

Be The Change You Wish To See

An Interview with Arun Gandhi

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Graceland is where the cabby expected to be taking me and my dear friend Linda Lantieri from the airport in Memphis, Tennessee, and in a way he was right. It was January, 1999, and we were on our way to interview Arun Gandhi for my forthcoming book, *MOURNING HAS BROKEN: Learning from the Wisdom of Adversity*. This is a book about personal transformation set in the context of the external tide of social change, exploring whether those who experience the greatest hardships in life have the greatest opportunity to stand strong in the face of further challenge. Realizing that the way people relate to transitions and difficulties in life clearly shows their whole mental, emotional and spiritual modus operandi, I carefully chose my interviewees so that from the collective wisdom arising from their stories I could glean a composite role model which would reflect the new emerging paradigm of human consciousness. Arun Gandhi's modus operandi exemplifies this consciousness and is an example of a non-violent paradigm of thought in which punishment and zero tolerance has no place. I will expand more on the new paradigm as I see it in relation to safe schools, but for now we'll stay in Memphis.

The Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence was our destination where we were graciously received by Arun and his wife, Sunanda, who work together with total dedication helping youth to avoid conflict. Around the walls hung a series of enormous photographs of Mohandas K. Gandhi, Arun's grandfather, on loan from an exhibition. They depicted scenes from his life, into which we felt as if we had walked. There was a still, peaceful presence in the room which remained as Arun began, in his soft lilting voice, to tell his story. At one point he admitted to feeling that his parents and grandparents were guiding him and we felt profoundly connected to history and the wisdom of his ancestors.

Arun Gandhi

I was born in 1934, in Durban, South Africa. My father, Manilal, was the second son of Mohandas K. Gandhi's four children. My mother, Sushila, and father adopted voluntary poverty and devoted their lives to nonviolent and political change in South Africa - a movement started by my grandfather in 1893.

During the most tumultuous period in India's struggle to free herself from British rule I was taken by my parents to live with Grandfather for 18 months for him to tutor me. I had a lot of anger about prejudice because I was living daily with the prejudice of apartheid, but his love was overpowering and he lived out in front of me the values he wanted me to learn. "Be the change you wish to see," he used to say.

When we left to come back to South Africa it was heartbreaking because we knew he was old and maybe he wouldn't be there when we came back. India was torn with violence, and Grandfather was in the thick of the fighting. He made it his mission to bring about peace there. We had been back for two months before that dreadful day came that will be etched in my mind forever. We lived in the Phoenix Center for Nonviolent Living, which was the ashram that Grandfather had started in 1903. I was fourteen and my little sister, Ela, was eight. We were on our two mile trek back from school through dusty, muddy roads across sugar cane plantations having an argument about whether I should carry her, when I saw in the distance an old gentleman from the Phoenix Ashram who never went out. So, when I saw

him walking hurriedly towards us I was surprised and intrigued. He had a very agitated look on his face and he told me, "Run home immediately, your mother wants you. I'll bring your sister." I realized there was something very urgent so I ran home...fast.

I saw my mom on the phone, tears streaming down her face. She was sobbing and trying to explain something. I just stood there silently, not knowing what all the commotion was about until she put the phone down and told me, between sobs, that Grandfather had been shot dead. He had been shot at point blank range and fell to the ground with his hands together in prayer saying, "Ram, Ram," - the Hindu name for God.

I was absolutely stunned. In that moment I could see the 18 months I had spent with him flash across the screen of my mind - all the lovely moments, the love he showered on me, the lessons he taught me. I couldn't understand how anybody could want to kill somebody who had so much love for human beings. My immediate reaction was one of tremendous anger and I wanted to throttle the person who committed this heinous crime. I remember saying: "I wish I was there, I would strangulate that person." That's when both my parents reminded me of the lesson that I was taught by Grandfather about using anger positively. They told me that Grandfather would have wanted me to forgive his assassin, that he wouldn't have wanted me to abuse my anger and take it out on him. I said, "Yes, I must find a more positive way of dealing with my anger rather than destroying the person, but I don't know how to forgive him."

My father and his brothers in India were able to forgive him and wrote a letter to the Government requesting them not to punish the assassin but to forgive him because that is what Grandfather would have wanted. The Government refused to do that. They said that the Law of the Land has to be observed, so the assassin was tried and hanged, but my family had forgiven him, and it was said that Grandfather had looked at him with love and forgiveness in his eyes as he fell to the ground. Much later, I went with Sunanda, my wife, to visit Gopal Godse, brother of the assassin, who served a life sentence as an accomplice. Although I found him ignorant and unrepentant, and ruined my life, but instead we left him to deal with his life and his conscience.

"I saw the wisdom in forgiving. I could have carried hate in my heart forever."

At the time, I think what really helped all of us get over the tragedy was becoming immersed in creating a special memorial edition of the *Indian Opinion* to commemorate Grandfather's life. That really diverted our attention from the tragedy and we were able to do something constructive.

In South Africa we were made aware that we were second class citizens of the wrong color from an early age. I remember simple things like going out shopping with the family and there being no public toilets for us. The best part of the beach was always reserved for the whites and the amusement parks were always in white areas so we couldn't go there. I was beaten by white South Africans for being too black and by black South Africans for being too white, and it affected me very deeply. I felt terribly inferior and my self-esteem was very low. Of course I was lucky my father was against all of this and so he continuously campaigned against it and spent 14 years of his life imprisoned. The majority of the non-white community in were content to accept the prejudices and just tried to keep away from it but Father used to tell us often to stand up to injustice and never accept it. This is what he was doing but often he was the only person defying the injustice and being taken away by the police and I could see most people, even the non-whites, were trying to ridicule the whole idea. "What do you gain out of it? Just wasting your time. Follow the mainstream," they seemed to be saying. These two extremes tore me up during my teens but later, in my early twenties, after reading a lot of Grandfather's writings, I realized my father had done a tremendous thing. Even without

support, he had refused to bow down to injustice. I realized the power and potential of nonviolence and it began to strengthen me.

I think we need to get back to morals and ethics in life. We have become so involved in our pursuits of materialism and greed that we are willing to sacrifice just about anything for monetary gain. We've got to reverse this trend and put back morals and ethics as things that we value highly. We should never accept injustice just because we are gaining from it. Grandfather and my father stood apart from the rest because they took a stand for justice. Grandfather said, "Materialism and morality have an inverse relationship. When one increases the other decreases." So there is this race of gaining as much materially as possible. Those that have it want to protect it for themselves. Those who don't have it want to steal it from those who have. There's this conflict which takes a violent approach, so we are going to see more violence occur unless the rich decide they want to share their wealth, including their technology, with the rest of the world and help them attain a better standard of life.

"We should never accept injustice just because we are gaining from it."

I went back to South Africa when my mother was dying, and not only did I lose my mother on that visit, but I saw the total destruction of the Phoenix Ashram, the place where I was born. I had a tremendous attachment to that place and it was in ruins; the buildings raised to the ground by arsonists, instigated by the apartheid government. That was a major shock and another source of anger but I was mature enough now to understand what Grandfather meant by using anger positively. One could so easily scream and shout and be violent towards people who have perpetrated that kind of crime, but the positive use of the anger is to turn things around and see that you can make some change.

We used the energy of the anger to start the Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence as a replacement to the work that Grandfather started. We came to the USA in 1987, primarily to do a study of race prejudice in this country and compare it with the caste prejudice in India and the color prejudice in South Africa, and were hoping that we would be able to go back to South Africa to start the Institute, but we found the Government and the people uninterested so we said, "Why not here?" We started by using nonviolence as a conflict resolution program and developed some programs helping children to creatively resolve conflicts. One day I felt, coming from within the spirit, this is not enough. We have to discover where conflicts start, get to the root of them, and show how to *avoid* conflict. The more I thought about it the more I realized that many of our conflicts come from two main sources:

1. Our inability to deal with anger positively
2. Our inability to build meaningful relationships

Relationships are so fragile because they are built on selfishness where I want something from this relationship and if I don't get it then I don't want the relationship. Or we base it on tolerance.

I found from Grandfather's writings and my father's experiences that ideal relationships must be built on the four principles of respect, understanding, acceptance and appreciation. We have to respect ourselves, each other and our connection with all of creation. We have to purge our minds of the thought that we are independent individuals and can do whatever we like. We are all interdependent and interlinked one way or the other, so whatever happens to one person eventually happens to the others also. If we respect that, we reach an understanding of who we are and what our role is in life. We are here to do something good for humanity. When we reach an acceptance of the differences that exist between people, then we begin to see them as human beings and not by their genders, or skin color, race or religion. We have created so many labels we cannot see through them to the soul of the human being. So it's a tough sell, but we have been able to explain this to thousands of young people. They

do get caught up in everyday life and so not much of it really sinks down, but I think the seeds will eventually germinate and make a difference.

“We have to purge our minds of the thought that we are independent individuals and can do whatever we like.”

We need to learn to be both verbally and physically nonviolent towards self and others, and one of the cardinal principles of the philosophy of nonviolence is developing compassion. We generally act out of pity, but think it's compassion. We are often willing to give to somebody who is distressed or hungry saying, “Here take some money and get yourself something to eat, but don't bother me. I don't have time to be involved with you.” That is acting out of pity. If you were acting out of compassion you would wonder why that person is suffering and you would share some of your time, talent and resources to help create an infrastructure to enable them to rebuild their self-respect and self-confidence and to stand on their own feet. Showering charity on people cripples them and makes them dependent on us, but by making them worthy citizens who can fend for themselves, we are lifting them up.

When we have a home, are well fed and cared for, we don't really understand the suffering of the hungry. We think we do, but we don't really know what hunger or homelessness is. So compassion requires a lot of humility, and that's what Grandfather was trying to do when he chose to go third class on the trains at great personal discomfort. He was coming down to the poorest of the poor and reaching out to them. That's one of the reasons why he touched the hearts of the poorest and most distressed people in the world.

In Reflection

As we think about creating safe schools, Gandhi's interview leaves us much to reflect on. What occurs to me is that we cannot hope to help students use anger positively, forgive others, drop prejudice, return to morals and ethics, build good relationships, or have humility and compassion until we, as their role models, are authentically committed (like these three generations of Gandhis) to becoming the change we wish to see - in all the small details of our lives. We know that to be true and yet that means making time in our busy days to focus on exploring the territory of our inner lives, and questioning ourselves deeply as to what effect our behavior has on others. We can no longer avoid the truth that safe homes, safe schools and safe societies are the effect of the belief systems and behavior patterns of those in a position of influence. We are each an important presence in the society we are so tempted to blame for our problems, and we have exactly the same potential as Mohandas Gandhi who made a huge difference in the world by simply following his principles with integrity and dedication.

We are all born into a particular legacy of human consciousness, a common vision of reality held by the civilization of our time. Different aspects of this paradigm of consciousness permeate our countries, societies, schools, and families in varying intensities, which we, from the moment of birth, absorb and repeat until such time as it becomes restricting and ineffective, the tension causing us to break through to a new framework of perception.

It is time for that breakthrough and the tide of consciousness *is* turning. As we begin en masse to digest the scientific information that on a quantum level our bodies and all external matter are indistinguishable, we are beginning to move in the direction of which Arun Gandhi speaks - towards recognition of our interdependence. The dominant paradigm into which we were born asserts that we are three dimensional beings, separate from all living things. Logic, reason, and control are highly valued, and moral judgment of others as “good” or “bad”, “right” or “wrong” is the accepted norm. It is a violent paradigm (sometimes very

subtle) which justifies revenge and hurting others as “righting the balance.” Anyone who commits a “wrong doing” is on the other side, and the enemy deserves punishment.

The new emerging paradigm naturally creates a nonviolent climate. It asserts that we are multi-dimensional beings who are all interconnected and therefore if we help someone else we help ourselves. This wider perspective sees life as one great tapestry, a unified system in which each thread has an affect on the whole picture and is as valuable whatever its color and texture. The heart, “in-tuition”, and the spirit are highly valued, along with the head, and there is a recognition that we are *all* capable of the highest and the lowest actions in life. Expressions of violence are seen as a calling to meet unmet needs that deserve a firm, compassionate and supportive response. Arun Gandhi’s family response to the assassin - forgiveness, is humbling and sets an example to us all when faced with incidents of violence in our own lives.

It is my belief that the truly effective and practical ways of facing the challenges in our schools are being, and will be, revealed to those have attained an inner climate of nonviolence such as the Gandhis, where compassion resides and blame is an unwelcome guest.

This edited interview is taken from Carmella B’Hahn’s book *MOURNING HAS BROKEN: Learning from the Wisdom of Adversity* (Crucible Publishers 2002) available from Carmella’s website below.

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