**Title of Lesson:** ON BECOMING A NONVIOLENT WARRIOR

**Lesson By:** Lisa Lindstrom

**Grade Level/ Subject Areas:**
- 8th Grade Humanities

**Class Size:** 24

**Time/Duration of Lesson:** 90 minutes

**Guiding Questions:**
- How does an ordinary person become a nonviolent warrior and change history?
- Why nonviolence?

**Lesson Abstract:**
The nonviolent movement led by Mohandas Gandhi intrigued African American intellectuals and activists almost from its start. This lesson examines how one, Reverend Jim Lawson, attempted to train Nashville students to respond to violence with conscious nonviolence and love. It then follows Lawson’s recruits through their first big test, the Nashville Lunch Counter sit-ins and asks students in 2009 to put themselves in their shoes.

**Lesson Content:**
In the early part of the twentieth century, a number of pre-eminent African-American intellectuals and political activists went to India to meet Mohandas Gandhi, who had become renowned for his theory and practice of nonviolence. Among these was Reverend Jim Lawson, a conscientious objector who had refused to serve in the Korean war and received a scholarship in 1954 from the American Friends Society to study the Gandhian movement in India.

Gandhi had articulated for the world a new way of life and civic interaction as he actively and consciously fought injustice with compassion. His strategy was “‘war’ armed with moral force. He called this force ‘satyagraha’, an active pursuit of truth through love and nonviolence.” (Sethia, p. 1373). Satyagraha, whose goal was harmony and unity, aimed on a political level at finding common ground between parties in conflict and removing injustices that divided members of society. Gandhi believed in the right of citizens to nonviolently resist abuses of power of the state by not obeying unjust laws. The civil disobedience he and his followers practiced was always constructive, proactive and “civilized”. His nonviolent warriors were highly disciplined and respectful as they protested because their ultimate goal was changing the hearts of their oppressors. No violent actions of any sort were used against opponents because this “would undercut the empathy and trust Gandhi was trying to build and would hinder that “change of heart” (Shepard, “Mahatma Gandhi and His Myths”). Gandhi knew well that public sympathy could be aroused and pressure brought to bear on unjust leaders if he and his followers fought with satyagraha. If a majority of public’s sympathy could be won, negotiations would begin and civic relationships could be brought one step closer to harmony. This strategy became the foundation of the African-American community’s struggle for freedom during the civil rights movement.

Martin Luther King himself went to India in 1959. When he returned, he recruited Jim Lawon
to move down to Tennessee and experiment with conducting nonviolence workshops for college students in Nashville. Both he and King understood the challenge of finding volunteers willing to consciously choose to have violence inflicted on them without attacking back. They realized the necessity of intensive training for any recruits who would be going against their instincts to become nonviolent warriors practicing satyagraha. As Bernard Lafayette a seminary student who trained with Lawson puts it, “It takes more courage to be nonviolent than to be violent. Your weapons are all internal. You step out of the shower fully armed. It requires discipline and creativity.”

African-American college students began to flock to Lawson’s workshops where they studied Gandhian philosophies of violence and nonviolence. They also trained vigorously in concrete practical techniques for confrontations with attackers. “As he strikes you, look him in the eye. Don’t fight back or curse. Fight to win the person over. No physical or verbal responses. Stay calm and confident.” The students would enact role-plays. They studied how to fall to the ground in a non-violent position when assaulted, the right way and the wrong way to do armlocks, and things like how to handle hecklers, spitting, firecrackers, water attacks and egg-throwing. They were learning conscious rehearsed response patterns and habits that could override their own “fight or flight” instincts. As one of the student leaders, Diane Nash, describes the training, “We would practice things such as how to protect your head from a beating and how to protect each other. …We would practice other people putting their bodies in between (someone who was being beater) and the violence, so that the violence could be more distributed.” (Eyes On The Prize website) They also practiced being respectful to their opposition, to keep focused on the issues and not get sidetracked. They worked hard to ingest Gandhi’s principle that one must try to oppose what a person does or represents, but not hate the individual being with whom one shares a common humanity.

In addition to Lafayette and Nash, other workshop students who would become committed nonviolent organizers were Jim Bevel and John Lewis. Lewis, also a seminarian, was shy, short and stammered, but he was devoted to the workshops and eager to put himself on the line. He and the others soon got their chance.

On Monday, February 1, 1960, four college students in Greensboro, North Carolina launched a movement that would ignite students throughout the South. Ezell Blair Jr., Franklin Eugene McCain, Joseph Alfred McNell and David Leinall Richmond, inspired by King’s nonviolent protests in Montgomery, Alabama, walked into a Woolworth’s in and sat down at a lunch counter reserved for whites only. When they were denied service, they just stayed until the place closed and then promised to come back the next day. Over the next few days, more and more of their fellow African-American students joined them at Woolworth’s. In solidarity, lunch counter sit-ins sprang up in cities all over North Carolina. Within two months, sit-ins would spread to 54 cities and 9 states. The students in Nashville, Tennessee were among the first to respond and they would eventually “establish themselves as the largest, most disciplined, and most persistent of the nonviolent action groups in the South” (Branch, p. 274).

By Friday, February 5, 500 new student recruits showed up at Lawson’s workshop in addition to the original 75. They all wanted to sit-in, but Lawson was reluctant. He felt uneasy using the 500 who were untrained and he was worried about being able to raise enough bail to cover all
the would-be protestors. In the end, the students prevailed and Lawson spent all night training the new volunteers. They were drilled in procedures and told to dress in their Sunday best.

The lunch-counters they were going to take seats in were in downtown department stores. Lawson’s students pulled off their first sit-in without a hitch. Diane Nash described it later as follows it said, “The first sit-in we had was really funny, because the waitresses were nervous. They must have dropped two thousand dollars’ worth of dishes that day. It was almost a cartoon. One in particular, she was so nervous, she picked up dishes and she dropped one, and she’d pick up another one, and she’d drop it. It was really funny, and we were sitting there trying not to laugh, because we thought that laughing would be insulting and we didn't want to create that kind of atmosphere. At the same time we were scared to death.” (Eyes on the Prize website) By the following Monday, the students had been endorsed by the Baptist Minister’s Conference of Nashville, which represented 79 congregations.

After two weeks of daily sit-ins, the merchants and the police announced that they would start arrests the next day if the protests continued. King, who was not yet “quite willing to follow his thoughts outside oratory” (Branch, p. 276), encouraged students to continue their courageous stands. “Let us not fear going to jail…If the officials threaten to arrest us for standing up for our rights, we must answer by saying we are willing and prepared to fill up the jails of the South” (Branch, p. 276) “Fill up the jails” became a rallying cry of the nonviolent protestors for many years to follow. They knew that they had moral force behind them and that their nonviolent actions were the means that would bring this truth to the light.

John Lewis stayed up all night February 6 preparing lists of procedures for students to follow while being arrested. He handed out mimeographed sheets with the instructions the next morning. On the bottom of the sheets was the phrase, “Remember the teachings of Jesus, Gandhi, Thoreau and Martin Luther King, Jr.”

On the way to the lunch counters that day they were attacked by a group of white teenagers who threw rocks at them, punched them, hit them with lit cigarettes and called them “chicken” and “nigger”. John Lewis was terrified and had to struggle to remember the rules and procedures they had practiced. Police were there but they let the assault happen.

Inside the stores, students who had made it to the lunch-counters were pulled off their seats. One student was pushed down the stairs. Their resistance remained peaceful, however. As soon as one group of students was arrested, others were there to fill their places. The lunch-counter seats were never empty.

Police eventually arrested 75 of the black protestors and five of the white teens for “disorderly conduct” to the applause of several hundred white people who gathered. The white teenagers would soon be released. In the paddy-wagon on the way to jail, John Lewis experienced an “exhilaration unlike any he had known”. (Branch p.279) He and his fellow Lawson trainees had made it through their first test of fire and now vowed to commit themselves even further to a nonviolent struggle for black freedom and equality.

Rev. C. T. Vivian, who was one of the student activists in Nashville that day said. “The
workshops in non-violence made the difference… the philosophy… the tactics, the techniques, how to … take the blows and still respond with dignity.” (Eyes on the Prize website)

Not long after, during a press conference with Nashville mayor Ben West, after the home of the students’ attorney, Z. Alexander Looby, had been destroyed by dynamite, Diane Nash got the major to say he felt it was wrong for lunch counters to racially discriminate. A week later, six Nashville lunch counters began serving black patrons. On July 25, 1960, the first African-American ate a meal at Woolworth’s in Greensboro. The sit ins would continue throughout the South using the patterns that had now been established. Over the course of the sit-in movement that would last in some cities through the passage of the Civil Rights act in 1964, 50,000 black and white protestors sat-in in 78 cities and over 2,000 were arrested.

John Lewis, who would go on to face much worse violence during the Freedom Rides and was a key organizer of the 1964 March on Washington, was later elected to the US House of Representatives where he now serves. At his inauguration in January 2009, President Obama gave Lewis a signed photograph that said, “Because of you.”

**New York State Content Standards:**
1. Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of the major ideas, eras, themes, turning points and developments in the history of the United States.
1.3 The study about major social, political, economic, cultural, and religious developments in United States History involves learning about the important roles and contributions of individuals and groups.
5.4. The study of civics and citizenship requires the ability to probe ideas and assumptions, ask and answer questions, take a skeptical attitude towards questionable arguments, evaluate evidence, formulate, rational conclusions and develop and refine participatory skills.

**Materials Needed:**
- DVD: A FORCE MORE POWERFUL: THE NASHVILLE SIT-INS
- Hand-outs: Notes from a CORE Non-Violent Training Session 1963 (Bruce Hartford)
- Paper and Pencils

**Suggested Teaching Activities:**
1. As a Do Now, ask students to free write for ten minutes on the following: “What’s worth fighting for? Is there anything you care deeply enough to risk your life for?”
2. Show students the film *A Force More Powerful: The Nashville Sit-ins*.
3. Hand out the *Notes from a Non-Violent Training Session* and use the notes as a springboard to discuss violence and nonviolence and what it takes to become a nonviolent warrior. (This can also be done without the handout if a teacher finds the material is not appropriate for his or her students.)
4. Ask for volunteers and have the rest of the class come up with ideas for a simple improvisational role-play in which the volunteers can practice responding to aggression with nonviolence. Use this exercise as a way to start a discussion about violence in your specific school culture and how nonviolence might be used to combat it.

5. After explaining how civil rights protestors often took old traditional songs and changed their lyrics to create Freedom Songs, ask students to each create a protest song about an issue they care about by changing the lyrics of a song they know.

6. Students should now each write a scene or short play in which a character struggles against his or her own instincts to use nonviolence to confront aggression directed at them. If they choose to do so, students can include protest songs they have written in their play. When the plays are complete, have the students read out loud each other’s work. If there is interest, have your students present their plays to students in other classes and become “trainers” by leading discussions based on what they have learned from their study of Lawson and the Nashville student movement.

Bibliography:


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www.markshep.com/nonviolence/myths.html
www.kinginstitute.info
www.tn4me.org
http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/F-0029/
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/story/04_nonviolence.html
www.sitins.com (excellent resource for Greensboro Sitins)
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