

The Satyagraha of John Brown

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John Brown, a complicated man with the plainest of names, lives on—or so we are told.¹ The past decade or so has seen a resurgence of scholarly interest in his remarkable life, due in part to a combination of the sesquicentennial of his Harpers Ferry raid, a handful of recent high-profile acts of terrorism within U.S. borders, and one well-received novel.² In popular memory, Brown is known for taking an unwavering stand against the evil of slavery, to the point of killing civilians who stood in his way. Accounts of his life typically begin with the dramatic raid—no surprise in a culture that celebrates the gunfighter archetype. In academic circles, Brown serves as the centerpiece of discussions regarding the use of violence for moral ends.³ As such, the John Brown

¹ Blakeslee Gilpin, *John Brown Still Lives!: America's Long Reckoning with Violence, Equality, and Change* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Evan Carton, *Patriotic Treason: John Brown and the Soul of America* (New York: Free Press, 2006), xi.

² David Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2005); Louis DeCaro Jr., “*Fire from the Midst of You*”: *A Religious Life of John Brown* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Robert McGlone, *John Brown's War Against Slavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Carton, *Patriotic Treason*; Tony Horwitz, *Midnight Rising: John Brown and the Raid that Sparked the Civil War* (New York: Henry Holt, 2011); Merrill Peterson, *John Brown: The Legend Revisited* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002); Russell Banks, *Cloudsplitter* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998).

³ Gilpin, *John Brown Still Lives!*, 1; Bruce Lesh, “Interpreting John Brown: Infusing Historical Thinking into the Classroom,” *OAH Magazine of History* 25:2 (Apr. 2011): 46-50; “John Brown, Slavery, and the Legacies of Revolutionary Violence in Our Own Time: A Conference Commemorating the 150th Anniversary of the Harpers Ferry Raid,” Yale University, Oct. 29-31, 2009. For a precise example of the prevailing emphasis, see Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown, 2006), 97, which says, “It was the wild-eyed prophecies of John Brown, his willingness to spill blood and not just words on behalf of his visions, that helped force the issue of a nation

story can easily become an aspect of cultural violence, meaning those beliefs, ideologies, and cosmologies that legitimize and perpetuate direct and structural (indirect) violence. Yet, as recent scholarship shows, there is another side to the story: John Brown's struggle *against* violence.⁴ Emphasizing, honoring, and learning from that part of his biography is an example of cultural peace. To fully appreciate the significance of Brown's peace work, though, it helps first to look at the thinking of Mohandas Gandhi.

Satyagraha

What did Gandhi mean by *satyagraha*? The term is a combination of two Sanskrit words: *satya* (ultimate Truth) and *graha* (holding). For Gandhi, Truth meant *ahimsa* (without harm or coercion), and universal Truth is God. Put another way, the interconnectedness of all living things is ultimate reality. A *satyagrahi* is a person committed to Truth, both as a goal (the integration of all humankind) and a means to that goal (non-harming).⁵ In A.J. Muste's perfect phrase, "There is no way to peace—peace is the way."⁶ Satyagraha—persistence in Truth—is a way of life, one that rejects all forms of violence, but not one that ignores conflict.

Conflict, in Gandhian thought, is an opportunity to bring the conflicted parties, Self and Other, closer together by correcting a bad relation.⁷ Other is not the enemy, but, rather, a partner in the conflict, and is invited to join Self in transforming their conflicted connection. However, there is much Self can do without Other's cooperation. To break away from dehumanizing relations, a satyagrahi seeks to develop power over Self, or *autonomy*. This includes fearlessness, to neutralize threat power; self-reliance, to eliminate vulnerability to exchange power; and self-respect, to rise above the power of persuasion.⁸ Autonomy works on either side of a bad relation: power over Self rather than *submission to* Other, and power over Self rather than *power over* Other. A fearless person won't be intimidated by threat of harm and also won't need to intimidate; bullies are motivated by deep-seated insecurity. A truly self-reliant person isn't vulnerable to exploitation and has no need to exploit others. True self-confidence means holding

half slave and half free. I'm reminded...that it has sometimes been the cranks, the zealots, the prophets, the agitators, and the unreasonable...that have fought for a new order."

⁴ Reynolds, *John Brown*, is the most thorough account of Brown's work against violence.

⁵ Raghaven Iyer, ed., *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 244.

⁶ Quoted in Ira Chernus, *American Nonviolence: The History of an Idea* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 133. An excellent summary of Gandhi's philosophy is found on 91-110.

⁷ Gandhi's conflict resolution is summarized in Johan Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996), 114-126.

⁸ Kenneth Boulding, *Three Faces of Power* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1989). Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means*, 2, identifies four power types: military (threat), economic (exchange), cultural (persuasion), and political (decision-making). See also Robert Burrowes, *The Strategy of Nonviolent Defense: A Gandhian Approach* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 83-84.

firmly to your truth, not submitting to Other’s truth, but without the need to force your truth onto Other; evangelists may be seeking affirmation.

Autonomy is an antidote for the three types of violence identified by peace theorist Johan Galtung: fearlessness versus direct violence, self-reliance versus structural violence, and self-respect versus cultural violence (which normalizes fear and dependency).⁹

<u>AUTONOMY</u>	<u>resistance to:</u>	<u>no desire to:</u>	<u>antidote to violence</u>
fearlessness	intimidation	dominate	direct
self-reliance	dependency	exploit	structural
self-respect	persuasion	manipulate	cultural

Conflict, then, is also an opportunity to test and strengthen Self’s commitment to nonviolence, an opportunity to rid oneself of fear, dependency, and submissiveness. By holding firmly to Truth, by being willing to absorb suffering but refusing to inflict it, by showing respect and concern for Other, Self employs *integrative power*. Simply put, integrative power is the ability to attract empathy, and the surest method is by expressing empathy. If threat power says, “Do this or else!” and exchange power says, “Do this for me and I’ll do this for you,” then integrative power says, “I’ll do this for you because I care about you, and maybe we’ll become closer.” Integrative power means appealing to the universal human need for interconnection, hoping this will inspire others to move in a similar direction.¹⁰ Gandhi called it “soul force.” So satyagraha is a method of nonviolent conflict resolution that approaches conflicts as opportunities to reduce violence of all types and also as opportunities for transformation of all parties involved.

Gandhi applied satyagraha in his attempt to resolve the conflict known as British colonial rule over India—a dehumanizing relation that kept the British imperialists dependent on exploitation of Indians, Indians submissive before British demands, and all sides persuaded of British superiority. But when Gandhi spoke of *Hind swaraj* (Indian self-rule), his was not the late 20th-century Western notion of freedom as license or “freedom to.”¹¹ Rather, Gandhi was concerned with “freedom from.” True freedom meant liberation from passions and desires. “The outward freedom therefore that we

⁹ Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means*, esp. 2, 9, 196-201. Galtung defines *violence* as “avoidable insult to basic human needs,” those needs being survival, well-being, identity, freedom. *Direct violence* is when one party physically or verbally causes harm. *Structural violence* (indirect violence) is built into a political or economic system, and the harm it causes may be unintentional. *Cultural violence* includes the beliefs, language, ideologies, and cosmologies that legitimize, motivate, and perpetuate direct and structural violence. Galtung believes “the major causal direction of violence is from cultural via structural to direct violence,” but each type of violence can cause or reinforce the other two types.

¹⁰ Boulding, *Three Faces of Power*, holds that integrative power is the most reliable because it builds upon itself, while threat power needs constant reinforcement, and exchange power requires both supply and demand.

¹¹ Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: Norton, 1999), 262-274, 307-332, discusses the notions of “consumer freedom” and “free market” that prevailed in the United States after World War II.

shall attain will only be in exact proportion to the inward freedom to which we may have grown at any given moment.”¹² For example, the attachment to material existence, the desire for physical satisfaction, will bring fear of physical suffering and death, and thus submission before superior threat force. Gandhi asserted that, “You cannot be ruled without your consent.” You can be tortured and killed without your consent, but giving into demands in order to avoid suffering—however coerced and unfair the choice may seem—is to cooperate in your subjugation. So Indian independence would come when Indians developed fearlessness in the face of British direct violence; self-reliance, rather than colonial dependency, to dismantle structural violence; and self-confidence to end the cultural violence that taught British superiority and Indian inferiority. Gandhi viewed the British as partners in this enterprise because the ultimate goal was integration of humankind—a planet of friends, no enemies; freedom from domination, not freedom to dominate.

Gandhi’s dramatic undertakings—the salt satyagraha, general strikes and boycotts, the near-fatal fasts—usually receive the most attention from casual observers, but far more of his effort went into what he called the “Constructive Programme”—putting into action his vision of Indian “civilization.” In his own words:

I am not interested in freeing India merely from the English yoke. I am bent upon freeing India from any yoke whatsoever....Work of social reform or self-purification of this nature is a hundred times dearer to me than what is called purely political work.¹³

Gandhi established small, communal villages called *ashrams*, where he experimented with a simple, sustainable, subsistence-oriented lifestyle. He worked against illiteracy, ignorance, and unsanitary living conditions, and he encouraged daily, universal “spinning”—Indians producing their own cotton thread to make homespun cloth as an alternative to dependency on imported British textiles. He promoted Muslim-Hindu unity, women’s rights, and the elimination of “untouchability.” Regarding the so-called “untouchables,” Gandhi renamed them *Harijan* (children of God) and invited them into his communities. Full integration was Gandhi’s vision, and he also knew that British rule was impossible over a united India of three hundred million people in autonomous yet cooperative communities; the British could join or depart. In the end, though, Gandhi’s unparalleled accomplishment was not as a nation-builder, but, rather, his systematic investigation into the potential of a human society based on “nonviolence of the strong.” Through his teaching, writings, and personal example, his “experiments with Truth” showed the way forward.

Compassionate Warriors

¹² Dennis Dalton, ed., *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 100.

¹³ Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi*, 120.

How does any of this apply to John Brown, a renowned man of violence? In 1859, Brown led eighteen heavily armed men in an audacious invasion of the U.S. arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. He hoped to outfit a guerrilla army of escaped slaves that would terrify southern plantation owners into abandoning slavery. The violent plan failed at the outset; Brown was captured at the arsenal by federal troops, tried for treason, and executed by the Virginia government. This sensational event, which presaged the Civil War, made Brown a household name and a polarizing symbol of the national slavery debate. Over one hundred fifty years later, Brown remains an iconic figure, but despite recent Brown biographies that depict a complex personage, the tendency is still to view him *only* as a man of violence. The Pottawatomie Massacre of 1856, which Brown directed, was so outrageous, and Brown's career ended so dramatically, that it's easy to interpret his life as one long, increasingly violent journey to Harpers Ferry.¹⁴ But to focus on Brown's violence is to miss his remarkable work *against* violence. Indeed, in his final hour—his finest hour—Brown appealed to integrative power, to the human need for interconnection that invigorates nonviolence, and may have done more to undermine U.S. slavery than his violence did. Reframing the narrative, placing Brown in the context of Gandhian thought, can be a way to teach the power of nonviolence.

The story of John Brown may seem an unlikely place to observe integrative power at work. Born in Connecticut in 1800 to parents who taught him the Calvinist doctrine of predestination and helplessness in the face of divine sovereignty, Brown was, in religious conviction, an old-style New England Puritan. The Puritan search for evidence of individual salvation may have promoted personal humility, but notions of predestination could easily become justifications for rather vile behavior: in a word, divinely ordained violence. The Puritan ministers who led the 17th-century colonization of the Massachusetts Bay region claimed that they represented the new “chosen people,” replacing the “chosen” Hebrews of the Old Testament and charged with a special mission to create the “true Christian community.” This was John Winthrop's “city upon a hill.” In the minds of Puritan leaders, “chosenness” justified the destruction of Native communities, with methods that included the slaughter and burning of entire towns and enslavement of the few survivors; religious certainty, expansionism, and militarism make a dangerous brew.¹⁵

Brown grew from a rather militant branch of Christianity—both of his grandfathers participated in the Independence War—but the tree had more than one root. New England also had a tradition of antinomianism—literally, “against the law”—which held that God spoke directly to the individual and one's conscience trumped socially established moral precepts. Anne Hutchinson is New England's best-known early antinomian; Massachusetts officials exiled her to Rhode Island, in 1637, for believing she

¹⁴ For example, see Horwitz, *Midnight Rising*, 7, which calls Brown's early life and career “The Road to Harpers Ferry.”

¹⁵ David Chichester, *Patterns of Power: Religion and Politics in American Culture* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1988), 18-27; Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (New York: Norton, 1976), 202-227.

could interpret scripture for herself. However, her friend, Mary Dyer, eventually presented a more powerful challenge to Puritan orthodoxy. Back in England from 1652 to 1657, Dyer converted to Quakerism, joining a new and rapidly growing sect whose beliefs threatened religious and political authorities. Quakers believed that all individuals had access to a divine “inner light,” and, thus, there was no need for seminaries and clergy, no need to obey unjust secular laws. Quakers also rejected violence. Faced with brutal persecution, Quakers were learning that “patient suffering” not only met the biblical admonition to “resist not evil,” but it could “purchase peace.” They were discovering the potency of integrative power. When Quakers who were sentenced to public flogging vocally forgave their tormentors, onlookers often expressed empathy, were moved to tears; some became Quakers. According to Quaker belief, awakening the world to the “inner light” would bring about the kingdom of heaven on earth, so suffering for faith was not simply individual martyrdom, it was also a tactic for fulfilling God’s covenant.¹⁶

In 1657, Mary Dyer sailed back to Massachusetts Bay, and was soon expelled for preaching Quakerism.¹⁷ Twenty years earlier, Dyer had gone quietly into exile with Hutchinson, but this time she was prepared for a campaign of “patient suffering.” When Dyer reappeared in Massachusetts, in 1659, to protest the arrest and flogging of fellow Quakers, the governor ordered her and two men, William Robinson and Marmaduke Stephenson, banished “upon pain of death.” A month later, the trio returned, ready to “lay down their lives.” The exasperated governor ordered their execution. As they walked to the gallows, Dyer called it “an hour of the greatest joy I can enjoy in this world.” Robinson forgave the assembled crowd. Stephenson whispered to the hangman, “I suffer for Christ.” After the two Quaker men were killed, Dyer received a prearranged pardon, but she objected, insisting, “I am willing to die as my brethren did unless you nullify this law.” Despite the presence of a large detachment of soldiers, the crowd refused to allow another killing—“patient suffering” had moved them. They surged on the gallows to pull Dyer to safety. Soldiers physically removed Dyer from the colony, and she rejoined her family in Rhode Island. But seven months later, she was back before a Massachusetts court, demanding repeal of anti-Quaker laws.

The eloquence of Dyer’s next and final visit to the gallows is a revelation. Onlookers begged her to accept banishment rather than be killed. She declined and was hanged, but not before explaining herself.

I came to keep Blood-guiltiness from you, desiring you to repeal the unrighteous and unjust Law of Banishment upon Pain of Death, made against the innocent

¹⁶ Meredith Weddle, *Walking in the Way of Peace: Quaker Pacifism in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹⁷ This section on Mary Dyer is drawn in part from the research and conclusions of Casey McEachern, “Through Blood We Purchase Peace: Mary Dyer, Patient Suffering, and Puritan Persecution in Massachusetts Bay, 1656-1661,” M.A. thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2007. A summary of this paper can be found in McEachern, “The Quaker Martyr Mary Dyer and the Principles of Nonviolence at Work,” *Peace Power* (Summer 2006): 26-28, www.calpeacepower.org.

Servants of the Lord; therefore my Blood will be required at your Hands who willfully do it: But for those that do it in the simplicity of their Hearts, I desire the Lord to forgive them. I came to do the Will of my Father, and in Obedience to his Will, I stand even unto death.¹⁸

Applying Galtung's definition of violence—"avoidable insult to basic human needs"—it's safe to say that violation of the human need for life is usually more obvious and dramatic than violation of the need for identity.¹⁹ With her bold civil disobedience, Dyer was dramatizing the violence of religious intolerance, equating religious identity with life, thereby confronting Massachusetts residents with the ugly implication of anti-Quaker laws: actively oppose religious intolerance or tacitly support murder. The Massachusetts governor did not want to kill Quakers, he just wanted them gone, but Dyer, Stephenson, and Robinson would not let him off so easily. They were directing their "patient suffering" at the cultural violence of religious exclusivism, which was reinforced by the structural violence of Puritan theocracy—government by churchmen—and which led to the direct violence of floggings and hangings. Peace theory aside, Dyer's words and actions made her intentions clear; a tearful onlooker reportedly said, "She hangs there as a flag for others to take example by."²⁰

What did the deaths of Dyer and her friends accomplish? The governor was employing threat power—do this or else!—to keep out Quaker influence, but integrative power—I do this because I care about you—reversed the effect. Puritans continued to become Quakers, among them a soldier guarding the gallows when Dyer was killed. When the king of England was informed of the events, he ordered Massachusetts to cease torturing and killing Quakers, and, under popular pressure, the governor halted even the jailing of Quakers—the beginning of the end of official religious intolerance in the colony. Longer-term results are more difficult to track, and the influence of these stunning demonstrations of "patient suffering" may be impossible to measure, but Dyer and other Quakers planted a seed of nonviolence in New England, and such powerful acts are not easily expunged from emotional memory. Just as an abusive parent teaches a child to abuse, lessons of tolerance and nonviolence were certainly passed through generations of New Englanders, knowingly and unknowingly, by word and example. Indeed, Quaker thought and experience were the original impetus for the U.S. peace societies and the slowly emerging abolitionist movement.²¹

The life of Owen Brown provides an instructive example of transgenerational integrative power. As a boy in Connecticut, Owen played with a neighbor's Guinean

¹⁸ The words of Robinson, Stephenson, and Dyer come from William Sewel, *The History of the Rise, Increase, and Progress of the Christian People Called Quakers* (1728), 222-229, as quoted in McEachern, "Through Blood We Purchase Peace," 27-32.

¹⁹ Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means*, 197.

²⁰ Horatio Rogers, *The Quaker Martyr that was Hanged on Boston Common* (Providence, RI: Preston and Rounds, 1896), 62, quoted in McEachern, "Through Blood We Purchase Peace," 32.

²¹ Gerda Lerner, "Nonviolent Resistance: The History of an Idea," in Lerner, *Why History Matters: Life and Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 60-66.

slave and was deeply affected when the man died. The kindness of an enslaved African humanized Owen, prevented him from seeing blacks as less than human, despite the dehumanizing culture of white supremacy. As an adult, Owen Brown became an abolitionist, but went beyond most white abolitionists in rejecting racial prejudice altogether, and taught his children to respect people of all races.²² When the family moved to Ohio, Owen's son John befriended local Natives, whose lingering presence other settlers resented. After he observed a white master abuse a black boy, John became, at age twelve, a committed abolitionist.²³ Like father, like son. In the ensuing decades, Owen and John participated in the Underground Railroad, assisting runaway slaves on their northward flight. The ideas of abolitionist Quakers, including John Woolman and Lucretia Mott, also influenced John Brown's thinking, and the rude behavior of U.S. soldiers during the War of 1812 disgusted him so that, as he explained in his curious syntax, "he would neither train, *or drill*; but paid fines & got along like a Quaker until his age finally has cleared him of military duty."²⁴ One acquaintance reported that Brown was a committed nonresistant.²⁵ In 1837, though, in response to the murder of defiant antislavery editor Elijah Lovejoy by a proslavery mob, John Brown stood up at a prayer meeting, with his father at his side, and declared, "I pledge myself, with God's help, that I will devote my life to increasing hostility to slavery."²⁶ His father had taught him colorblindness, but the abused boy, the desperation of fugitive slaves, Lovejoy's courageous death on their behalf—these reached Brown's heart. He felt their suffering and knew their humanity.

After his public vow, Brown emerged a Puritan warrior certain of his divine mission. William Lloyd Garrison and other prominent abolitionists rejected violence; they were Christian "perfectionists," believing that by achieving a sinless existence they could provide a righteous model that would persuade slave owners to cease their sinful ways.²⁷ In contrast, Brown's old-school Calvinism led him to believe that he was chosen by God to end slavery and that God, not human efforts to rise above sin, determined who was saved and who was damned. Inspired by accounts of violent slave revolts throughout the Americas, and by the example of Oliver Cromwell, a 17th-century English Puritan who believed he had been chosen by God to wage war against monarchy, Brown declared a war of arms, not words and piety, against slavery.

The conflict over the expansion of slavery into Kansas Territory provided Brown with a theater to begin his holy war. After "border ruffians" sacked Lawrence, an antislavery town, in 1856, Brown organized the brutal murder of five proslavery settlers. The Pottawatomie Massacre, as it was called, escalated hostilities from threats and

²² DeCaro Jr., "Fire from the Midst of You," 23-24.

²³ Brown's account of the beating is likely stylized, but it accurately presents his view of blacks as peers. DeCaro Jr., "Fire from the Midst of You," 53-56; McGlone, *John Brown's War Against Slavery*, 53-55.

²⁴ Quoted in Reynolds, *John Brown*, 33.

²⁵ McGlone, *John Brown's War Against Slavery*, 54, 237; DeCaro Jr., "Fire from the Midst of You," 72.

²⁶ Quoted in Carton, *Patriotic Treason*, 82.

²⁷ Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: Norton, 2008), 223-226, 236-237.

property damage to pitched battles—“Bleeding Kansas”—with “Captain” Brown leading antislavery forces. In late 1858, Brown directed a raid on two Missouri farms, liberated eleven slaves, and delivered them over one thousand miles to permanent freedom in Canada. Next came the spectacular takeover and shootout at the Harpers Ferry arsenal, which brought death to ten of Brown’s men, one federal soldier, and four townsmen, including a slave. Brown and six others were subsequently hanged—live by the sword, die by the sword—and Brown’s plan to “carry the war into Africa,” meaning into southern states, appeared a complete failure.

The John Brown Problem

Brown’s antislavery violence created a problem for white Americans opposed to slavery.²⁸ For the pacifist abolitionists, the question Brown raised was should they abandon their nonresistance principles. Garrison, for example, had rejected moderation and gradualism in the fight for abolition, but, after Harpers Ferry, Brown appeared the one man fully committed to destroying slavery *immediately*. By comparison to Brown’s method, perfectionism could seem hesitant, even cowardly. In a public address on the day Brown was killed, Garrison invoked “the spirit of ‘76” and equated Brown with George Washington and other “revolutionary fathers” who struck “a blow for freedom.” The rhetoric of the Independence War—patriotic killing in the name of “liberty”—had great resonance, even for a self-described “ultra peace man.” “I am trying him by the American standard,” Garrison said, and characterized that standard as violent resistance to despotism. Garrison affirmed his own rejection of violence, but insisted that violent resistance by the oppressed was better than submission. “Rather than see men wear their chains in a cowardly and servile spirit, I would, as an advocate of peace, much rather see them breaking the head of the tyrant with their chains.”²⁹ When they were the foremost abolitionists, the pacifists’ claim to moral superiority had been secure. But when violent abolitionism took the lead, the pacifists had to decide whether or not to support killing that might bring liberty to the enslaved, and, indeed, all but a few dedicated pacifists eventually embraced Union efforts in the Civil War.³⁰

For others, the problem was *non-state* direct violence. Within modern states, government administrators claim a monopoly on violent redress; officeholders and courts get to decide when killing is just; blood feuds and vigilantism are circumscribed. The Pottawatomie murders made Brown a federal outlaw, and the Harpers Ferry action was a blatant attack on federal property, so expression of support for Brown could easily be construed as promoting vigilantism, anarchy, and treason. Immediately after Brown’s capture, public opinion in the North generally condemned the raid, and presidential

²⁸ Black Americans generally had little quarrel with Brown’s antislavery violence. Benjamin Quarles, *Allies for Freedom: Blacks and John Brown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

²⁹ Garrison’s eulogy for John Brown was printed in *The Liberator*, Dec. 16, 1859. John Stauffer and Zoe Trodd, eds., *The Tribunal: Responses to John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid* (New York: Belknap, 2012), 160-165.

³⁰ Mayer, *All on Fire*, 518-526. In explaining Garrison’s decision to support the Union war effort, Mayer wrote, “The wound dealt to his pacifism by John Brown had now proved fatal.” (520)

candidate Abraham Lincoln, even as he spoke against slavery, took pains to deny any connection between his Republican Party and Brown's "peculiar" and "absurd" enterprise.³¹ But the demise of slavery at the end of the Civil War complicated the issue. Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation as a wartime maneuver, and Union victory led to ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment by southern states. The simple equation that follows—the Civil War ended slavery—implies that antislavery slaughter was appropriate or served a higher purpose. In that sense, as W.E.B. Du Bois insisted, "John Brown was right."³² He was fighting the good war before it was officially declared, while federal laws were still protecting slavery, while Lincoln was repeating his promise not to "meddle" with the South. Brown was a premature antislaveryist.³³ But lauding Brown's antislavery raids is to honor unsanctioned direct violence—unsanctioned by the state—which mainstream opinion usually deems illegitimate. Approval of Brown sets a dangerous precedent, as it suggests violent enforcement by private citizens is acceptable if their cause is righteous, or if they simply believe it is.³⁴

In the early twenty-first century, the U.S. political class's nervous obsession with "terrorism" made the John Brown problem even more awkward.³⁵ Scholars who label Brown a "terrorist" may be referring to a category of violent action, but in current parlance, this term is an indictment.³⁶ It says that extralegal killing defines the historic figure—defines him as "evil"—with no room for nuance. But how could he be evil if he

³¹ Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: Norton, 2010), 137; Stauffer and Trodd, eds., *The Tribunal*, 2012, 206-209.

³² W.E.B. Du Bois, *John Brown* (Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson, 1973, originally published in 1909), 338.

³³ Milton Wolff, an American citizen who fought with the International Brigade against Spanish fascists while the U.S. government claimed "neutrality," discovered during his World War II service that the U.S. Army had labeled him a "premature anti-fascist"—a very dangerous creature. Studs Terkel, *"The Good War": An Oral History of World War II* (New York: New Press, 1984), 480.

³⁴ Robert E. Lee, the U.S. officer who captured John Brown at Harper's Ferry, and who later committed unambiguous treason by going to war against the United States, isn't nearly as problematic as Brown, because the treasonous Lee was a professional soldier dutifully serving a government—directing state-sanctioned killing—even if that government was the Confederate States of America (C.S.A.) slavocracy. Lee and C.S.A. president Jefferson Davis received U.S. presidential pardons in the 1970s. Brown has not been pardoned.

³⁵ U.S. opinion-makers use the term "terrorism" to indicate direct violence they condemn and "counter-terrorism" to mean direct violence they condone. A U.S. Army manual's more technical definition of terrorism—"the calculated use of violence or threat of violence to attain goals that are political, religious or ideological in nature"—would include most U.S. war-making, and thus cannot be employed. Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Empire* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003), 188-189.

³⁶ Tony Horwitz, "Why John Brown Still Scares Us," *American History* 46:5 (Nov.-Dec. 2011): 38-45. Michael Fellman, *In the Name of God and Country: Reconsidering Terrorism in American History* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2010), 14-56, 237-244, places Brown within an American tradition of terrorism, and concludes with an insightful essay about the term. Reynolds, *John Brown*, 500-506, is careful to distinguish Brown from less tolerant "modern terrorists": "He was an *American* terrorist in the amplest sense of the word, because he believed in the American ideal of equal rights for all, regardless of creed or race." (503) In other words, Reynolds believes Brown's terrorism was for a worthy cause. DeCaro Jr., "Fire from the Midst of You," 268, believes that Brown's concern for his hostages proves he wasn't a terrorist.

was trying to end the evil of slavery? One way around the John Brown problem is to dismiss the old man as insane—a strategy originally attempted by Brown’s lawyers and roundly rejected by Brown and recent scholarship. Heroic or dastardly, misguided or treasonous, good or evil—what to do with “Osawatimie” Brown?

Radical Egalitarianism

Peace theory offers a different perspective on John Brown’s career. Brown characterized slavery as “war,” and believed that God had chosen him to end it. That was Brown’s stated goal: the elimination of slavery in the United States, the liberation of the slaves. He declared war on a war. Direct violence to stop direct violence—the contradiction is clear. Yet Brown had other methods, and while it would be wrong to equate him with Gandhi and other advocates of nonviolence, looking beyond his violence reveals surprising parallels to Gandhi’s approach to conflict resolution.

Like Gandhi, Brown believed he served a higher power, desired to liberate an exploited people, and was willing to die for his cause, but Brown wholeheartedly embraced direct violence as the means to his goal. Brown’s solution to the direct violence of slavery was greater direct violence—a guerrilla army of escaped slaves terrorizing slave owners—violence of the strong. In this, he succeeded. The Kansas slavery war and the Harpers Ferry raid hurried secession by the South, leading to the warfare of 1861-65, which created the circumstances of slavery’s demise, most critical being the willingness of slaves to become Union soldiers—mass, state-sanctioned slave revolt. (Hence, the John Brown problem.) If Gandhi’s goal had been simply the end of British rule over India, we could say he, too, succeeded. Yet just as Gandhi failed to create a nonviolent, unified subcontinent, Brown’s war against slavery, even with the federal government taking up his crusade and then outlawing slavery, did not end the subjugation, exploitation, and marginalization of black Americans by white Americans. Brown’s antislavery efforts, though, amounted to more than a war of arms, albeit without the benefit of Gandhi’s philosophical analysis, profound insight, formal education, and international influences. A hide tanner by trade, remarkably unsuccessful as a businessman, seemingly only skilled at producing children—nineteen by two wives—and starting wars, John Brown still managed to develop a “constructive program” of his own.

As peace theory predicts, structural and cultural violence supported the direct violence of U.S. slavery. The structural violence included an economic system based in part on private, concentrated ownership of land and other means of production, and on the exploitation of the laboring masses by ownership. In the North, industrialization brought “wage slavery”; in the South it was worse yet. The U.S. political system was an anemic version of representative government, with participation usually limited to white adult males and filtered by two-party dominance of the electoral process. Dissenting voices were excluded, co-opted, or drowned out. The most obvious cultural violence was the ideological partnership of patriarchy and white supremacy. The Gandhian approach to resolving the conflict known as U.S. slavery would likely have included the creation of communal, interracial, self-sustaining, gender-cooperative, agrarian villages, with former

slave owners welcomed as friends. The John Brown approach too. In his own home, Brown taught racial tolerance, sheltered fugitive slaves, insisted on gender cooperation rather than task differentiation, supported women's rights including suffrage, promoted education for blacks, and tried to establish a cooperative warehousing system to protect wool producers from corporate buyers. His son, John Jr., later recalled, "Father's favorite theme was that of the *Community plan of cooperative industry*, in which all should labor for the common good; 'having all things in common' as did the disciples of Jesus in his day."³⁷

Again similar to Gandhi, though perhaps more intuitively than philosophically, Brown understood that to overcome the divisiveness of racism, blacks and whites would have to live and work together as equals. To understand the uniqueness of Brown's radicalism, consider that many antislavery activists supported deportation of freed slaves, believing blacks and whites could never, in Lincoln's words, "live together upon the footing of perfect equality." In 1848, Gerrit Smith, an immensely wealthy abolitionist, designated 120,000 acres in far northeastern New York for distribution to black families; they would be free and self-supporting and *isolated*. Brown convinced Smith to sell him a farm in the same mountainous region, promising to provide farming instruction and assistance to his black neighbors.³⁸ There Brown lived among blacks as equals, cooperating at work, socializing, even seeking their advice and approval as he plotted his next move. He imagined a free state farther south, in the Appalachian Mountains, and wrote a political blueprint modeled after the U.S. Constitution, then he organized a biracial convention to ratify his document. In a clear rebuke of U.S. slavocracy, Brown's "Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the People of the United States" would guarantee protection of all citizens regardless of race and gender, institute communal ownership of property, and require all "to labor in some way for the general good." Males and females alike would be encouraged to carry arms for defense of the community, and slave owners who voluntarily freed their slaves would be "treated as friends." In brief, Brown's "Provisional Constitution"—like his personal life—challenged the cultural violence of racism and patriarchy by providing for an interracial, gender-cooperative community, and addressed the structural violence of capitalism by proposing economic communalism.³⁹

Of course, the contradictory commitment to direct violence remained; the Provisional Constitution wouldn't go into effect without a violent uprising. But even Brown's war plan incorporated his vision of radical egalitarianism. More than simply abolish slavery, Brown wanted to empower blacks, and he surmised that arming them for battle would do both. In 1851, he issued a call to arms urging free blacks in the North to organize and fight back against slave catchers.

³⁷ Quoted in Reynolds, *John Brown*, 82.

³⁸ Fergus Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 397-400.

³⁹ Horwitz, *Midnight Rising*, 80-82, 113; Stauffer and Trodd, eds., *The Tribunal*, 26-37.

Be firm, determined, and cool; but let it be understood that you are not to be driven to desperation without making it an awful dear job to others as well as you. Give them to know distinctly that those who live in wooden houses should not throw fire, and that you are just as able to suffer as your white neighbors.⁴⁰

At Brown's encouragement, 44 black men and women formed the United States League of Gileadites to do just that. Brown believed that antislavery whites would be inspired by courageous blacks and compelled to take their side. "Nothing so charms the American people as personal bravery," he wrote, an argument later echoed by Frederick Douglass's call for blacks to join the Union Army to prove their worth, and by Gandhi's encouragement of Indians to fight in World War I to prove their manhood; Gandhi, like Brown, preferred brave men of violence to pacifist cowards.⁴¹ Brown wanted a black president for his biracial state, and he recruited black leaders for his invasion of the South. Douglass, who thought the plan hopeless and who had no desire to return to Virginia, declined the leadership role offered by Brown. Harriet Tubman, legendary "Moses" of the Underground Railroad, responded more positively to Brown's overtures—he dubbed her "General Tubman"—but she missed the adventure, perhaps due to illness. (Brown recruited a sickly black woman to lead white and black men—sound absurd? In 1863, while serving the Union Army as nurse, spy, and recruiter, Tubman led Union forces up a river to liberate hundreds of slaves from South Carolina plantations, the first woman to direct a U.S. combat operation.⁴²)

All told, Brown had a plan to cultivate fearlessness, self-reliance, and self-respect among blacks and their white allies. The comparison to Gandhi's Constructive Programme may be unconvincing or unfair—Gandhi laid out a far more comprehensive and holistic philosophy, Brown's approach was marred by advocacy of direct violence—but whereas Gandhi worked at it for over forty years before he was killed, Brown was just getting started.

The Sword of the Spirit

The raid on Harpers Ferry began smoothly enough. In short order, Brown's men seized the weapons stockpiles, taking townspeople hostage in the process. All that remained was for slaves to flee nearby farms en masse and take up arms with the raiders. That did not happen, due to fear, mistrust, and lack of communication. (One can speculate on a different outcome had "General Tubman" been present.⁴³) When Brown

⁴⁰ "Words of Advice to the United States League of Gileadites," in Jonathan Earle, *John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Bedford/St.Martins, 2008), 45.

⁴¹ Judith Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1989), 125-126.

⁴² Catherine Clinton, *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom* (New York: Little Brown, 2004), 124-136, 163-168.

⁴³ Horwitz, *Midnight Rising*, 136, 145; McGlone, *John Brown's War Against Slavery*, 268-274. Brown chose a Sunday night for his raid, not realizing that slaves would be out visiting, away from their homes, and hard to locate. Tubman probably wouldn't have made that mistake. Also, she probably would have

realized only a few slaves were bold enough to answer his call, he still had time to attempt a withdrawal; some of his men suggested it, and a few did escape capture. Shortly after surrendering to U.S. troops, Brown explained it was out of concern for his prisoners that he had erred in not fleeing—perhaps he had imagined more townspeople being killed in a fighting retreat. But Brown seems to have been weighing both the power of personal sacrifice and a desire for national attention when at the chaotic point of no return—run or die—he stayed put. At least a year earlier, according to one of his confidantes, Brown had concluded that only the deaths of white men could awaken people in the North from their apathy toward slavery.⁴⁴

More certain is how Brown, in prison for six weeks awaiting execution, viewed his failure at Harpers Ferry and his impending death. He believed it was all part of God’s plan to end slavery, and thus he would go joyfully to the gallows. His many letters and interviews are consistent on that point. He rejected talk of a rescue attempt, insisting, “I am worth now infinitely more to die than to live.”⁴⁵ With two days to go, he wrote to his family, “I have now no doubt that our seeming *disaster*: will ultimately result in the most *glorious success*.”⁴⁶ He didn’t explain just how his death would bring change, but there are clues as to what he anticipated. His “Words of Advice to the United States League of Gileadites,” written eight years earlier, begins with reference to the *Amistad* trial, but reads like instructions to himself:

The trial for life of one bold and to some extent successful man, for defending his rights in good earnest, would arouse more sympathy throughout the nation than the accumulated wrongs and sufferings of more than three millions of our submissive colored population.⁴⁷

Brown knew, too, how the fighting death of Elijah Lovejoy had inspired his own commitment to ending slavery. Brown held the Puritan belief that the innocent must suffer for the sins of the guilty, but, in his talk of joyful sacrifice, the Puritan warrior was sounding more and more like Mary Dyer and her comrades in “patient suffering.”

To me it is given in behalf of Christ, not only to believe in him, but also to *suffer* for his sake....I think I feel as happy as Paul did when he lay in prison. He knew if they killed him it would greatly advance the cause of Christ....Let them hang me; I forgive them, and may God forgive them, for they know not what they do. I

been more successful than John Cook, Brown’s point man, in communicating with local slaves ahead of time, as she did before her South Carolina raid.

⁴⁴ McGlone, *John Brown’s War Against Slavery*, 249, 304-306; Horwitz, *Midnight Rising*, 236-240; DeCaro Jr., “*Fire from the Midst of You*,” 251. Garrison wondered if Brown’s intent at Harpers Ferry was “a desperate self-sacrifice for the purpose of giving an earthquake shock to the slave system.” Quoted in Mayer, *All on Fire*, 496.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Reynolds, *John Brown*, 388.

⁴⁶ Earle, *John Brown’s Raid*, 101.

⁴⁷ Earle, *John Brown’s Raid*, 44.

have no regret for the transaction for which I am condemned. I went against the laws of men, it is true; but “whether it be right to obey *God* or *men*, judge ye.”⁴⁸

When the threat power of armed struggle could take him no further, Brown had turned to integrative power, dying to win sympathy for his cause. Or, as he put it, “Christ...*saw fit* to take from me a sword of steel after I had carried it for a time but he has put another in my hand (‘The sword of the Spirit;’).”⁴⁹

What did Brown accomplish? The Harpers Ferry raid unleashed a wave of violence across the South that became the Civil War. In the North, thanks to the storm of publicity surrounding his trial and execution, particularly the exultant pronouncements of Garrison, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Brown became the symbol of the war, the rallying cry, and the meaning.⁵⁰ The Union Army’s wildly popular marching song, “John Brown’s Body”—the source of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”—ended with the refrain “His soul goes marching on.” And his “soul” imbued antislavery with a greater moral authority.⁵¹ Brown is often labeled a “martyr,” but this term implies a kind of passivity—at best, refusing to betray one’s beliefs, trying to maintain personal purity; at worst, choosing to play the self-pitying victim—and does not adequately capture the proactive nature and social dimension of “patient suffering” and integrative power. A Bible-quoting white man, undeniably courageous and sincere, who proclaimed his joy in forfeiting his life for slaves, who demonstrated that such people are worth fighting and dying for, was rehumanizing blacks in the eyes of whites. His eloquent words reached minds, and, like Mary Dyer, his eloquent deed touched hearts.⁵² In so doing, he was also rehumanizing whites, teaching them to recognize the humanity in blacks, and dramatizing the violence of slavery in a fashion they could not ignore, undoing what Douglass called the “benumbed...moral sense of the nation.”⁵³

Brown’s influence worked in remarkable ways. For example, his death inspired Tubman to be bolder in her antislavery efforts. A few months later, in Troy, New York, Tubman transformed a biracial crowd of onlookers, including prominent white townsfolk, into a rescue party that liberated a fugitive slave in broad daylight. A reporter concluded that the rescue “has developed a more intense Anti-Slavery spirit here, than was ever

⁴⁸ Earle, *John Brown’s Raid*, 97. Quaker influence can be seen in Brown’s last days: in court he quoted John Woolman, and from prison he corresponded with Quaker friends.

⁴⁹ Earle, *John Brown’s Raid*, 93.

⁵⁰ Mayer, *All on Fire*, 495-507. Mayer’s comment—“Brown’s act...irrevocably moved the slavery controversy from the sphere of constitutional and moral abstraction to the visceral realm of feelings intensified beyond measure or reason” (495)—identifies the emotional power of Brown’s sacrifice.

⁵¹ Franny Nudelman, “‘The Blood of Millions’: John Brown’s Body, Public Violence, and Political Community,” *American Literary History* 13:4 (Winter 2001): 639-670, discusses how proponents of wartime nationalism used Brown’s sacrifice as a model for the suffering of soldiers, transforming Brown’s attack on a federal installation into a basis for greater state authority.

⁵² According to a New York reporter, Brown’s testimony in a hostile courtroom “touched the hearts of many who had come only to rejoice at the heaviest blow their victim was to suffer.” Quoted in Peterson, *John Brown*, 14.

⁵³ Quoted in Horwitz, *Midnight Rising*, 287,

known before.”⁵⁴ Just as Gandhi expanded the notion of freedom, Brown’s “soul” was liberating *whites* from enslavement—enslavement to racist indifference. This was the power of Brown’s soul force: From the outset, Lincoln’s political war for the Union was becoming a righteous war against slavery; even white Union soldiers understood they were killing and dying for black freedom.

Yet one courageous death was not enough to transform the most deeply dehumanized individuals in a deeply dehumanized society. The greater the dehumanization, the greater the sacrifice required for rehabilitation, and it did not help that Brown’s soul force was compromised by his earlier violence. The integrative power of his sacrifice may have moved northern whites, but southern whites responded more to the threat force of his raids. Brown’s last scribbled note was predictive:

I John Brown am not quite *certain* that the crimes of this *guilty, land: will* never be purged *away*; but with Blood. I had *as I now think: vainly* flattered myself that without *very much* bloodshed; it might be done.⁵⁵

Understood in traditional terms, Brown was anticipating the Civil War catastrophe—U.S. society would pay for its sins at the price of over six hundred thousand corpses. But mutual slaughter is not how a society overcomes violence. This is where the Brown approach falls well short of the Gandhian. Wars dehumanize, they widen the gap between Self and a “foreign” Other. Slavery plus war does not equal peace. If southern whites viewed black slaves as subhumans, they now imagined black soldiers as subhuman enemies coming to rape and kill. After the war, the presence of the Union Army in the South—threat power—allowed former slaves the space to practice citizenry and improve their condition, but the weakness of threat power is that it requires frequent reinforcement. When federal soldiers departed, southern whites remade black subjugation into racial segregation and de facto slavery. The cultural violence of white supremacy not only lingered, but intensified—across the entire country—in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁵⁶ Slavery was outlawed; racial harmony was hard to find. A century after Brown’s death, the integrative power of the Civil Rights Movement, organized around Gandhian principles, finally put a dent in U.S. racism. The suffering and deaths of those who nonviolently absorbed the violence of police batons, Klan bombs, assassins’ bullets, attack dogs, and fire hoses gave new meaning to Brown’s final prediction. From Mary Dyer to John Brown to Martin Luther King Jr.—when you open your eyes to integrative power, you start to see connections everywhere.

There are, indeed, strong ties between Brown and the Civil Rights Movement. Well into the twentieth century, Brown remained an inspiration to those who worked for black liberation. One of the founders of the NAACP, the most important early civil

⁵⁴ Clinton, *Harriet Tubman*, 136-138.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Reynolds, *John Brown*, 395.

⁵⁶ James Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (New York: New Press, 2005).

rights organization, acknowledged it was “a direct descendant of the old League of Gileadites founded by John Brown.”⁵⁷ King’s masterful speech at the Alabama state capitol, in 1965, concluded with words from “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”—a tribute, in effect, to John Brown on the scaffold: “His truth is marching on!” The Gandhian influence behind the Civil Rights Movement actually reaches back to the early Quakers who learned, through painful trial, the integrative power of “patient suffering.” Quakerism influenced the nonviolence of U.S. abolitionists, including Adin Ballou, who influenced the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy’s radical Christian anarchism, which in turn influenced Gandhi’s satyagraha. Thoreau is also part of this tradition, not for nonviolence, but for other principles—individual conscience, asceticism, the integrity of labor—shared with Tolstoy and Gandhi.⁵⁸ Good company to be in, and John Brown is there too. Perhaps more than any other contemporary white observer, Thoreau immediately understood the power of Brown’s sacrifice. In his lecture, “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” Thoreau noted, “When a man stands up serenely against the condemnation of mankind, rising above them literally *by a whole body*...the spectacle is a sublime one...and we become criminal in comparison.”⁵⁹ Brown’s Puritan militarism took him away from the nonviolent tradition, but, in the end, “the sword of the spirit” brought him back: an accidental satyagrahi.

Conclusion

The popular framing of Brown as a man *only* of violence, while other aspects of his life and work are largely disregarded, is an aspect of cultural violence as it emerges from, and reinforces, the thinking that legitimizes direct violence. The emphasis on Brown’s violence fits the mindset that believes direct violence “works,” without careful consideration of what the maiming and killing of others actually accomplishes. This follows from the belief that threat power, which functions on fear, is more potent than integrative power, which functions on the universal human need for interconnection.⁶⁰ From this perspective, Brown’s violence was more effective and remains more noteworthy than his attempts at biracial community, and his attack on a federal arsenal deserves more attention than his radical revision of the federal constitution. But if the goal is to decrease violence of all types, then integrative power, especially in the form of “patient suffering,” is what works. The Harpers Ferry raid may have sped the demise of

⁵⁷ Quoted in Reynolds, *John Brown*, 496. After the Civil War, a Maine businessman funded a school in Harpers Ferry with the stipulation that it would uphold Brown’s commitment to racial and gender equality. Storer College trained African Americans to be teachers, and, in 1906, hosted the Second Niagara Movement conference, whose members later formed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Reynolds, *John Brown*, 491-496.

⁵⁸ Chernus, *American Nonviolence*, esp. 1-25; Lerner, *Why History Matters*, 59-73.

⁵⁹ Stauffer and Trodd, eds., *The Tribunal*, 105-109.

⁶⁰ DeCaro Jr., “*Fire from the Midst of You*,” 39, for example, argues that “fear of escalating violence is a far greater catalyst for change within an indifferent majority than ‘moral suasion’ or appeals to the conscience of a society.” DeCaro, a Christian minister who seems to see God at work in human history, has done a fine job of describing Brown’s religious life without getting caught up in the sensationalism of Brown’s violence. He calls Brown a “saint,” but his apparent skepticism of integrative power may prevent him from understanding the power of Brown’s death. See pages 4-7, 283-284.

southern slavery, but it didn't bring any lasting reduction in the violence of white supremacy and exploitation of southern blacks. That shift came a century later with the "patient suffering" of Civil Rights Movement activists. Therein lies a solution to the John Brown problem. Rather than debating whether or not his resort to vigilante murder was legitimate, justified, and righteous, it is more fruitful to investigate the dynamic that made his death so powerful and to consider how his positive peace efforts, throughout his life, challenged a violent status quo. Consider this a prescription for cultural peace: less discussion about when killing might be justified, more discussion about how to address all violent aspects of society.