We are Unstoppable: Another World is Possible

Emily Welty

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Emily Welty is a group member of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017. She is Director and Professor of Peace and Justice Studies at Pace University. Her presentation was cosponsored by the Will Judy Lectureship and the Baker Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies.

On Saturday, I started to write some notes about what to share with you, and I felt neither unstoppable nor very hopeful that another world is possible. I started wondering why I chose the title of my speech. I took a long walk on the public boardwalk near where I live. I drove through the center of a neighborhood where people on both sides of the road, who supported and opposed the appointment of Brett Kavanaugh for Supreme Court Justice, shouted at each other. I called some of my friends to see how they were feeling, and I kept asking myself: "What does it mean to engage in radical dissent or generosity in a moment when you might not feel like your voice is worth very much? Do we decide to give up? Where do we turn when our souls feel sick?"

As a person of faith, when I am feeling most crushed, I sometimes find inspiration from a sacred text that reaches out and takes my hand. This sometimes comes from my own Christian tradition or sometimes from my Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, or indigenous brothers and sisters. What really reached me the other night and gave me some sense of purpose was an adapted piece from the Talmud. It reads, "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now. Love mercy now. Walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work but neither are you free to abandon it." When I think about the connections between some of the social movements that I'm going to talk about tonight, particularly our work on nuclear weapons, this guidance feels especially relevant. The grief of our nuclear plight can feel like it could crush you. The sense that you are such a small piece of something bigger can make every action feel insignificant.

Thinking about what it means for us to be unstoppable, I want to acknowledge that sometimes survival is all that we can muster. To live in queer, black, brown, indigenous, refugee, undocumented, and female bodies, and sometimes just to exist in a system that does not recognize your inherent worth as a human being becomes an important source of your resistance. If this is the space that people are in when struggling for social justice, it is okay. Sometimes it is okay just to recognize, tend, and heal the despair.

Sometimes you have to continue to insist that your life has meaning, or the despair will suck all of the fight out of you.

One of the things I want to contextualize for you is that we need everyone to engage in making the world a different place. What we have learned from those who have gone before us is that our survival is highly interconnected. Surviving means refusing to be politely complicit in the suffering of others. Surviving means sometimes becoming unbearable and annoying other people when your cause is just. Sometimes this means being disruptive in a culture that has systematically, and often legally, created suffering for millions of fellow human beings. I think if I were to amend my title a little bit, it would be to say that another world is possible, but it requires all of us. To be unstoppable means to refuse to be wiped out, to refuse to be invisible, to refuse to choose silence. Being unstoppable means getting angry and being willing to sacrifice something.

Sometimes that something is your time; sometimes that something is your desire to avoid conflict. Sometimes that is sacrificing your own sense of certainty or moral self-righteousness in order to live generously with other human beings. When the world changes for good, it is because people, ordinary people actually, decide to find a clear, quiet voice within themselves that cannot accept injustice. When the world changes for good, it is because people decide to exercise a generosity of spirit and a depth of presence that allows us to step back from a desire to annihilate our opponents, to destroy them in the way that they might wish to destroy us.

We do not need to choose between different struggles for justice, and we certainly should not be pitting them against one another. Working against nuclear weapons does not mean that I do not care about the violence of occupation, mass incarceration, and the ongoing violence against women (both here and worldwide), or the devastating structures of capitalism that have extracted profit from some of the most marginalized people. I care about all of those things. If your issue is offering hospitality to refugees, challenging the ongoing gentrification, standing up against deportation, or registering to vote, I am not telling you that you have to stop doing those things and join our work on nuclear weapons. However, I am saying that if you are standing on the sidelines, more focused on your own prosperity and whomever you have decided is in your inner circle, then it is time to step up and commit yourself to a broader vision of what it means to be human. What I offer you is a little bit of the story of how I became involved in activism on some particular issues so that you can think strategically about how different movements for justice have built power.

It is important to say that we are always building on the experiences of other movements. We are always standing on the shoulders of people who have gone before us, but if I can be a little bit provocative, I think that we need to stop endlessly repeating and talking to each other about Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Cesar Chavez, and the Civil Rights Movement, not because they did not do

some incredible things but because we need voices calling out to us, not only from the past but from down the street. I cannot help but notice that we spend a lot more time saying those names than elevating people like Dorothy Day, Septima Clark, Fannie Lou Hamer, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and so many others. What we need is to start thinking critically about other voices.

For me, becoming reengaged in activism here in the United States, after living abroad, doing field work, and completing a Ph.D., was grounded in my involvement in the Occupy Wall Street movement. Zuccotti Park in New York City, the first site of Occupy, was literally four blocks from Pace University, where I had just been hired as a contingent faculty member, not completely clear about whether they could fire me at any moment. Deciding whether I would go to Zuccotti Park or not became a litmus test about where I would stand in relation to social justice movements. One of the things I learned from the Occupy Wall Street movement is that different language lands differently for different people. While the idea of literally *occupying* space in the financial district was a very resonant and powerful language for some people, it connotes violence for other people.[1] The media has often mischaracterized Occupy as being chaotic or disorderly. However, this movement actually had an underlying structure that facilitated consensus not only within crowds but also in smaller affinity groups of people who knew each other and were willing to set wide norms about what should be morally acceptable to larger groups of people.

One of the lessons that comes out of Occupy that I think we used in unusual ways within the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) is what it means to be in a space that maybe is not built for you. I am very interested in the way that the field of Queer Studies has talked about what it means to "queer a space," to unsettle binaries, certainties, or our assumptions about who belongs in this space and who does not. For me, Occupy was about thinking about the role of the university and the relationship between our income-generating jobs and our commitments, which do not always reflect our values.

According to social movement theory, prefigurative politics describes and conducts social interactions and policies reflecting a desired, possible future. This theory also applies to ICAN: we firmly assert that it is possible to live in a world without nuclear weapons. For most of human history, people have done just that. Social movements have often engaged in prefigurative politics as a way to reflect the kind of future in which they want to live. Prefigurative practices in Occupy included mutual aid, horizontal power structures, and wider participation in community building. What became very interesting about Occupy as a social movement was that when Hurricane Sandy hit the New England coastline during late October 2012, Occupy provided food, medical aid, and shelter in hurricane-affected areas.

Another grassroots social movement to consider is the Moral Monday movement that began in North Carolina.[2] This movement has questioned what it might mean to live in a moral country and how

we might redeem traditional governance structures. It has now become the Poor People's Campaign, a nationwide movement attempting to reinvigorate some of the original activist strategies of Martin Luther King, Jr. This expanded movement is led by Reverend William Barber, a powerful writer and orator who won a 2018 MacArthur Genius Grant. This movement arose out of the idea that state politics and a fusion model of organization offers an alternative to national political movements that are often the focus of movement building. During 2013 in North Carolina, a small group of people who were united by this belief and outraged about oppressive legislative activities began showing up at the State House and refusing to leave. Seventeen were arrested the first night. During the weeks that followed, more people from all over North Carolina showed up and united across political lines. This was not a Democratic or Republican movement but a broad-based coalition working for voting rights, public education, fast-food rights, minimum wage, rights of LGBTQIA+ people, and the environment. This movement had built a bigger way of thinking about intersectional organizing.

The rallying cry of the Poor People's Campaign has been "Forward together! Not one step back!" This slogan reflects the need both to exhibit resilience and determination and to recognize that social movements are stronger with broad coalitions. Reverend Barber revitalized the fairly traditional structure of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) by refocusing its energies on direct action and justice. This suggests that it is not always necessary to create new social movements; sometimes re-energizing an existing organization can bring new passion and energy to issues.

This brings me to my work with ICAN. One should never assume that everybody understands nuclear weapons. In fact, most people harbor all sorts of misconceptions about their prevalence, destructive capabilities, and history. I am not a nuclear physicist, and I am not going to explain the physics behind nuclear weapons. However, I think every person of conscience, whether they are from a state possessing nuclear weapons or not, should have some awareness that, in 1945, the United States dropped two atomic weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, that killed more than 200,000 people. Part of my challenge as a human being is to contend with the daily reality that I live in a country that dropped not one, but two nuclear weapons, the only country ever to do this. This happened a long time before I was born. I did not make that decision, but the effects of that decision are, in some sense, my birthright, an obligation to repair the damage that began before I was born. This obligation feels like part of my moral responsibility of living as a person in this country. Those who survived, the Hibakusha as they are called, have suffered a wide spectrum of radiation-related diseases, including cancer, heart disease, and infertility. These effects have been passed down to their children and grandchildren. From the very beginning of the nuclear age, the violence of nuclear weapons has been widespread, indiscriminate, and multinational. Nuclear weapons have been tested in fifteen different countries:

Algeria, Australia, China, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, French Polynesia, India, Kazakhstan, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Pakistan, Russia, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, United States, and Uzbekistan.

Radioactive fallout has been even more widespread and usually has caused the most devastation to innocent civilian populations, who are often unwitting recipients of the violence of the nuclear weapon states. The United States detonated almost a thousand nuclear devices during 945 tests either within or above the continental United States, mostly at the Nevada test site. The US government has recognized that people in twelve different states have developed serious illnesses resulting from exposure to radiation. This risk of nuclear weapons is not just a past threat; it is ongoing. Nuclear detonations create devastating, long-lasting, environmental impacts on animals, plants, oceans, and the land itself.

Of the approximately 15, 000 nuclear weapons in the world right now, many of which are on high alert, the majority belong to the United States and Russia. Although Americans may express much concern about the nuclear weapons of other countries, there are actually just as many risks, in some ways more serious, that relate to our own nuclear weapons. There is a terrifying history of mechanical and human errors, close calls, accidents, and times when nuclear weapons were almost launched. They are an inherently unstable piece of machinery that can fail. Have you ever had your laptop crash, perhaps in a moment when you needed something urgently from it? Have you ever had your cell phone suddenly stop working when it was critical that you get an important text? If so, you need to understand that nuclear weapon technology is also not failsafe and comes with much more serious risks.

Setsuko Thurlow, one of the women who accepted and delivered our Nobel Peace Prize speech on behalf of ICAN, said, "I think the most important thing to think about when we are thinking about nuclear weapons is that everybody who died had a name; people were loved by someone." This all feels so upsetting and intractable that it feels that maybe there is nothing we can do, but there is. There are many different organizations that work against nuclear weapons. The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons was founded in 2007 to try to learn from the success of campaigns that had worked on banning landmines and cluster munitions. ICAN has member organizations all over the world in almost every country advocating for governments to shift the discourse from focusing on nuclear weapons as security issues to making the conversation about humanitarian disarmament, human rights, the environmental dimensions of nuclear weapons, and victim assistance. Many governments see nuclear weapons as expensive, dangerous, and threatening. Most nations do not have nuclear weapons and are tired of the few countries that do that fail to get rid of them, contrary to their promise under the Nonproliferation Treaty. Every country with a nuclear weapon that sits on the Security Council promised in 1968 that they would get rid of their nuclear weapons, but they have repeatedly failed to honor these obligations.

What we have done in ICAN is to encourage governments to adopt the new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. The treaty conference, held in March and July of 2017, produced a treaty that frames nuclear weapons in ethical, humanitarian, and environmental terms. It stigmatizes weapons as unacceptable, according to the principles of humanity and the dictates of public conscience. The treaty also establishes a framework for assisting victims. There are legal provisions that entitle victims affected by nuclear testing or a nuclear detonation to assistance, including environmental remediation. To date, 122 governments voted to adopt this treaty. We did not invent this strategy; it is the same strategy that was used to ban cluster munitions, chemical and biological weapons, and land mines. We are now in the process of having the treaty enter into force, which is a signature and ratification process.

In 2017, we won the Nobel Peace Prize for our work both inside and outside the United Nations on this treaty. My role was engaging specifically with faith-based communities and raising the voice of people of faith at the United Nations. However, the prize does not belong to just one of us. It belongs to all of us who work on this issue. This is not a medal that should be locked away in a vault. ICAN members have actively taken the Nobel Peace Prize medal out on the streets, where we use it to encourage other activists and inspire people who want to commit to work on this issue. It is a different approach to what it might look like to be a Nobel Laureate, but we are trying to reimagine what this means and how activism is at the heart of this.

That brings me to you. What can you actually do about nuclear weapons? There are many possibilities. For example, a very easy first step is that you can change the way that you talk about nuclear weapons. It is unacceptable to make jokes about nuclear weapons, decide that it does not affect your daily life, or just hope for the best. This is an issue that requires your thoughtful consideration. Rather than seeing nuclear weapons as an inevitable part of the status quo, we can acknowledge, as South Africa reiterated when they signed and ratified the ban treaty, “There are no safe hands for nuclear weapons.” No one has the moral right to possess nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons do not care who owns them. They do not distinguish between civilians and soldiers. There is no difference between a nuclear weapon that is owned by France and one that is owned by Iran. If nuclear weapons are too dangerous for North Korea, they are just as dangerous for the United States. We have to have some confidence that we are in the world to change the world. We cannot just leave the process of nuclear disarmament to politicians and diplomats.

One of the most exciting parts of this activism has been the way that ordinary people like you, like us, have been able to participate meaningfully in a process that has usually been closed to us. In the past, the process of talking about nuclear deterrence was largely the domain of a small group of mostly white men from a handful of countries. Within ICAN, we have been insistent that everyone should be part

of this conversation. Women, in particular, have played an important role in promoting the nuclear ban treaty. The leadership of ICAN is largely female. People of color, both from the governments who led the negotiations and from civil society, have also played a leading role in this process. There is dissatisfaction with a small group of countries with nuclear weapons holding everyone else on the planet hostage.

I am often asked what I will remember most from the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony. One of the moments that is most significant was during the evening of the Nobel Prize ceremony when Setsuko Thurlow and Beatrice Fihn, executive director of ICAN, stood on a balcony together to greet the Norwegian public. This was a very powerful image because it showed two women who had worked to end nuclear weapons standing together, despite having very different backgrounds.

It is incumbent upon all people from the generation that created nuclear weapons and the rest who were born into its legacy to get rid of these nuclear weapons. I think your work on this issue can be one of the things that you leave behind. Nuclear weapons are not inevitable. Like any oppressive social construction, they were created by human beings and, thus, can be dismantled by human beings who are fueled by the courage and determination not to settle for a world with nuclear weapons. When I am teaching in my university department of Peace and Justice Studies, I often think about what Cornel West once said: “Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public.” On some days when I feel particularly hopeless, it is helpful to believe that human beings are inherently good and that we have to be hopeful, even in the face of the terrifying reality of nuclear weapons.

Annoyingly, in the course of working at the United Nations, some diplomats have often told me (if I may paraphrase), “It is really nice that you are so passionate, but you need to understand that this is a very complicated issue. A slow, step-by-step process is the only thing that is really going to work.” To that, I simply say, “No, I will not live under the constant threat of annihilation and just hope that people have it under control. That is not something I can do. It is not something that I am willing to do.” I actually love the world too much. I am too engaged in what it means to be human to hope that a handful of other people understand it better than me and that I should not translate my passion into action. I also refuse to accept that we must have a degree in Nuclear Physics or International Relations to say “No” to nuclear weapons. One of the ways that people will often be shamed out of the conversation is by a technocrat demanding that, unless you can explain exactly where the weapons are located or exactly how they are detonated, you do not have a right to express an opinion. You absolutely have an obligation and a right to speak about an issue that has a potentially dangerous impact on everyone's lives.

Another practical action that you can take is to look at where your money is invested. Ask about where your university invests its money. Call your bank and tell them that divestment from nuclear weapon technology is a priority. Many banks and institutions are already starting to do this. There is a

wonderful campaign called “Don't Bank on the Bomb” that analyzes how the particular investments of your college institution and retirement funds can reflect your values.[3]

One may also advocate for nuclear-free cities. New York City has been a nuclear-free city since the 1980s. With the growing ratifications of the nuclear ban treaty, many US cities have declared themselves in compliance with the treaty or working to support the treaty. In addition, one can also ask religious communities to speak out on the issue of nuclear weapons. ICAN has worked with religious communities across the world that, despite their theological differences, believe that it is sinful or morally wrong to threaten the complete destruction of strangers. Doing so radically violates our ethic of care for one another that is common to all world religions.

For those who are more drawn to activism than to advocacy, there is a long tradition of principled civil disobedience with regard to nuclear weapons. Two of my very dear friends are elderly Dominican nuns who have been working for 40 years to ban nuclear weapons. They have spent months in prison as a result of showing up at nuclear weapons bases. The day after the negotiating conference on the nuclear ban treaty ended, they both boarded a plane to Germany to deliver copies of the new treaty to the commanders of an airbase where twenty US nuclear weapons are stored. In moments when I feel overwhelmed by this work, I am re-energized by the inspirational work of Sister Ardeth and Sister Carol and other activists who continue to call us all to be prophetic with our lives and our resistance.

Because I care a lot about many different justice issues, I often become anxious and worried about what I should choose to do with my one short, small life. During my despair walk on Saturday night, I asked myself: “What is it all for? What am I doing? Why am I still working on nuclear weapons? Why this? Why me? Why now? How do we work in contexts where the odds feel stacked against us? How do we stay angry and also keep our integrity?” I think what we need to do is look beyond ourselves. We learn from the strategies and moral history of other social movements. At times, we cry out to our beloved community, and we help each other to continue the struggle. I’m inspired by a question posed by Chief Arvol Looking Horse of the Lakota Nation: “Did you think the creator would create unnecessary people in a time of such terrible danger? Know that you yourself are essential to this world. Understand both the blessing and the burden of that. You yourself are desperately needed to save the soul of this world. Did you think that you were put here for something less?”[4] We do not always win. We do not always have the moments when it feels all worth it. It was wonderful to receive the Nobel Peace Prize and to know that moment was not going to last forever. However, we always have the option to be boldly on one another’s side and to love one another, even those who oppose us. We always have the obligation to struggle for each other.

NOTES

1. For more reflections and critical analysis on the importance of Occupy Wall Street as a new social movement, see: Emily Welty, Matthew Bolton, Meghana Nayak, and Christopher Malone, eds., *Occupying Political Science: The Occupy Wall Street Movement from New York to the World* (New York: Palgrave, 2013).

2. For more information, see: William Barber and Barbara Zelter, *Forward Together: A Moral Message for the Nation* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2014).

3. See www.dontbankonthebomb.com for updated resources about divestment from nuclear weapons.

4. Quoted in Kathleen Dean Moore, "One Good Turn," *Orion*, 36 (2017): 21.