



What Can We Do?

by Margie Carter

*Dead power is everywhere among us — in the forest, chopping down the songs, at night in the industrial landscape, wasting and stiffening the new life; in the streets of the city, throwing away the day. We wanted something different for our people: not to find ourselves an old, reactionary republic, full of ghost fears, the fears of death and the fears of birth. We want something else. — Muriel Rukeyser, **The Life of Poetry***

Preparing for this **Beginnings** issue on violence has taken me on quite a journey. I spent several months reading research, relevant books and articles, conducting informal interviews, and pursuing the topic on nearly every occasion with friends and family. During the week I actually sat down to write several additional events captured by my attention:

- A close friend disclosed her fear of domestic violence at home.
- A 12 year old boy in my state was convicted of killing a migrant worker who had a makeshift camp by the Columbia River.
- Two teens were shot by a classmate in the cafeteria of my neighborhood high school.
- A right-to-bear arms group announced a Martin Luther King Day demonstration to protest that gun-control legislation denies their civil rights.
- Bill Moyers aired a two part, four hour PBS special — “What Can We Do About Violence?” — with tragic stories and inspiring community action projects
- Hundreds of Bombay residents hurled their TV sets

out the window in a protest against violence and sex on television in India

Though I consider myself an activist and risk-taker, these combined events shook me into a new level of self-awareness. I have been hiding my emotional life from the daily occurrences of fear and violence around me, *accommodating* these truths as best as I can. This accommodation has buried flames of outrage and vision within me, immobilized my creativity and courage to respond effectively.

The evidence in this country of the relationship between poverty, media violence, easy access to handguns, violence at home and on the streets, and offender neglect and abuse in their own childhoods is staggering. It is so overwhelming that I think these statistics serve to numb us out, rather than spur us into action. For a moment, just try to take into your mind and heart the reality these statistics represent, especially when looked at together, because the roots of violence in this country are very interlinked.

A gun rolls off the assembly line in America every **10 seconds**, while another gun is imported into the country every **11 seconds**. There are **211 MILLION** firearms in the US, more than **2** for each household.

When every **2 minutes** somebody in the US is shot and every **14 minutes** somebody dies from a gun wound, why do we allow the handgun industry to claim Martin Luther King Day? Perhaps it’s that the NRA’s lobbying arm spent nearly **\$30 million** in 1992 alone. The NRA’s political action committee ranks **9th** in congressional campaign spending.



Between 1979 and 1991, nearly **50,000** children were killed by firearms — a total equal to the number of US battle casualties in Vietnam.

Meanwhile, studies show that TV prime-time dramatic programming in North America features an average of **6 to 8 acts of violence an hour** and **2 murders** each evening. These figures exclude news broadcasts and special reports. There are an average of **25 acts of violence** an hour in children's programming. For entertainment, this is rivaled only by video games encouraging you to repeatedly maim and kill to become a winner.

Someone in the US is murdered, raped, assaulted, or robbed **every 16 seconds**. About **30%** of Americas say they know a woman who is currently a victim of spousal abuse, but **only 18%** of them said they've tried to help reduce domestic violence in the past year. **84%** of violent offenders were abused as children.

Since 1993, more people have died from gunshot wounds at home than in all the wars this country has fought before or since.

As I compiled these facts, it took several readings to really let myself have a *feeling* response. I began reciting the statistics aloud with friends, and in one case a group of us did a round-robin almost confessional-type reading which finally burst the dam of pain and outrage for me. This, in turn, has led to wonderful discussions of hopes and dreams along with the fears and nightmares. Naming them and moving them out of the shadows of our busy lives has been empowering. We've begun to talk more of community action.

Our country was founded with heinous acts of violence and exploitation alongside ideals of liberty and justice for all. Violence is in the memory of our bones as surely as our hearts cling to ideals of democracy. We know much more about victimization and the urge to retaliate with violence than we do about empowerment, creative anger, and conflict management. More prophetic than symbolic, Dr. King's reminder that "an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind" sits on our doorstep. We need "life service, not lip service," he said.

To live non-violently requires a profound sense of commitment and source of spiritual grounding, especially with today's climate of fear and denigra-

tion of life. It involves simple acts and large scale social action for economic justice. Yes, we need to advocate for government funding and support of violence prevention, anti-poverty programs, human services, education, and health care. Write letters, make calls, vote in every election. March, rally, and protest — not only to the government, media, and gun industry, but to reclaim our streets from drug dealers, weapon dealers, gangs, and those who rape. It takes courage to confront these evils and we'll be safest in large numbers. It is far more dangerous to wait for someone else to solve the problem of violence. Again, words from Martin Luther King, Jr. can inspire and fuel us forward:

Courage faces fear and thereby masters it . . . we must constantly build dikes of courage to hold back the flood of fear.

The ultimate measure of a man (sic) is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.

I have the audacity to believe that people everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies; education and culture for their minds; and dignity, equality, and justice for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down, other-centered men can build up.

Those interviewed on the Bill Moyers' special also had powerful reminders for us: "Economic hardship is the greatest predictor of violence. The best way to stop a bullet is a job. We can't sustain communities without jobs and economic opportunities." There were ideas about immediate things we can begin to change in our lives.

"Violent TV shows have become persuasive guests in our families. Millions are realizing that it's not just a matter of what we are watching, but what we are becoming. We are increasingly turning over to electronic devices the task of occupying our time. People acquire morality by human interaction; to the extent we isolate ourselves we further immorality and our destruction."

Angela Blackwell of the Urban Strategies Council described the effects of a "Turn Off the Violence Day" in Minneapolis. Responding to the call to "get the violence out of your life however it comes in," Minneapolis citizens turned off their TVs for a day, talked, worked, and played together, experiencing a brief moment of power. Blackwell said, "Everything



Beginnings

Beginnings

seems out of your control until you begin to act, to say ‘what can I do personally?’ And if we do it for one day as part of a community, all doing it together, it lets us sense our power and see there’s more we can do.”

Bill Moyers suggested we “get mad as hell and don’t take it any more,” demanding enforcement of the 1990 Children’s Television Act. Yes, and if we don’t get a positive response, I suggest we stage an action similar to those in Bombay. Throw our TVs out and pledge not to buy a new one until the violence entertainment industry is curbed.

There is no one answer to violence, but many. We need to firmly say no to many things we have accepted as “the way things are,” honoring Dr. King’s memory by mobilizing large scale non-violent direct action to end this madness. No more economic crumbs, tokens, and lip service while the bank accounts of the rich continue to grow; no more jobless, eyeless, and toothless communities. “True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.”

And we must envision what we will say yes to, every day of our lives. Let us fill ourselves with a heartfelt longing, a thirst that won’t be fooled, an unflinching will and determination to envision and create something new. In my journey to write about violence in the lives of children, I uncovered renewed sensibilities — the contrast between how things are and how they could be, a source of vision and strength that I want to spread all around. I hope you’ll join me.

For transcripts or videos of the referred to Bill Moyers’ special — “What Can We Do About Violence?” — along with a community guide of action steps, call (800) 336-1917.

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