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Pilgrimage to Nonviolence: Part 2

By Erin Watkins

In the play *Antigone*, by Sophocles (translated by Richard Braun), the king Kreon, makes a speech about the type of person a leader should be. He talks about what that leader should do and if he doesn't take into account his people's wants then he "is the worst man there." His speech centers on the idea of being balanced and fair. However, his actions in the play contradict his speech. Martin Luther King, Jr., a spokesperson for nonviolent resistance, has his own beliefs as to what a leader should be. Some of the qualities the men describe agree with each other, but King Kreon's speech is very direct and strict and King would not have fully agreed with all of Kreon's beliefs, as demonstrated below.

Just recently found, the following pages are King's long-lost famous response to King Kreon's speech on leadership. King writes on it, explicitly addressing Kreon's controversial statements.

In my readings I came across a Greek tragedy called *Antigone*. It's about a man thrown into kingship because the country was at war and the former king's (Oedipus's) sons fought on opposing sides and slew each other. Kreon (the new king) makes a decree that Eteocles should be

given a proper and honorable burial since he died serving his country, but that Polyneices, the other brother, is given the punishment of not being given any sort of burial. He should be left to rot and to be eaten by the dogs. However, this doesn't sit well with Antigone, their sister. She goes against Kreon's decree and buries him anyway, and that's where the tragedy really begins. Kreon's strict desire to remain rigid to the law even if that means hurting his family does just that. He sentences Antigone to live in a cave so that she will die but her blood won't be on his hands. It all goes wrong when she ends up dying and Haemon, his son and her fiancée, kills himself over her death and his anger. Furthermore, Kreon's wife kills herself over her grief.

The character that held my interest most was Kreon. At the beginning of the play, he made an important speech about a man's soul and leadership. He says "It is impossible to know a man's soul both the wit and the will, before he writes laws and enforces them." This I found inarguable, as one can only guess of what a man's soul truly consists. He continues, "I believe that he who rules in a state and fails to embrace the best man's counsels, but stays locked in silence and vague fear, is the worst man there." This I found quite intriguing. I agree that a leader is someone that needs to set aside his pride and seek counsel, if not only for confirmation of his beliefs. I am considered a leader and as previously mentioned in part one of my book, I did not formulate all of my beliefs by myself. I read many books, taking parts of each and compiling them into

the foundation of my belief in the importance to nonviolent resistance. From Marx I learned that "Capitalism is always in danger of inspiring men to be more concerned about making a living than making a life" (53). Life is about justice and living in it. From the pacifist position, I agreed that "war could never be a positive or absolute good, but it could serve as a negative good by preventing the spread of evil." Through war, people can see the harm that it causes. And after each war, there's always some treaty or agreement that this will not happen again.

Later I was exposed to the works and writings of Gandhi. From him I learned the most and founded many of my beliefs from his work. I learned "the potency of love in the area of social reform" (53). Niebuhr balanced this thought by arguing that nonviolent resistance "could only be successful if the groups had some degree of moral conscience." Based on these people and their works, I formed my own opinions about nonviolent resistance. After that, I believed Kreon's statement that those who stay silent and in fear are really not leaders at all.

Kreon continues his speech stating, "he who cherishes an individual beyond his homeland, he, I say, is nothing." This I found myself to only partially agree with. My work in nonviolent resistance is to bring justice to all. Justice can't be found when there is favoritism involved. However, throughout his time as king, his rigidity to the law led to his entire family's death. I agree that favoritism shouldn't be shown, but family is the core in everyone. While one can't always make excuses

and allowances for everything a family member does, in his case I believe that the country would have understood his internal struggles with fairness and love. They could all say that the law is the law, but I believe that very few, if put "in Kreon's shoes" would have remained as rigid. The country needs a compassionate leader as well as a fair one. This "exception" could have proven him to be both. Family ties are very strong, a strength which includes loyalty and pride. Antigone believed that both her brothers deserved to be buried because it would be dishonoring her family to leave Polyneices to rot. Also, in this time, they placed a high value on pleasing the gods. Antigone remembered that Zeus values family and he declares that it is a family responsibility to give proper burial to each family member, and she chose to honor the gods over an earthly king.

Kreon follows that statement with, "Zeus who sees all will see I shall not stay silent if I see disaster marching against our citizens, and I shall not befriend the enemy of this land." In this, he is acknowledging Zeus from the war aspect as if he were vowing to take action when war would come upon the land. This would be the perfect opportunity to actively begin a nonviolent resistance. Show the invading country that you don't intend to fight. Kreon wouldn't be "passive," the term generally given to those against war, but would be actively working to persuade the minds of the country to change their mind. "Nonviolence does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and

understanding" I have said (56). If this can be attained, the result would be "a beloved community" rather than one full of bitterness and grief.

Kreon concludes his monologue saying, "For the state is safety. When she is steady, then we can steer." I sense that this is the central part of what Kreon's goal is. He is a new leader thrown into the position and wants safety for his country. Once that goal is accomplished, then he feels that he can begin the process of prospering the country. This is a great goal to set but it can be dangerous in the respect that he may never feel that the country is totally safe and therefore never start the process of flourishing his country. I believe that they work together. The more the country prospers the safer and more stable it will become.

Agape love is the underlying theme of nonviolent resistance. "It is a love in which the individual seeks not his own good, but the good of his neighbor" (57). Kreon has this love because he wants what's best for his country and respect from his citizens. However, he doesn't let it have any emotional control over him. *Agape* is a powerful thing, and while it could have been better channeled to preventing the war itself, he at least tries to act on it. However, he left out *philia* love. Love for family can make a person do irrational things, but it is hard to tell that person that what they did was unjustified. If *agape* love had been in place from the start, it is possible that the war which killed Antigone's brothers may not have happened at all. *Agape* is love in action, but it can come in the form of nonviolence. I have also found another meaning of *agape*: "it is a

recognition of the fact that all life is interrelated. All humanity is involved in a single process, and all men are brothers" (58). If Kreon could have let either love have some control, he might have seen the value in bending his law rather than merely the dangers. But I do give him credit for standing by his beliefs to the end and admitting that what he had done was wrong and something he couldn't take back. That is the mark of a real leader: being able to take responsibility for it when something does go wrong.