

Dalai Lama, Nobel laureates tussle (gently) over violence

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NEWARK, N.J. (RNS) The Dalai Lama says peace in the world begins with peace in oneself. Some of his fellow Nobel laureates, however, aren't convinced.

"It isn't that I'm just an angry human being, it's anger at injustice," said Jody Williams, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997 for her work to ban land mines. "I'm still struggling with inner peace and I'm not sure I'll ever work it out."

About 1,500 people turned out Friday (May 13) for the start of the city's three-day Peace Education Summit. Though two dozen small workshops dealt with different aspects of achieving peace, a debate emerged over the role of forgiveness and inner peace.

The Dalai Lama, whose strategy for nonviolence begins with a Buddhist approach of transcending inner conflict, urges his followers to let go of anger and achieve tranquility.

"Like children, a little quarrel here takes place, a fight," the exiled leader of Tibetan Buddhism said. "But to keep ill feeling is very bad."

Williams and fellow Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi, however, cautioned against easy forgiveness, suggesting that anger at oppression could be a tool for fighting injustice.

"Forgiving the oppressor while he is committing injustice is permitting him to continue," said Ebadi, who won her Nobel Prize in 2003 for defending the rights of women and children in Iran. "Therefore the timing of forgiveness is very important."

Ebadi said that after the Islamic Revolution in 1979, women went from relative equality to servant status. "Fifteen years later, studies were done and the number of women killing their husbands increased," she said.

Williams worried too much talk of tranquility contributed to the stigma of peace advocates as "wimps."

"Shirin Ebadi is no wimp. His Holiness, fighting for the freedom of his people, is no wimp. Gandhi was no wimp. Martin Luther King was no wimp," Williams said, adding that peace had become synonymous with weakness.

The Dalai Lama agreed, saying tranquility should not be confused with ease.

"Peace is not just the absence of violence. Peace is something fuller," he said. "Real nonviolence you confront, conquer the problem ... You have the ability to use force, but you restrain."

James "Loose" White, 28, a one-time member of the Crips gang who advocates for nonviolence on the streets, agreed with the Dalai Lama that restraint can be harder than giving in.

"It takes courage to act like an individual and choose the right path," he said. "To take all that aggression and redirect it in a positive way."