The Quaker Martyr Mary Dyer and the Principles of Nonviolence at Work

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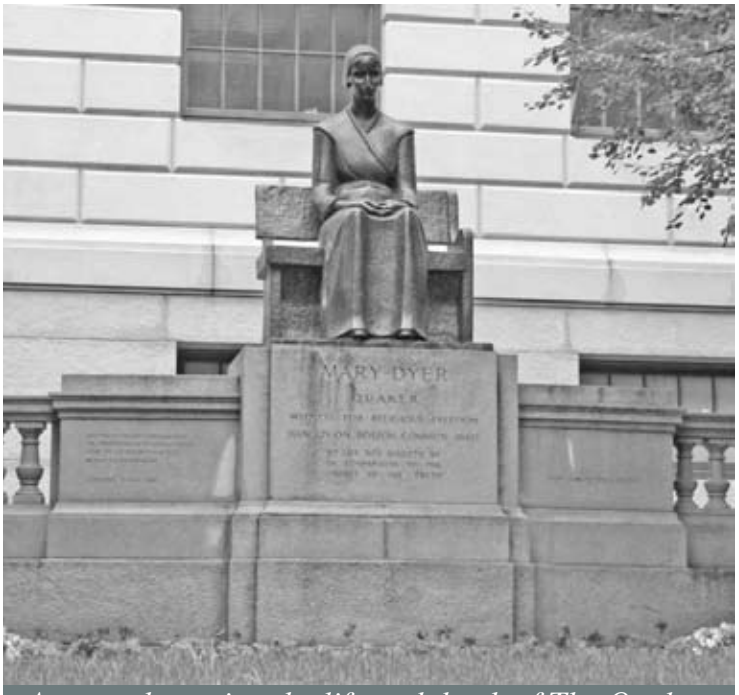
I. Introduction

On September 12th, 1659 Governor John Endicott summarized the frustrations of Massachusetts Bay authorities, stating: "We have made many laws […] to keep ye away from us and neither whipping, nor imprisoning, nor cutting of ears nor banishment upon pain of death will keep ye away from us. I desire not your death!" The 'ye' Endicott refers to were the dangerous and growing sect known as Quakers. In the weeks prior to Endicott's impassioned plea, the courts issued a death sentence for anyone practicing Quakerism in Massachusetts Bay. The edict was the culmination of a series of increasingly violent laws aimed at uprooting the seeds of the Quaker religion from the fertile soil of the New World. "This court doth order and enact," the document stated,

> that every Person or Persons of the accused sect of Quakers [in Massachusetts bay] shall be apprehended […] to close prison, there to remain without bail […] where they shall have a trial by a special jury and being convicted to be of the Sect of Quakers, shall be banished upon the pain of death.[2]

In the seventeenth century, the Quakers seemed adversarial to their more strict and conservative Puritan peers. Abolishing priests, the equality of sexes, nonviolence—just a few of the Quaker ideologies the Puritans detested and feared. This literal death-threat, however, failed to deter Quaker missionaries. Indeed, one brave Quaker woman relished the opportunity to die for her faith, for her peers, and for the cause of religious tolerance. Mary Dyer's compelling narrative of martyrdom additionally illuminates four key laws of nonviolence, and thus aids in our understanding of the power of nonviolent resistance.

First, the Quaker-Puritan conflict follows closely the Conflict Escalation Curve.[3] Michael Nagler, founder and current professor of Peace and Conflict Studies at

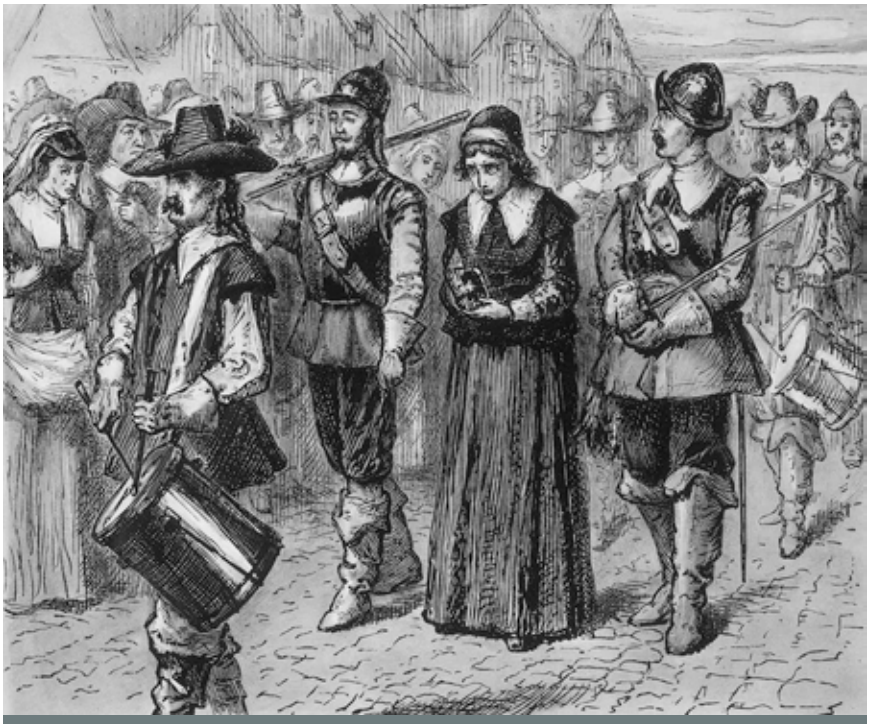


A statue honoring the life and death of The Quaker Mary Dyer stands in front of the Boston State House

UC Berkeley, argues that conflict escalates in three distinct stages, as measured by the passage of time and level of dehumanization. In stage one, both parties are still in communication via letters, petitions, and mediation sessions. However, when these diplomatic means fail, one side begins to severely dehumanize the other in preparation for the ensuing violence. In stage two, violence, torture, or imprisonment is employed in an attempt to resolve the conflict. At this point, the nonviolent actor must accept "self-suffering" to reach the oppressor and breakdown the dehumanizing ideologies. At stage three, the dehumanization is so great that the nonviolent actor must be willing to sacrifice their life. Dyer's conflict follows perfectly the three stages of the Escalation Curve.

The next three terms constitute the core principles of nonviolent conflict and are all readily perceptible in Dyer's struggle. First, Dyer, as a Quaker, was dehumanized by her Puritan foes. Dehumanization paves the way for violent persecution as the hated individual or group is removed from the human, and thus moral, sphere of consideration. Dyer's willingness

to endure violence, however, renders her human once more in the eyes of her oppressors--a concept known as rehumanization. Finally, Dyer's nonviolent sacrifice converts a former foe into a Quaker companion, a phenomena dubbed 'nonviolent conversion.' In short, dehumanization allows for violent persecution while nonviolent suffering rehumanizes the persecuted individual, and, at its very best, converts previously intolerant individuals. As we analyze Dyer's story, try to identify all four of the nonviolent precepts at work:



Mary bravely went forward and was hung

1. Escalation Curve
2. Dehumanization
3. Rehumanization
4. Conversion

II. Dyer's Dire Decision: Life, Death, and Quakerism in Massachusetts Bay, 1654-1659.

From the outset of their arrival in the Massachusetts Bay colony, the Quakers faced an uphill battle in both openly practicing their religion and procuring converts. The Quakers' emphasis on the individual as the sacred unit of religion threatened the Puritanical social structure of the colony, which emphasized a patriarchal church hierarchy over individual will. Historian Patricia Bonomi writes: "The Quaker belief in a divine light, an inner radiance shed by God directly on the souls of individual men and women, struck Puritan leaders as a dire threat to the secular authority of law and magistracy."[4] Thus, Massachusetts Governor John Endicott, perceiving the Quakers as a threat to Puritan hierarchical control, publicly denounced the group as "malignant and assiduous Promoters of Doctrines directly tending to subvert both our Churches and State,"[5] while influential Puritan minister John Higginson, claimed that the sacred individual was nothing but a "sticking vapour from hell."[6]

In 1656 Endicott passed a law barring the immigration of Quakers to the colony. The law prohibited "all Masters of Ships to bring any Quakers to this Jurisdiction […] on Penalty of the House of Corrections."[7] Later that year, Endicott ordered imprisonment of Quakers, whippings, and torture—but not death. The death decree came three years later, in 1659; it was a ruling that greatly shaped the life of Mary Dyer.

Mary Dyer, as both a wife and mother, no doubt agonized over her decision: in September of 1659, Dyer, a Quaker, was permanently banned from the Massachusetts Bay colony. For seven months Dyer spent time with her husband and son, but ultimately decided that the principles of religious tolerance outweighed all of her commitments—even the familial. She returned to Boston on May 21st, 1660, preaching the merits of Quakerism. A shocked Governor Endicott could not believe his eyes: "Are you the same Mary Dyer that was here before?"[8] Mary answered undauntedly: "I am the same Mary Dyer that was here the last General Court […] let my Council and Request be accepted with you, To repeal all such Laws that the truth and servants of the Lord may have free passage among you."[9]

Mary was swiftly sentenced to death by hanging. On June 1st, at nine a.m. Dyer began her death march to the gallows. A massive crowd gathered to taunt Dyer. Yet, as she approached the gallows, a hush fell over the mob. The silence was punctured by a loud yell, "Mary, go back to Rhode Island where you might save your life. We beg of you!"[10] Mary, however, refused. Standing atop the gallows, the emotion of the crowd turned, and many pleaded, "That if she would return [to Rhode Island] she might come down and save her life."

Mary bravely went forward and was hung; her neck snapped and her lifeless body dangled in the wind. Dyer's dress billowed with the breeze. A weeping bystander remarked: "She hangs there as a flag for others to take example by."[11] And yet, amidst the persecution and death, a new life flourished. Edward Wanton, an officer placed under the

CONTINUED FROM P. 27 gallows to protect the structure was "so affected at the sight" of Mary's courageous sacrifice "he became a convert to the cause of the Friends [Quakers]." Three years later Wanton was arrested in Boston for holding a Quaker meeting in his home.[12]

After Dyer's death, the waves of remorse and empathy fused and Bay colonists lashed out at Governor Endicott. The harsh reactions of the colonists and Quaker sympathizers in England prompted Endicott to produce a written defense of the General Court's actions entitled, "An Exculpatory Address to King Charles II,"[13] a rationalization of state torture and execution, which "incurred the King's Displeasure."[14] The king, in turn, reversed the death penalty, and halted all other forms of harassment. The amazing reversal in fortune testifies to the anger and outrage of the Bay citizens. Charles II wrote:

> Having been informed that several of our Subjects among you, called Quakers have been and are imprisoned by you, whereof some have been executed [...] you are forebear to proceed any farther, but that you forthwith send the said Persons over to this our Kingdom.[15]

Apparently the public demanded more from Governor Endicott, for shortly after the repeal of the death penalty and the manumission of Quaker prisoners, the jailing of Quakers, strictly based on their religious beliefs, was outlawed altogether. And although whippings were never abolished, the floggings were applied in "three towns only."[16]

III. Principles at Work

The first principle of nonviolence--the escalation curve--is observable in the evolution of the struggle: from slander (stage one), to imprisonment and torture (stage two), and ultimately death (stage three). The slander also signals the beginnings of dehumanization. That is, violence was more easily perpetrated on the Quakers precisely because they were cast as outsiders. However, Mary Dyer's willingness to suffer--her nonviolent resistance--rehumanized her in the eyes of her captors. Thus, the crowd that assembled to taunt her instead pleaded for her release and, after her death, demanded that the king enact more merciful laws concerning Quakers. Finally, Edward Wanton, a gallows officer, experienced a nonviolent conversion; instead of hanging people, Wanton converted to Quakerism and now attempted to "save people's souls."

IV. Conclusion: History's Secret

Alongside the dominant historical narrative of violence lies a subtle, albeit equally powerful, narrative of nonviolence. That is, hidden beneath the bloody skirmishes of our Earth's past are numerous historical examples of conflicts resolved nonviolently. And this is history's secret—juxtaposed with this violence is the answer to a more peaceful future; it simply awaits our excavation. It is my hope that I have provided a modicum of the tools used to 'excavate' nonviolent stories and that you, the reader, can aid in their discovery.

Edward Wanton, an officer placed under the gallows to protect the structure was so affected at the sight of Mary's courageous sacrifice he became a convert to the cause.

Works Cited

1. Joseph Bolles, Persecutions in New England, Connecticut: New London,
2 Massachusetts, Public Information, Massachusetts: Cambridge, 1658-1660.
3 Michael Nagler, Is There No Other Way?: The Search for a Nonviolent Future, (Berkeley: Berkeley Hills, 2000), 124. This is a slightly modified version of Nalger's curve which reads: stage one: mediation, stage two: dehumanization and violence, stage three: death.
4 Patricia Bonomi, Under the Cope of Heaven, (New York: Oxford UP, 2003), 27.
5 Ibid. 27.
6 George Bishop, New England Judged, 1703.
7 William Sewel, The history of the rise, increase, and progress, of the Christian people called Quakers: intermixed with several remarkable occurrences, (London, 1728), 158.
8 William Sewel, 228.
9 Sewel, 11.
10 Surprisingly, I found this exchange on a great website, and corroborated the dialogue in Sewel. See: http://www.rootsweb.com/~nwa/dyer.html; accessed 30 March 2005.
11 Retrieved December 6, 2004, from http://www.rootsweb.com/~nwa/dyer.html
12 http://www.rootsweb.com/~nwa/dyer.html; accessed 30 March 2005.
13 Horatio Rogers, Mary Dyer of Rhode Island: The Quaker that was Hanged on Boston Common, June 1, 1660, (New York: 1896), 62.
14 Albert Bushnell Hart, ed. American History Told By Contemporaries VI, (Macmillian: New York, 1897), 454-57.
15 Sewel, 226.
16 Horatio Rogers, 1896.