

Where is Gandhi When We Need Him?

I was born just after World War II and grew up with dinner table talk about the war years and of our great victory. My father was too young for World War I and too old for World War II, but my mother had brothers who fought in No. Africa, Normandy, Italy, So. Pacific, and Okinawa. I was a college student in the 60's just as the Viet Nam war was escalating. However, as the result of a childhood accident on the farm, I am blind in one eye and have no depth perception and poor peripheral vision. My draft board wisely determined that giving me a gun would make me more dangerous to our own soldiers than to the enemy. Why they didn't just have me do a non-combatant task like typing orders in the Pentagon puzzled me but I didn't complain.

That long-drawn out war made me wonder about the efficacy of armed confrontation as a means of resolving conflict. I quickly became a strong advocate for peace which made me a pariah almost everywhere. I had a high school friend say: "Don't you want to die for your country, it's such an honor to die for your country". Being a bit of weisenheimer, I replied that I would be just as dead as if I had been hit by a beer truck. That went over like a lead balloon. It was only a few years later that I learned a better response. It was a quote from Gen. George Patton: "No one ever won a war by dying for his country. He won it by making the other poor dumb SOB die for his". [Edited slightly for church].

Since the beginning of time, humans have been the only creatures on this planet that periodically set upon and kill their own kind in the quest for power, control, or dominance. In the state of nature, one can see many examples of animals that attack each other in a struggle for dominance in their band or herd. But usually it involves some head butting, or pushing and shoving, until one of the two combatants gives up and accepts a secondary role in the herd or leaves to join another. Humans are the only creatures that often seek not only total dominance but also the extermination of their adversaries.

We see so much violence in the world today, much of it performed in the name of religion. We have even invented parlor games about it. Dr. Mike Newcomb on his Air America radio show would read a verse of scripture and would ask people to call in and guess whether it came from the Christian Bible or from the Koran. He would read something about "ruthlessly

slaying enemies and tearing out the tongues of the unrighteous ones” and half the time it would be from the Koran and half the time from the Bible. It was always from the Old Testament which was actually not Christian but the Hebrew Bible. The reason there was so much violence in them is because both the Old Testament and the Koran are written in the context of their respective tribal cultures which often had long traditions of distrust with neighboring tribes and cultures.

The New Testament was a departure from this. If you look at the four books of the Gospel and concentrate on the actual words of Jesus within them, you have a religious philosophy that is in sharp contrast to the Old Testament and above all to the tribal cultures of the time. It says to love thy neighbor, it advocates forgiving your enemies, it says to turn the other cheek, it talks about the virtues of poverty, simplicity, humility, love, and non-violence. Early Christians were very peaceful and it was so frustrating to many of the kings and rulers at the time because the Christians would not take up arms against them or even with them. If the king would kill some of them as a threat to others, the other Christians would just ignore it. The early Christians existed and thrived because they did not fight back.

Throughout the past two millennia, whenever a new Christian sect formed as a response to the perceived corruption of the state-sponsored Christianity, the new sect almost always preached of a life based on love, forgiveness, simplicity, indifference to secular government, and pacifism. Many well-known examples are the Amish, the Mennonites, the Quakers, the Shakers, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Brethren, etc. Rarely did you find a Christian sect that went back to basics by advocating aggressive behavior.

It was when politics hijacked Christianity early in history that it departed from these original values.

Recently, the fundamentalist Christian authors of the Left Behind book series were interviewed on Sixty Minutes. These books chronicle the end of days as prophesied in the Book of Revelation where true believers are whisked to heaven and days of turmoil follow for unbelievers left behind. During the course of their interview, the authors talked about their patriotism. That if you were to cut them, they would bleed red, white, and blue. These are cultural influences perverting the values that were taught originally by Christ and nothing could be farther from the actual words of Christ.

What are some modern examples of non-violent change in practice? Many are closer to home than we think.

One of the most moving moments in the 1982 film Gandhi was the opening scene where Edward R Murrow was broadcasting from Gandhi's funeral. He said:

"The object of this massive tribute died as he had always lived - a private man without wealth, without property, without official title or office. Mahatma Gandhi was not a commander of great armies nor ruler of vast lands. He could boast no scientific achievements or artistic gift. Yet men, governments and dignitaries from all over the world have joined hands today to pay homage to this little brown man in the loincloth who led his country to freedom. In the words of General George C. Marshall, the American Secretary of State, "Mahatma Gandhi had become the spokesman for the conscience of mankind, a man who made humility and simple truth more powerful than empires." And Albert Einstein added, "Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth."

What is so remarkable about Gandhi's life and accomplishments is not that he was the unofficial leader of so many people, it is that his technique was so unprecedented in the annals of historical change.

What is even more remarkable about Gandhi is that his method of non-violent struggle not only led to his nation's independence, but, through that struggle, bound together an extraordinarily diverse people on a vast subcontinent.

Before the British colonized the Asian subcontinent, it was composed of countless princely states, monarchies, kingdoms, and duchies. Over the centuries, many conquerors had come but had failed to conquer very much for very long and certainly were not successful in unifying it. There are hundreds of distinct language groups and immense cultural and geographical diversity. Although, the main religion is Hindu, it has the largest population of Muslims outside of Indonesia scattered throughout the subcontinent, also a large concentration of Christians in the Kerala state of southwest India, Jews in Cochin and Bombay, Sikhs in Punjab, Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Jains, animists, and countless variants of all the above. And then there was the caste system which consigned people to a certain social status regardless

of their talents and merits. That this could even be regarded as a nation is something that stretches credulity, much less a nation that works.

The British were reluctant to grant independence to India for a number of reasons but a major one was that they felt that the continent would fall into chaos because of these sectarian, social, cultural, and linguistic differences. The miracle that it did not happen was the miracle that was Gandhi. Though his methods took almost forty years to achieve independence, it engaged the people of India at all levels of society. When so many are involved in a process, the process is not easily hijacked by others. When so many have invested the bulk of their lives in securing the freedom of a nation, they are very unwilling to give away that power to anyone. The democratic process has a lot more sticking power and the recurrence of violent revolution is rare.

I have had probably had a bit more experience with India than most Americans. In 1986, Nancy and I adopted a daughter from India and discovered the bureaucracy that is India. The only way that I can describe it is that when the British departed, they left behind their complex judicial system, which the Indians built upon. In my travels there, I have also discovered that they seem to be trying to create full employment by hiring an enormous number of people to review your travel documents as you enter or leave the country.

In 1990, Motorola started the outsourcing trend to India when it established the first software center there. During my first visit, the director took my colleagues and myself out to dinner (vegetarian food on a banana leaf with lots of cold beer). He asked me what I thought of India and I said it was one of the most interesting places I had ever been. I then recounted my experience of getting from the airport to the hotel. Our taxi was driving down the road into Bangalore which was being shared by other taxis, bicycles, motorcycles, pedicabs, motorized rickshaws, and pedestrians (there are no sidewalks). Lane markers and traffic lights are sort guidelines rather than rules. The horn seems to be the primary form of traffic control. In the midst of this chaos, there would be a cow sleeping in the middle of the road. At the same time, we passed a billboard advertising a 21st century state of the art internet service provider. It was the 12th century cheek to jowl with the 21st century. My Indian host then told a story about how, shortly after India's independence, the Soviet premier Joseph Stalin paid a state visit. India was founded as a democratic socialist state and perhaps Stalin felt there was a potential ally there. As he was boarding his plane to leave the

country after a week's visit, an Indian reporter asked Stalin what he thought of India. His reply was that he had been an atheist his entire life, but now he is convinced that there must be a God. Because only God could have created India and made it work.

Gandhi was born into a middle caste family in the port city of Porbander in Gujarat in western India in 1869. His father was a tradesman (the name Gandhi means grocer) and a minister in the local government of the kingdom. Gandhi was not academically inclined but was sent by the family to England for a proper British education. England was a fairly tolerant society and he was well accepted by the people there. He took a law degree and was admitted to the Bar. One result of his experience in England was that he began to read extensively about politics and religion. He returned to India and set up a practice as a barrister. In 1892, he went to South Africa to represent an Indian trading firm. It was here that he encountered his first major experience with injustice when he was thrown off a train for riding in first class, for being "colored", despite having paid for a first class ticket. In the years that followed he organized non-violent civil disobedience against the racial pass laws and spent considerable time in jail.

Although it is commonly thought that it was the writings of Henry David Thoreau that ignited Gandhi's belief in non-violent resistance, it was actually the writing of Leo Tolstoy. It was Tolstoy's book, The Kingdom of God is Within You, that first acquainted Gandhi with non-violence and passive resistance. It was while Gandhi was in jail in South Africa for one of his non-violent protests that he read Thoreau's essay, On Civil Disobedience. Thoreau writes that being in jail is an honor if it means you are there for breaking an unjust law. It brought credibility to the act of being jailed and reinforced Gandhi's commitment to this strategy.

Although it may appear that the Thoreau influence on Gandhi may not have been as early as originally thought, it turns out that the roots of non-violent resistance are indeed very American. As a matter of fact, it was a Unitarian and Universalist idea long before the two denominations were even linked.

Non-violence first blossomed among the Abolitionists before the Civil War. One of the most famous of these was a Universalist named Adin Ballou who later became a Unitarian minister and founder of the Hopedale Utopian community. Ballou's argument for nonviolence began with a simple point: everyone must choose either to practice or abstain from violence. "They who

will not be obedient to the law of love, shall bow down under the law of physical force."

Ballou argued that violence is a learned habit, not a necessary part of human nature. He said that we should not assume that a nonviolent society could never exist, simply because we had never seen it before. Should Africans deny that ice exists just because they have never seen it? Is it any more logical, he asked, to deny that the moral perfection of nonviolence is possible, just because we have never seen it?

Ballou wrote, "Is not the Kingdom of heaven 'within' and 'among' men?" Years later, Leo Tolstoy used that as the title to his book on nonviolence that influenced Gandhi.

Gandhi's genius was to put together these two strains of American thought. He saw that the surest way to clog the machinery of the state is to live perfectly nonviolently, as if moral perfection were already here, and to actively resist unjust laws. He put that combination of ideas into practice in South Africa and then in India. Eventually Gandhi was discovered by the African-American community, where his words ultimately reached the ears of a young Black theology student named Martin Luther King. The rest is well-known history.

Gandhi was a devout Hindu but he found the true essence of God to exist in all religions. Gandhi was also not afraid to mix politics with religion but his politics wanted to unite Muslims and Hindus and Christians under a secular Indian state.

There were two key components to Gandhi's non-violent philosophy. The first was an invented term called Satyagraha which literally means Truth-Force. The other was Ahimsa which was a refusal to inflict injury on others.

Satyagraha is not intended to prevail over an opponent but over a conflict. It is meant to transform the adversary in such a way that all parties are uplifted. Vindication of truth is the goal not the infliction of suffering. It is intended to convert the heart and soul of opponents so that they become allies and not perpetual enemies. It does not believe in an "eye for an eye" but rather returning good for evil until the perpetrators realize the wrongness of their conduct. Someone once approached Gandhi and said that they must retaliate

for violence inflicted on his followers because of an eye for an eye. To which, Gandhi replied: “And soon the whole world will be blind”.

Think about Jihad in the same context. For some it merely means a struggle, for others it is a license to kill. Which one will be more successful in the long run?

But, no civil disobedience campaign of Gandhi's ever succeeded by directly causing a change of heart in his opponents. It did work, however, by impressing the public with the sincerity of his protest. The public rallies to his support and the opponent comes around to what the public believes not the other way around. The change of heart is in the public and not necessarily the opponent.

This was exactly the same tactic used by MLK during the Civil Rights movement. Although there had been efforts at peaceful protest in 30's and 40's led by A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, they were generally not well-known. The difference with the MLK era was television. There were very powerful images of young Black men and women peacefully sitting in at a lunch counter and having food poured over them or kneeling in prayer in front of police and having fire hoses turned on them, or trying to go to classes and having police or politicians block the entrance. These images were broadcast into everyone's living room every night on television. For many people outside of the South, this was the first time they had ever seen the harsh treatment that Blacks received regularly.

What would have happened if the civil rights movement had used violent methods? What sort of country would we live in now? Would the kidnappings, lynchings, and drive by murders have been done by both sides. Would the general public have been sympathetic to the civil rights advocates? Would the federal government have ever come to their aid? Would the White supremacist terrorist insurgency have become more powerful and institutionalized? Would we have become like Iraq?

Violence and warfare, believe it or not, is in the minority as a means of change, it just gets more press. Consider all the nations that have become democratic in recent decades without a violent revolution. All the countries of Eastern Europe, South Africa, Philippines, Mongolia. Even Yugoslavia, one of the most troubled countries in the region, was able to depose Milosovich peacefully after months of street demonstrations. Iran's Islamic

revolution in 1979 transitioned peacefully, but went out of control when they decided to start executing everyone who disagreed with them. Contrast that to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission that brought emotional closure to the long and bitter struggle for black majority rule and gave reassurance to those who felt they were losing political power. In John McCain's recent book, Character is Destiny, he profiles Nelson Mandela's virtue of forgiveness. Here was a man who spent 27 years in prison for his beliefs, became a symbol of their struggle, was released and led the new democratic nation. The first time he ever was able to vote was when he voted for himself to be the first president of the new South Africa. The world needs to understand and appreciate this virtue of forgiveness, or soon the whole world will be blind.

If the Palestinians had a Gandhi instead of an Arafat, they would have had their own state forty years ago and would be one of the more prosperous countries of the Middle East. Instead, they chose a violent response and are one of the most impoverished and brutalized people on the planet. Would non-violence have worked? Can you imagine if in the 1960's, the Palestinian people had staged massive non-violent protests, a million men, women, and children blocking roads, sitting in front of tanks, putting flowers in rifle barrels, forming a human chain around the city of Jerusalem. With TV cameras capturing every moment of this, the possibility of violent response by Israel would have been nil. In addition, the approach would have convinced everyone that the Palestinians could be good neighbors and could be trusted to govern themselves peacefully.

Instead, the violent approach may have given them temporary satisfaction, but the notion of an eye for eye has led to a cycle of revenge killings that has escalated to the level we see to this day.

“And soon the whole world will be blind”.

It has often been said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results each time. How insane we must be to continue killing in the name of our God, in the name of freedom, in the name of patriotism, in the name of nationalism. All we do is create more dead and the situation changes very little. The only difference between now and ancient times is the speed, efficiency, and thoroughness of the killing process. Has the advancement of our civilization taught us nothing? How soon will the whole world be blind?

We can argue that with so much religious and cultural diversity in the world, it is difficult to find common values. Is there a core value that is common to all religions and cultures that we can encourage to become our satyagraha? Some would say the Golden Rule. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”. But think of the golden rule in this way. There is a great flood. An eagle is sitting in the top of a tall tree and sees a raccoon struggling to swim by. The eagle reaches down with his beak and pulls the raccoon to safety in the tree. The raccoon feels extremely fortunate to have survived and wants to do the same for another creature. He sees a fish swimming by and reaches down and grabs it and brings it safely into the tree with him. Has he done a good thing?

But the common spirit that I find in all religions is a very simple one. You find it in Gandhi, you find it in Martin Luther King, you find it in Nelson Mandela, you find it in Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma in her non-violent effort to bring democracy to her nation. It is a verse from the Book of Micah in the Old Testament chapter 6 verse 8 that states: “And what is required of you but to act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God”.

If that spirit burned in everyone, the whole world would never be blind.
