

The Experiments of Gandhi: Nonviolence in the Nuclear Age

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Gandhi needs no further introduction. John Dear may. As the first Roman Catholic priest to head the FOR, John brings a cornucopia of gifts that can only energize and extend FOR's mission. A Jesuit, he has lived and worked in El Salvador, Guatemala and Northern Ireland, and has traveled widely in the Middle East, Central America and the Philippines. He has frequently been arrested, and served nine months in prison for civil disobedience at a US Air Force base in North Carolina. He is a prolific writer whose works include Disarming the Heart, Our God is Nonviolent, Seeds of Nonviolence, Christ is with the Poor, Oscar Romero and the Nonviolent Struggle for Justice, and a substantial work of theology, The God of Peace: Toward a Theology of Nonviolence, winner of the Pax Christi Book of the Year Award for 1997. He has also edited books on Dan Berrigan, Henry Nouwen (for which he received the Pax Christi Book Award for 1999), and Mairead Maguire. The following article succinctly summarizes the ongoing relevance of Gandhi for our time. (*Fellowship* 54 (January/February 1988), 19-21)

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January 30, 1988 marks the fortieth anniversary of the assassination of Mohandas Gandhi. He died shortly after World War II, after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, after India's independence and civil war. He was killed at a prayer service.

Forty years later, the nuclear arms race has soared to astronomical numbers; while millions of dollars are spent daily on weapons, over 45,000 people die of starvation every day.

What has become of Gandhi's experiments in truth, his rediscovery of nonviolence as the personal and public method for positive social change? What does Gandhi's nonviolent resistance and truth force mean for North Americans, forty years after his death?

Gandhi never achieved political office. He sought solidarity with the poorest of the poor, and in this powerlessness he found the power of love and truth. "My message is my life," he wrote, and his life was a never-ending series of experiments in truth and nonviolence. "My greatest weapon is prayer," he maintained, and through his steadfast faith and study of the Bhagavad Gita and the Sermon on the Mount, he was able to move mountains. "Truth is God," he realized, and in truth, he found a way to liberation and resistance, the way of nonviolence.

But nonviolence was never simply a tactic. For Gandhi, "nonviolence is a matter of the heart." From his inner unity, through years of discipline and renunciation, Gandhi found the ability to suffer for justice's sake, to refuse to harm others, to go to prison for peace. For his friends in the independence movement, he wrote an essay, "How to Enjoy Jail." Such an essay came as a fruit of inner freedom already realized. Gandhi's nonviolence starts from within and moves outward.

His nonviolence and truth-seeking gave him the strength to claim in all humility, "I have ceased for over forty years to hate anybody. I hold myself to be incapable of hating any being on earth." His willingness to lay down his life for suffering humanity gave birth to tremendous new life in himself and for those around him. With great care and discipline, he discovered new truths, and his discoveries were open to all. "I have not the shadow of a doubt that any man or woman can achieve what I have, if he or she would make the same effort and cultivate the same hope and faith."

Gandhi's sense of experimentation in truth continued through to the last day of his life. He was constantly growing, seeking new ways to pursue the truth of nonviolence in his own heart and therefore in his world. The world of North America has much to learn from Gandhi's experiments. As we race ahead in the mad rush of violence, his message of nonviolence waits calmly to be heard and undertaken anew. Several points may apply to our own North American context as we remember and ponder his life.

Faith was the center of life for Gandhi. Gandhi believed in God, in truth. "What I want to achieve, what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years," he wrote in his autobiography, "is self-realization, to see God face to face. I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal. All that I do by way of speaking and writing, and all my ventures in the political field, are directed to this same end." Gandhi saw the face of God in the poorest peasant and in the struggle of nonviolent resistance and love in the public realm. He sought to uncover truth at every turn and found that justice and nonviolence spring from the journey in truth. "You may be sent to the gallows, or put to torture, but if you have truth in you, you will experience an inner joy. Truth, for Gandhi, is the essence of life.

Nonviolence is the essence of truth; one cannot seek truth, Gandhi discovered, and still continue to participate in violence and injustice, within one's heart and in the world. Nonviolence is the power of the powerless, the power of God, the only power that overcomes evil, including the evil of the bomb. "Nonviolence is the greatest and most active force in the world.... One person who can express nonviolence in life exercises a force superior to all the forces of brutality.... Nonviolence cannot be preached. It has to be practiced," he insisted. "If we remain nonviolent, hatred will die as everything does, from disuse."

Gandhi's nonviolence began with prayer, solitude and fasting. By avoiding power in all its forms of violence and control, and by renouncing his desire for immediate results, Gandhi discovered that one could be reduced to zero. From this ground zero of emptiness, the compassionate love of God—nonviolence—can grow. At this point, Gandhi wrote, the individual becomes "irresistible" and one's nonviolence becomes "all-pervasive."

Gandhi's experiments in truth revealed that the mandate of the Sermon on the Mount—to love one's enemies— is of critical importance. In all of Gandhi's public uses of nonviolence, he always manifested a desire for reconciliation, friendship, with his opponent. In South Africa, he showed deep respect for General Smuts and the two adversaries became fast friends. In India, Gandhi struggled to win over Jinnah, his Muslim opponent, through nonviolent love. His satyagraha campaigns began in a community of love and resistance and endeavored to extend that beloved community as far and wide as possible. When in prison, Gandhi befriended his jailers.

Gandhi always taught that "noncooperation with evil is as much a duty as cooperation with good." In order to seek God's kingdom first, Gandhi believed one must dissociate one's self from every form of evil, within and without. His noncooperation campaigns put into public practice the teachings of Jesus: "When someone strikes you on one cheek, turn and offer the other." His willingness to suffer for justice's sake (his apparent cooperation with violence) actually was a total noncooperation with violence. The violence ended there, in Gandhi's own person, as Jesus showed, and Gandhi's noncooperation with evil, his nonviolent resistance, led to the presence of new life and love.

Gandhi learned nonviolence, he confessed, from his wife, Kasturbai. "I learnt the lesson of nonviolence from my wife, when I tried to bend her to my will." Gandhi wrote. "Her determined resistance to my will, on the one hand, and her quiet submission to the suffering my stupidity involved, on the other, ultimately made me ashamed of myself and cured me of my stupidity." Kasturbai taught Mohandas that nonviolence includes feminism, the practice of the equality of the sexes. Gandhi became an advocate of women's rights and maintained that if the world was to make any progress, sexism must be banned and forgotten.

Gandhi always tried to stand with the outcasts of society and to speak up for the rights of the marginalized. In India, such solidarity primarily meant taking the radical, scandalizing public stand on behalf of the so-called "untouchables." Gandhi called them *harijans*, or "children of God" and begged his fellow Indians to banish untouchability from their hearts and lives. His message needs to be proclaimed in every part of the world today, including North America. Such solidarity might mean touching the lives of the marginalized in our own society: gays and lesbians, people of color, illegal aliens, the elderly, the mentally handicapped and AIDS victims.

Gandhi also developed a practical, constructive program to rid India and the world of poverty and injustice. He lived with the poor and taught ways to improve their lives, while always advocating voluntary poverty and simplicity of life. He tried to improve the environment and public sanitation, and to encourage the personal responsibility of daily work through the spinning wheel. Gandhi's motto was: "Recall the face of the poorest and the most helpless person whom you have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to that person. Will he or she be able to gain anything by it?"

In our own day and age, Gandhi's lessons of nonviolent resistance are more essential than ever. Perhaps, the primary lesson we need to relearn from Gandhi is to choose every day for the rest of our lives, with the gift of our lives, the truth of nonviolence over the lie of nuclear violence. Gandhi's path to nonviolence—the way of the cross—is an invitation to resist the nuclear arms race at its roots, within each of us. The spiritual power of nonviolent love when sought through prayer, fasting and discipline, will mean the reversal of the arms race. Such nonviolent love will lead to noncooperation and loving disobedience, and possibly imprisonment and death for some.

But Gandhi believed that there is no such thing as defeat for the person seeking the truth of nonviolence. When one accepts love and nonviolence in one's empty heart, then the doors of life are opened. Everyone is seen as a sister or a brother, an image of God, a child of God. The poor are embraced and welcomed with special warmth and given everything. The truth can be told; forgiveness can be given and accepted; disarmament can begin. Suffering can be accepted willingly and transformed into a gift of love that will bear fruit in humanity. Arrest and imprisonment for nonviolent resistance become doorways to freedom. Death becomes the door to resurrection. Gandhi's nonviolent resistance is based in hope, in a vision like the dream of Martin Luther King, Jr. of a new life, a new age, a new world without weapons or fear, in which all will be treated as one, as brothers and sisters, everyone a child of God.

In his autobiographical essay, "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," Martin Luther King, Jr. tells how he "came upon the life and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi" and "became deeply fascinated." He wrote:

Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale. For Gandhi love was a potent instrument for social and collective transformation. It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered the method [for social reform that I had been seeking [or so many months.... I came to feel that this was the only morally and practically sound method open to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.

At the beginning of the nuclear age on August 6, 1945, Gandhi wrote, "Unless now the world adopts nonviolence, it will spell certain suicide for humanity. Nonviolence is the only thing the atom bomb cannot destroy." Shortly after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he reflected that the bomb made clear for all the world what war is all about: the mass pursuit of death.

Hours before he was assassinated, Gandhi was asked by a North American journalist how he would meet the atomic bomb with nonviolence. Gandhi replied: "I will not go underground. I will not go into shelter. I will come out in the open and let the pilot see I have not a trace of ill-will against him. The pilot will not see our faces from his great height, I know. But the longing in our hearts—that he will not come to harm—would reach up to him and his eyes would be opened."

Ultimately, Gandhi's message of nonviolence for North Americans today is a call to resist the nuclear arms race. As the struggle for peace continues, we need to return to Gandhi's satyagraha campaigns, to study his discoveries and to seek ways to apply them with the same effort in our own work to rid the land of weapons and ourselves from the arms race within. "We have to make truth and nonviolence not matters for mere individual practice but for practice by groups and communities and nations," Gandhi wrote. "That, at any rate, is my dream. I shall live and die in trying to realize it."

Nonviolence, the power of the powerless, Gandhi believed, is the power of God, the power of truth and love that goes beyond the physical world into the realm of the spiritual. This power can overcome death, as God revealed through the nonviolence of Jesus, his crucifixion and subsequent resurrection in the resisting community. In the twentieth century, Gandhi sought this power on a public level as no one else in modern times has done.

What Gandhi sought was the spiritual liberation of humanity. He wanted the kingdom of God within each person to be realized, and that kingdom to extend throughout humanity so that oppression, injustice, and violence would cease and love and truth would reign. "When the practice of the law (truth and love) becomes universal, God will reign on earth as God does in heaven. Earth and heaven are in us. We know the earth, and we are strangers to the heaven within us."

Gandhi's life pursuit of the reign of truth and love led him to nonviolent resistance in a variety of campaigns. He and his colleagues resisted the violence and death in untouchability, sexism, racism, war, colonization, religious division and the nuclear arms race. His participation in the struggle resulted in imprisonment, beatings, and eventually, assassination. But Gandhi had pledged his life to seek justice and peace without the use of violence; he willingly accepted the punishment meted out to him. He had long ago offered to sacrifice his life for peace and justice. He went to jail

smiling. He was killed while offering a sign of peace. These acts of resistance done in this spirit of nonviolence epitomized the message of Gandhi:

A satyagrahi must always be ready to die with a smile on his face, without retaliation and without rancor in his heart. Some people have come to have a wrong notion that satyagraha means only jail-going, perhaps facing blows, and nothing more. Such satyagraha cannot bring independence. To win independence you have to learn the art of dying without killing.

Gandhi's twentieth-century experiments in truth point to the Way of the cross, the way of nonviolent love and resistance. His gift is a life committed to nonviolent resistance and seeking first God's justice. He was a faithful Hindu who invites us to explore the depths of Love and Truth in our own faiths, and to become renewed in the Spirit of Love and Truth. He was quite clear about the depths of nonviolence that need to be pursued in the nuclear age, if humanity is to live. "Several lives like mine will have to be given if the terrible violence that has spread all over is to stop and nonviolence reign supreme in its place." The life of Mohandas K. Gandhi needs to be explored today with renewed vigor if humanity is to have a future. We need to study his message, his life, and the scriptures that gave him strength. Then, we need to get together with others in our own North American ashrams, base communities of nonviolent resistance, to begin the work of nonviolent love with a deeper commitment. We need to cultivate the spirit of love and truth in our own lives, through our own modern day experiments in love and truth, that may lead us to public, loving disobedience to government authority.

One of Gandhi's associates, Asha Devi, was asked by a BBC interviewer: "Don't you think that Gandhi was a bit unrealistic, that he failed to reckon with the limits of our capacities?" With joy, Asha Devi responded, "There are no limits to our capacities."

Gandhi discovered that indeed there are no limits to our capacities. May God give us the strength to undertake new lives of nonviolent love with the same conviction he had.