

The Force of Truth

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
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Readings

from the Gospel of Matthew:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’
But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well.
If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.
Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’
But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

from chapter two of the *Bhagavad Gita* (Eknath Easwaran translation)

They live in wisdom
who see themselves in all and all in them,
whose love for the Lord of Love has consumed
every selfish desire and sense craving
tormenting the heart...

They are forever free who have broken out
of the ego-cage of *I* and *mine*
to be united with the Lord of Love.
This is the supreme state. Attain to this
and pass from death to immortality.

Sermon

This Wednesday, October 2, is the 150th anniversary of the birth of Mohandas Gandhi, who because of his accomplishments and example came to be known to the world as Mahatma Gandhi – the honorific “mahatma” meaning “great soul.” Even if it were not his birthday, this would be a good time to reflect on the life of a man of peace, truth, and love.

Gandhi didn’t much like the title “mahatma” because he thought of himself as just a man, a man who did things that, he affirmed, anyone could do if they put their minds and hearts to it. In this spirit, his autobiography, published in 1927, he subtitled *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. The names and dates and events of his life are all there, but Gandhi’s purpose in writing the book was not primarily to give an accurate accounting of names and dates, but to transparently describe his life’s journey and life’s work as “experiments” designed for what we might call self-improvement, but what he understood as transformation of self from ego-based living to living as a channel of Truth, of God – because for Gandhi, Truth was his name for God. And he did believe that anyone could do what he had done.

I first read Gandhi’s *Autobiography* for a college class.

It had a profound effect on me.

Most immediately, reading of what Gandhi called his “dietetic experiments” as he strived to simplify his life (during his time in England as a young man studying the law), convinced me to become a vegetarian. I don’t think I’d given vegetarianism a thought before then, but following Gandhi’s example of giving up the meat-eating he had for a time believed necessary to good health, I’ve been a vegetarian ever since. Oh, I backslid to eat fish for a few years, but mostly I’ve kept to a vegetarian diet for almost fifty years.

Yes, for my health, yes for the health of the planet (I found Francis Moore Lappe’s book *Diet for a Small Planet* at about the same time), but also to a significant extent in the spirit of Gandhi because it felt more in harmony with the moral truth of who we are.

For as time went on Gandhi’s reasoning for being vegetarian became fully integrated with his religious, moral, and spiritual views relating to non-violence – *ahimsa* is the Sanskrit word – for he came to fervently believe that adhering to Truth included living as best he could in the spirit of *ahimsa*.

Of course there was far more to the example of Gandhi’s life for me than his vegetarian diet. I was reading Gandhi at the height of the Vietnam War, and Gandhi inspired me to mail my draft card back to the draft board – admittedly a feeble gesture, since my high number in the draft lottery had already excused me from the draft – but it was something. More generally Gandhi’s example of living a life of *ahimsa* encouraged me to strive to live with as little violence of word or deed as I imperfectly am able.

Time to say a little more about truth as Gandhi understood it. This will help explain not only the title of his autobiography, but will explain a great deal about his life, and might also help us to see the ways in which his life continues to be relevant to us in a very different time and different circumstances – to any time after all.

The Sanskrit word translated as “truth” is *satya*, and *satya* is derived from the Sanskrit *sat*, which means “being” or “that which is.” This means that Gandhi’s experimenting with truth was a much more fundamental enterprise than might at first glance appear. His experiments were, as we might put it, an effort to align his individual life with the truth of the way things are – physically, intellectually, and above all morally. All this in the midst of his personal life, his family, his community, and of course in the midst of what we would call social action and the field of political conflict.

For Gandhi’s nonviolent method, which we may understandably think has almost entirely to do with social and political conflict, he applied to every dimension of his life. And he created a new word to describe his method: *satyagraha*, which is often translated “truth force” – holding to the truth.

Further, Gandhi affirmed that to properly use this method one must, as Eknath Easwaran put it in his book about Gandhi, practice “ ‘self-satyagraha’ that the individual imposes upon himself or herself to neutralize self-interest.” This, in turn, leads to treating one’s opponents, political or otherwise (“enemies” as we too often think of them) with respect or at least with understanding, as together in the method of *satyagraha* opponents reach some higher or wider truth than either had held at the outset.

But Gandhi’s overarching goal in life was not to solve conflicts, was not even the liberation of India from the British, and certainly was not to become “mahatma” or to win prizes and plaudits or even to create world peace and harmony. His life’s goal was spiritual liberation. He put it quite clearly in the opening pages of his autobiography:

What I want to achieve – what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years – is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain *Moksha*.
(*Sanskrit for liberation, spiritual union*)

And he had discovered that his path to his goal of *Moksha* was not sitting in meditation in a cave for twenty years, but was through selfless service to others, service to his nation, service to the world. To use the term from Hinduism, he followed the path of *karma yoga*, the path of action – selfless action – in the world.

Now, though he experimented along this path – experiments with diet, with personal simplicity, with family relationships, with social movements – he had guides. He was inspired by the Sermon on the Mount, by Tolstoy’s writings on peace and nonviolence, by Thoreau’s essay on civil disobedience, and above all by the Hindu *Bhagavad Gita*. And though the story of the *Gita* takes place on a battlefield, Gandhi understood this to be a metaphor for the battlefield of life, the field on which we struggle to purify ourselves of egoistic motives and to live accordingly.

For though books and teachings may give us maps of the territory, we have to walk the path, fight the battles, ourselves. Of course. Hence the experiments.

And not easy. Maybe requiring more than a lifetime for most of us. But how else would we want to live, other than according to truth, according to how things are, how the world and life actually work at the most profound levels.

I saw a few Old Ship folks in the full to overflowing Glastonbury Abbey conference center the other night to hear Arun Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi's grandson, now himself in his mid-eighties – and a beautiful man. Arun Gandhi's life has been inspired by and guided by his grandfather's life more profoundly than most.

When Arun was a boy, his parents lived in South Africa, where they were continuing to pursue Gandhi's social justice work there. Arun told us that he was a sometimes difficult child. So when he was ten years old his parents sent him back to India to live for awhile with his grandfather, Mahatma Gandhi.

Well, this was in the 1940s, an extraordinarily busy time for Gandhi as we might well imagine. But he took with utmost seriousness the moral education of his grandson Arun.

One of Arun's stories of how his grandfather offered life lessons went something like this.

Returning from school one day, Arun was frustrated that his pencil had worn down to a short stub. He wanted a new pencil, and he thought that if he came to his grandfather saying he had no pencil, grandfather would get him a new one. So as he walked home he threw the stub down. Upon arrival, he announced to grandfather that he no longer had a pencil and needed a new one. Grandfather Gandhi saw through the ruse, asked Arun what had happened to the small stub of a pencil, and then sent him out into the now dark night to retrieve the pencil. But it's dark, Arun complained. Grandfather handed him a flashlight. After two hours Arun found the pencil stub.

The lesson, his grandfather told him, was in two parts.

First, if we throw away something that is still of use, additional resources need to be expended for a new item. This, grandfather said, is violence against nature.

Second, overconsumption indirectly deprives others of things they need for survival. This is violence against humanity.

Well, implicit in this and other lessons, as Arun Gandhi also told us the other night, is that much of the violence in our world is what he called passive violence. Yes, there is a great deal of physical violence, yes there is the violence of warfare. Yet equally destructive can be the violence of our words, of our dismissiveness of others, the violence of overconsumption, the violence towards nature, and so on. All of which is contrary to the moral truths of kindness and understanding, of harmony and of love – of *ahimsa* in every dimension of our lives.

Well, preaching about the force of truth in late September of 2019, one has near at hand awareness of the beating that truth has been taking these days.

We have a leader who is more about self-interest rather than truth.

We have battle-lines drawn more sharply than ever, left and right, Democrat and Republican, liberal and conservative, and on and on, many seeking political gain rather than truth.

Respect for political opponents in short supply.

Social media which all too often encourages divisiveness and dismissiveness of those with whom we disagree.

And on it goes.

Can we reclaim the rightful place for truth in our shared lives?

Well, Gandhi's message was to begin with ourselves – that's what he did. Arun Gandhi re-affirmed this the other night. Not that we must wait until we are perfectly pure of heart, no more ego, precisely aligned with truth before engaging in the world of our relationships, social change, politics. Not at all. But *as* we engage in the world as it is, paraphrasing Gandhi, striving to be the change we wish to see, striving to be truth-tellers, striving to overcome self-interest, striving to live with the interests of others, of the whole of life, as our highest interest.

In the final pages of Gandhi's story of his experiments with truth he wrote:

...this much I can say with assurance, as a result of all my experiments, that a perfect vision of Truth can only follow a complete realization of Ahimsa.

To see the universal and all-pervading Spirit of Truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest of creatures as oneself. And a man who aspires after that cannot afford to keep out of any field of life. That is why my devotion to Truth has drawn me into the field of politics; and I can say without the slightest hesitation, and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do know know what religion means.

Gandhi went on in this passage to affirm that what he called self-purification is necessary in order to follow *ahimsa*, non-violence in word and deed, in order to follow truth. And he wrote that individual purification or what we might call transformation effects all one's surroundings, from, as we might put it, the personal to the political.

So, can we reclaim the rightful place for truth and the force of truth in our lives and in our nation?

Can we live each day more deeply aligned with the force of moral truths of simplicity, understanding, and love?

Can we reclaim some measure of if not respect then understanding for our political or personal adversaries?

Maybe even along the way learning to love our enemies, or at least considering what that might mean?

None of which means we don't confront our adversaries, confront those who perpetrate lies and violence. Not at all. But in what spirit?

Remembering that the goal is not winning some battle over others, but with the weapons of truth and non-violence, *satya* and *ahimsa*, to create more peace – within ourselves, among our close companions, and in the life we all share.

The cliché is true: it begins with each of us.

So may it be.