

Gandhi Revisited

Gandhi's life intrigues me no end. I keep returning to his writings and biographies to find a clue about how to live in our culture of violence. His answer is always the same: steadfast, persistent, dedicated, committed, patient, relentless, truthful, loving, active nonviolence.

In one juicy story, a young British activist, Ronald Duncan, wrote a pamphlet about a labor strike he organized and sent 100 copies to activists around the world. No one responded--except Gandhi, who wrote back explaining that the means are the ends, that all our organizing must be nonviolent to the core.

Duncan asked Gandhi if he could come to India for a visit. Gandhi sent a cable saying, "Meet me at Wardha on the 23rd." With the support of friends, Duncan set off to India, arrived in the village of Wardha, and hired a taxi to the ashram. On the journey through the barren countryside, Gandhi appeared alone on the road. He had walked three miles to meet him.

"As I was saying in my letter," Gandhi said without missing a beat, "means must determine ends and indeed it's questionable whether there is an end. The best we can do is to make sure of the method and examine our motives."

They walked back, discussing nonviolence. No introduction. No questions about the trip. Gandhi picked up as if they were old friends, engaged in passionate discussion. That's Gandhi: single-minded attention to nonviolence. Duncan was profoundly impressed (as he wrote in his collection, *Selected Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Beacon Press, 1951).

Gandhi had that effect on everyone. Yes, he made mistakes, but he kept trying to plumb the depths of nonviolence and his persistent example inspires us to keep at the great task before us: the abolition of war, nuclear weapons, violence and injustice, and the creation of a culture of peace, justice and nonviolence.

For years, whenever anyone asked me what I thought was the best book on peace and justice, I answered, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, by Louis Fischer (Harper & Row, 1950). I first read it 18 years ago, and have studied it ever since. I think it's one of the classic tales of nonviolence, chock full of stories, insights, great quotes, and the epic account of two historic movements for freedom, in South Africa and India.

A recent rereading gave me three new insights. First, Gandhi was like a broken record. He kept insisting that nonviolence was the hope of the future, and that it had to be put into practice at every level of human life, in our own hearts and among our own friends, as well as nationally and internationally.

Second, Gandhi believed that nonviolent change would come about only through risk and sacrifice, by going to jail and offering our lives for peace and justice. "Freedom is to be wooed only inside prison walls and sometimes on the gallows, but never in council chambers, courts, or the schoolroom," he said.

Third, Gandhi spoke a lot about suffering. Nonviolence involves conscious, daily, voluntary suffering in the struggle for justice and peace, he insisted. When asked to sum up the meaning of life in three words or less, Gandhi responded, "That's easy: Renounce and enjoy." We don't talk about self-denial or suffering that much these days, but Gandhi talked about it all the time.

Another classic book on Gandhi is the newly revised *Gandhi the Man* by Eknath Easwaran (Nilgiri Press, 1997), which not only tells his life story but includes magnificent photos and quotes. Its great contribution is its emphasis on the spiritual foundation of Gandhi's life journey, the study of the Bhagavad Gita passage that Gandhi read every day for fifty years, his belief in a nonviolent God, and his insistence that nonviolence is "a matter of the heart." Gandhi was neither angry or strident. He radiated peace. He laughed. He seemed to be full of joy. These traits encourage me to live life to

the full, even as we resist the forces of death.

Finally, another Gandhi classic which I reread regularly is Thomas Merton's collection, *Gandhi on Nonviolence* (New Directions, 1964). Besides Merton's brilliant introduction which insists that Gandhi's actions are "the fruit of an inner unity already achieved," this small book offers the best gems of Gandhi's wisdom: "Nonviolence is the greatest and most active force in the world." "There is no such thing as defeat in nonviolence." "Humanity can only get out of violence through nonviolence." "Unless now the world adopts nonviolence, it will spell certain suicide of humanity."

Just as we continue to study Dr. King, Dorothy Day, and the scriptures for insight, so we cannot go wrong from delving periodically into the life and writings of Gandhi. As King said, "If humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable. We may ignore him at our own risk."

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