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Satyagraha: Gandhian Principles of Non-Violent Non-Cooperation

BY WILLIAM STUART NELSON

CHANGE in the social order today is proceeding often violently and is frequently being resisted just as violently. Our own country is caught in a strange conjunction of Christian and democratic principles, fanatical resistance even to the belated application of these principles, and grave uncertainty as to how best the victims, the victimizers, and the innocent can escape both moral embarrassment and physical pain.

Somehow, happily, men appear less reluctant than formerly to hear testimony to faith in non-violence, a testimony borne so urgently in the past by Jesus of Nazareth, Gautama Buddha, Leo Tolstoy, Mohandas K. Gandhi. Gandhi is nearest to us in time, the problems he faced were extraordinarily akin to ours, and his experiments with non-violence in the presence of these problems were so unique in method and so revolutionary in result that we are constrained to ask what guidance he has for us. Moreover, he fell under the influence of those who went before, and in him their spirit flowered.

I have chosen to discuss the principles of Gandhi's non-violent non-cooperation. Those who wish to understand the practice of non-violence must understand both the principles and the methods of the Gandhian way. There is, however, a limit to what may be included in one paper.

TRUTH

Gandhi was a practical man, but a man whose practice was rooted in verities from which he was unshakable. Thus when he sought a name for his struggle he chose *Satyagraha*, which means literally firmness in truth, but translated from the vernacular into English means Truth-Force and is called also Soul-Force. All of these terms are completely applicable to Gandhi's movement, for the movement was equally the product of his firmness in truth and a demonstration of the power of truth and of the spirit.

What, in Gandhi's view, was truth? In the answer to this question lies the first step to an understanding of Gandhi and *Satyagraha*, for *Satyagraha* is a method of pursuing truth.

"What then is Truth?" asks Gandhi, and he answers: "A difficult

question, but I have solved it for myself by saying that *it is what the Voice within tells you.*" Still again he says, "What a pure heart feels at a particular time is Truth." We would say obedience to one's conscience.

In Tallahassee, Florida, a few months ago I explained this Gandhian version of truth to some of the members of the Inter-Civic Council of that city and one member of the Council raised the very natural question as to whether this did not make truth a variable, dependent upon an individual's interpretation, and thus not an absolute, fixed eternally in the heavens. Gandhi anticipated this question and answered it in this wise: "Well, seeing that the human mind works through innumerable media and that the evolution of the human mind is not the same for all, it follows that what may be truth for one may be untruth for another, and hence those who have made experiments have come to the conclusion that there are certain conditions to be observed in making those experiments. . . . Everyone should, therefore, realize his limitations before he speaks of his inner Voice." For Gandhi, the experiment leading to the right to speak of one's following truth must include the vow of truth, of purity, of non-violence, of poverty, and of non-possession.

What I wish here to emphasize is that Gandhi's entire theory of non-violent non-cooperation had at its center the principle of truth or obedience to one's conscience, a consuming conviction burnished by the fire of a pure life. The true *Satyagrahi* (that is, one who follows truth, *Satyagraha*, or the non-violent way) cannot be the tool of self-interest or the victim of prejudice or a moment's emotion. He must be deeply convicted after long and humble self-searching. "One discovers Truth," said Gandhi, "by patient endeavor and silent prayer. I can only assure friends that I spare no pains to grope my way to the right, and that humble but constant endeavour and silent prayer are my two trusty companions along the weary but beautiful path that all seekers must tread."

If there is any doubt as to the hold of truth upon Gandhi, one need only recall that he identified God with truth. "I have come to the conclusion," he said, "that for myself God is Truth." Then, he added that he had gone a step further and was prepared to say that truth is God.

Having heard this from him, that truth is one's own and deepest inner voice and that this is God, it is at first unsettling to hear him say also: "The very insistence on Truth has taught me to appreciate the beauty of compromise. . . . But Truth is hard as adamant and tender as a blossom. The golden rule of conduct, therefore, is mutual toleration, seeing that we will never all think alike and we shall see Truth in fragment and from different angles of vision. Conscience is not the same thing for all. Whilst,

therefore, it is a good guide for individual conduct, imposition of that conduct upon all will be an insufferable interference with everybody's freedom of conscience." None, thought Gandhi, can realize truth perfectly "so long as we are imprisoned in this mortal frame," but men do have the obligation to experiment in their search and they have the right to err. He said "compromise," but he did not mean compromise on fundamentals.

Here then is a central principle upon which Gandhi built his program—truth or conscience, the voice of God itself, but a principle which never prevented him from, indeed, which led him to endless, tireless effort to reach agreement with those who differed with him.

NON-VIOLENCE

The second great principle of Gandhi's program was non-violence. "And," says he, "when you want to find Truth as God, the only inevitable means is Love, i.e., non-violence, and since I believe that ultimately means and ends are convertible terms, I should not hesitate to say that God is Love."

In this, two very important ideas are apparent: the first, that non-violence is equated with love; and second, that truth and love are the twin pillars upon which Gandhi's great revolutionary program rests.

Let us now take a further look at the nature of non-violence as Gandhi saw it. Repeatedly, Gandhi made it clear that non-violence is not to be confined to physical action but that it involves also words and even thoughts: "One had better not speak it," he said, "if one cannot do so in a gentle way, meaning that there is no truth in a man who cannot control his tongue." This does not suggest, he makes clear, that one should be deterred from telling a truth which may for the moment appear harsh or unpopular for fear of wounding susceptibilities.⁴ The intention never to do violence must be controlling.

For Gandhi, in the second place, non-violence is non-violence of the strong and not of the weak. At the beginning of his mission, he was offended by South African interpretations that this method was devised for the weak, and toward the close of his life he was hurt beyond words that his own people had never learned the lesson that non-violence was of the strong and not of the weak. What virtue is there in a man being non-violent when he possesses no weapons? "Non-violence," he says, "presupposes the ability to strike. It is a conscious, deliberate restraint put upon one's desire for vengeance." He rejected the use of the term "passive resistance" because of its being interpreted as a weapon of the weak. Moreover, he said, "Non-cooperation is not a passive state, it is an intensely active state."

Again non-violence makes a distinction between evil and the evil doer, and a *Satyagrahi* must never forget the distinction. He must not harbour ill-will or bitterness against the latter (that is the evil doer). He may not even employ needlessly offensive language against the evil doer, however unrelieved his evil might be. No attack upon character should be made and no word should be spoken that will do lasting injury, lead to later regret, and make reconciliation impossible, remembering that the purpose is always to convince and correct, to reconcile and not to coerce. ". . . It is an article of faith with every *Satyagrahi* that there is no one so fallen in this world but can be converted by love." Gandhi was glad to contrast his attitude toward the colonial policy of the British Empire and his determination that not even the hair of one Britisher should be harmed.

Said he, "I hate the system of government that the British people have set up in India. I hate the ruthless exploitation of India. . . . But I do not hate the domineering Englishmen. . . . I seek to reform them in all the loving ways that are open to me. My non-cooperation has its roots not in hatred, but in love. My personal religion pre-emptorily forbids me to hate anybody."

We are led immediately to an idea so fundamental that to fail to understand it is to fail completely to grasp the spirit and method of Gandhi. I repeat these words from Gandhi: "For it is an article of faith with every *Satyagrahi* that there is no one so fallen in this world but can be converted by love." Without this faith there can be no non-violence in the Gandhian sense. Read Gandhi's *My Experiments with Truth*. Follow him day by day along the torturous path of bringing an empire to bay or making "untouchables" "Children of God," and you will see not only the persistence in him of his faith in human beings but its near miraculous power.

"If I am a follower of *ahimsa* (non-violence)," says Gandhi, "I must love my enemy. I must apply the same rules to the wrong-doer who is my enemy or a stranger to me as I would to my wrong-doing father or son." This is hard but it is the price which Gandhian non-violence exacts. "Having flung aside the sword," he says, "there is nothing except the cup of love which I can offer to those who oppose me. It is by offering that cup that I expect to draw them close to me. I live in the hope that if not in this birth, in some other birth I shall be able to hug all humanity in friendly embrace."

THE EXALTATION OF THE MEANS

I come now to a third principle of *Satyagraha*, the relation of means to ends. Milovan Djilas, the Yugoslav writer, whose recent book, *The New Class*, has created such a sensation, states that "nothing so well reveals the

reality and greatness of ends as the methods used to attain them." There is still, however, a subtle and dangerous fascination in the doctrine that "the end justifies the means," and no doubt many a well-intentioned person has fallen under its allurements. Gandhi wrestled strenuously with this problem for his was the need of fashioning means for the attainment of certain over-riding ends and he was forced to make his choice in the light of a principle or court moral chaos. He defined his position unmistakably. He wrote that men often say, "Means are after all means." He said, "Means are after all everything. As the means so the end. There is no wall of separation between means and end. . . . Realization of the goal is in exact proportion to that of the means. This is a proposition that admits of no exception." He went on to compare the seed to the means and the end to the tree, and to quote the maxim, "As is the God, so is the Votary." He says one would scarcely speak of worshipping God by means of Satan. "We reap exactly what we sow."

It was suggested to Gandhi that the English had attained certain ends by brute force and that it was possible for the Indians to do likewise. To which Gandhi answered that surely Indians did not want that—the very kind of subjugation from which they were then struggling to be freed.

Or, as he said to me on the eve of India's freedom, "We could have killed the British and perhaps have had our freedom but it would not have been this way." By "this way" he meant that of the British leaving peacefully without the outward sign of animosity and the prospect of the two nations living not only in peace but in friendship. Twenty-five years earlier he had said, "Let there be no manner of doubt that *Swaraj* (freedom) established by non-violent means will be different in kind from the *Swaraj* that can be established by armed rebellion. . . . Violent means will give violent *Swaraj*. That would be a menace to the world and to India herself." For him, it was not the immediate but the enduring result which mattered.

The application of Gandhi's philosophy of means and ends can be seen clearly in what he held to be the relationship of non-violence to truth. Truth is the end. Non-violence is the means. To take care of the means, to keep them pure, is to reach the end sooner or later. Ultimate victory is assured.

CONSTRUCTIVE SERVICE

Gandhi's program of non-violent resistance or non-cooperation is often associated solely with his efforts to free India from British rule or from any one or more of the oppressive aspects of that rule. It was more than this. It involved intra-Indian conflicts and included numerous constructive movements within Indian life which in Gandhi's view were essential to the

winning of the freedom sought more directly by forms of non-violent resistance.

Untouchability was a curse in Indian life which Gandhi could not abide, and against this institution he fought relentlessly and against great odds. "My idea of village *Swaraj*," he said, "is that it is a complete republic. . . . There will be no castes such as we have today with their graded untouchability. Non-violence with its technique of *Satyagraha* and non-cooperation will be the sanction of the village community." He said further, "I have put untouchability in the forefront because I observe a certain remissness about it. . . . We can never reach *Swaraj* with the poison of untouchability corroding the Hindu part of the national body. *Swaraj* is a meaningless term if we desire to keep a fifth of India under perpetual subjection and deliberately deny them the fruits of national culture. . . . Inhuman ourselves, we may not plead before the Throne for deliverance from the inhumanity of others."

Gandhi did not simply speak and write against untouchability. He threw the full force of *Satyagraha* and his very life against it. In 1924 and 1925 *Satyagraha* was undertaken in Vykom in the Province of Travancore, South India. Its purpose was to obtain permission for "untouchables" to use certain roads about the temple in Vykom. Gandhi was not present in Travancore, but from a distance he sent advice and encouragement. The importance he attached to this episode is seen in the following statement which he made in *Young India*, the paper he was editing at that time: "The Vykom *Satyagrahis* are fighting a battle of no less consequence than that of *Swaraj*. They are fighting against an age-long wrong and prejudice. It is supported by orthodoxy, superstition, custom and authority. Theirs is only one among the many battles that must be fought in the holy war against irreligion masquerading as religion, ignorance appearing in the guise of learning."

In September, 1932, Gandhi was in jail after his threat of a civil disobedience campaign against the passage of certain oppressive ordinances by the British. From newspapers he had learned that the new constitution for India proposed by the British was to grant separate electorates for the "untouchables," that is, that these members of the so-called "Depressed Classes" would have both a vote as Hindus and a vote as "Untouchables."

Previously the British had made a somewhat similar provision for both Moslems and Hindus. To Gandhi this would be unbearable. He could not suffer these people to be separated from other Hindus in this statutory manner. As he wrote to Prime Minister MacDonald, it was a matter of pure religion, for it would arrest "the marvellous growth of the work of Hindu

reformers who have dedicated themselves to their suppressed brethren in every walk of life." The decision of the Government, therefore, he must resist with his life, in a fast unto death. This fast, he said, "is aimed at a statutory separate electorate, in any shape or form, for the Depressed Classes. Immediately that threat is removed once for all, my fast will end." Since the British had stated that any different and mutually satisfactory agreement reached by the Hindus and "Untouchables" would be satisfactory to them, this fast, according to Gandhi, was "to sting Hindu conscience into right religious action." Such an agreement was reached and on the sixth day the fast was ended. During the period of the fast "a spirit of reform, penance, and self purification swept the land." Hundreds of temples were opened to "untouchables," thousands of the orthodox who had never received food from "Untouchables," did so: villages, towns, and cities, organizations of many kinds, resolved to stop discrimination against these people. The fast has rightly been called the "Epic Fast," and *it was directed by Gandhi at his own people.*

Another acute internal problem which haunted Gandhi was that of the unhappy Hindu-Moslem relations. The causes were both ancient and new and very deep. But Gandhi knew that tragedy for India was the price of continued failure to solve the problem. The freedom of India, he felt, depended upon Hindu-Moslem friendship. In 1919 he was given an opportunity to take a step toward reconciliation. The Moslems of India were deeply distressed that the Armistice of November 11, 1918, following the defeat of the Central powers, provided not only for the overthrow of the Turkish Sultan as temporal sovereign but as the Caliph or religious head of Islam, in spite of the promises made by Lloyd George, British Prime Minister, that the suzerainty of their religious head would be respected. This was a source of deep distress to the Moslems of India who organized a powerful opposition movement called Khilafat. Gandhi sympathized with the Moslems of India and persuaded the Congress, which was the organization for the mobilization of Indian opposition to foreign rule and oppression, to engage in a movement of non-cooperation on behalf of the Moslem position. This non-cooperation provided for a boycott of British exports, British schools, British courts, British jobs, and British honors. Unhappily for Indian Moslems, Kemal Pasha (Ataturk), the powerful leader of the new Turkey, deposed the Caliph and left the Moslems in India without a cause. But Gandhi had attempted one more contribution toward the strengthening of Hindu-Moslem relations and toward the freedom of the Indian people.

Gandhi was deeply opposed to the use of alcoholic beverages and

occupied himself with the promotion of a prohibition movement. In addition to all the other evils growing out of the use of intoxicants there was the inability of those who were in their grip to contribute moral effort to *Satyagraha*. He urged especially that women take up agitation against the sale of liquors, and women who had lived the most sheltered lives were to be found in picket lines outside stores dispensing intoxicants. Moreover, they were enjoined to lay hold of the hearts of those given to drink by the provision of recreational facilities and other acts of loving service.

Dear to the heart of Mr. Gandhi was his movement called *Swadeshi* and *Khadi*. These too, he felt, were indispensable to the attainment of freedom. *Swadeshi* is the use of all home-made things, in so far as such use is necessary for the protection of home industry—more especially those industries without which India would become pauperized. Gandhi was so fervent about the importance of *Swadeshi* that he addressed huge meetings and asked those present to take off such garments as were foreign made and place them in a pile. He would then set fire to the pile. Inherent in the movement is the sacrifice of a love for fineries and gladness in the wearing of coarse but beautifully hand-woven fabrics of India.

Khadi is this homespun cloth. Not only did Gandhi declare against the use of foreign-made cloth and for the wearing of homespun garments; he demanded that Indians make the garments themselves. Let every one become his own spinner, he urged. Spinning he put in the center of the *Satyagraha* program, "no haphazard programme of spinning, but scientific understanding of every detail, including the mechanics and the mathematics of it, study of cotton and its varieties, and so on." "That," he said, "is the mass constructive programme I want you to do, and that is the basis of the training for the non-violence of the brave." In this program, Gandhi led, for he spun his cotton and he reduced his needs for clothing practically to a loin cloth.

Satyagraha had, therefore, what Gandhi called its constructive side. In this side he included many other programs but it is well illustrated by his determined efforts to heal the divisions of caste among the Hindus, to unite Hindus and Moslems, to break Indians away from intoxicants, and to unite the nation in the rejection of foreign fineries and in the making of their own necessary apparel.

RENUNCIATION

I come now to the principle of renunciation, the final principle of Gandhi's movement of non-violent non-cooperation which I shall discuss. Gandhi's recurrent theme was "I must reduce myself to zero." From the

beginning of his program he almost achieved this in matters material. In England he knew how to play the English gentleman. All this was changed, however, by his bitter experiences in South Africa and his dogged determination to do what he could about them. To his son he wrote: "Remember please that henceforth our lot is poverty. . . . The uses of poverty are far sweeter than those of riches." At his Tolstoy farm, which was a kind of "co-operative commonwealth" for civil resisters, the members ground their own wheat, labored at construction work, and excluded every item of food above that necessary to health. Walking to the city, a distance of 21 miles, on any private errand was the rule, and Gandhi on one day walked fifty miles.

This was the beginning of nearly fifty years of austerity. It included the barest of clothing and food, the minimum of physical comforts of every sort; it included, at the age of 61, a walk to the sea of twenty-four days to break the law against the making of salt. Gandhi spent years in prison. At the age of thirty-seven, in marriage, he took the vow of sexual abstinence which vow he kept to the end of his life. His fasts were numerous. He died a martyr.

Why this renunciation and self-suffering on the part of Gandhi? He reminds us that sacrifice means to make sacred. He knew and he told those who would be leaders of the people that they must become one with the people. Said he of the people, "We must first come in living touch with them by working for them and in their midst. We must share their sorrows, understand their difficulties and anticipate their wants. With the pariahs we must be pariahs and see how we feel to clean the closets of the upper classes and have the remains of their table thrown at us. . . . Then and not till then shall we truly represent the masses and they will, as surely as I am writing this, respond, respond to every call."

Or again he says, "The *Satyagrahi's* course is plain. He must stand unmoved in the midst of all cross currents. He may not be impatient with blind orthodoxy, nor be irritated over unbelief of the suppressed people. He must know that his suffering will melt the stoniest fanatic. . . . He must know that relief will come when there is least hope for it. For such is the way of the cruelly-kind Deity who insists upon testing His devotee through a fiery furnace and delights in humbling him to the dust."

Leading India to freedom was a monumental achievement of Gandhi. But if freedom had never been attained, leading the Indian people by his own example to sacrifice themselves in the struggle for freedom would have been an achievement equally as monumental. Thousands upon thousands of them entered the prisons and some died there, including Kasturbai,

his wife. They were beaten; they were killed. Following his example they entered upon the simple life, even the formerly well-to-do. They spun and wore *khadi*; they foreswore intoxicants; they embraced the lowliest, lived among them, died among them. They reduced themselves, in their sights, to zeros. This was renunciation, the fifth great principle of non-violent non-cooperation.

These are principles upon which the great Gandhian experiment was based: truth, non-violence, the exaltation of the means, constructive service, and renunciation. The experiment was determinative in the winning of India's freedom. It altered the lives of countless Indians. But the experiment is not completed. There is still oppression in the world, humiliation, and other offense. Well might we join in the wish of the President of India, Rajendra Prasad, recently uttered: "May some individual or nation arise and carry forward the effort launched by him till the experiment is completed, the work finished and the objective achieved."

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