from it. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was formed so that the country could shift toward truth, reconciliation and most important, forgiveness.

Forgiveness, faith, redemption and spirituality were at the center of many of our discussions. We each had our own unique frame of reference and life experiences to pull from. Our class was made up of Christians from many denominations, Muslims, Buddhists, atheists and agnostics. It was also a sweet mixture of gender, age, race and social class. It was an amazing little community our classroom had turned into.

Over the course of the semester we worked on writing a research-based spiritual autobiography. It was to be a deeply personal account of our own spiritual journey, sharing our own stories of joy, pain,



Patrick Welage teaches laughter yoga and non-violence.
Photo by Aimie Willhoite.

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growth and revelation. Our autobiographies would also be based upon the writings and practices of one of the prophets of non-violence we had learned about. How had our life experiences shaped our views on non-violence? What changes could we make in our lives to soar from theory alone to a daily practice of being peacekeepers?

Each student made a presentation before the class. Nothing could have prepared us for what we were about to share and experience with one another. We each had a story to tell. Our initial reservations about opening our lives to a roomful of strangers were gone. Something had occurred throughout the duration of the semester.

One by one we shared our stories and memories: drug addiction, rape, violence, domestic abuse, alcoholism, loss of loved ones, serious illnesses, child abuse, divorce, affairs, single parents, depression, suicidal thoughts and attempts. It was almost unbelievable, the gravity of what we were doing in this small class setting. Their pain became my pain, and my pain became their pain.

I am convinced that, unless you face the truth, the truth cannot set you free. Facing ourselves takes courage, let alone facing others. Healing and recovery begins with dialogue. I was able to make the correlation between what the professor had been teaching us and what we were doing for one another as a class. In the very speaking of "unspeakable acts," a person, family, community or nation can begin to heal. Dialogue is purgative medicine for an ailing world.

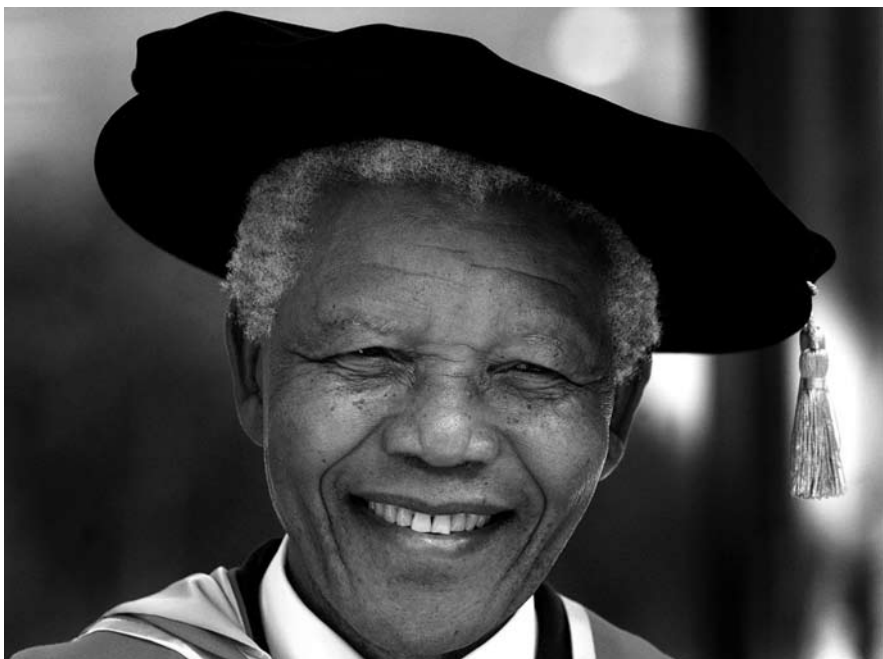
Even if it takes a lifetime, we must encourage one another toward forgiveness when we have been emotionally, spiritually or physically harmed. Pumla Gododo-Madikizela, who described her personal experience with the post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission, wrote about the effects of forgiveness she witnessed in others.

"Some societies are finding it more constructive to focus on discovering and nurturing the conditions that make forgiveness first conceivable, then ultimately possible," she wrote.

Forgiveness is a form of non-violence. We need to nurture it within our corner of the world.

The final moment of enlightenment came for me as I listened to a young Muslim student discuss what this class had meant to him. He was able to articulate what the majority of us also felt. We were all proud of one another for having the bravery to share our stories. We put ourselves in a very vulnerable position, and yet what we found was that no one judged us or rejected us. We respected one another's individuality. No one's faith, beliefs or race were attacked. We simply listened to one another and learned from one another. We accepted our differences.

One has to wonder how different the world might be if what happened within the classroom could happen outside it. We all have the potential to be prophets – advocates for non-violence.



Former South African President Nelson Mandela. REUTERS/David Gray.