

# AVP AND THE WIDER WORLD

DAVID GEE – KEYNOTE TALK TO AVP NATIONAL GATHERING, 5-7 OCTOBER 2012

I'm glad to have this opportunity to share some thoughts about AVP in the future. I'll talk for about 25 minutes and then there will be time for your own comments or questions.

The theme of this gathering is 'AVP and the Wider World' and that's the theme I want to pick up. We call ourselves the Alternatives to Violence Project; we run workshops and now a distance-learning course in nonviolence for people in prison. In these ways we support people to handle conflicts and build better relationships. It's a testament to AVP's community of volunteers that we are able to sustain a generally high level of practice, so that mostly, participants leave our workshops better able to relate to others, which for some means living with less violence.

In my first AVP workshop, a fellow participant – a physically very strong woman – told me that this was her second workshop. She used to beat people up; it was her usual way of dealing with a feeling of being wronged. 'AVP has turned my life around,' she said, and then she said it again, 'It turned my life *around*.' She kept the AVP mandala on her fridge door as a daily reminder of what she was committing to, knowing that her journey towards a less violent life, and a more humane way of being in the world was really only beginning.

AVP's effect is not always so dramatic, and for a few people it seems not to help them much at all, but we know that experiences like my fellow participant's are common. We read the feedback forms in the office and are reminded of the value of project we are involved in. I think it's pretty amazing that a community of volunteers is able to support people so effectively to resist and transform the violence in their (and all our) lives.

But my question today is not so much about whether AVP works for individuals, crucial though that question must remain for us, but rather whether it also works for society as a whole. Does the nature of our work mean that AVP is involved in a wider project, which has to do with challenging the social conditions that give rise to violence, and building the alternatives? This might sound like I'm inviting us to do more lobbying and media work (and I think that AVP continues to develop, work with media and the political system would be a natural development) but I'm really wondering whether the work we do now – workshops and distance-learning – is itself a form of social change.

I think it is, and to illustrate this point, I'd like to tell a story. The story is that of the Good Samaritan. We're usually told this story in school in order to encourage us to help the needy, but I don't think that's mainly what it's about. And yes, it's a Christian story, but really it's a story about humanity – it's really a story for everyone.

It's a fitting story for AVP, perhaps, because its setting is one of violence. It begins with a man who has been mugged, badly beaten on the road to Jericho; in fact, he's been left for dead. Two people, a priest and a Levite, pass by the man – they are so repulsed they walk right on the other side of the road. The priest and the Levite represent the mainstream orthodoxy of the time – these are the people who are held up as right-thinking – but they still pass by the man. But a third traveller, a Samaritan, stops.

In fact, he doesn't just stop. The Samaritan gets off his donkey, pours precious oil into the man's wounds, puts the man on the donkey and takes him to a safe place, an inn. He leaves money with the inn-keeper to look after him. If that money is not enough, he says, he will return and pay whatever is needed until the man is better.

Jesus tells this parable because he has been asked a question by an expert in Jewish law. That question is not, 'Should we love our neighbours?' or 'Should we help our neighbours out?' That much they agree on because it's been part of Jewish law since

Moses. The question Jesus has been asked is, 'Who is my neighbour?' The expert is trying to catch Jesus out, because he knows the proper answer, under the orthodoxy of the time, is that your neighbour is your fellow Jew. But no, says Jesus with his parable, the neighbourhood for a faithful person is the whole world, not just people who are like you or near you. (And by a faithful person, I don't mean a religiously faithful person necessarily, but someone being faithful to their own humanity.)

And why is the Samaritan pouring oil on the wounds, putting the man on his donkey, writing a blank cheque for his care, and so on? With these gestures, the Samaritan is treating the man not as an object of need but as an equal. He is not just giving handouts; when he puts the man on his donkey and walks alongside, he honours the man in the same way he honours himself – this is how you love your neighbour, as someone radically equal with yourself.

But I think the real bite of the parable is in another thing, being the contrast between the representatives of mainstream orthodoxy, who walk past the beaten man, and the Samaritan outsider, who, using nothing but his own heart to guide him, does the right thing. The Samaritans were hated by the orthodoxy – these were people who in the eyes of the mainstream definitely thought the wrong thing; their theology and practices were wayward and the mainstream religious system was in conflict with them. But this outsider, oddbod, indeed a theological fool, knew what to do by the beaten man when the mainstream had failed him. In counterposing the two passersby with the Samaritan, Jesus is saying, I think, that the Samaritan's acts not only do right by the man, but challenge the powers that be. The Samaritan shows up the orthodoxy for failing in its duty to work for humanity rather than against it. In other words, the Samaritan's acts are counter-cultural; they run against the grain of social norms; they are about social change. So the Samaritan's acts are not merely charity, in the sense of providing relief, but an expression of justice.

We have here a story, then, that tells us that everyone is our neighbour, not just people like us; that love is not just helping people out, it is honouring their humanity alongside your own; and that when we make this love real in the world, we are involved in a project that is counter-cultural, for it goes against the grain of mainstream culture by challenging violent social norms.

Is the Alternatives to Violence Project like this? In providing workshops for people who want to handle conflict without violence, is AVP more than charity alone; does this work, rather, also challenge the way society works?

I want to suggest that it does. Indeed, this is the reason I have wanted to be involved in AVP. Take the AVP workshop, for example. It is based on honouring participants as radically equal with others, in which all present work together find ways forward on their own terms. In this respect, AVP places a great deal of faith and hope in the healing power of people's own humanity. This is not the same as simply training people in conflict management skills, by which we, the self-appointed wise, pass down our wisdom to others. Certainly, we graft onto the process some bits of practical training, but in general we are aiming at something else: to try, albeit imperfectly, to use humanity to engage humanity, to engage humanity in turn. This, so we trust, will support all present to build the foundations of better relationships in the future. But in doing so – in supporting people to understand the violence in our lives and society and to discover ways to overcome it – AVP supports people to see society differently, to recognise the structural inhumanity that engenders violence, such as poverty, patriarchy, and a social culture that legitimates violence in so many ways. With good fortune, this process might support participants and facilitators alike not only to manage conflicts and build better relationships, but to make a commitment to a different way of being in the world. I actually think AVP workshops could do more to foster such a commitment to these values... and I'm not saying that we always succeed in this either, but if AVP does support all involved to honour dignity of others alongside oneself, then this has consequences for how we live in general – the work we do, the lifestyle we make, and what we stand up for (and against) in the wider world. In other words, like the Samaritan, it can support us to express justice, and to do this not only as individuals, but as a community, as part of a movement of nonviolent social change.

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Are we involved in that? Are we committed to honouring humanity in all we do – not only through the workshops but how we relate to one another, how we manage our organisation, how we raise funds, how we imagine the future of our work? And are we not only a charity but also a movement for social change? The answer to both these questions has to be both yes and no! But I think there is enough of the 'yes, we are' in AVP for me to believe that what we do is special – not unique, but unusually valuable.

It might be useful to revisit the beginnings of AVP's, to remind ourselves of the historical story to which we belong. While preparing this talk I took some time to look at the origins of the first AVP workshop in Greenhaven Prison in New York. This was way back in March 1975. The workshop was a cross-cultural collaboration. Its purpose was to bring the nonviolence techniques of the civil rights movement to bear on the situation faced by prisoners, who lived with daily violence. The organisers, including prison inmates and activists from outside, described the first workshop as 'nonviolence training in prison' and an 'intensive training in nonviolence'. By 'nonviolence' they did not mean just 'not violent' – the intention of the training was not simply to get prisoners to stop behaving violently. Rather, nonviolence is the Gandhian term for a whole approach to life based on the dignity of being, and a commitment to set the dignity of one another's being to work in confronting violence and its systems. In other words, nonviolence is not just the absence of violence, but a way of changing the world based on the presence of dignity. So, the AVP training, which wasn't called AVP initially, was intended to support prison inmates to recover their own dignity as human beings; to use that as the wellspring of a life-affirming philosophy; and to confront the violence of their own lives and the system that surrounded them.

The facilitators' notes for the first ever workshop are a useful indication of the radical nature of this project. The notes introduce the training in this way:

'We're here to experiment with you in the use of a method used successfully by many groups. Examples include its use against Hitler by the teachers of Norway, its use by Gandhi to win independence from the imperialism of Britain, its use by Quakers to overcome religious intolerance and its use by Martin Luther King to end much racial segregation in the south.'

In other words, AVP was not a way to avoid a fight, but a life-affirming way of fighting a fight. As Diane Leonetti put it at the time, '[N]onviolence demands strength ... and is *not* for people who are afraid to fight.' Bernard Lafayette, who was one of the first AVP trainers, lays down three requirements for living nonviolently: a tough mind, a tender heart and a together philosophy.' We've started to gather together some of these historical materials in a folder, which is available to view this weekend.

Indeed, the facilitators believed that what they were doing with AVP belonged to a wider struggle for nonviolence, part of a wider commitment to the dignity of being, including nonviolent, political action for social change. Rather than only providing techniques for handling conflict, AVP was to support participants to make a commitment of their own nonviolence commitment.

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I hope this shows something of AVP's radical edge. Whether AVP today is radical in the same way is perhaps a useful discussion point, but I think AVP still belongs to this story of commitment, nonviolence and social change. If that is so, we have to wonder what this means for us, given that we are also trying to manage an organisation in a world that does not share the same values. Just how does a counter-cultural nonviolence movement survive and thrive in an economic and political system whose values are often hostile to our own. This leads me to my third and final theme, which has to do with the world AVP has to navigate.

I say this because the charity world in which we move is not necessarily committed to the same things as we are. Hundreds of small charities are going to the wall and it's a long way from being over. Big charities are getting bigger, in fact the large charities are now literally big businesses, managed by people who have crossed over from the corporate sector, valued for their business acumen.

Most of these big charities do good work – there's no doubt about that – and I am not meaning to criticise people in business either, for I think AVP and other charitable organisations can learn a lot from business methods; I hope AVP will be open to learning from all quarters. But I think there is a problem when leaders of the corporate sector of a consumer-capitalist society begin to lead charities working to alleviate the effects of that society, for charities can start to mimic the system that is engendering the problems of injustice and violence in the first place. Once conformed to the system, you can't change it anymore. Will a big charity, run along big business lines, still want to do the unpopular work, the work you can't take a photograph of? Will they believe that the values you bring to your work matter as much as the outcome? When they appeal to us for support, will they reach out to our most humane impulse, rather than our guilt and fear, which they well know are such powerful fundraisers? Will they listen honestly to their supporters and members, and serve them? And will they not only work to support people and planet in need, but also work to change the social conditions which create injustice?

I remember my former colleague Becky was looking for funders for AVP's work and found that Macmillan, the huge cancer charity, had been getting very large grants from major trusts – in the millions – but would also swoop on £500 or so from a small trust. I remember wondering how the smaller cancer charities, such as local, grassroots groups – these are the local hospices and so on with volunteers sitting at bedsides – how they would survive when the grants they depended upon were being siphoned off by a big charity with a large, heavily paid, fundraising department. It's this kind of ruthlessness that I think is among the risks of running charities like big businesses. Even Greenpeace, which was set up originally as a radical grassroots initiative, sent me a Christmas email a couple of years ago encouraging me to use their biodegradable credit card so I could [quote] 'Defend our world while you shop.' [endquote] They were encouraging me to participate in the very individualistic, debt-driven consumerism that is probably the greatest of all drivers of harm to the Earth.

Despite these misgivings, I am glad that these big charities do exist – the world might be worse without them. What I do want to say, though, is that the kind of thing that AVP is trying to do is not that usual. Specifically, it is not usual for charities to provide a service in such a way that supports its beneficiaries to challenge the norms of society. And nor is it common to commit to ensure that the values we are trying to support in the world also inform how we carry out our work, how we relate to one another, and how we arrange our organisation. None of this is unique to AVP, but it is not common and will probably become less so as the charity sector is run increasingly on consumer-capitalist lines.

We might not like this situation (and you'll probably tell already that I don't like it very much) but this is the world AVP has to navigate. We are trying to do something difficult: to hold faith with our values as a social movement with counter-cultural tendencies, while navigating a world that generally does not share those values, and while still delivering a service to a professional standard. That's really not easy, and it brings pressures on our organisation and community. AVP is facing a tension between being a volunteer-based movement, in which the work is the expression of a community of people, and being a lean, light-footed organisation managed from the centre, but with volunteers edged out to the margins.

Most organisations that reach AVP's stage of development go one way or the other. Personally, I think either option would be a mistake. I want to suggest that it would not be good for AVP if the work is no longer felt to be the expression of a community of people, it would not be a social movement any more, AVP might have gained the world and lost its soul. And I don't think it would be good if staff and Trustees were having to do so much consulting with the community of volunteers that the organisation just ran into the mud. Staff and trustees need to be trustworthy, for sure, but they also need to be free and trusted to make decisions on the organisation's behalf.

So I think AVP has to live within this tension in a creative way. Specifically, I think staff and Trustees need to be able to steer the ship, steer it around rocks and away from typhoons – we can't check every manoeuvre with the community of volunteers first. But it is for the AVP community to decide the meaning of the voyage and its overall direction; it is for the community, mainly, to safeguard the soul of the organisation and decide what we should be aiming to achieve. I think some volunteer organisations go wrong when the staff start to think it's for them to decide the meaning of the journey and they then use their power to impose this on everyone else. I think other organisations go wrong when volunteers become so afraid of letting the staff make decisions that everyone starts reaching for the steering wheel and the ship goes round in circles. AVP needs to avoid both of these possibilities. If AVP stopped being a grassroots movement, it could betray the values of nonviolence at the heart of its work; these values are radical, inclusive and experimental, and need to be held within a community. And conversely if AVP does not allow the organisation to have the freedom of movement it needs, day to day, then it might not survive the rigours of the capitalist-consumerist society we have to navigate.

I am being slightly provocative in saying this and I'm doing so because I think these questions are with AVP now and it's better if they are in the open. I actually think AVP does steer a fairly good middle course, with a good level of volunteer involvement and a fair amount of staff decision-making. Our structure provides quite a good mix of accountability and flexibility, with leadership coming as it should from many places, although I'm sure we sometimes make mistakes.

So, I have talked a bit about AVP as more than providing a service, but also being part of a movement for nonviolent social change... and I have wondered a little about how such a movement can hold faith with its mission of challenging society's violent norms, while also navigating that society to survive and thrive.

I would like to end with three questions for us:

The first: Do we feel that AVP belongs to a wider nonviolence movement for social change and, if so, what does that mean for how we do our work? I mean, do you actually *feel* that? Do we collectively feel it?

The second: Are we committed to embodying the values we profess in the ways we relate to one another and organise ourselves? Again, do you/we actually *feel* such a commitment?

And the third: While holding faith with our values as a counter-cultural project, are we also willing to make pragmatic choices that will enable us to survive and thrive in a world that generally does not share our values?

I hope our answers to these are, as much as possible, Yes.

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David Gee, AVP, Oct 2012