

Metta Center Certificate Program
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Learning the Magic of Soul Force by Fighting Apartheid

In the spring of 1988, I somewhat belatedly became involved in the anti-apartheid movement. I had worked for the American Friends Service Committee (Quakers) in Rhode Island for 16 years on peace and justice issues. My position was slated to be terminated at the end of September and I was graciously told that I was free to spend my remaining staff time on the work of my choice. The organization had painfully wrestled with racism issues for years, and I decided to offer my time and skills to the African American community in Providence and to the Black-led Free South Africa group, Rhode Island Divest. My time is yours, I said. I am here to serve and to see the world through eyes other than my own.

Rhode Island played a special role in the anti-apartheid movement in the U.S., with its senior Senator Claiborne Pell holding the chairmanship of the prestigious Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Rhode Island Divest, under the leadership of Joseph Newsome and South African-born Prudence Matima Mashile, had secured passage by the Rhode Island General Assembly of legislation divesting pension funds from South Africa (it was the 7th state to do so).

Divest had also mounted a vigorous campaign to persuade Senator Pell to support strengthening the 1986 Congressional sanctions against South Africa. The organization did letter-writing, petitioning, held public gatherings and demonstrations and met with Senator Pell on several occasions, but to no avail. Pell's hesitance about strengthening sanctions was philosophical: he was convinced that economic sanctions hurt the poorest of the poor and, therefore, thought it was morally wrong to use them as an instrument of U.S. foreign policy. He understood the brutality of apartheid and concurred that the system must be brought down, but did not think sanctions were the best strategy. His position was identical to that of the Friends Committee on National Legislation.

All of the traditional methods of social change seemed to be getting nowhere and Rhode Island's Black activists had all but despaired of any prospects for persuading Senator Pell of the necessity of ramping up pressure on the apartheid regime. Something new was needed. It so happened that I had gained the respect of Senator Pell back in 1974 when I fasted on the steps of the U.S. Capitol for 62 days as part of the Tiger Cage Vigil and Fast, calling for an end to U.S. funding of the war in Vietnam after the U.S. had signed the 1973 Paris Peace Accord.

Pell was an outspoken critic of that war and had confided several times that he was so distraught that sometimes he felt he should do something dramatic like cut off a finger to convey the depth of his opposition. So my fast resonated with him and that became the

inspiration for my role in helping to achieve Divest's goal. I knew I needed to make a personal appeal that only I could make. I embarked on a 19-day fast, starting on June 16, the anniversary of the 1976 Soweto township uprising and continuing through Independence Day, July 4. I announced my fast at an Interfaith Service against Apartheid at the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John and traveled the next week to Washington, D.C. to give testimony, along with Divest Co-Chair Joe Newsome, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

In Washington, I met privately with Senator Pell in his office at the Capitol. I did not want him to feel in any way coerced by my fast. Indeed, I prefaced my remarks by saying that I held him in great esteem, understood his philosophical reservations about sanctions, and would never ask him to vote against his conscience. Rather, I was fasting to express the depth of my own convictions about the need to strengthen sanctions. I looked into his eyes, opened my heart, and sought to convey the spiritual bond I felt with him. His face visibly relaxed.

Six weeks later, I returned to Washington for the Foreign Relations Committee debate and vote on sanctions legislation. Leading off the hearing, Senator Pell announced his reluctant support for stronger sanctions. Amazing me, he made his way to me through a crowd of anti-apartheid activists during a break in the debate. He extended his hand and told me he was reading a biography of Gandhi. At that moment, I understood the remarkable power of what Gandhi called soul force, an appeal to the heart and not to the intellect. I had taken the truth as I saw it, presented it to the Senator lovingly and non-coercively, and left space between the two of us for the spirit to do its work.

Why did this use of nonviolence work? There was no insistence that my position was correct and his was wrong, removing any need for defensiveness on his part. See "Your Brain Is Hooked on Being Right," by Judith Glaser. Respect was shown and the Senator's humanity and compassion were affirmed. There was no expectation conveyed that there was only one right answer or that he must respond immediately to a demand. Safe and supportive space was provided in which transformation might be possible. His conscience was aroused but not hammered.

Although not satyagraha in the sense of obstructive power, this use of soul force helped Senator Pell change his position on the imposition of stronger economic sanctions against South Africa, schedule a hearing on the legislation (it might have died in committee), and lead the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the U.S. Senate to passage of the bill.

Rhode Island Divest had done the heavy lifting. It was the light touch added to the heavy lifting that helped Senator Pell over the threshold we wanted him to cross. It was my most effective use of nonviolence in 40 years of work. At times when I feel righteous anger and strident, I must remind myself of the light touch.