

The fellow making an undignified exit in the photo below is a state health bureaucrat, one of many who deprive our people of liberty, or life, with a few well-practiced clicks of the keyboard.

What he is seen escaping is not a fire but a seige. Activists have blockaded the building, chanting, "Just like a nursing home, you can't get out."

They want a meeting with his bosses so that change can begin and lives can be saved.

He wants to get home in time for the six o'clock news.



FILE PHOTO BY TOM OLIN

## what's wrong with this picture?

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*some tough new thinking on anger and change*  
*by Josie Byzek*

I am terrified for our movement and terrified for myself as I write these words. Being critical of my heroes doesn't come easy to me.

I've always thought that those who don't like the direction our movement is taking ought to get out of the way so the rest of us can get on

with the serious business of changing the world. In the past, that's what I would have done.

But I can't, not now. I have to speak out about what I see.

I'll pick on ADAPT, but only because that's the part of our movement I care most about. After talking to others around the nation, I think that many of my criticisms and observations apply to the disability movement at large, not just to the radicals. But I have to start somewhere. Sorry guys, I truly am, but here goes:

first, what value exactly is our movement based on? I hear that it's anger. *Anger is power. Anger is beautiful. Anger is strong.* But as the cornerstone of our movement?

Being partial to anger myself, I was shocked to read Gandhi's opinion of that intoxicating emotion. "Harbor no anger but suffer the anger of the opponent," he wrote in his Satyagraha code. That's his Step One!

Elsewhere in his writings he talked about anger being a sign that something is wrong, that something needs to be changed. But he's clear: After realizing what is wrong and what needs to be changed, let the anger go. Holding onto it is destructive to us and others.

As a movement, we need to talk more about where that anger comes from and, more importantly, what is below that anger. We need to stop allowing our anger to numb our souls.

In response to my recent ideas about anger, a leader I deeply respect accused me of bashing our friends. Why go after our own, she asked. Why weaken our movement? My taking this stance, she said, will only confuse other disabled people or make them hesitant to speak out. I thought her



exactly what value is our movement based on? anger?

line of reasoning was contradictory — which proved to me I was on to something important — so I pressed her. How about you, I challenged. Are you truly driven by your anger or are you driven by something else? After a volley of e-mails back and forth she finally laid bare her secret: She is driven by love. She loves our community, our people, our leaders, our world, and she simply wants those she loves — all of us — to be free. To share love.

Write about that then, I challenged her. Write your truth: You love so deeply that you allow yourself to be handcuffed and taken away to jail in the hope that those you love may someday go free from institutions.

How about Lucy Gwin? What's below her abundant and well-articulated anger? I pried it out of her one night. Despair, she told me. A deep well of despair that I'm afraid will drown her. She despairs that we'll never free people from nursing homes, personal care homes, group homes, mental institutions, "sheltering" parents, and a medical system that would rather we die than spend its precious time and energy patching us up, helping us live.

She admits that being angry is much easier than dealing with her anguish. Oh, I hope I never plumb her despair, as beautiful and powerful as it is. I would drown.

And me? Below my anger at how our people are treated is the bedrock knowledge that it doesn't have to be that way, that it can change. That bedrock is slick with the tears of

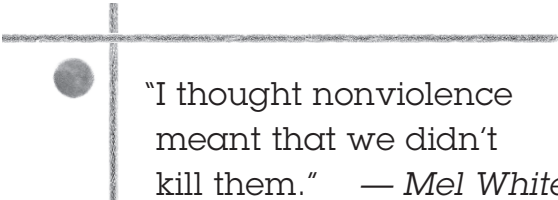
knowing how far we are from equality and freedom in our society. I remember meeting my intelligent, beautiful, autistic and visually impaired brother after school and plucking his classmates off of him like ticks off a hound dog. They beat him up because he was different. Even the teachers picked on him. I don't know how to tell you about the sadness I still feel, the iron tang in the top of my mouth, remembering my brother's terror and confusion — *Why don't they like me?*

As a teenager, for the most part I could “pass” and hide my disability, a tactic which carries its own sadness. But I know if our communities would just let us live, let us be who we are created to be, disability and all, the horror and sadness would stop tomorrow.

There is also, dare I say it, joy bubbling up below and through my anger. My first national ADAPT action was in Las Vegas back in 1994. It wasn't the anger that drew me in. It was the electric current of collective power and the overwhelming sense of *we can do this* that sustained me for those first few years. That and a sense of homecoming — I was among my own.

I still feel the skin-tingling joy of community when I am with a group of disabled people.

second, do we truly believe that the ends of our actions justify our means? That nonviolent civil disobedience is simply a tactic, an expedient strategy? Because I can't believe that anymore.



“I thought nonviolence meant that we didn't kill them.” — *Mel White*

There's a man I know, Mel White, who organizes civil disobedience actions against mainline religious groups with anti-gay doctrines. His group is called Soulforce, the English translation for Gandhi's concept of *satyagraha*. Years ago, after White went on television and angrily attacked the policies of fundamentalist Christians, he received a letter from Coretta Scott King gently suggesting he read some of the work of her husband, Martin Luther King, Jr. “She said I was causing suffering, so I wasn't following King's path of nonviolence,” he admits now. “I thought nonviolence meant we didn't kill them!”

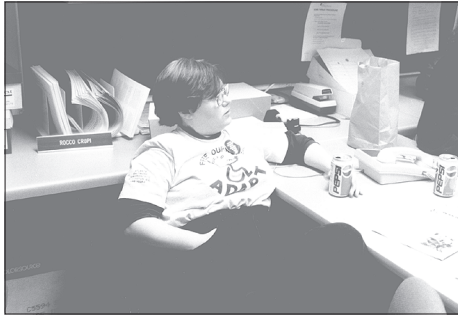
Taken to heart, nonviolence means much more than that we don't kill, slug, trip, or maim them.

The King and Gandhi style of civil disobedience, if that's truly what we're pursuing, means we would have to give up the “nobody in, nobody out” strategy that's so much fun, but violent. You know the one: “just like a nursing home ... you can't get out.”

We surround and barricade buildings, forbidding office workers to leave. We're holding hostages and that is violent. Following Gandhi and King also means we'd have to give up forcing cops to strain their backs pushing and dragging us out of streets, doorways and so on. Two cops lifting one ambulatory person probably doesn't cause pain. Even four cops dragging a 200-pound wheelchair with a passenger weighing half that can hurt. Hurting another human being is violent. Let's show them how to take our power chairs out of gear and why not to brake our manual chairs. That is still passive resistance.

Screaming, cursing, and insulting people is also violent, according to the teachings of Gandhi and King.

What does that leave, then, if we



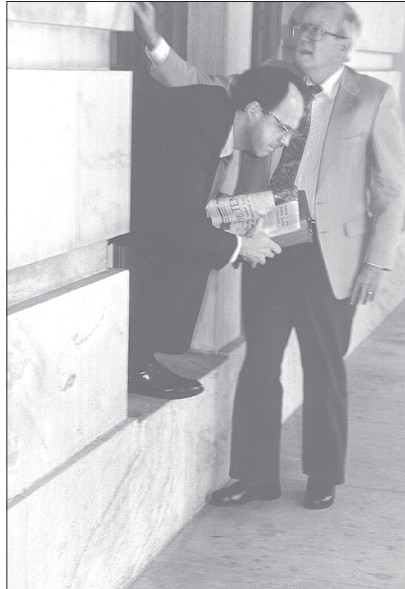
do we truly believe  
that the ends of our  
actions justify our means?

can't take hostages or scream our outrage?

That leaves us with our persistence, our creativity, our knowledge that we have justice on our side. It certainly won't mean fewer arrests. In the end, it might mean more since more people will feel comfortable joining us, going to jail with us.

third, are we truly empowering people who come to actions? The empowerment of individuals and communities is a goal of nonviolent civil disobedience-based activism. A true fruit of empowerment would be everyone having a say in strategy, goals and actions. Not just feeling that we have a say, but actually being encouraged to openly and honestly give our opinions.

Right now, this doesn't happen at ADAPT. As we've all heard at one time or another, ADAPT is not a democracy; it's not designed to be. ADAPT's strength is that it's like a militia — fast-moving and disciplined. The leaders pick the issues, targets, actions, and pass the word to the second tier for assent or maybe some tweaking.



FILE PHOTOS BY TOM OLIN. AT LEFT, JOSIE WAITS OUT THE BUREAUCRATS. ABOVE, ANOTHER ESCAPES.

The second tier helps pass the orders down to contact people, who rope in locals and fire them up. That's a fine model, but it leaves no room for fresh ideas, creative strategies. And there is absolutely no room for honest questions or criticism to be taken seriously when they come from outside the inner sanctum.

I've been thinking along these lines for a few years now. It took me this long to write about it because I've been hoping I'm wrong. If I'm right, then our movement is in trouble. If I'm right, our current path — anger-based, pseudo-nonviolent, non-self-critical — leads to a cul-de-sac. I don't want that to be true. Because if that's true, then we'll just slowly die out — both our movement and our individual activists. Who would remain to fight?

Sure, we'll still win some victories between now and then ... but fewer and fewer significant ones ... and victories we thought would last forever will turn into defeats.

Who would remain to fight? ●