

A CONSISTENT ETHIC OF DIGNITY

The Philippines People Power Movement

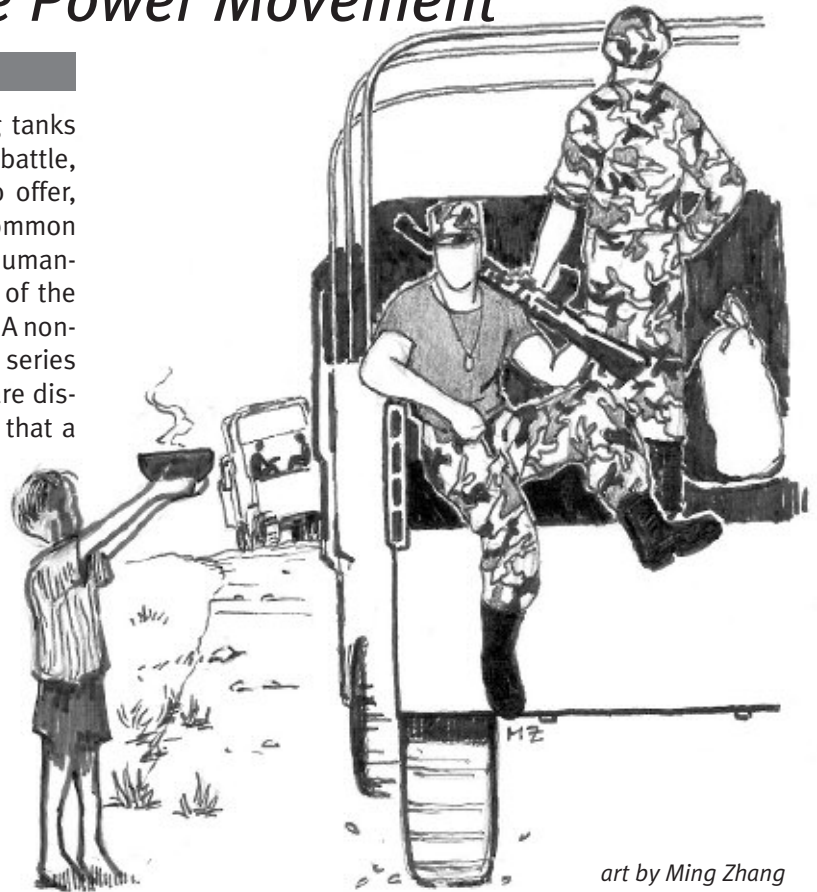
Eli Sasaran

How can one kneel and stare down rumbling tanks and hundreds of soldiers trained for military battle, especially when all one has is supplies of food to offer, words for conversion, faith and hope in their common humanity, and prayer to the possible source of that humanity and power? This was the “nonviolent moment” of the human crisis in the Philippines of February 23, 1986. A nonviolent moment creates the clearest moment over a series of actions when the forces dependent on violence are displayed in contrast to the power of nonviolence, so that a deeper truth of the situation is exposed. Individual persons within a communal tradition generated this scenario as they gathered together and chose to adhere to *alay dangal*, which means “to offer dignity.” I shall explore their story to illuminate the potential of ‘offering dignity’ as a guide for the practice of nonviolence.

President Marcos had ruled as a dictator since 1972. Before the nonviolent moment of 1986, various organizations had given years of trainings in the methods of nonviolent resistance for the marginalized people. It was these poor and voiceless people who most suffered from their dignity being ignored. Both ethical and pragmatic principles motivated this preparation.

The roots of the movement included using role-plays for training, the development of consumer collectives that created an indigenous economy outside of the dominating transnational institutions, and massive organized protests that shut down sectors of society such as transportation and built the confidence of the populous. Nonviolent discipline was maintained despite harassment and threats by the police, who attempted to provoke the activists toward violence. This demonstrated the government’s preference for violent confrontation over facing nonviolent power. Intimidation and violent force are more familiar to most governments, and violent protests tend to legitimate a violent response in the eyes of most populations.

The International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR) and the Catholic Church were key players in motivating, organizing, and training the populace. Hildegard Goss-Meyer was a famous trainer with IFOR in the islands. Catholic teaching upheld human dignity with a strong ethical objection to killing, and provided a network of people through Christian Base Communities. From these perspec-



art by Ming Zhang

“I used to hate the military and the police, but on Sunday I found myself preparing sandwiches for them.... I remembered all the times when I cursed them during rallies and was amazed now that I walked so far and worked so hard for them.”

-Yolanda Lacuesta

tives, nonviolent action left open the possibility for reconciliation rather than merely being a tactic to usurp power. Furthermore, they taught that human dignity was an unalterable, inextinguishable, and equivalent value given (i.e. inherent) to each human. Regardless of what we have, such as money, power, intelligence, looks, etc., or what we do, such as generosity, justice, murder, sin, etc., human dignity remains unaltered, inextinguishable, and equal for each human. We are encouraged and perhaps drawn by gratitude to both illuminate and live in accord with this gift of dignity in all people by our choices, but this does not increase our gift of dignity. Yet, the people of the Philippines were largely experiencing economic and political oppression, which ignored their dignity and left the oppressors living in discord with their own dignity. Thus,

from the perspective of *alay dangal*, 'to offer dignity,' both groups were suffering and as a community were in need of restoring their sense of human dignity. The power of nonviolence activates this restorative and liberating process.

After election fraud in the 1984 parliamentary elections, months of non-violent protests and organizing arose to set the tone for the 1986 elections between Marcos and Cory Aquino. The Catholic Bishops called for a nonviolent struggle for justice against Marcos that led to civil disobedience and work stoppages. On February 22nd of 1986, some military leaders announced their revolt against Marcos but were badly outnumbered and stuck in highly vulnerable bases. Through radio, Cardinal Sin called people to bring food and supplies to those revolting, while encouraging other soldiers to defect. Soon 40,000 supporters, including women, men, children, elderly, nuns, priests, and seminarians, had gathered around the bases forming a human barricade, displaying many religious artifacts, convicted with hope for reconciliation, and many active in prayer. Risking their own lives, they offered their own willingness to suffer as a message to the hearts of the soldiers. Although Marcos ordered his remaining loyal troops to move in on the camps, when they took aim with guns and tanks many troops broke into tears and retreated to an empty field. As startled troops were met with gestures of friendship, defections escalated and Marcos' entourage fled February 25th.

Bringing food and supplies to those revolting, while encouraging soldiers to defect were both ways of acting in accord with their own dignity and "offering dignity" to each group. They were not trying to humiliate their opponent, since such action is not in accord with the gift of dignity. They were trying to help their opponent, the government and its loyal soldiers, to step out of the embarrassing role of depending on violence and threat power, which is in discord with their own gift of dignity and mistakenly assumes they could diminish another's gift of dignity by continuing the oppression.

Not only did the people attempt to illuminate the dignity of



"The world is best reconstructed by valuing the people and human lives, by reaching out in joy and dialogue. That is Filipino people power. This will be our contribution to human progress and peace."

-Fr. Jose Blanco S.J., Founder, Aksyon Para sa Kapayapaan at Katarungan (Movement for Peace and Justice)

all participants in the conflict, but they also evoked actions in accord with dignity. Thus, we may consider the power of nonviolence as 'illuminating and evoking dignity'. Catholic Cardinal Bernadin of Chicago coined the term a "consistent ethic of life" to refer to a moral framework for discerning various social issues. A paradigm of nonviolence may help refocus this framework toward considering a "consistent ethic of dignity." Clearly violations of dignity, injury and deaths would have been much greater if violence was the chosen recourse. Regarding the choice of nonviolence, Cardinal Sin adds, "It was two million independent decisions. Each one said, in their heart, 'I will do this,' and they went out." Michael Nagler calls this "Person Power," and when this unfolds within the context of a community committed to dignity, the energy for transformation of hearts and societies cultivates an ever-expanding horizon of love in action.

RESOURCES

The Philippines EDSA Revolution:

<http://library.thinkquest.org/15816/mainpage.html>

We Remember People Power 1986:

<http://tinyurl.com/getjz>

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