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My Gandhi

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THIS IS THE STORY OF my lifetime journey to comprehend and embrace Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence. I recount the unusual pathway that led me to Gandhi, which began while I was serving in the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War. I spoke out against the war as an active duty soldier, and through that experience and my participation in the peace community encountered the ubiquitous image and message of Gandhi. I examine the ways in which Gandhi's nonviolent philosophy and method shaped the beliefs and practices of the U.S. peace and civil rights leaders who most influenced me. ... In the last part of the essay I reflect less favorably on Gandhi's beliefs and practices on matters related to women and sexuality, and how I struggled to reconcile my admiration for his many valuable contributions to the cause of justice with my revulsion at his reactionary views on gender issues. In the end, after much deconstruction, my sojourn arrives at a place of deep respect. Gandhi for me is not the iconic Mahatma on a pedestal, but an ordinary man with extraordinary courage and political vision, one who struggled with inner demons and was flawed in some respects as we all are. Gandhi changed the course of history by introducing into the world a revolutionary new principle of mass nonviolent action to achieve social change. Our challenge is to understand and apply his philosophy and method but also to enrich it with a deeper understanding of the meaning of social justice.

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Mentors and models

My introduction to Gandhi came through the impact he exerted on many of the peace leaders who mentored and inspired me. One of these was Dave Dellinger, an important leader of the U.S. antiwar movement. Dellinger was a legendary figure to me and other young converts to the peace movement. He was known most prominently as one of the Chicago Seven, a group of antiwar activists who were indicted for supposedly inciting a riot at the 1968 Democratic National Convention but were later exonerated.

Dellinger had a long history of activism for justice and peace, much of it inspired by Gandhi and shaped by his principles and practices. As a student at Yale University in the 1930s Dellinger read and was impressed by Richard Gregg's 1934 book *The Power of Nonviolence*, which was based on close observation of Gandhi's methods of nonviolent struggle, including seven months in residence at Gandhi's Sabarmati ashram. Gregg was one of the first to provide a systematic analysis of nonviolence, focusing on the psychological dynamics of nonviolent action as a creative and effective means of confronting oppression. Dellinger also read the work of Rev. John Haynes Holmes, a founder of the War Resisters League and leader of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, who was one of the earliest American proponents of Gandhi's method of nonviolent action. Holmes called Gandhi "the greatest man since Jesus Christ" for developing the method of nonviolent action as a practical alternative to war. Through these and other sources Dellinger came to see Gandhian nonviolence as a new way of resisting injustice and war.

Dellinger supported radical pacifist efforts in the years before World War II and was imprisoned in 1943 for refusing to register for the military draft. He was a sharp critic of Cold War militarism and the repressive political climate of the 1950s. He participated in marches for civil rights and economic justice during the 1960s, and throughout his life played a prominent role in mobilizing resistance to war, nuclear weapons and social injustice. He applied the methods and lessons of Gandhi's experience to the challenges of resisting war and racial injustice in the United States.

When I met him, Dellinger was a co-chair of the People's Coalition for Peace and Justice, PCPJ, the successor organization to the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam. The antiwar movement in those days made a special effort to reach out to antiwar soldiers and veterans. I was invited to serve as an endorser of PCPJ, which I was happy to do, although my Army duties kept me at Ft. Bliss most of the time. On one of the rare occasions when I was able to travel to Washington DC for a national

meeting I was introduced to Dellinger. He showed genuine interest in me and the efforts of other antiwar GIs and said he admired our courage in speaking out within the military, in the proverbial belly of the beast. That brief encounter with Dellinger had a major impact on me. I was encouraged and inspired by his words of personal support and deeply impressed by the example of his lifetime commitment to justice and peace. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was being motivated by him and other antiwar leaders to follow a similar path of full time commitment to the cause of peace. Thus began a life of working for the prevention of war and studying peace and nonviolence, a dedication from which I have not veered in all the years since. Along the journey I have gained a steadily deepening appreciation of the importance of Gandhian nonviolence and of the ever more creative ways it can be applied to bring justice and peace.

A revolution in the revolution

What impressed me most about Dellinger's philosophy, and that of other antiwar pacifists of that era such as Barbara Deming and A.J. Muste, was the combination of radical activism with an insistence on nonviolent methods. They sought to bridge the gap between a commitment to peaceful methods and a belief in the need for revolutionary change. The 1960s were a time of ferment in American society – an era of massive growth in the scale of social protest and radical activism, but also a time of deep factionalism within the left. Frustrated by the lack of progress in ending the war and bringing justice to African Americans, some factions began to advocate the use of violent means. Dellinger and others of the older generation agreed with the need for stronger and more effective forms of resistance to militarism and racism, but remained resolute in emphasizing the commitment to nonviolence. They had studied Gandhi's methods and philosophy and argued that nonviolent means, if applied properly, were more effective than armed struggle and were more likely to bring about a just and democratic society. Dellinger synthesized these ideas in an approach he called "revolutionary nonviolence," which was the title of a book of essays he published at the time.

Muste endorsed Dellinger's ideas. An ordained minister of the Dutch Reform Church in America and a pacifist during World War I, Muste remained an active opponent of war right up until his death in 1967. In the 1920s he was supporter of labor rights and in the 1930s aligned himself with the Trotskyists. He quickly became disillusioned with Marxism-Leninism, however, and in 1936 returned to his religious roots and pacifist convictions. Muste's renewed

commitment to nonviolence was made easier by the example of Gandhi and his demonstrated effectiveness in achieving political change. "The main thing Gandhi did for me," he wrote, was to provide "inspiration through his successful application of nonviolent action in a large-scale political situation."

Muste corresponded with Gandhi but never met him. He carefully studied his method, however, and was especially influenced by Krishnalal Shridharani's important book, *War Without Violence*, which was published in 1939.¹⁰ Shridharani's work became essential reading for pacifists and radical activists at the time and also influenced the first wave of civil rights activism in the years after World War II. Muste recognized that Gandhian nonviolence was not only morally superior to Marxism-Leninism but also politically more effective. "Watching Gandhi achieve political ends in a way with which I could agree was enormously encouraging," he wrote. "It became clear that it was Gandhi who confronted Lenin in our era." Gandhianism provided a constructive alternative for those on the left who sympathized with revolution but rejected the use of violence.

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One of the critical lessons Gandhi taught is the need for persistence. We should not brood over results or expect that our actions will always succeed, he said. We are committed to the search for truth and justice because it is the right thing to do. It is our moral duty. The struggle continues regardless of whether it is immediately successful or not. Major social change movements may require decades of sustained struggle to achieve their objectives. Gandhi's historic Salt Satyagraha of 1930-31 mobilized civil disobedience on an unprecedented scale, but in the immediate aftermath the British Raj remained obdurate and unwilling to yield on constitutional issues. Yet the seeds of liberation were being sown in this campaign and others that preceded it, and in 1947 finally bore fruit.

Consider the movement for women's suffrage in the United States, which began in the 1840s but did not realize its objective until 1920. The movement against racial segregation in the United States started long before the Montgomery bus boycott of 1954-55 and continued for more than a decade afterwards, culminating in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and sweeping civil rights reforms.

Social progress may not be evident to those who are in the midst of the struggle. The movement against the Vietnam War continued for nearly ten

years and seemed at times to be making no progress. Yet our antiwar efforts, however frustratingly difficult and prolonged, ultimately had a significant impact. As Melvin Small, Tom Wells, Jeffrey Kimball and other historians have documented, the continuous massive public opposition to the war weighed heavily on decision makers in the White House. At several critical points during the war, such as the Moratorium campaign, public pressures halted U.S. military escalation. The cumulative effect of social protest was to force the government to withdraw troops and end the bombing. A few years after the war Dellinger published the important book, *More than we know: the people's movement toward democracy*. Nonviolent mobilization can be effective in constraining injustice and war and is an essential means of achieving social progress.

Those ideas and the experience of being part of an historic mass peace movement deepened my interest in nonviolence generally and in Gandhi particularly. Gandhi was no longer merely a fascinating and important figure in history, someone distant in time and culture, an ascetic man in loincloth who managed to bring freedom to India but otherwise was not relevant to my life. Now I could see him as someone of direct significance to my experience, a creative thinker and doer who developed ideas and methods of social action that were crucial to the challenges we were facing in modern America and that offered powerful and effective ways of resisting war and racial injustice.

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Deconstructing Gandhi

Gandhi was called Mahatma and considered a saint by many, but he himself rejected that label. I am only an ordinary person, he insisted, imperfect and flawed like everyone else. Yet he consciously cultivated the aura and manner of a religious ascetic and guru. Many of the early works published about him had an almost reverential tone, more hagiography than social analysis. Over the years more balanced and critical studies have appeared, and we have become more aware of Gandhi's weaknesses as well as his strengths. We are able to honestly examine his negative side without rejecting his many positive contributions.

Gandhi's flaws and peculiarities make it hard to grasp his larger meaning and message. My attempts to study his life were often impeded by the man himself. When I tried to comprehend Gandhi, I found myself turned off by the eccentricities of his personality and some of his bizarre beliefs. I was

particularly repulsed by his extreme views on sexuality and women. When I attempted to read his autobiography, *My Experiments in Truth*, I was perplexed by his obsession with sexual “temptation.” I wanted to know more about Gandhi’s theories of nonviolence and social change, but I couldn’t get past his offensive views on women.

I found a way around these obstacles when I read Erik Erikson’s *Gandhi’s Truth*. Erickson challenges Gandhi beliefs and practices on celibacy and women. He allows us to separate Gandhi’s views on sexuality and other questionable beliefs from his larger and more valuable writings on nonviolence. The Gandhian method, Erickson writes, “must not remain restricted to ascetic men and women who believe that they can overcome violence only by sexual self-disarmament.” Erickson shows that accepting Gandhi’s truth has nothing to do with sexual abstinence or misguided views about women. We can reject these narrow beliefs, while focusing on his broader message of human dignity. This made Gandhi more accessible and allowed me to dig more deeply into his important thinking on nonviolent strategy.

Female colleagues and students in my classes agree on the value of Gandhi’s principles of nonviolent action, but they won’t let Gandhi off the hook so easily. They challenge and interrogate the misogynist assumptions at the root of his social philosophy and demand a feminist re-evaluation of nonviolent theory and practice. I share these criticisms and concerns and have attempted to craft a more inclusive post-Gandhian perspective on nonviolence that incorporates feminism.

For a more detailed discussion of these issues see my Book, *Gandhi and Beyond: Nonviolence for A New Political Age*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm Publishers, 2009).

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For many today who look up to Gandhi as a source of inspiration and hope, his attitudes and behavior toward women are shocking and deeply disturbing. Some may be tempted to dismiss him entirely as a result. Critiquing Gandhi’s views on these issues is legitimate and necessary, but this should not blind us to his larger contributions to the cause of human freedom and nonviolent social change. Gandhi linked personal asceticism and social activism, but we are free to separate the two, to reject a narrow version of the

former and embrace a more inclusive vision of the latter. Over the decades many have sought to enrich Gandhianism by incorporating the insights of feminism and emphasizing the necessity of women and men working together to achieve a more just society.

Feminist writers and activists have long recognized that the subordination of women is a form of violence ultimately based on the threat of force. Rape and the physical abuse of women are expressions of this connection. The use of violence and physical force as a means of social control assures the domination of men over women. The British pacifist writer Vera Brittain said "militarism and the oppression of women are both based on force." The women's movement expresses the opposite belief, that reason is "superior to force as a factor in human affairs" and that the commitment to nonviolent solutions is linked to the empowerment of women. Feminism is a negation of the male-dominated hierarchies that are at the root of violence and oppression. It is a struggle against institutional structures, backed up by the threat of force, that confine women to male-prescribed roles in society and at home. Feminism broadly defined in this way is fully compatible with and a necessary component of nonviolent action. It is a dimension of revolutionary nonviolence.

As I have struggled to understand and accept these principles and overcome my own male prejudices I have found Gandhi's views on women more a hindrance than a help. He was unable to overcome the limitations of the rigid patriarchal culture in which he lived, and was haunted by personal vulnerabilities and weaknesses that drove him to sexual denial and insensitivity toward women. Despite his many historic contributions to human freedom, Gandhi could not fully understand or accept the right of a woman to be fully equal and autonomous, to control her own body and decide for herself the most important questions of life and society. He did not understand the importance of women's equality in creating a more just, compassionate and nonviolent society. We can transcend these limitations and enrich Gandhianism by incorporating the insights of feminism and forging a more inclusive and holistic form of nonviolence in which women and men work together as equals to create a more just future.

The journey that began decades ago has taken me to unexpected places, but my interest in and commitment to peace has been constant. The image of Gandhi remains, his gift of nonviolence undiminished, his influence on my life large and profound. Gandhi taught us new and more effective ways of fighting for justice and truth. He invited us to march with him toward a more

nonviolent future, and I have tried throughout my life to follow in his footsteps.