



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR
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WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

The Simple Lesson from Mahatma Ghandi

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Gandhi set standards of conduct, personal and political, by which we continue to measure others in our complex Covid-infected, climate-challenged universe.

An oration to be given on October 2 at the Gandhi Jayanti celebrations' 21, organised by the Indian High Commission, in Canberra, ACT.

Mahatma Gandhi is a thinking ocean: his thought- waves ripple across the shores of islands and continents of our hearts and minds in so many humane ways.

Although assassinated in 1948, on a winter's evening in New Delhi, India, his spirit still meanders sublimely through the landscape of India's inner being like the Ganges, in all its human pollution and pristine purity.

Gandhi standards

Gandhi set standards of conduct, personal and political, by which we continue to measure others in our complex Covid-infected, climate- challenged universe.

His moral voice still shines like a lighthouse in the chaotic sea of our militancy and military build up, greed and corruption, where often politics is perceived not as a means for service but an end to petty power.

In such a wounded world, does Gandhi's philosophy have any relevance or salience in our personal and political lives?

His contemporary, another genius, Albert Einstein wrote:

Gandhi had demonstrated that a powerful human following can be assembled not only through the cunning game of the usual political manoeuvres and trickeries but through the cogent example of a morally superior conduct of life.

In our time of utter moral decadence, he was the only statesman to stand for a higher human relationship in the political sphere.

Surely the phrase 'our time of utter moral decadence' must resonate with us today in so many societies with which we've connections: from A to Z: take your pick.

The world is what it is. It's a mixture of evil and good. Gandhi confronted its manifestations daily and waged battles with these twins of life with the peaceful weapons of Ahimsa: Love-in-Action and Satyagraha: Truth-in-Action.

But his vision was anchored only in the good. All his life he believed that men and women were slightly more inclined towards good and, on that slight imbalance, we may survive future Holocausts and Hiroshimas, partitions of our hearts.

Gandhiji was a practical idealist. Everything for him was his story, an experiment in shaping human destiny.

A man of his age and times, he asked the deepest questions and found answers to some of them. Or at least showed a possible way in a troubled and turbulent world. He lived in the midst of it and died walking in a prayer garden.

Why was he unique?

So what is so unique about this frail man with a long lathi who never raised a hand or his voice in hatred against anyone? And yet became the most universal human being, inspiring millions in numerous countries and communities, in huts and hamlets, palaces and parliaments, to stand up for their human dignity and self-respect.

For their inalienable rights to freedom and faith: from indentured laborers to learned men and women, from class-ridden to caste-riven societies, in cultures of cruelty defined by communalism, ideologies and sheer brute strength.

If any human being truly believed that all women and men are created equal, it was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. He lived that belief. He was killed for it.

I cannot think of anyone who was like him: He is often put in the company with the Buddha and Jesus Christ. But his times and challenges were different: and he was human, above all.

Gandhi's faith was forged in the furnace of painful experience of daily living, in so many ordinary human relationships: son, husband, student, father, lawyer, friend, political adversary, jailbird and freedom fighter.

He claimed no divine connections and was not fond of the title of Mahatma. In the face of inhuman odds, he showed grit and grace and incredible gratitude to God for being a human being.

It is really his humanity, his humility and humour, with flaws and fads, that make him the Mahatma, the great soul. He revealed himself so honestly that most people found his revelations embarrassing. Truth gave him immortality.

In remembering him today our self-respect is enhanced for he, more than most, believed in common human decency that ought to be part of our common humanity.

While he walked in cities and villages, his journey was always inwards: The atman had the infinite energy of an atom. The celestial song, Gita, his favourite book, was an expression of the inner conflict in the heart of our souls.

His beliefs, growing up

And he showed by example the transformative power of love-in-truth in oneself and in one's God. He called it Ahimsa.

He believed in nonviolence in a very violent world: for he grew up during the first and second world wars—his contemporaries were Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Mussolini and Churchill, to name a few.

In his lifetime the world had experienced two world wars and two mighty revolutions: the Russian and the Chinese.

But his belief that men and women could rise above these and live in truth and love was supreme. His weapons of non-violence, *Ahimsa-Satyagraha*, never faltered and his evolution as a human being was, I think, the most marvellous revolution in human history.

Mohandas Gandhi grew up in a remote corner of the British Raj. He knew little English and less about the sages of India or the prophets of the world outside.

In his teens he left to study in London, having been outcasted by his clan. It's here he discovered a wider world even though his crippling shyness prevented him from much social interaction.

But he was an avid reader, a great learner; London left its mark on the personality of this most marvellously self-made man.

Then he was sent to Natal, a failed lawyer from Bombay: but Gandhi's great gift was that he turned every seeming failure into a magnificent challenge.

It is in his exilic struggles in London and South Africa, where he spent 25 most formative years, that he learnt lessons that would catapult him to lead India's freedom struggle against extraordinary odds, from within and without.

And against the most militarily powerful empire the world had ever known.

Our modern world is shaped so deeply by exiles and immigrants. Our Australian society in the making is a telling example. We are part of it, shaping it in our small, priceless ways, with our voices and visions and the daily bread.

Gandhi wrote that when isolated drops meet, they develop the majesty of an ocean.

Within less than fifty years the Empire was reduced to a rubble and Great Britain had become little England. And India's freedom inspired freedoms of many nations. A new kind of history was being written.

If the brutal vivisection, Partition, is the greatest crime of imperialism, the assassination of the Mahatma, I feel, has been the worst crime on the subcontinent.

Today, in hindsight, one wonders how a civilization was so wounded that it extinguished its most luminous light : it's a history that will continue to hurt us.

Today's world

Recently we've commemorated several anniversaries of violence—of wars, of tyranny and terrorism—heightened by the pandemic of coronavirus.

COVID -19 has wrought its havoc; life on the earth is facing extinction through what we have done and are doing to Mother Earth.

If we go back to Gandhi's writings, we'll find he raised some of these issues in his book *Hind Swaraj*, published in 1909. Much of his trenchant criticism of modern civilization is as valid today as it was more than a century ago. The book was banned in India and few today are aware of its existence.

But no human hand has written more than the Mahatma's.

From diet to death, from sanitation to spiritual enlightenment, from temples to toilets, from the life of a goat to the worship of a God, from caste to creed, Gandhi's thoughts were and are felt expressions of the questing spirit and the possibilities within each of us.

While deeply rooted in the spiritual home-soil, he flowed like a river across many landscapes, changing and challenging his thoughts.

And taking ideas from *Sermon on the Mount*, from Ruskin, Tolstoy, Thoreau, and others which enriched his journeys and sharpened his beliefs for he was a man of action and contemplation, a man of all seasons and reasons.

The world was his heritage and today he belongs to the world.

He said nonviolence and truth are as old as the hills. But he made his life into the most potent message. Satyagraha became the power of the powerless, a force more powerful that resisted dictators and brutalising governments in numerous countries.

Even today, in a changed and over-crowded universe, this force remains the one hope of humankind. And it requires greater courage than those who carry a gun in one hand, a bomb in the other.

Practise, preach Gandhi's message

We, I think, should practise and preach Mahatma's message with pride and Gandhian passion.

In India's epical grandeur, there's no greater Epic than the life, love, struggles, achievements and failures of this most magnificent fragment of our shared humanity. He made the ordinary so extraordinary.

Closer to home, in Australia, one of Gandhi's ardent admirers was the great novelist Patrick White, the only literary Nobel laureate in Australasia.

His first novel, written in 1939, has an epigraph from Gandhi's writings.

One of the best books written on Gandhi's religion is by another Australian Jos Jordens, titled simply Gandhi's Religion, like a home-spun shawl with many threads and colours to warm our limbs on a winter's night and not suffocate us to death by fundamentalist beliefs.

Political creativity between the most ancient multicultural civilisation and the most modern—India and Australia—is worth pursuing in the midst of global crises.

Perhaps there's some consolation, though belatedly, that the relationship between Australia and India is being strengthened for our region. Australia of today is a good place to begin for it is touched by two oceans, the Indian and the Pacific, and we dwell in a land with the oldest living culture on the planet.

One hopes an Aboriginal Mahatma will arise to tell us who we are, and wither is our journey together?

Mahatma Gandhi would have understood the Uluru Statement from the Heart and embraced it with his poetic soul. For he would have known it is about peace and justice, truth-telling and living together in Ahimsa.

In my little book, *Gandhianjali*, published last year, I quoted an unknown Greek poet:

What else is wisdom?

What of man's endeavour or

God's high grace ,so lovely and so great?

To stand from fear set free,

To breathe and wait,

To hold a hand uplifted over hate

And shall not loveliness be loved forever?

Gandhiji understood where there's love, there's life. I personally cannot think of a nobler gift to the world from India. His life, as he said, is his message. I saw it inscribed on his statue in Pietermaritzburg where he was thrown out of the first class train compartment on that fateful night of 7 June, 1893.

Sometimes in the wrong train you reach the right destination. The fight against injustice and discrimination has never been the same since that cold and cruel night.

Today the journey continues in that amazing light from New Delhi to New York and beyond our immediate horizons for justice, equality, liberty and simple human dignity.

A man of vision and action, he carved a path in a pathless world on which we can still walk with our heads held high and our feet on the ground. That for him was true self-rule, self-reliance, *atmanirbhar* — the deepest human capacity of hope in every soul.

From the crooked timber of humanity, he continued to make something straight.

He believed that in the humiliation of another human being there's no honour. And there's enough space for all of us on the streets of our lives.

We can walk together; we can walk alone, *Ekla Chalo*, without fear, our heads held high, because one man showed us what courage really means.

That is Gandhiji's gift to everyone, big and small, here and there, and everywhere.

