

2005

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Recommended Citation

Clark, Joshua and Teitelbaum, Emily (2005) "Letting Gandhi In," *Denison Journal of Religion*: Vol. 5 , Article 8.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/religion/vol5/iss1/8>

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Letting Gandhi In

Josh Clark and Emily Teitelbaum

If humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable. He lived, thought, and acted, inspired by the vision of humanity evolving toward a world of peace and harmony. We may ignore him at our own risk.

*Martin Luther King, Jr.*¹

The most daunting task for any college student at a liberal arts school often is to answer the question, “How can I use what I’ve learned in the classroom to create a positive change in the world?” It’s one thing to sit and talk about creating change in the world, but it’s quite another thing actually to go out and do it. Sometimes the answers to the problems seem so out of reach that the question of where to start stops you in your tracks.

Society has been plagued by violence throughout history. War seems to perpetuate itself. How do we even begin to end that cycle? After two years of fighting in Iraq, the violence there has not stopped. Either we can believe that violence and hate are fundamental to human existence, or that we have not found an effective way to end the cycle of violence. Hope can be found from the belief of the great twentieth century religious leader Mohandas Gandhi that all human beings are fundamentally loving. He argued that we just need to draw out this love that often becomes clouded from various superficial societal influences. Gandhi has been a shining example of someone who not only recognized this cycle but tried to end it as well.

Gandhi dedicated his adult life to searching for moral truths in the world, and once he found them, he devoted himself to them. For Gandhi, the truth was inextricably linked to nonviolent action in all aspects of life. Nonviolence, though, involved more than just the absence of physical force; it incorporated the belief in an interdependence and love of all people that extended even beyond tolerance. Nonviolence was free from all kinds of exploitation, coercion, or deception. An unjust system compromised the morals of everyone involved. Whenever he encountered an unjust structure, he fought nonviolently to reach a resolution that valued both parties. Gandhi believed “inaction at a time of conflagration is inexcusable.”² For him, the worst reaction to a conflict was inaction.

When confronted with the English rule over India, Gandhi used many different nonviolent methods to establish common ground between the English government and the Indian citizens. He tailored each method according to the context and sought conversion of the other party, not coercion. Gandhi started a campaign for all Indians to use khadi, hand-spun cloth, as a national uniform in an effort to end any sort of social inequality in India and bond people together. Gandhi hoped this would create a commonality among the Indians and reduce their dependence on foreign goods. This empowered the citizens and taught them that they could create change, even in simple daily actions.

Sometimes, when Gandhi came in contact with a law he felt was unjust, he deliberately broke it. One such example was the tax the British placed on salt in 1882. This tax gave the British government a monopoly over salt and forced all Indians to pay unreasonable prices on a vital commodity. Eventually, Gandhi decided that the best solution would be to violate the law openly. In March, 1930, he and seventy-nine followers led a highly publicized march to the sea, with tens of thousands more gathering to follow them, to take salt from the beaches. Not only did this openly violate the monopoly and relieve the burden of the tax, it left the British government in the difficult position of how to respond to this situation. Either it reacted and encouraged the resistance, or did not react and acknowledged the validity of the resistance. In fact, Gandhi and his followers wanted to be arrested to make a statement showing the oppression of the British government. In either case, he had demonstrated that India was free, in that British rule depended on Indian compliance. Once that compliance was ended, so was British suzerainty.

Often times when faced with no other promising alternative, Gandhi utilized his most controversial tool of fasting. Although he claimed it was an effort to bring both parties together, many criticized the method as coercive. His opponents would be forced to give in because of the high esteem they had for him, no one would let him die. When confronted with a dire situation, such as the persistence of chronic Hindu-Muslim rioting following India's independence in 1947, Gandhi knew something had to be accomplished. Within two weeks, Gandhi's famous Calcutta Fast brought an entire city of riots temporarily to peace. This was his ultimate example of one person effecting enormous change.³

Gandhi can give us hope that alternative forms of change have been effective. But how do we apply what he did in our contemporary conflicts? Much of his success may have been based upon the fact that he was such a strong leader who was fighting a very image-conscious government. Is having this type of leader

critical for change or can it be done from a grass roots level? Did Gandhi succeed because he was right that people are fundamentally loving and nonviolence can be used to effectively resolve any conflict? Or, instead, did his success come from his strong leadership and the British government's compliant willingness to compromise?

Some have also argued that his vision of a nonviolent society is too idealistic. However, Gandhi was struggling for a more radical change. The only way to create a pervasive structural change is to push the limits of what we think is practical. He wanted to change what we thought was practical and possible. Gandhi acknowledged the difficulty of reacting to violence with nonviolence but would not let it dissuade him. Even in his most personal relationships, and the simplest settings, he wouldn't compromise his principles.

In reality, there have been many instances when Gandhi's ideas of nonviolent resistance have successfully created change. One such example is the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. This group consisted of a number of women, mostly mothers, who were outraged by the disappearances, tortures, and deaths of their children and loved ones during the Argentine "dirty war" from 1976 to 1983. The Argentine government and military who were involved in the thousands of disappearances, refused to release any information about them and often times denied all allegations that anyone had disappeared. These women decided to take a stand against such an injustice and demanded that the government give information about their loved ones and fought for civil rights in the face of the brutal dictatorship's attempts to suppress their protests. The women's actions consisted of nonviolent protests in front of government offices, often breaking the Argentine law prohibiting citizens from gathering in public places. The women spoke to the media, government, and police officials, never giving up on their fight for justice and the rights of their children and loved ones. These women, like Gandhi, weren't intimidated by violence and refused to accept the injustice of their situation. Collectively, they became a strong voice that raised awareness of human rights. Even in the midst of a very violent atmosphere, nonviolence was able to prevail.⁴

Both Gandhi and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo were directly affected by the oppression at hand. But for thousands of college students across the country, violent and oppressive governments seem like they are in a different world from us. Gandhi would say whenever we encounter oppression we must act.

The current genocide in Sudan has left our country in horror but still standing on the sideline. The Sudanese backed militia, Janjaweed, has been responsible for the deaths of roughly 200,000 non-Arabs in the region, and left nearly two mil-

lion more homeless. Meanwhile, the United States government has mostly stood idly by. Such extreme violence sometimes seems hard to fully comprehend, and we find it difficult to know where to begin. Here inspiration lies in the works of a thirteen-year old girl from Philadelphia, working on a project for her Bat Mitzvah, who has raised 13,000 dollars for humanitarian aid for the region. After she educated herself on the situation, she knew she couldn't sit idly by. She spoke at several area synagogues and to the local media. Like the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, she spread awareness and concern for the issue.⁵

These are some examples of people who are unwilling to accept the unending cycle of violence. They, like Gandhi, envision a society where violence and cruelty isn't tolerated, and they commit themselves to creating change, even if the change was only gradual. Although they are peaceful, like Gandhi, they actively devote themselves to their moral principles. He claimed "full effort is full victory."⁶

We cannot dismiss Gandhi as being too idealistic, even if many of his ideas were seemingly impractical. They only seem unrealistic because we do not give them a chance. In order to create real structural change we must push the limits of what we think is practical. Nonviolence can be a reality when we let ourselves realize it. Gandhi devoted his life to changing our consciousness of what we think are possible methods of change. We cannot accept the status quo as a barrier for action.

Footnotes

1 Quoted in Dennis Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. ix.

2 Quoted in Mark Juergensmeyer, *Gandhi's Way: A Handbook of Conflict Resolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p.12.

3 Information from this paragraph from Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action*.

4 Information from this paragraph is from Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1994).

5 Samantha Fredrickson, "Teen Fighting War Against Genocide." PhillyBurbs.com http://www.rnsnbc.rnsn.com/id/7_698250.