

Learning nonviolence is a matter of practice, says Bernice King, Martin Luther King Jr.'s daughter

Don't be afraid to pull out the weed!

Pastor, civil rights activist and family man who became a martyr – Martin Luther King Jr. was born 94 years ago, on January 15. He used means of peace to stand up for the civil rights of African Americans. His mission towards equality and nonviolence is carried on by his daughter, Dr. Bernice Albertine King.

Réka Mohay

The daughter of the Nobel Peace Prize-winning activist is the president of The King Center Institute, based in Atlanta. On the occasion of this year's Martin Luther King Jr. Day, which is a federal holiday in the United States, the institution launched an online training program. It focuses on nonviolence and is designed for individuals, companies, organizations and educational institutions.

We talked to Bernice Albertine King about the upcoming Memorial Day and the desire for nonviolence that is becoming increasingly pronounced throughout Europe. Following in his father's footsteps, the Protestant minister, lawyer and peace advocate shared his thoughts on victory over violence, the responsibility of Christian leaders and ordinary people in shaping societies.

– As a pastor, following in his father's footsteps, he preaches nonviolence. What do you think is the biggest obstacle to this and what could be done to overcome these obstacles?

– I think the biggest challenge is that we live in an extremely violent world. People have not been taught how to deal with conflict. When we are faced with injustice and violence, we instinctively react on an emotional basis. Nonviolence is a discipline that teaches you to deal with conflict, violence, injustice, differences of opinion and ideology—but it requires training and education.

– How widespread is this type of thinking in modern societies?

– Unfortunately, the world has not yet seen the value of incorporating this into education systems or workplaces. If more and more of us don't consciously deal with it, violence will continue to exist among us. In his Nobel Peace Prize lecture in 1964, my father emphasized that nonviolence should become the subject of study and practical application in all areas of human conflict, especially in relations between nations. He uttered these words fifty-nine years ago, but the human community needs to hear them again today. To this end, the King Center created the Nonviolence365® Online e-learning platform, where registrants can learn the principles of nonviolence and steps to deal with when they experience injustice in their environment. We also adapted it for workplace use, for managers and employees who want to create an environment where people can feel accepted and valued.

– Do you think that all problems, even our conflicts at the national level, stem from personal antagonisms and problems?

– Yes exactly. Learning nonviolence is a step-by-step, everyday task. There will always be conflicts, what is decisive is the way we resolve and work on them. We must pay attention to respect the dignity of the other person, which does not mean that we must tolerate injustice. We should still hold others accountable, but in such a way that they never feel stripped of their humanity, even if they have stripped us of ours. We have to keep the moral standard of dialogue high, which requires others to rise, instead of us sinking lower.

– You work for social justice and equality, similar to Pope Francis. How can nonviolent Christian voices shape the society of the future?

– I think the process does not start with the message of nonviolence, but with a lifestyle without violence. My father personally embodied this, and people respected him and were willing to follow the direction he set. As leaders, we must internalize nonviolence, it is not enough to just talk and give messages about it. We need to show people how to truly love our enemies, pray for them even if they persecute us – as my father did, following Jesus. But this requires discipline, study and practice. I think we as Christians should be at the forefront of this. You are the light of the world, Jesus said – as Christians, as church leaders, it is our moral responsibility to be a light to others on the path of non-violence.

– What can ordinary people, communities or business leaders do to promote this?

– The most important thing is to learn to conduct ourselves from a love-centered approach. If this is what guides us, then as leaders we will strive to ensure that the environment in which we operate is free from violations of law and injustice. We will never be able to stop these, but when they do occur, we can become a voice for nonviolence. I think most of the issues that we are faced with today, ordinary people can actually address, we just don't have the courage to deal with them. We don't want to be left out, we're afraid of the consequences, so we prefer to remain closed in our own little world. However, when things happen that are bad and unjust, we have a responsibility to state that we will not tolerate such things. We need to get in touch with those who think similarly and jointly develop a plan on how we can influence our environment. The world changes when ordinary people decide to change it – and, that is key, we don't even have to be leaders to do that. Martin Luther King Jr. started out as an ordinary minister, the people appointed him as a leader later on. The changes regarding equality and human rights in the United States of America that have taken place since, have been possible because ordinary people have decided that they will no longer tolerate injustice. They acted collectively for what they believed in and they didn't need everyone, just a critical mass. This is what my father's movement was about: people who had similar dreams and missions came together and developed a strategy for change. However, we cannot succeed in the solitude of our bedrooms, it is essential that we work together for the sake of change.

– It seems that a lot of courage is needed to dare to take the necessary steps.

– Courage and self-discipline. A seed needs good soil to bear fruit, but we also need to take care of it, regularly removing weeds that cause damage. We need to do this in our minds as well, because we have a lot of weeds in our thinking about people and society. We have to get rid of a lot of bad conditioning to get into the right mindset that is needed to change our world. As Albert Einstein put it, problems cannot be solved at the same level at which they

were created. If we don't change the way we deal with social inequalities and injustices, we will continue to get the same results as before – so don't be afraid to start pulling out the weed!