

# Fred and Joan's conversation about Nonviolence

by Joan Baez

**Fred:** OK. So you're a pacifist. What would you do if someone were, say, attacking your grandmother?

**Joan:** Do I have a gun?

**Fred:** Yes.

**Joan:** No. I'm a pacifist, I don't have a gun.

**Fred:** Come on, OK, look. We'll take another example. Say, you're driving a car. You're on a narrow road with a sheer cliff on your side. There's a baby girl sitting in the middle of the road. You're going too fast to stop. What would you do?

**Joan:** I don't know. What would you do?

**Fred:** I'm asking you. You're the pacifist.

**Joan:** Yes, I know. All right, am I in control of the car?

**Fred:** Yes.

**Joan:** How about if I honk my horn so she can get out of the way?

**Fred:** She's too young to walk. And the horn doesn't work.

**Joan:** I swerve around to the left of her since she's not going anywhere.

**Fred:** No, there's been a landslide.

**Joan:** Oh. Well then, I would try to drive the car over the cliff and save the little girl.

.... **Silence** ...

**Fred:** Well, say there's someone else in the car with you. Then what?

**Joan:** What's my decision have to do with my being a pacifist?

**Fred:** There's two of you in the car and only one little girl.

**Joan:** Someone once said if you have a choice between a real evil and a hypothetical evil, always take the real one.

**Fred:** Huh?

**Joan:** I said, why are you so anxious to kill off all the pacifists?

**Fred:** I'm not. I just want to know what you'd do if ...

**Joan:** Listen, no one knows what they'll do in a moment of crisis and hypothetical questions get hypothetical answers. Also, note that you've made it impossible for me to come out of the situation without having killed one or more people. Then you say, 'Pacifism is a nice idea, but it won't work'. But that's not what really bothers me. **Fred:** What bothers you?

**Joan:** Well, you might not like it because it's not hypothetical. It's real. I'm thinking about how we put people through a training process so they'll find out the really good, efficient ways of killing. Nothing incidental like cars and landslides. Just the opposite, really. You know, how to growl and yell, kill and crawl and jump out of aeroplanes. Real organised stuff.

**Fred:** That's something entirely different.

**Joan:** Sure, because it's real, and it's going on right now. Look. A world leader sticks a pin into a map and a week later a bunch of kids are sweating it out in a jungle somewhere, shooting each other's arms and legs off, crying, praying and losing control of their bowels. Doesn't it seem stupid to you?

**Fred:** Well, you're talking about war. It's human nature to kill. Something you can't change.

**Joan:** Is it? If it's natural to kill, why do people have to go into training to learn how? There's violence in human nature, but there's also decency, love, kindness. Humans organize, buy, sell, push violence. Nonviolence wants to organize the opposite side. That's all nonviolence is - organized love.

**Fred:** You're crazy.

**Joan:** No doubt, but would you say the rest of the world is sane? Tell me that violence has been a great success for the past five thousand years, that the world is in fine shape, that wars have brought peace, understanding, democracy, and freedom to humankind and that killing each other has created an atmosphere of trust and hope. Or that even if it hasn't been smooth going all along, we are now at last beginning to see our way through to a better world for all, as soon as we get a few minor wars out of the way.

**Fred:** I'm doing OK. I still don't get the point of nonviolence.

**Joan:** The point of nonviolence is to build a floor, a strong new floor, beneath which we can no longer sink. A platform which stands a few feet above napalm, torture, exploitation, poison gas, nuclear bombs, the works. Give nonviolence a decent place to grow. We've been wallowing around in human blood and vomit and burnt flesh, screaming how it's all going to bring peace to the world that we forget about trying other options.

**Fred:** It all sounds real nice, but I just don't think it will work.

**Joan:** I don't know if it will work or not. But one thing I do know is that so far, we've been a glorious flop. The only thing that's been a worse flop than the organization of nonviolence has been the organization of violence.