

## Soul Force and Real Life: Gandhi's Challenge

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### Sermon Part I: Words about the Mahatma

Mohandas K. Gandhi is one of the most popular spiritual figures in this country, but he's from India and he's been gone since 1948. He's an enduring source of political inspiration. A friend sent me a picture from her travels in Switzerland. In a lovely park at the United Nations Palace in Geneva, there's a bronze statue of Gandhi seated cross-legged in a simple robe and reading a book. Under him it reads: "My life is my message." Truly, he belongs to the world.

He was born in 1869, in a family of a privileged Hindu caste. His father was a government official in the northwestern state of Gujarat. From his mother, he was shaped by the nonviolent principles and vegetarianism of the Jain religion. He and his wife were 13 when their arranged marriage began. After they had four sons, Gandhi took up abstinence from sex as well as from alcohol and meat. At age 18 he went to London, where he became a lawyer. While there he studied religions too: Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and others. He later said: "I see the same God in the *Bhagavad Gita* [of Hinduism] as I see in the Bible and the Koran." (M. K. Gandhi 1951, 27)

He viewed all human beings a family, and every one of us as a reflection of the divine image.

God is like the ocean, Gandhi said. Every one of us is "like a little drop of water belonging to the ocean." When one drop forfeits or forgets its unity with the others, this one drop is helpless. It

"cannot feel the majesty and might of the ocean. But if someone could point out that it is the ocean, its faith would revive and it would dance with joy, and the whole of the might and majesty of the ocean would be reflected in it." (M. Gandhi 2009, 14)

As a new lawyer, he moved from London to South Africa for a one-year job. He stayed for 21 years. The white rulers there made Indians and blacks carry racial identity papers at all times, restricting their movements. Gandhi founded an Indian political movement there, and began experimenting with resistance by civic non-participation.

One of his major sources of guidance was the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy, a Christian who wanted to take the teachings of Jesus to their literal conclusion. In a letter to the young man Gandhi, Tolstoy advocated nonviolent resistance, calling it the truly unconditional practice of love. The two corresponded until Tolstoy's death in 1910.

Fired up from his experience in South Africa, and by Tolstoy's inspiration, Gandhi went back to India in 1916, where the freedom struggle was gaining steam. By 1921 he was leading the Indian National Congress, and advocating for complete separation of India from Great Britain. The British had counted part or all of the Indian subcontinent as their imperial possession for three centuries. Gandhi led strikes and boycotts of British goods. After one strike, he was charged with sedition and given a sentence of six years in jail, but he spent only two of those years in jail.

He led a series of nonviolent protests and conducted fasts or hunger strikes to shame the colonizers. In 1930, the British introduced a tax on salt. Gandhi led Indian marchers on a hard walk 250 miles to the sea so that they could collect their own salt. For protesting the conscription of Indian men into the British Army in the Second World War, he was jailed another time, along with his wife, Kasturba. During that imprisonment, his wife died.

Due to Gandhi's popularity with Indians of all castes and religions, he was able to negotiate with the British for women's rights, legal status for the "untouchable" caste, and a reduction in poverty. (Biographies: Mahatma Gandhi)

Eventually, amid Great Britain's exhaustion after the war, Gandhi's National Congress achieved total independence.

For his courage and compassion, people gave Mohandas Gandhi the title of Mahatma, which means Great Soul. However, for his vision of a country of social equality and religious pluralism, he was *hated* by Hindu nationalists. They made four attempts on his life before he was assassinated in 1948.

Ghandi promoted the concept of *soul force*. This means that the spiritual strength of love is greater than fear, greater than violence. In a spiritual sense, as he put it, this means, “Nobody can hurt me without my permission.” No oppressors can win in the end if you keep your sense of dignity.

If you do not give in to revenge but kept remembering the humanity of the wrongdoer, you show soul force. Always, the goal is to convert the oppressors, to have them see *your* humanity, to see you no longer as an object but as a fellow human being. Soul force in Sanskrit is *Satyagraha*, literally, “insistence on the truth.”

Now Carl will offer a few words from Gandhi, and then Ross will offer music.

**1-Readings** from *The Wit and Wisdom of Gandhi* (ed. Homer Jack, Beacon, 1951) by Carl Gardener

**2-Music** by [Ross Hammond](#); improvisation on 12-string guitar inspired by an Indian raga.

## **Sermon II: Words about India**

With its countless deities and many languages and regional cultures, the ancient civilization of India is one of the oldest on the globe. Yet the Republic of India is one of the youngest countries, only 68 years old as of yesterday. Independence came at the stroke of midnight August 15, 1947.

As that moment approached, the British hastily drew the lines of the subcontinent’s partition. This left a mostly Muslim Pakistan and an India with a Hindu majority, though it still has many Muslims, Sikhs, and other groups.

By separating them, the partition of the two countries caused “one of the most massive human migrations in human history.” It uprooted 15 million people and caused the death of another one million. (Dalrymple, 65)

The British tactic of dividing up colonized communities and pitting them against one another had brought power to empire; now it set the stage for bloodshed. Though the freedom struggle had used nonviolence to win independence, the partition unleashed vengeance. Villages were burned. People were lynched, tortured, raped, slaughtered.

Nisid Hajari writes: “Foot caravans of destitute refugees fleeing the violence stretched for 50 miles and more. As the peasants trudged along wearily, mounted guerillas burst out of the tall crops that lined the road and culled them like sheep.” (Dalrymple, 69) Refugee trains were ambushed multiple times on their way to the border. Torn by rage from their sense of human unity, people attacked those with whom they had struggled in solidarity for independence.

Hajari’s recent book (*Midnight’s Furies*) attributes the driving energy for partition less to the hostilities of ordinary people and more to infighting and rivalries among leaders of the struggle. One of Gandhi’s early allies and later opponents was Ali Jinnah, the head of India’s Muslim League. Though a Muslim, he was Westernized and secular in his outlook and moral habits. Jinnah mistrusted Gandhi in part because of Gandhi’s spiritual emphasis, and he addressed him as Mr. Gandhi, not by the spiritual title, Mahatma. Jinnah is quoted as having said that “it was a crime to mix up politics and religion the way [Gandhi] had done.” (Dalrymple, 67)

Ali Jinnah supported partition. Gandhi was against it, but his Congress party did not support him. Partition agreements included reparations to Pakistan for lost territories. When Indian leaders wouldn’t pay the reparations, Gandhi went on a hunger strike for weeks. To stop his fast and avoid a mass uprising, Indian authorities did pay the money. In 1971, more bloodshed caused the creation of Bangladesh out of the part of Pakistan to the northeast of India.

Ever since partition, India and Pakistan have eyed each other with fear and suspicion. Nisid Hajari says the relationship now “is getting more ... dangerous: the two countries’ nuclear arsenals are growing, militant groups are becoming more capable, and rabid media outlets on both sides are shrinking the scope for moderate voices.” By several measures, India is seven times as big as Pakistan. Pakistan’s leaders have relied on terrorist

proxies to push against India, and now the military has little control over the Taliban and similar groups. Meanwhile, India's new governing party "rejects dialogue" with Pakistan. (Dalrymple, 70)

My first encounter with India's government took place late in 2003, in a crowded windowless office where I sat in a row of hard plastic chairs under fluorescent lights. I was in the Indian consulate in San Francisco, California. I had just filled out a visa so I could visit India for five weeks during a sabbatical from the church I was then serving.

In that closed-up room, it seemed like a long wait. Finally, the window at the counter flew open, and a clerk barked my name. When I approached the metal bars of the window, I got a harsh response. On the form, I had listed my occupation as clergy. Now I had to fill out an additional form.

On this one I had to promise that I would not be evangelizing, organizing, or preaching while in India. Nor would I take any religious materials to distribute.

This gave me pause. I was planning to visit the remote Unitarian churches of the Khasi tribes in a northeastern state of India. "What if they want a sermon while I'm there?" I asked myself. "I guess I better not bring that up now." I just wrote the answer they wanted.

A few days later in San Francisco I chatted with a teacher of Buddhism and a peace activist. He explained that the ruling party, the BJP, was right wing, with a Hindu nationalist agenda. Not only did the BJP stir up antagonisms with Indian Muslims, he said, the party leaders feared evangelical Christians.

Of course they were a bit late for this fear, given that Catholic, Anglican and other Christian churches have been part of India's religious diversity for centuries. Indeed, tradition has it that the Apostle Thomas traveled all the way to the south of India back in the year 52! In Kerala, a lush green state on the southwestern coast, many call themselves St. Thomas Christians, and Thomas is the most common name for males.

For a few days I stayed at the home of one such Christian man and his wife, in a rural area. In 1990 he founded a non-governmental organization, what we call a not-for-profit. He runs dozens of social service, education, and economic

development programs for destitute people in his area. He funded it by selling off most of his inherited land. On the remaining parcel he built a large concrete house with dormitories for guests like me, and lots of others.

For a few weeks every year he and his wife host a large group of students from a women's college in Japan. He makes peace delegations to Japan, especially to promote the reduction of nuclear weapons around the world. At the house with me were two young Japanese young women, staying on for an extended immersion at the organization, teaching and helping out in its programs.

It was clear Thomas was well connected. Through his activism, he'd become a friend of the author Arundhati Roy, who's also an activist. She wrote *The God of Small Things*. I thought this was cool--until I understood this meant I was staying in the home of a troublemaker.

On my first night in his house, Thomas told me the government lied about its nuclear weapons testing. He had gone to weapons testing sites to take photographs to prove otherwise, and the authorities detained him. They broke his camera. "Next time, we'll break your arm,"

"If you don't stop this, we'll arrest you, Thomas, and put you away." *On what charges*, he inquired. They'd find something, they assured him. He guessed that they might plant fake evidence. I imagined government agents bursting through the doors of the house during what I had expected to be my quiet rural visit. Nothing like that happened, however. Thomas was darker, pudgier and younger looking than Gandhi seems in those classic black and white photos of him. But like the Mahatma, my host was cheerful as he told of his encounters with the machinery of power.

During the day, he took me out on his motorbike. I saw a sewing class, child care and literacy programs. I saw a project installing latrines in small villages. In the countryside he showed me quaint Christian churches, where Christian craftsmen had carved images of elephants and other Hindu deities in the decorative wooden doorways. After a big lunch, we napped inside (through the hottest part of the day). Then we went out to see volunteers serving up cooked food to a line of

people beside a pickup truck. It reminded me of pictures of relief programs during the Depression of the 1930s.

We saw an open-air hospital with frail patients lying on mats on concrete floors; it looked more like a parking garage of ailing humans. That night, Thomas and his wife invited me to join them and their young Japanese guests in prayer. Sitting in a circle on their cool polished concrete floor, we sang chants whose refrains were easy to repeat in the local language, but impossible to understand. The only words I could identify were “Abraham” and “Sarah,” the first family of the monotheistic religions.

Intimate visits like this one taught me that India’s population is more pluralistic than I had imagined. It’s blessed with so many creative and committed citizens. AND the country has a greater variety of opinions than the BJP Hindu nationalist ruling party wants people to know about.

Later in 2004, the BJP was voted out of power. Now it’s back in power, elected a little over a year ago. India’s new prime minister is a controversial figure. Back in 2002, when he, Narendra Modi, was leader of the state of Gujarat, he *stood by* during mass riots, while hundreds of people were slaughtered.

While many *Hindus* also died, many more Muslims were killed and injured. Modi was suspected of orchestrating much of that sectarian violence, or at least condoning it. It’s an irony that he comes from Gandhi’s home state of Gujarat. When Modi was the leader of Gujarat, the U.S government barred his entry here. Now he’s the prime minister, and we have to deal with him.

Human rights reports out of India show his government is not willing to tolerate criticism of its agenda.

The Human Rights watch website says: “The government has conducted harassment and arbitrary arrests of activists, particularly those organizing protests against development projects.... Caste and religion-based discrimination is rampant....” Censorship is on the rise.

“The government has failed to take strong action against ultranationalist or extremist groups that threaten violence,” nor against abusive security forces. (Human Rights Watch)

The government considers environmental activists to be threats to “national economic security.” (Mashru) In April the government froze the bank accounts of Greenpeace in India, saying it’s a front for foreign intervention. Yet Greenpeace asserts that 70 percent of its funding comes from Indians, not to mention it has Indian staffers and volunteers. (Lakshmi)

According to *Foreign Policy* magazine, the government *does* court foreign investment in defense, roads and other industries, yet it fights foreign donations to groups engaged in human rights and environmental advocacy. (Mashru 2014)

In April the government canceled the charity registration of 9,000 non-governmental organizations that receive money from overseas donors. (New York Times)

What an irony. Mohandas Gandhi led a non-violent mass movement of ordinary people to resist an unaccountable foreign government. Now, their own government is repressing rights and harassing civic organizations.

Today’s Indian activists carry on the struggle for justice. To be sure, there are still more civic freedoms and religious tolerance in India than in Pakistan or Bangladesh.

Also, as the world’s largest democracy, there is a potential in India to change the course of government policies. Brave and persistent Indians are committed to such change.

Gandhi no doubt would be appalled to see citizen action suppressed. He’d be heartbroken to see politicians allow sectarian violence, even support it.

I’m not an expert about India. Yet I love the people I met there. I admire those who engage in the work of justice and service, healing and hope over there.

I’m sure they would appreciate our continued awareness of their struggles, and our help and care for them. I think it would hearten them to know that we are holding them in our hearts, holding them in prayer, holding them in hope.

Before independence came to the people on midnight August 15, 1947, the British had ruled them for three centuries. Gandhi had led the freedom struggle for nearly three decades. By strategy, persistence, and the *soul force* of his

deepest commitments, Gandhi he led them to a new place.

He did not give up on the hope of human unity. Let us not, either. He did not give up on the power of ordinary people to improve their world. Let us keep our faith the same power, which lives in every human soul.

Let us work, strive, give, and pray for the power of love and courage to blossom ever more from every human soul. Amen.

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