Strength
Through
Peace
The Ideas and People of Nonviolence

Center for Teaching Peace
Edited by Colman McCarthy
Nonviolent Weapons of the Spirit  
by Colman McCarthy

In courses on nonviolence that I've been teaching for the past seven years in high schools and colleges, no question arises more frequently than this: Nonviolence is fine as an abstract intellectual system, but do you seriously believe it would have succeeded in the real world against the Nazis?

The question—usually thrown up as a statement wanting to end the discussion, not broaden it—is currently being answered in a low-budget film, now playing at the Key in Georgetown, that is making its modestly advertised way across the country. Weapons of the Spirit, written, directed and produced by Pierre Sauvage, tells the story of Le Chambon, a farming village in central France that nonviolently defied the German Army in the occupation during World War II.

The film, in understated narrative and with simple photography presents surviving villagers whose fearlessness and quality of love in the early 1940s led them to harbor 5,000 Jewish refugees.

Other villages hid Jews, but they were few and did so only reluctantly. Le Chambon deliberately sought refugees by putting out the word that all were welcome. The Chambonnais were Huguenots-Protestants in a Catholic country who had not forgotten centuries of persecution.

Le Chambon was unique for another reason: It did not adopt pacifism as a strategy the day the Gestapo swept into town. Citizens had embraced it as a way of life years before. Saving Jewish refugees was the external fulfillment of the internal commitment to peace through the strength of nonviolence.

In their defiance of Nazis, the villagers, most of them peasants, were led by their pacifist minister, Andre Trocme. When France surrendered to Germany, he called on his people to resist Nazis with "weapons of the spirit."

Trocme and his family came to Le Chambon in 1934. Part of his ministry was establishing a parish supported school where the study of nonviolence and pacifism was emphasized. When the
Losers of the Spirit
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Nazis came, the town had a choice for self-defense: violent or non-
violent. It could choose the superior one of nonviolence because
it was educated by the pastor in the theories and techniques.

In Weapons of the Spirit, villagers, now in their seventies
and eighties, recall their nonviolent resistance and harboring of
refugees as exercises in common decency, not uncommon valor.

What is life for, they had been taught to wonder, if not to risk for
others? What is peacemaking for, if not to do it at the moment of

Two years after Trocme’s death in 1971, some of his essays
were collected in Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution. The
writing is as virile as anything found in Gandhi or Martin Luther
King, Jr. when they wrote of nonviolence. Trocme addressed the
question of how to stop the world’s Hitlers:

“People say, ‘Our nation is about to be exterminated; or the
future of our civilization, of our moral values, of true religion, is threat-
ened; or yet, our institutions violate human rights to save human rights,
we must temporarily forget our scruples and use violence, sacrificing
men to destroy unjust structures, and thus saving the poor from oppres-
sion.’ For centuries both progressive and reactionary camps have been
‘temporarily’ choosing violence, ‘temporarily’ shedding the blood of mil-
ions of victims in the name of a better future. Because each side specu-
lates about ‘what would happen if we let the enemy win,’ they merci-
lessly sacrifice man, whether friend or enemy … And every generation
is faced with new options time after time considered to be so important
that it repeatedly believes itself compelled to use violence.”

In addition to Weapons of the Spirit, the story of Trocme
and Le Chambon is told in Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed by Philip
Hallie. In the 1979 book, Hallie, a professor at Wesleyan University,
captures the soul of the pastor much as Pierre Sauvage’s film
reveals the iron of the villagers: Trocme “believed that decent
people who stay inactive out of cowardice or indifference when
around them human beings are being humiliated and destroyed are
the most dangerous people in the world. His nonviolence was
not passive or saccharine, but an almost brutal force for awaken-

After World War II, the historian and military strategist
B.H. Liddell Hart interviewed German generals on the different
kinds of resistance they met in occupied countries. As practiced in Denmark, Norway, Holland and such places as Le Chambon, non-violent resistance was effective. The Nazis, Hart writes, had an "inability to cope with it. They were experts in violence, and had been trained to deal with opponents who used that method. But other forms of resistance baffled them ... It was a relief to them when resistance became violent."

By defending themselves with love, the strongest weapon of the spirit, the Chambonnais gave the Nazis no relief.

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