

CHAPTER 32

Non-Violent Change

Often when we look around us, we become aware that the world is not the way we would like it to be. Everywhere there seem to be problems. Many things happen that we feel are wrong or unjust — either at home, at school, or in the wider world. What should we do? On the one hand, it is tempting to distance ourselves from what goes on around us and just concentrate on our own lives. On the other hand, it is tempting to busy ourselves in reforming everything except ourselves.

Historically, people who have had strong feelings about something often have resorted to violence to put things right or to seek revenge against the perpetrators of injustice and oppression. Others have questioned the use of violence as a means to solve disputes and bring about change.

Non-violent resistance to evil

Among Russian thinkers who taught the principle of non-violent resistance to evil, Leo Tolstoy has a special position. Here is how he expressed his views on this issue in the book *Way of Life*, which he wrote during the last year of his life:



The teaching of non-violent resistance to evil is not some new law; it only indicates the mistake people make when falling away from the law of love; it only indicates that any permission of violence against neighbor for the sake of revenge or in order to save oneself or one's neighbor from evil is incompatible with love.

No violence can bring peace to man, it will only irritate him. And that's why it is obvious that only non-violence can change the lives of people.

The false assumption that some people can fix the lives of other people by violence is especially harmful, because those who follow this assumption cease to differentiate between good and evil.

If there was raised a question, what is the way to free oneself completely from any moral responsibility so that one would act in the most evil way without feeling any guilt, then there would be no better means than the prejudice that violence can bring happiness to people.

It's difficult to argue with these words. At the same time, all of us understand that it is one thing to preach just and noble principles, and another to put them into practice. There is an inevitable question: Is it possible to follow noble ideals and bring about real change, not only in one's own life but also in a society in which injustice rules?

In our century, two men who were deeply influenced by the writings of Leo Tolstoy, one an Indian and the other a black American, led movements to bring about change without the use of violence. One, Mohandas Gandhi, led the movement that won his country's independence. The other, Martin Luther King Jr., inspired a movement for civil rights. Neither lived by the sword, but both were assassinated. Still, the changes they helped to bring about have had a profound, lasting and beneficial impact on their societies.

Mahatma Gandhi

Mohandas Gandhi, who is generally known as Mahatma ("Great Soul") Gandhi, was born in West India in 1869. Although he was raised in the Hindu tradition, the main religion of India, he firmly believed that wisdom is within all the great religions, and his ideas reflect his eclectic use of spiritual traditions along with his own. As a child he was deeply influenced by Jainism's teaching of *ahimsa*, which emphasizes hurting no living creature. Jains, of a religious tradition that began in India at the same time as Buddhism, believe that each person should develop within himself the conviction that injuring someone else is morally repugnant and should seek to

eliminate this desire. From Hinduism Gandhi absorbed the teaching that enduring any suffering could bring one to either a victorious or an unsuccessful end. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount also impressed him. After sincere study and reflection, Gandhi sought to discover the universal truths behind these spiritual teachings by living them out in daily life. He wanted to reduce all the principles he believed to practice.

Gandhi studied law in England and became the legal champion of the Indian community there, before moving to South Africa. In South Africa

the races were separated by law. Black Africans and Indians were treated as second-class citizens. They had few rights, and even those could be easily revoked or disregarded. For example, only white people were allowed to travel in the first-class compartments of trains. Gandhi experienced this firsthand when he was evicted from a train. In the face of such injustice, he realized that he could either "go back to India or go forward with God as my helper, and face whatever was in store for me. I decided to stay and suffer. My active non-violence began from that moment."

Gandhi firmly believed that non-violence is the law of the human species, as violence is the law of the brute. Many times during his life Gandhi was faced with the choice to practice his true humanity. When he was beaten and imprisoned, facing unjust treatment, he never fought back with violence, insult or injury to his persecutors.



Gandhi taught the Indians that they could gain their proper rights by refusing to cooperate with the South African authorities. Such tactics, though, were not without physical danger. Although badly beaten and almost lynched by white thugs, Gandhi refused to prosecute them. Many times he was thrown into jail, and his followers suffered as well. During this period he was encouraged by the essay “Civil Disobedience” by the American essayist Henry David Thoreau, which stated that a person must obey his conscience, even against the opinion of his fellow citizens, and even if it means he will be imprisoned. Gandhi also corresponded with Count Leo Tolstoy and was influenced by his ideas on non-violence. However, Gandhi did not affirm unconditional pacifism. He later supported Britain in the First World War against Germany and in the Second World War against fascism.

Throughout his life Gandhi taught his followers the importance of human dignity and of non-violent resistance to unjust government treatment and policies. At the end of his campaign the South African whites agreed to a compromise that Gandhi himself had worked out.

Satyagraha

The basic principles on which Gandhi based his life follow the central idea of *satyagraha*, a Sanskrit word meaning “devotion to truth.” If one always does the true thing, one will be supported by the moral universe. Results from true decisions and behavior would flow naturally; therefore, he did not fret over the results of his activities.

He encouraged others to be confident in aligning themselves with the side of truth and justice. The same moral law that permeated the universe applied to the lives of individuals, groups and nations as well.

Gandhi’s philosophy and way of life of non-violent civil resistance developed out of this devotion to truth. He advised citizens not to cooperate with the authorities and to refrain from submitting to any order out of fear or anger. Likewise, Gandhi warned against harboring ill will toward assailants or unjust leaders. Active non-violence required the practitioner to absorb anger and assaults without retaliation. Even swearing under one’s breath was against the principle of non-violent resistance. When authorities used force in an attempt to secure the obedience of the people, Gandhi said:

We will match our capacity to suffer against your capacity to inflict suffering, our soul force against your physical force. We will not hate you, but we will not obey you. Do what you like, and we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. And in the winning of the freedom we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you over. So ours will be a double victory; we will win our freedom and our captors in the process.

When he returned to India in 1919, Gandhi became involved in the movement to win India’s independence from the British Empire. Until then, the independence movement had grown underground, manifesting itself in bombings and other acts of terror. Though he had no formal position, Gandhi soon became the leader and guiding spirit of the movement. He

brought the hatred which people had been holding within for many generations to the surface and made the movement completely open and public. He inspired Hindus

Devotion to truth is the sole reason for our existence. All our activities should be centered in truth, which should be the very breath of our life. Once this stage in the pilgrim’s progress is reached, all other rules of correct living will come without effort, and obedience to them will be instinctive. But without truth, it is impossible to observe any principles or rules in life. Generally speaking, observing the truth is understood to mean truth in what we say, but there should be truth in thought, truth in speech, truth in action. Everyone should follow truth according to his own principles. Indeed, it is one’s duty to do so. Then if there is a mistake on the part of anyone so following truth, it will automatically be set right. The quest for truth involves suffering, sometimes even unto death. There is no place in it for even a trace of self-interest. In such a selfless search for truth, nobody can lose his bearings for long. Directly one takes to the wrong path, one stumbles, and is thus redirected to the right path.

— Gandhi

and Muslims to work together and advocated a policy of non-cooperation with all British organizations in India. At times the British reacted violently and many people were killed.

Means and ends must be consistent

Although his country's independence was important to him, Gandhi was determined that India would win its freedom by truth and non-violence. He would not use an incorrect means to gain a moral end, for he knew that the means are contained in and determine the end. Means and methods must be consistent with the goal of such action.

Still, there were people who were not able to fully embody the principle of non-violence, and there were tragic violent incidents. As the instigator of the non-cooperation campaign, Gandhi was sentenced to six years imprisonment, of which he served two before being released in 1924 following a serious illness.

When there were occasions of serious violence or rioting, Gandhi often would fast for up to 21 days. He explained the reason for such fasting as follows:

I launched non-cooperation. Today I find that people are non-cooperating against one another, without any regard for non-violence. What is the reason? Only this, that I myself am not completely non-violent. If I were practicing non-violence to perfection, I should not have seen the violence around me today. My fast is therefore a penance. I blame no one. I blame only myself. I have lost the power wherewith to appeal to people. Defeated and helpless, I must submit to His Court. Only He will listen to me, no one else.

He also fasted to touch the conscience of people so that they would change.

But what should a non-violent person do when he finds his friends, relations, or countrymen refuse to give up an immoral way of life, and all arguments prove futile to evoke any response? Such a person must not use a semblance of force to convert the wrongdoer. He even eschews the use of harsh language. The first step is gentle and affectionate persuasion. When it fails to produce any salutary effect, voluntarily he accepts suffering in his own body to open the eyes of the person who is determined to see no light.

When a Christian asked him if fasting in this way was itself a form of coercion, Gandhi replied, "Yes, the same kind of coercion which Jesus exercises on you from the cross."

Gradually the movement matured and grew. Hundreds of thousands participated in the campaign by marching, praying, striking, going to prison and fasting. In this way the resisters did not use violence or injury to the authorities during their protests, but simultaneously withstood the injustices inflicted upon them by the government.

Gandhi appealed to the conscience of the British, since they claimed to be running their empire on moral principles. His successful use of non-violence depended partly on the fact that his opponents in the end were forced to ask whether their own behavior fitted their deepest moral convictions. Eventually,



Gandhi's movement touched the conscience of the British, which allowed India in 1947 to become an independent state.

Gandhi was assassinated in 1948 by a militant Hindu who disagreed with non-violence and wanted to establish a Hindu state with force if need be. Gandhi's martyrdom, however, meant that his assassin's policies were strongly condemned and discredited.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, in the heart of the American South, where until the Civil War of 1861-65, black people worked on plantations as slaves. Even after the U.S. Congress abolished slavery in 1865, black

people were not treated equally and in many places in the South legalized discrimination prevailed. Black people were segregated from whites in public places. They had to use separate toilets and water fountains, stay in separate hotels, eat at separate restaurants, and were expected to give up their seats on buses to white passengers. Black Americans went to separate schools, and in some places they did not have the right to vote.

King was born into a family where both his father and his maternal grandfather were Baptist preachers. He received a Ph.D. in theology from Boston University in 1955. During his studies he met a music student, Coretta Young, who became his wife and bore him four children. King was painfully aware of the racial discrimination in American society, and as a Christian he believed that the only way to achieve equality was by non-violent and peaceful forms of protest. He had been profoundly impressed by Mahatma Gandhi and in 1959 visited India and discussed *satyagraha* with some of Gandhi's followers.

In 1954 King became pastor of a Baptist church in Montgomery, Alabama. At that time black and white people were officially kept apart on Montgomery buses.

Blacks were restricted to the seats in the back of the bus and were expected to give their seats to whites if the need arose. On Dec. 1, 1955 a black woman named Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a public bus to a white passenger. She was arrested.

King helped set up the Montgomery Improvement Association to have the law changed. The association decided to boycott the city transport system. For 381 days black people did not use the buses. Instead, they organized their own transportation with voluntary car pools or they simply walked to their destinations. Although King's house was bombed and he and other ministers were violently abused, King was determined to keep Gandhi's teaching to meet violence with non-violence. In the end, the law was changed and the boycott stopped. King later described how such non-violent direct action worked:

Non-violent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue; it seeks to dramatize the issue so that it can no longer be ignored.

By deliberately appealing to the conscience of white Americans, King sought to challenge unjust laws that gave whites greater privileges and positions in American



We shall not fully understand the great meaning of Jesus' prayer unless we first notice that the text opens with the word "Then." The verse immediately preceding reads thus: "And when they were come to the place which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, the other on the left." Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them." Then — when he was being plunged into the abyss of nagging agony. Then — when man had stooped to his worst. Then — when he was facing a most ignominious death. Then — when the wicked hands of the creature had dared to crucify the only begotten Son of the Creator. Then said Jesus, "Father, forgive them." That then might well have been otherwise. He could have said, "Father, get even with them" or "Father, let loose the mighty thunderbolts of righteous wrath and destroy them" or "Father, open the mighty floodgates of justice and permit the staggering avalanche of retribution to pour upon them." But none of these was his response. Though subjected to inexpressible agony, suffering excruciating pain, and despised and rejected, nevertheless, he cried, "Father, forgive them."

— Martin Luther King, Jr.

society. His home, person and family were threatened, and he was imprisoned after protesting with 33 others against separate eating facilities for blacks and whites in an Atlanta shop. Police with dogs and on horseback attacked him and his followers as they demonstrated. He was jailed again in 1963, together with a large number of his followers, but remained convinced that his tactics were right.

In the civil rights movement many whites fought alongside their black neighbors for the rights of blacks within America, some even at the cost of their lives.

King knew that his tactics of non-violence would not create immediate change. Militant black leaders, who wanted to pursue change through violent means, accused him of not being firm enough. But King had a deep faith that only non-violence would bring real and lasting change. He was also belittled and criticized by the more conservative leaders of the black community, who thought he was too radical. But King felt that "One of the great tragedies of life is that man seldom bridges the gulf between practice and profession, between doing and saying." He closely followed the biblical teaching of overcoming evil with goodness, and he affirmed that evil could never be overcome by evil, but only by love and goodness. He believed that he and his followers should emulate the example of Jesus Christ.

Love your enemies

King was very practical in his advice and guidance, since he spoke and wrote from his own experience. In a sermon he addressed the question "How do we love our enemies?":

- ✘ First, we must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love... Forgiveness does not mean ignoring what has been done or putting a false label on an evil act. It means, rather, that the evil act no longer remains a barrier to the relationship. Forgiveness is a catalyst creating the atmosphere necessary for a fresh start and a new beginning.
- ✘ Second, we must remember that the evil deed of the enemy-neighbor, the thing that hurts, never quite expresses all that he is. An element of goodness may be found even in our worst enemy.
- ✘ Third, we must not seek to defeat or humiliate the enemy but to win his friendship and understanding.

To the more theoretical question, "Why should we love our enemies?" he explained:

- ✘ Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.
- ✘ Hate scars the soul and distorts the personality... Hate is an evil and dangerous force... (that) brings irreparable damage to its victims... But... hate is just as injurious to the person who hates... (It) corrodes the personality and

eats away its vital unity. Hate destroys a man's sense of values and his objectivity.

- x Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend. We never get rid of an enemy by meeting hate with hate; we get rid of an enemy by getting rid of enmity... (As Abraham Lincoln said,) "Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?"



King knew that once black men and women began to demand their rights in a non-violent fashion, their own feelings of self-respect would be enhanced. As he said, "The non-violent approach does something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it. It gives them new self-respect. It calls up resources of strength and courage that they did not know they had." He claimed that any form of violence would bring instant downfall to the efforts of the black community in their fight for equality within society. As one biographer wrote,

By making a virtue of a necessity — any resort to violence on the part of the blacks would be suicidal — he reinforced the claim of black southerners to represent a superior morality to that of the white racists.

In 1963 King was joined by more than 250,000 Americans, black and white, in a march to Washington, D.C. The peaceful demand for human rights resulted in the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In 1964 King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In 1968 he planned a march to Washington on behalf of poor people but first visited Memphis, Tennessee, to show his support for the city's striking sanitation workers. There, on April 4, he was assassinated. Preaching the day before in Memphis, he had declared:

I've been to the mountaintop and I've looked over and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know that we as a people will get to the promised land. So I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

Something to think about



- Do you see any situations in the world that could be improved through organized non-violent resistance such as took place in India, South Africa and the United States by the efforts of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.?
- Do you agree with the philosophy behind non-violent resistance? Imagine that you were from a group of people who were oppressing others. Would this change your mind about non-violent resistance?
- Why do you think that the tactics used by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King were so successful and that both men became legends in their time?
- Is there anything that strikes you as being of particular importance in the philosophy of one of these two men?

For Your Journal



Imagine that you are a black American following Martin Luther King Jr. during the 1960s and you have just been imprisoned for participating in a non-violent protest. Although you were treated unjustly, you never retaliated with violence or even verbal abuse against your oppressors. You are now in prison and you are about to write a letter to your family, who do not believe in your philosophy of non-violent protest. Explain to them why you practice these principles and either defend non-violent protest by showing the good it has done, or refute the principle by showing that it has done harm.