

Baldwin Nhất Hạnh

(The following is a transcript of an imagined conversation between James Baldwin and Thích Nhất Hạnh, recorded and assembled across time, space, and comprehension.)

James Baldwin: *White people go around, it seems to me, with a very carefully suppressed terror of Black people. A tremendous uneasiness—they don't know what the Black face hides. They're sure it's hiding something. What it's hiding is American history. What it's hiding is what white people know they have done and are doing. White people know very well, one thing, it's the only thing they have to know. If they know this, everything else they say is a lie. They know they would not like to be Black here. They know that. Now they know that and they're telling me lies. They're telling me and my children nothing but lies.*

Thích Nhất Hạnh: *The foundation of nonviolent action is understanding and compassion. When you have understanding and compassion in your heart, everything you do will be nonviolent. Suppose someone is killing, someone is breaking, and you arrest him. You put him in jail. Arresting that person and putting him in jail, is that violent or nonviolent? It depends. If you arrest that person, if you lock him up, and yet, you do it because of understanding and compassion, that is nonviolent action. And even if you...you don't do anything, you allow [people] to kill and destroy...although you don't do anything, that is also violence.*

JB: *The poverty is piled high, making it even more inescapable. Making it even more inescapable how thoroughly you're despised. A high-rise slum is a high-crime area almost at once because **what are you going to do with all these children—really, whole families—condemned, forever, to nothing? In the richest city in the world?***

My best friend, a Black boy, jumped off the George Washington Bridge, when he was 24 and I was 22. And I was sure [that] I was going to be next. Because you can get to a place where, you know—you're in battle so often, that's all you can do. You've been beaten so hard, all you can do—your world narrows to a kind of red circle of rage, and you begin to hate everybody which means you hate yourself. And when that happens, it's over for you.

TNH: *Violence can be action or non-action. The outside appearance might be violent, but if you do it with a mind of understanding and compassion, it is not truly violent. We should not wait until the situation presents itself to decide whether we should react with violence or nonviolence. We have to begin right now.*

JB: *There's a price this republic exacts [from] any Black man or woman (unintelligible). And that is a crime. I have paid for that crime with my life. And I don't believe my countrymen anymore. They'll not do to him what they failed to do to me. I was seven years old 47 years ago, and nothing has changed since then.*

TNH: *When you tell your child how to do, how to act, you are having nonviolent action. You don't wait until the child becomes cruel and begins to destroy and kill in order to teach. You have to prevent, [use] preventive measures. So in the realm of education, the realm of*

agriculture, in the realm of art, you can introduce nonviolent thinking and nonviolent action, and teaching people to remove discrimination is the basic action of nonviolence.

JB: *Look, look, I don't mean it to you personally, I don't even know you. I've got nothing against you, I don't know you personally. But I know you historically. You can't have it both ways! You can't swear to the freedom of all mankind and put me in chains.*

*The American sense of reality is dictated by what Americans are trying to avoid, and **if you're trying to avoid reality, how can you face it?** If you don't know what's going on in the ghettos of this nation, in the hearts and minds [of] women and men you see every day, then, first of all, you don't really know what's going on in your own heart and mind. And you have no way of knowing what's going on in the hearts and minds of millions of people on this globe.*

TNH: *My true home is not limited to a place...to a time. My true home is not Vietnam. My true home is not France. My true home is not America. My true home is not Africa. My true home is not the Palestine. My true home is not Israel. Although they don't let me go back to Vietnam, I still have my true home available in the here and the now. And maybe they are in Vietnam, but they don't have a home.*

JB: *I think it comes as news to a great many of my co-citizens that the reason that Black people are in the streets has to do with the lives they're forced to lead in this country. And they're forced to lead these lives by the indifference and the, um, apathy, and a certain kind of ignorance—a very willful ignorance—on the part of their co-citizens. Everybody knows, no matter what they do not know, that they wouldn't like to be a Black man in this country. In the teeth of a structure which is built to deny that I can be a human being.*

THH: *They believe that if I go home, I will create an atmosphere of solidarity, of friendship, of brotherhood that may be threatening to the power. And it is fear that is an obstacle. I want to help them to be free from fear. They are not my enemies, they are the ones I want to help. They are [the] object of my practice of compassion and understanding. I have no enemies.*

JB: *The great question in the country has been, all these years I've been living here, and I was born here 47 years ago, is what does a Negro want? And this question masks a terrible knowledge. I want exactly what you want. And you know what you want. I want to be left alone. I don't want any of the things that people accuse Negroes of wanting, and I don't hate you. I simply want to be able to raise my children, in peace, and arrive at my own maturity in my own way, in peace. I don't want to be defined by you. I think that you and I might learn a great deal from each other, if you could overcome the curtain of my color. The curtain of my color is what you use to avoid facing the facts of our common history, the facts of American life.*

TNH: *During the war, during the Vietnam War...it was so difficult for us to voice our concerns. Many of us, most of us, did not want a war. And our voice was silenced by both sides, both warring parties. We tried to speak out. We tried to tell you in the world that we don't want a war. We don't want killing, the killing of each other with foreign weapons and foreign ideologies. And yet we were forced to do so. So those of us who practice mindfulness, understanding and compassion, we did not want to accept the war. We wanted to reconcile. And*

our [voices were] not allowed to be heard. Sometimes we had to burn [ourselves] alive to get the message across.

JB: *It is easy to call me a Negro, or a promising Black man, but in fact I am a man, like you. I want to live, like you. This country is mine too, I've paid as much for it as you. White means that you are European, still. And Black means that I'm African. And we both know, we've both been here too long. You can't go back to Ireland or Poland or England, and I can't go back to Africa. We will live here together, or we'll die here together. It is not I who is telling you, time is telling you. You will listen or your will perish.*