

The Chord of Conscience: Eight Audiences of Nonviolent Protest

By Dennis Rivers, for a 1996 discussion of nonviolence at Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley (revised 2006)

I have been deeply moved by listening to the stories of protest related by people in this class and I have been struck also by the complexity of the communication processes involved. (I am studying interpersonal communication.) Perhaps one reason why nonviolent protests are difficult to plan and difficult to conceptualize is that there can be many audiences to an act of conscience and each audience may be taking home a different message. Here is my preliminary list of the various audiences and the possible different messages, based on my participation in many nonviolent protests and trainings since the late 1970s. These are the messages I hoped to send, but they are not automatic.

Although one would imagine that protest is aimed at authorities, my list suggests that authorities are only one audience of many, and not always the most significant. For each protest, the idea of multiple audiences raises at least two issues of priorities: *whom do we want to reach most of all? ...and what is the message we most want to deliver?* I doubt that my list is complete. Please let me know your suggestions for additional entries.

1. To the *victims of injustice* we say, “we have not forgotten you, we will not be a part of the conspiracy of silence that ignores your oppression.”
2. To our *fellow protesters* we say, “I join you in speaking out, I honor your love of life, I join with you to share whatever suffering our speaking out may bring us.”
3. To the *authorities immediately in charge* of the offending process (toxic waste dump, nuclear power station, etc.) we say, “your mistakes are known by everyone, now. There is no sense in trying to hide or deny the problem. Now is the time to start working on a solution.”
4. To *more distant regulatory authorities* we say, “Look what’s going on over here! Do your job (fulfill your mandate of office) and change this situation.” or... “follow a higher mandate (of truth and justice) and change this situation.”
5. To *representatives of the news media* we say “Watch this act of conscience... this is really unusual and/or creative and/or symbolic... you’ve never seen this before... or you haven’t seen this in a long time,” with the hope of carrying the deeper message, “Pay attention to the problem that has caused us to demonstrate.”
6. To *ourselves*, we say, “I will not become a silent accomplice to this crime. I will assert my integrity as a person, against the powers that be, by saying “no” to the current way of doing things and “yes” to a better way.”
7. To *the general public/bystanders* we say “Join us and withdraw your consent from this crime. Communicate with legislators and regulators and let them know you don’t agree with this offense against (human rights, God, nature, the constitution, etc.) and you want them to represent your views.”
8. To *God, Jesus, the Buddhamind, St. Francis, Spirits of the Grandparents and/or other manifestations of ultimate reality*, “I walk with You and keep faith with You as I follow Your way in a world full of greed, hatred, oppression and confusion.”