

**Mahatma Gandhi, Apostle of Nonviolence:**  
***An Introduction***  
***By John Dear***

When Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated on January 30, 1948, the world hailed him as one of the greatest spiritual leaders, not just of the century, but of all time. He was ranked not just with Thoreau, Tolstoy, and St. Francis, but with Buddha, Mohammed and even Jesus. “Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth,” Albert Einstein wrote at the time.

Gandhi’s legacy includes not just the brilliantly waged struggle against institutionalized racism in South Africa, the independence movement of India, and a ground-breaking path of interreligious dialogue, but also boasts the first widespread application of nonviolence as *the* most powerful tool for positive social change. Gandhi’s nonviolence was not just political: It was rooted and grounded in the spiritual, which is why he exploded not just onto India’s political stage, but onto the world stage, and not just temporally, but for all times.

Gandhi was, first and foremost, a religious man in search of God. For more than fifty years, he pursued truth, proclaiming that the best way to discover truth was through the practice of active, faith-based nonviolence.

I discovered Gandhi when I was a Jesuit novice at the Jesuit novitiate in Wernersville, Pennsylvania. My friends and I were passionately interested in peace and justice issues, so we undertook a detailed study of Gandhi. We were amazed to learn that Gandhi professed fourteen vows, even as we were preparing to profess vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. I added a fourth vow--under Gandhi’s influence--a vow of

nonviolence, as Gandhi had done in 1907. My friends and I undertook our own Gandhian experiments in truth and nonviolence, with prayer, discussions, fasting, and public witness, followed by serious reflection. My friends and I returned to Gandhi as a way to understand how best to respond to our own culture of violence.

Gandhi has helped me enormously over the years in my work for peace, interreligious dialogue, civil disobedience and opposition to nuclear weapons. When I was imprisoned for an anti-nuclear demonstration for eight months, I studied Gandhi again to see how he survived prison and promoted civil disobedience as a tool for social change. For more than two decades, I have read Gandhi's writings and biographies to find clues about how to live humanly in our inhuman world. Gandhi's answer is always the same: steadfast, persistent, dedicated, committed, patient, relentless, truthful, prayerful, loving, active nonviolence.

For example, a 21-year old British student activist named Ronald Duncan wrote a pamphlet about a labor strike he organized and mailed copies to over one hundred activists around the world. Only Gandhi replied, explaining that the means are the ends, and that all our organizing must be nonviolent to the core.

Duncan responded by asking Gandhi if he could someday come to India for a visit. Gandhi immediately sent a cable saying, "Meet me at Wardha on the 23rd." With the fundraising support of friends, Duncan set off to India, arrived in the village of Wardha, and hired a taxi to the ashram. On the journey through the barren countryside, Gandhi appeared alone on the road. He had walked three miles by himself to meet the young student. Gandhi was in his late sixties at the time.

"As I was saying in my letter," Gandhi said without missing a beat, "means must

determine ends and indeed it's questionable whether there is an end. The best we can do is to make sure of the method and examine our motives.”

They walked back, discussing nonviolence. There were no introductions or questions about the trip. Gandhi picked up as if they were old friends, engaged in passionate discussion. That's Gandhi: single-minded devotion to nonviolence. Duncan was profoundly impressed.

According to all the accounts I have read, Gandhi had that effect on everyone. He kept trying to plumb the depths of nonviolence, beginning with his own heart and soul. Along the way, he unleashed a new method of social change, which he called “Satyagraha” (from the Sanskrit for truth force.) He led a movement against racial injustice in South Africa and then brought about a nonviolent revolution in India that secured independence from the British empire. His example and teachings inspire us to apply the same single-mindedness in our pursuit of an end to war, nuclear weapons, environmental destruction, violence, hunger, poverty and injustice, and the creation of a culture of peace, justice and nonviolence. In other words, he challenges us to become prophets and apostles of nonviolence.

### **Gandhi's Life in South Africa**

Gandhi experimented with his life as few others have. He strived to renounce every trace of selfishness and violence within himself in a relentless pursuit of truth. While he was plumbing his own depths of nonviolence, he realized that he also had to pursue the practice of nonviolence as widely as possible in the public sphere in the pursuit of peace and justice for the poor. He was at once a devoutly spiritual, religious person as well as an astute politician. He introduced an entirely new way to organize and

run nations and to transform cultures of violence into cultures of nonviolence.

Gandhi's transformation was a slow, painful process of daily renunciation, prayer, study and radical experimentation with his own life at great personal cost. He was born in a small seaside town in India on October 2, 1869 to a proud businessman and a devout mother who fasted regularly and prayed constantly. A shy boy, he was married at age 13 to a girl, Kasturbai, in a marriage arranged by their parents. At age 18, he was shipped off to law school in England, where at first he tried to become the perfect Westerner, even learning how to dance and play the violin. When he returned to India in 1891, he was unable to find a job, so his relatives suggested he pursue an offer to practice law for the Indian community in South Africa. Desperate and excited, he boarded a ship to South Africa in 1893.

Fifty years later, a Christian minister asked Gandhi what the most transformative experience was in his life. Gandhi told the story of his first week in South Africa. He was traveling overnight by train to conduct a case in Pretoria. He was quietly reading in a first class compartment when a white conductor appeared at the door and ordered him to move immediately to a third class compartment, or be thrown off the train. Gandhi found himself face to face with institutionalized racism. He refused to budge, so they beat him up and threw him off the train. He sat all night in the freezing cold on the train platform in the middle of nowhere weighing his options. He could return to India, or he could join the handful of violent revolutionaries who seek change through bloodshed, or he could pursue a third path: peaceful, prayerful, public confrontation with legalized racism until everyone's civil rights were honored.

“The train steamed away leaving me shivering in the cold,” Gandhi recalled. “The

creative experience comes there. I was afraid for my very life. I entered the dark waiting-room. There was a white man in the room. I was afraid of him. What was my duty, I asked myself. Should I go back to India, or should I go forward, with God as my helper, and face whatever was in store for me? I decided to stay and suffer. My active nonviolence began from that date. And God put me through the test during that very journey. That was one of the richest experiences of my life.”

The next day, Gandhi began organizing key leaders within the Indian community to speak out publicly against segregation. When he turned twenty-five, he won the law case that had originally brought him to South Africa, and planned to return home to India. But the day of his departure, the South African government announced that Indians would no longer be allowed to vote. At the huge farewell party organized in his honor that night, Gandhi’s friends pleaded with him to stay and help them fight for their civil rights. He stayed in South Africa for twenty more years.

Indians in South Africa had been denied basic civil rights, including the right to vote. Gandhi organized widespread nonviolent resistance to these injustices. He defended hundreds of clients, wrote countless articles and press statements against these unjust laws, and spoke to any group that would listen. Then in 1906, the Transvaal South African government announced it was considering new legislation that would require every Indian to register with the government, be fingerprinted, and carry a certificate of registration at all times. The Indian community was stunned.

On September 11, 1906, Gandhi called a mass meeting in Johannesburg to protest the proposed legislation. Three thousand people filled the Empire theater. Gandhi was not sure what he would say, until one of the preliminary speakers made an offhand

remark, announcing that he would resist these unjust laws “in the name of God” even if it meant his death. That was the answer. Gandhi stood up and declared that if everyone present took a vow of nonviolent resistance to these unjust laws, and remained faithful to their pledge and to God, even if they were arrested, imprisoned, tortured and killed, the struggle would be won. It was as simple as that. Their voluntary suffering would attract the sympathy of the world and melt the hearts of white South Africans. The audience was captivated. They rose as one and took a vow of nonviolent resistance to the proposed legislation. Within a matter of months, over 1,500 Indians were arrested and imprisoned for opposing the “pass laws.” Thus was born the Satyagraha movement. (Excerpts from Gandhi’s famous speech are located at the beginning of chapter 7.)

A short time later, in response to a letter Gandhi had written to him, Leo Tolstoy wrote to Gandhi that Gandhi was offering not just South Africa, but the whole world, a new way to fight injustice through the practice of loving resistance on a massive scale. Tolstoy had theorized and theologized about such a program, but Gandhi was living it. Gandhi wanted to find a word to describe this new method of opposing injustice, and so he organized a contest. Eventually, he coined the word himself, *Satyagraha*, or “truth force.” “Satyagraha means resisting untruth by truthful means,” Gandhi explained in a speech in 1911. “It can be offered at any place, at any time, and by any person, even though he may be in a minority of one. If one remains steadfast in it, in a spirit of dedication, it always brings success. Satyagraha knows neither frustration nor despair.”

When the Asiatic Registration act became law in July 1907, Gandhi officially launched the Satyagraha campaign. On January 10, 1908, Gandhi was arrested for the first time and the next day, he was sentenced to two months of hard labor in prison. It was

his first prison term On August 16, 1908, Gandhi publicly called for the burning of registration certificates. Indians throughout South Africa were inspired by Gandhi and joined his campaign. "They will put us in prison, they will torture us, and they will kill us," Gandhi told the Indian community, "but we will not fight back nor will we give in, and so, our victory is assured." Thousands marched and went to jail and the oppressive white government was forced to back down. When Gandhi was arrested and imprisoned later that year, he studied Thoreau and drew the astonishing conclusion that, "The real road to happiness lies in going to jail and undergoing sufferings and privations there in the interest of one's country and religion."

In 1913, the South African government announced that only Christian marriages were valid, in a blatant attack on the Indian community, which was largely Hindu and Muslim. Gandhi organized new marches and demonstrations and Indians burned registration cards. As government repression intensified, Gandhi called upon Indians to accept whatever suffering they were forced to endure without flinching or retaliating. He held that the authorities, as well as the whole world, will eventually be forced to recognize the Indians' human dignity and the truth of their cause and give them justice. As the jails filled up and the world denounced the racist repression, the government caved in to the growing pressure.

On November 6, 1913, Gandhi led 5,000 Indians, primarily mine workers, in an illegal march from Natal to Transvaal. He was arrested and imprisoned on November 11th and sentenced to three months hard labor. Like Nelson Mandela fifty years later, Gandhi spent those long prison days breaking rocks. But within months, the South African government gave in to the campaign, passed new legislation protecting the rights

of all Indians, and set all the remaining political prisoners free. As the pass laws and other segregation laws were lifted and the prisoners released, the Indian community declared victory, not just for themselves, but for all South Africans.

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Throughout their years in South Africa, Mohandas and Kasturbai raised four sons. One day, near the turn of the century, Gandhi visited a Trappist monastery outside of Johannesburg. He was so inspired by the life of intentional community, prayer, simplicity, and farming, that he considered forming his own religious community and farm. His reading of Ruskin's classic work, *Unto This Last*, pushed him to do it. In 1904 Gandhi purchased one hundred acres near Durban and created the Phoenix Settlement, his first ashram.

In 1910, as the movement exploded and hundreds sought to join his farm, he bought 1,100 acres near Johannesburg and founded Tolstoy Farm, his second ashram, which became the center of the Satyagraha campaign and the support network for all political prisoners. Ashram community members grew their own food, built their own buildings, ran their own schools, pooled all their money, made their own clothes, prayed together, and shared everything in common. In an effort to be poor and simple, Gandhi walked nearly everywhere he went. For years, he walked nearly every day to Johannesburg--a twenty-one mile hike, one way. Gandhi also started a national weekly newspaper to mobilize and organize the Indian community in their struggle for justice.

Just as he arrived on South Africa's political stage, Gandhi underwent a profound inner spiritual explosion. Gandhi studied Tolstoy, Thoreau, Emerson, the New Testament and the Bhagavad Gita. His reading of the religious scriptures, particularly of



the Sermon on the Mount, deepened his convictions and gave him a moral and spiritual framework that determined the rest of his life. He committed his life “seeking God face to face.” In 1906, he professed lifelong vows of truth, nonviolence, celibacy, poverty and fearlessness.

### **Gandhi’s Struggle for India’s Independence**

On July 18, 1914, after negotiating a breakthrough settlement with the government, Gandhi left South Africa for good. He embarked on a trip to England, and finally returned to India permanently on January 9, 1915, to a hero’s welcome. Under the guidance of G. K. Gokhale, a revered politician, Gandhi spent his first year back rediscovering his homeland by criss-crossing the country, learning its problems and listening to the poor. He reacquainted himself with India’s needs and potential and studied how he could apply the lessons of satyagraha learned in South Africa to India’s struggle for independence from Britain.

Gandhi set up another ashram, on the Sabarmati river near Ahmedabad, where he lived for the next sixteen years. Over 250 people eventually joined his community, which practiced the same austerity he originally witnessed at the Trappist monastery in South Africa. Each member professed 14 vows, including truth, nonviolence, celibacy, poverty, fearlessness, physical labor, tolerance of all religions, and making their own clothes. They prayed together, ate together, farmed the land, published newspapers, and prepared themselves to suffer and die in the nonviolent struggle for independence.

In 1917, a determined peasant from the other side of the country begged Gandhi to visit his desperately poor remote region (Champaran) and to help the starving peasants in their struggle against oppressive British landlords. Gandhi agreed, made the long

journey by train, and quietly started gathering information about the specific injustices committed against the peasants. He expected to stay a month, but stayed nearly two years. One day, while he was riding along on an elephant, the British arrested him. Overnight, the news spread throughout the region that a holy man had been arrested while seeking their rights. Thousands of peasants gathered outside the courthouse to support Gandhi. He was immediately released, allowed to finish his study of illegal abuses against the farmworkers, and eventually, the Indian government passed a new agrarian reform law to protect disenfranchised farmworkers. Gandhi became the hope of the Indian people.

On March 18, 1919, Britain announced that the repressive measures it set up during World War I against the Indian independence movement, restricting basic civil rights, would continue, even though the war was over. The Rowlatt Acts suppressed freedom of speech, press and assembly, in an effort to crush the ever-growing dissent. Gandhi announced the next day that he had a dream in which the whole nation had gone on strike against British rule, and he invited the whole nation to consider making his dream a reality. On April 6th, in response to Gandhi's call for a general hartal, a national day of prayer and fasting, virtually everyone stayed at home to pray and fast and India was shut down for a day. Millions marched in the street to the stunned shock and amazement of the British (and Gandhi). Suddenly, India was waking up. The British government responded by doing what empire's do--repressing the movement, arresting its leaders, killing demonstrators. The following week, British soldiers massacred 379 peaceful protesters and wounded another 1,200 in the city of Amritsar.

In the months that followed, Gandhi prayerfully decided to make a complete

break with the British empire and dedicated the rest of his life to achieving India's independence through peaceful nonviolence. He called for massive "nonviolent non-cooperation with the British, until they peacefully realize they are masters in someone else's house and leave." In 1920, Gandhi persuaded the Indian National Congress to adopt the strategy of satyagraha to achieve freedom, and the movement officially began. From 1920 to 1921, Gandhi called for widespread civil disobedience against British rule, but after a handful of demonstrators brutally killed 21 police officers in Chauri Chauri, Gandhi suspended the movement, infuriating other protest leaders. For the rest of his life, Gandhi would wrestle with the movement, calling off every campaign at the slightest outbreak of violence. In the end, he regretted that the Indian people were never as committed to nonviolence as he wanted them to be.

By 1922, over 50,000 Indians were in prison for civil disobedience. When Gandhi called off the campaign, the British released all political prisoners, but then arrested Gandhi. On March 18, 1922, Gandhi was brought before a judge on the charge of sedition and invited to make a statement before he was sentenced. "Noncooperation with evil was as much a duty as cooperation with good," Gandhi said, and since British rule over India was evil, he declared, he was guilty of nonviolent non-cooperation with it. Then he challenged the judge to give him the highest penalty possible or to resign and join the movement. Gandhi was sentenced to six years in prison, the maximum sentence.

For the next two years behind bars, Gandhi meditated, read hundreds of books, wrote countless letters, and worked on his spinning wheel each day. He also began writing his autobiography. Though the British government tried to silence Gandhi, his imprisonment only raised his stature in the hearts of all Indians, who now called him,

“Mahatma,” meaning “Great Soul.”

Gandhi urged all those who risked arrest to embrace suffering with love, as the path to political and spiritual freedom. “We must widen the prison gates,” he wrote, “and we must enter them as a bridegroom enters the bride’s chamber. Freedom is to be wooed only inside prison walls and sometimes on the gallows, never in the council chambers, courts, or the schoolroom.”

On February 5, 1924, Gandhi was released from prison because of poor health. In the following years, while continuing his support for independence, he focused much of his time on reforming Indian life, to prepare India for the coming of independence. His top priority was Hindu-Muslim unity. At one point, he undertook a grueling 21 day fast for interreligious reconciliation and reformation, which inspired millions of Indians to relinquish past prejudices and pursue reconciliation. He called for the abolition of Hinduism’s lowest caste, the untouchables, the poorest of the poor, who were consigned from birth until death to clean toilets. He advocated daily use of the spinning wheel to make one’s own clothing, and a boycott against British clothing. He campaigned for the development of “constructive programs,” which would improve village life for ordinary, impoverished Indians. He toured the country, preaching nonviolence and inspiring millions of Indians to change their lives and their nation. Occasionally he met with the current British viceroy and would announce that the time had come from Britain to leave India. Hundreds of thousands of people would turn out to catch a glimpse of the Mahatma wherever he appeared. If the crowd was loud or unruly, he would sit in silence for hours, until everyone became perfectly still. Then, he would quietly depart.

On March 2, 1930, Gandhi wrote to the viceroy and announced that unless Britain

lifted the unjust salt tax that deprived millions of salt, he would embark on a campaign of civil disobedience. On March 12, Gandhi set off on a 240 mile march to the sea town of Dandi. Thousands of people turned out to greet the marchers, surprising even Gandhi. Each day, the tension and excitement mounted. On April 6th, after his morning meditation, Gandhi bent down and picked up the illegal salt. The country exulted in jubilation. Hundreds of thousands of people began to pick up, make, sell and distribute salt, thus violating the British salt tax and declaring their independence. Gandhi's simple gesture worked. It woke up the sleeping giant, and the days of British rule were numbered.

Within a month, the British arrested and imprisoned 60,000 protesters, including all the leaders of the movement. Gandhi himself was arrested on May 4th and imprisoned for eight months. On May 20th, two thousand satyagrahis marched to the Dharsana salt mines and approached the entrance in small groups in order to enter and demand their right to salt. As each group of Gandhian protesters approached, the British soldiers savagely beat them over the head with steel rods, seriously wounding hundreds and killing several of them. The world was horrified by reports of this vicious assault by the so-called "civilized" British empire upon unarmed, peaceful demonstrators who did not lift a hand in self-defense. Thousands more joined the protest. The British were quickly losing control and becoming ever more repressive. Within the year, the British imprisoned more than 100,000 Indians for nonviolent protest. Millions of people around the world began to call for the British to leave India.

In March 1931, in response to mounting pressure, the British released all political prisoners, recognized the right to boycott foreign-made cloth, and lifted the ban on home-

made salt. They then invited Gandhi to England for a “Round Table” conference to discuss possible independence for India. Gandhi went to London, where he stayed for four months with Muriel Lester at Kingsley Hall in the poor East End section. Though there was no immediate political outcome from his efforts, Gandhi was able to put the case for independence to millions of British citizens and Europeans. He won them over with his sincerity, charm and truth. Though many of his co-workers concluded that the conference was a failure, Gandhi felt that one should not refuse to meet with one’s enemies. One week after he returned to India, on January 4, 1932, the British outlawed the Congress party and imprisoned all its leaders, including Gandhi.

Gandhi continued to speak out for the abolition of the Hindu untouchable caste. On September 20, he began a “fast unto death” in his prison cell “for the removal of untouchability.” The country was shocked. His friends, particularly Nehru, said that untouchability had existed for thousands of years, and such a fast was suicidal. But Indians revered Gandhi and trusted his wisdom. Almost immediately, Hindu leaders around the country welcomed untouchables into their temples for the first time in thousands of years. In just days, Hinduism underwent breath-taking reforms as the faithful feared the death of their mahatma. After five days, Gandhi ended his fast. He would continue to advocate for the untouchables for the rest of his life, and Hinduism would never be the same.

Gandhi was released from prison in May, 1933. He and Kasturbai decided to move their home to the poorest region in India, the tiny, inaccessible village of Wardha, located directly in India’s center. Then, he embarked on a full-time, nationwide tour and campaign to reform Indian village life. For the next six years, Gandhi traveled the

country, spoke to millions of people, fought poverty and illiteracy, urged use of the spinning wheel, and raised enormous amounts of money to support the untouchables, whom he now called “Harijans,” or “Children of God.” At several rallies, over two hundred thousand people turned up to watch Gandhi strike a match and burn huge mounds of British clothing.

Over the years, he built what he called a “model village,” or “Sevagram” meaning “Service Village,” in Wardha, which became his home for the rest of his life. He chose the location because of its extreme poverty and because this region was inhabited almost entirely by untouchables. He hoped it would be a place of solitude. Instead, it quickly became a pilgrimage site, and tens of thousands of people visited the village over the years. His home was a small, mud and bamboo hut which contained a spinning wheel, a straw mat, a low writing table and two shelves for a few books. He rose for prayer at 4:00 a.m. every morning, and ate only fruit, nuts and vegetables. As before, he and his friends made their own clothes, grew their own food, ran their own school, published their own newspapers, raised funds for the poorest of the poor, and shared everything in common. Once when he was beginning a prison term, he was told to list his occupation and wrote “farmer and weaver.” Though a lawyer, politician, and journalist, Gandhi saw himself as a simple, poor man of the people, living in solitude and poverty, devoted to his friends and the struggle for peace and justice.

As the world rushed again to war, Gandhi continued to advocate nonviolence and peaceful alternatives to war. When the war began in 1939, Gandhi broke down and wept. Though he opposed the Nazis, he also opposed warfare and spoke out against it everywhere, pleading for nonviolent resistance to Hitler. His was one of the few voices in

the world against World War II. In 1940, Gandhi left the Congress party when they decided to support Britain in the war. He rejoined the following year after Churchill rejected the Congress' party offer to help fight the Nazis. Gandhi announced repeatedly that if the Allies truly stood for the cause of democracy, they must immediately grant independence to India. His public stand against the war threatened Britain even more than his work for independence, and the British government, led by Churchill, hated Gandhi more than ever.

On August 8, 1942, Gandhi called for a new civil disobedience campaign against British rule. The next day, the British arrested him and his wife. Riots broke out throughout the country. In early 1943, Gandhi undertook a 21 day fast against both British imperialism and Indian violence. He barely survived.

On February 22, 1944, Gandhi's beloved wife Kasturba died in his arms in prison, after a long illness. They had been married for sixty-two years. Gandhi buried her ashes on the prison grounds. A few months before, Gandhi's secretary, one of his closest friends, had also died in prison. That spring, after Gandhi contracted malaria and nearly died, the British released him--on May 6, 1944. Altogether, Gandhi was arrested on twelve occasions during his life and spent nearly six years behind bars (2,089 days in Indian prisons and 249 days in South African prisons.)

As the war came to an end and it became increasingly clear that the British would withdraw from India, Muslim politicians demanded that India be divided along religious lines to create East and West Pakistan. Hostility and riots between Hindus and Muslims broke out across the country. Gandhi decided to journey to one of the poorest outskirts of India, where the most brutal riots and massacres were occurring, in a living plea for unity



and nonviolence. For nearly six months, Gandhi walked through Noakhali, one of the most inaccessible regions of India, made up of two and half million Muslims living and dying in desperate, absolute poverty. Though he was relatively unknown in this remote province, where no one heard any news from the outside world, within weeks, the region celebrated the presence of a mahatma walking barefoot through their villages preaching nonviolence and religious unity. Gandhi would stay overnight with the first peasant who offered to take him in. Altogether, he visited 49 villages. He inspired the Muslims to welcome back the Hindus who had fled the region. Within a few months, the entire region was disarmed and at peace. Later, after his death, Gandhi's associates described the months in Noakhali as the most miraculous period of Gandhi's life. He walked unarmed as a pilgrim of peace into a chaotic warzone, an apostle of nonviolence in a land possessed by violence. Everyone was captivated by Gandhi. He was seventy-eight years old at the time.

As the war ended, the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, incinerating over one hundred forty thousand people in two brief flashes. Gandhi condemned the atomic bomb, and pleaded with the world powers not to use these weapons again. He was the most prominent religious voice in the world against the U.S. development of nuclear weapons. He pleaded with his own country never to manufacture or use such weapons. Until the very afternoon of his death, he said repeatedly that the possession of nuclear weapons risks the destruction of the planet. His plea for nuclear disarmament became his central spiritual message until his death.

After Churchill was defeated, the new British government decided to grant independence to India and accepted Muslim demands for the creation of the separate

Muslim nations of Pakistan and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). On August 15, 1947, independence was granted. Gandhi spent the day alone in solitude, prayer and fasting for unity and nonviolence. But as millions of Muslim refugees fled to the two Pakistans and millions of Hindus fled East and West Pakistan for India, the country exploded in violence. Hundreds of thousands of people were massacred within a few short months.

Gandhi searched for a way to stop the killing. He decided to move into a poor Muslim home in Calcutta, the scene of the worst violence, and declared a fast unto death until the violence stopped. Within 73 hours, Hindus and Muslims not only stopped the violence, but began to march and pray together by the thousands. As Gandhi approached death, Calcutta came to a standstill and everyone prayed for peace. Gandhi ended his fast. The violence had stopped because no one wanted him to suffer for what they were doing. Gandhi had performed another miracle. Nevertheless, during those terrible years, nearly one million Indians were killed as the country was divided.

Gandhi then moved to Delhi to try to stop the riots there. On January 13, 1948, Gandhi began another fast to the death. This was his eleventh public fast. Huge parades were organized and meetings between local politicians and religious leaders were held, and on the sixth day, fifty leading Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, signed a peace pledge in Gandhi's presence. But Gandhi said this was not enough, and broke down sobbing. They insisted their commitment to Hindu-Muslim unity was sincere. As he listened to their pleas, he decided to end his fast. The next day, on January 20th, a bomb exploded while he was holding his outdoor evening prayer meeting. While many Muslims hated him as a Hindu leader, many Hindu fanatics hated him for defending and protecting Muslims. On January 29th, he said to a friend, "If someone were to end my life by putting a bullet

through me, and I met his bullet without a groan and breathed my last taking God's name, then alone would I have made good my claim." Gandhi expected he would be killed.

Gandhi felt that he had failed to convince India that nonviolence was the only way to independence. The partition of the country, the massacres, the riots, the deep hatreds and the world war left him sad and depressed. Still, he continued his public work of disarmament, and planned to travel to Pakistan. On January 30, 1948, at 5:10 p.m., as he walked through the garden to his evening prayer service, Gandhi was shot and killed. He fell to the ground calling out God's name.

"I have nothing new to teach the world," Gandhi wrote shortly before his death. "Truth and nonviolence are as old as the hills. All I have done is to try experiments in both on as vast a scale as I could. In doing so, I have sometimes erred and learned by my errors. Life and its problems have thus become to me so many experiments in the practice of truth and nonviolence."

### ***Gandhi as a Spiritual Teacher and Religious Leader***

"I am not a saint who has strayed into politics," Gandhi once wrote. "I am a politician who is trying to become a saint." While Adolf Hitler organized genocide in Europe, Franklin Roosevelt militarized America, Winston Churchill cheered on the Allies and Harry Truman ordered that atomic bombs be dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Gandhi was attempting an entirely new kind of politics based on the transformative spirituality of nonviolence.

Gandhi wanted independence for his people, but he did not want to kill anyone for it. He wanted the basic human rights of food, clothing, shelter, education, jobs, healthcare, and dignity for the hundreds of millions of impoverished Indians. But he

called for justice by first living in radical solidarity with the poorest of the poor. He demonstrated in his daily life, through the use of the spinning wheel and communal living, how they could transform their own lives, even as they sought political independence. He wanted to stop oppression everywhere in the world, but he did not want to use the methods of the oppressors and in the process become just another imperialist. He wanted to reach the heights of sanctity in his own life, and so he disciplined himself ruthlessly, denied himself basic pleasures, and shared his mistakes and faults with the world. He also refused to give in to a narrow world worldview, and instead led daily interreligious prayer services, called for religious unity, and opposed any injustice committed in the name of God.

The tie that binds Gandhi's life together is that Gandhi tried to be a person of integrity and authenticity. He wanted to do God's will, and he did not want to be a hypocrite. That meant he had to identify as radically as possible with the poorest people on the face of the earth. If he wanted to achieve the heights of divinity, he said to himself, he had to touch the bottom of humanity and become one with the starving millions. He learned quickly that the path to God required the ongoing purification of his own heart and life. Throughout fifty years of letter-writing, he always maintained that the way to peace, justice and salvation, begins first with the purification of one's own heart and daily life. As he purified his inner life, he stepped deeper into public turmoil and willingly suffered for his political beliefs, undergoing repeated arrests, trials, imprisonments, death threats, attempts on his life, constant verbal abuse, and fasting for his causes, coming to the brink of death on several occasions. Never had such religious idealism been practiced politically and socially on the world stage.

When Gandhi began his personal transformation at the turn of the century in South Africa, he realized that he could never hurt or kill another human being, or indeed, any creature; that there was no cause, however noble it may appear that justified the taking of another life. At the same time, he knew he could not be passive or indifferent in the face of the violence, racism, poverty, and war. Gandhi thought that an honest spiritual search for God must thrust a person into the world in search of justice for the poor and peace between warring peoples. But he also quickly concluded that the only way to pursue social change and justice for the poor--in the name of God--was through strictly nonviolent means.

“I am endeavoring to see God through the service of humanity, for I know that God is neither in heaven, nor down below, but in every one,” Gandhi wrote to a friend on August 4, 1927. If God is in everyone, Gandhi believed, then he would have to love everyone, even his enemy. He would have to side with the most oppressed, impoverished, suffering people on the planet, and not just once, but every day and for the rest of his life, come what may. If he remained true to this hard road, he knew his outcome was assured: not only political independence and peace, but the vision of God.

In this spiritual search, Gandhi came up with the method of satyagraha as a holy strategy for social and political revolution and widespread structural change. If one were willing to suffer and die for justice and peace, Gandhi taught, without even the desire to retaliate or kill, then the spirit of all-encompassing redemptive love would capture even God’s attention, win the sympathy of the world and wear down the opponent in the process until justice and freedom were achieved. It is a foolproof method, he insisted. As Gandhi sought the spiritual roots of political struggle, he realized more and more that he

was merely applying the ancient spiritual teachings of Jesus, Buddha and other religious figures to today's political crises. His great achievement was simply the scientific, systematic, steadfast application of ancient spiritual truths to widespread national and international problems.

“Every act has its spiritual, economic and social implications,” Gandhi told Ronald Duncan during his visit to Wardha. “The spirit is not separate. It cannot be.” Gandhi saw everything he did as a religious act. “I believe God is always near me,” he wrote a friend in 1906. “God is never away from me. May you also act in this faith. Believe that God is near you and always follow the truth.” To understand Gandhi, we need to notice his daily dedication to prayer, meditation, and scripture study. When he was a child, Gandhi's nurse taught him whenever he was scared, to repeat God's name over and over again throughout the day. He tried to continue this practice every day for the rest of his life. He sought to experience the presence of God every minute of his life. This personal spiritual search, coupled with his dramatic public search for God's nonviolent transformation of the world, inspires us today to attempt the same spiritual journey in our own lives.

“I have grown disillusioned with Western civilization,” Gandhi said after returning from the Round Table conference in London. “The people that you meet on the way seem half-crazy. They spend their days in luxury or in making a bare living and retire at night thoroughly exhausted. In this state of affairs, I cannot understand when they can devote themselves to prayers.”

Prayer was critically important for Gandhi. Each morning, he spent one hour in silent meditation before sunrise. Each evening, he spent another hour in silent meditation.

Every day for nearly fifty years, he read from the Sermon on the Mount, the Koran, and most importantly, the Bhagavad Gita, with a focus on the second chapter, which calls for renunciation of selfishness. There, he found instruction on how to do God's will and "see God face to face."

Gandhi viewed the Hindu scripture as a radical call to complete renunciation, steadfast love, and perfect nonviolence. He wrote many commentaries on the Gita, translated it several times, and tried to change his life and habits to fit its teachings. Using the teachings of the Gita, he summed up the model human being as one "who is jealous of none; who is a fount of mercy; who is without egotism; who is selfless; who treats alike cold and heat, happiness and misery; who is ever forgiving; who is always contented; whose resolutions are firm; who has dedicated mind and soul to God; who causes no dread; who is not afraid of others; who is free from exultation, sorrow and fear; who is pure; who is versed in action yet remains unaffected by it; who renounces all fruit, good or bad; who treats friend and foe alike; who is untouched by respect or disrespect; who is not puffed up by praise; who does not go under when people speak ill of him; who loves silence and solitude; and who has a disciplined reason." Gandhi spent his days trying to incarnate this spiritual ideal.

Gandhi then was not just as lawyer, politician, activist, social reformer, or revolutionary: Gandhi was a contemplative, a person of God, a saint. He showed the possibilities not just of Hinduism and Christianity in practice, but what it means to be human. He did so because he relied on God. He allowed God to disarm his heart and in the process became an instrument for God's disarmament of the world. Indeed, he not only rediscovered the possibilities of peace and justice, he recovered the possibilities of

holiness, innocence, and Godliness. That is why his life and martyrdom have become so influential not just for Indians, but for all people. He inspires us to seek God, to promote peace, to walk with the poor, to pursue justice, to meditate and to speak the truth

### *Gandhi's Message of Nonviolence*

Gandhi's greatest contribution to humanity is his message of nonviolence as the way to peace, justice, and God. Gandhi took seriously the biblical commandments, "Thou shalt not kill" and "Love your enemies," along with the Hindu tradition of *ahimsa* (non-killing), and applied this renunciation of violence to his own heart and life as well as to South Africa, India and the world. But he taught that nonviolence is not just refusal to kill: it is the action of love and truth as a force for positive social change. Indeed, he insisted that nonviolence was the most active and powerful force in the world. Since he saw it as the force of God, the method of God, the power of God at work for good among the human race, he concluded that nonviolence is more powerful than nuclear weapons. If millions of ordinary Americans would practice nonviolence, would peacefully, publicly and actively resist the production and maintenance of nuclear weapons, disarmament would be assured. Nonviolence always works, he said, because it uses the method of suffering love to melt the human heart.

While Gandhi was a brilliant political strategist and revolutionary, what set him apart from others was his unique reliance upon God in his public practice of nonviolence. Nonviolence for Gandhi was not just a tactic, but a spirituality, a way of life, the center of his religion. "Nonviolence succeeds only when we have a real living faith in God," Gandhi insisted. As such, Gandhi stands on the world stage as a prophet and an apostle, a messenger from God telling us that God is nonviolent and wants us to become nonviolent



even on the political, national and international levels, if we only dare try.

Though few nations have disarmed, Gandhi's life and teaching offers an ideal that many uphold. From grassroots activists to Nobel Laureates, billions of people around the world know about Gandhi and have been touched by him. Dorothy Day, Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, and Archbishop Tutu have all expressed their debt to Gandhi. Recently, while visiting the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, I saw a video of the late John Lennon, at the height of his fame as a Beatle, explaining how he thought Gandhi was right and that Gandhi's way of nonviolence was the only option for himself and for humanity.

Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote about Gandhi and edited a book of Gandhi's writings on nonviolence to help the growing peace movement oppose nuclear weapons, racism and the war in Vietnam. Merton concluded that the key to understanding Gandhi was to grasp his nonviolence not just as a tactic, but as a spiritual path to personal, social and global transformation. "Gandhi's spirit of nonviolence sprang from an inner realization of spiritual unity in himself," Merton wrote. "The whole Gandhian concept of nonviolent action and satyagraha is incomprehensible if it is thought to be a means of achieving unity rather than as the fruit of inner unity already achieved." If we can experience this same inner spiritual transformation, Merton declared, the power of God's spirit can work through us to transform the world.

Gandhi never gave up hope that the world would adopt his method of nonviolence. Indeed, he thought the experiment with widespread nonviolence was just beginning, that we were embarking on a whole new era in human relations, that the future of the world has the potential to be entirely different, with no more wars, no more

weapons, no more racism, no more sexism, no more violence and no more injustice. As the nightmare of World War II exploded, he told the great African American minister Howard Thurman that the only way nonviolence might be vindicated would be through an African American struggling for civil rights. In a few short years, Martin Luther King, Jr. was studying Gandhi at Morehouse College, Crozier Seminary and Boston University, and would emerge to teach the West the wisdom of this great peacemaker from the East.

“As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi,” King wrote in his first book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, “my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time its potency in the area of social reform. Prior to reading Gandhi, I had about concluded that the ethics of Jesus were only effective in individual relationship. The ‘turn the other cheek’ philosophy and the ‘love your enemies’ philosophy were only valid, I felt, when individuals were in conflict with other individuals; when racial groups and nations were in conflict a more realistic approach seemed necessary. But after reading Gandhi, I saw how utterly mistaken I was. Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale. For Gandhi, love was a potent instrument for social and collective transformation. It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered the method for social reform that I had been seeking. I came to feel that this was the only morally and practically sound method open to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.”

“I had come to see that the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to African-Americans in the struggle for freedom,” King observed. “Christ furnished the

spirit and the motivation while Gandhi furnished the method.”

### **Gandhi's Contribution to Modern Spirituality**

“If humanity is to progress,” King concluded, “Gandhi is inescapable. We may ignore him at our own risk.” Gandhi’s contributions to modern spirituality include not only his impact on social movements around the world through the political strategy of active nonviolence and satyagraha, but his transforming influence on religion itself. Thanks to Gandhi, many of the world’s religions have been inspired to return to their root beliefs of truth and nonviolence that they all share in common.

Gandhi’s influence is so great and yet so sublime that it is hard to categorize his many contributions and achievements. But a few essential teachings can be gleaned for his life work and testimony.

Gandhi’s primary contribution to spirituality and the world itself is nonviolence. Gandhi insisted that if our worship of God is honest, if our faith is sincere, if we want to be people of prayer, indeed, if we want to be fully human, we need to become people of nonviolence. Gandhi worshiped the God of nonviolence, and announced that every major religion was rooted in nonviolence. He taught that nonviolence could be put into practice at every level of human life, in our own hearts, among our own family and friends, in our local communities, as well as nationally and internationally. Gandhi urges us to get rid of our guns and bombs, stop hurting those around us, simplify our lifestyles, enter the public struggle for disarmament and justice, and pursue the depths of nonviolence. He said that each of us can do it, from the poorest prisoner to presidents and popes.

More than that, Gandhi challenges people of faith to recognize the hypocrisy in their lives. He argued that we cannot go to church, synagogue, and mosque one day, and

the next day, sanction war, support executions, foster racism or pay for nuclear weapons. We cannot claim to be people of faith and Godliness and at the same time, contribute to the world's faithlessness and Godlessness, as seen in murder, executions, warfare and nuclear weapons. For Gandhi, the only authentic spirituality is a spirituality of nonviolence. Every facet of life from now on, he said, had to be gauged from the perspective of nonviolence. When he applied this spirituality of nonviolence to South Africa and India, he showed how we can transform politics, religion, social institutions, laws, and even empires. He knew it would work because nonviolence, he said, is the way of God.

Through his dedication and sacrifice, Gandhi unlocked the spiritual dynamite, not only in the Hindu scriptures, but in the Gospels as never before, just when the world needed it most, at the dawn of the nuclear age. He gave us a way out of our madness. In particular, he showed Christians that the pinnacle of Jesus' teaching, the Sermon on the Mount, was not impractical, that it could be applied to nations as well as individuals, that it was not an interim ethic but the hallmark of all ethics. For Gandhi, the Sermon on the Mount was nothing less than a clarion call to active nonviolence, in Jesus' words, not to offer violent resistance to evil but to love one's enemies. Indeed, Gandhi held that Jesus was the greatest practitioner of active nonviolence in history, from his teachings and actions to his martyrdom on the cross. He said the only people in the whole world who do not understand, much less accept, the nonviolence of Jesus are Christians.

Gandhi's influence on Christianity is particularly important. He proclaimed that to be a Christian, one has to practice nonviolence. Anything less is not just infidelity, but betrayal. From now on, he pointed out, instead of being a pawn to state-sanctioned

violence, like Judas handing Jesus over to the empire, or practicing justified, redemptive violence, like Peter chopping off a soldier's ear in self-defense, Christians need to take seriously Jesus' last words to the community, "Put away the sword." In light of Gandhi's critique, every Christian church, by definition, has to become a community of nonviolence.

Second, "non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as cooperation with good," Gandhi said during the Great Trial of 1922. If we want to work for peace and live in peace, we must, due to the nature of the world, also work against war and stand against war. We need to be publicly active in promoting the common good as well as organizing against the common evil. Most people of faith have yet to grasp this essential spiritual insight.

Third, Gandhi thought that faith pushes us to promote peace and justice, but he revived the deep wisdom held by every ancient religious tradition that the way to positive, nonviolent social change for peace is through risk and sacrifice. Gandhi insisted that these issues are a matter of life and death, that they are spiritual questions, and that peace and justice requires the lifelong dedication and the willingness to suffer and die. This is not a new teaching. Jesus commanded his followers to take up the cross. The early Christians wrote that the way to the reign of God lay in our participation of the Paschal Mystery, the cross and resurrection. Gandhi translated the cross to mean an active willingness to be arrested, tried, imprisoned and killed for the cause of justice and peace. "Freedom is to be wooed only inside prison walls and sometimes on the gallows," he declared, "but never in council chambers, courts, or the schoolroom." Gandhi's path to political transformation is fundamentally rooted in the spiritual requirement of risk,

renunciation, sacrifice, even martyrdom.

Fourth, Gandhi teaches us to accept suffering, even to court suffering, if we want personal transformation, political revolution and a vision of God. “Nonviolence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering,” Gandhi wrote. “It does not mean meek submission to the will of the evildoer but it means the pitting of one’s whole soul against the will of the tyrant. Working under this law of our being, it is possible for a single individual to defy the whole might of an unjust empire to save his honor, his religion, his soul and lay the foundation for that empire’s fall or regeneration.” Indeed, Gandhi said that the soul of peacemaking lay not in the art of killing, but in the art of voluntary suffering and dying. He taught, like Jesus, that we must constantly die to ourselves, and confront systemic injustice with a profound willingness to lose our freedom and our lives if necessary, in order to be true to God’s reign of nonviolence.

When asked to sum up the meaning of life in three words or less, Gandhi responded cheerfully, “That’s easy: Renounce and enjoy.” Today, it is not popular to talk about self-denial or voluntary suffering, but Gandhi talked about it all the time. The key to his daring achievements lies in his own ongoing suffering, including his poverty, celibacy, arrests, imprisonments, attacks and assassination. He testified throughout his life that the more he denied himself and sought God and the good of humanity, no matter what the personal cost to him, the greater the joy and peace he experienced within himself.

Fifth, though Gandhi was a lawyer, politician and revolutionary, he acknowledged that his most powerful weapon was prayer. Through his daily meditation, he came to believe in the presence and nearness of God in day to day life. He did not see visions or

hear voices, but his prayer led him to a near total reliance on God that gave him the faith (much more important than courage) to undertake his bold public actions for justice and independence. Because Gandhi practiced peace through prayer and mindfulness, he was neither angry or strident. He radiated peace. He laughed constantly. He was full of joy. The more influential his life became, the more he relied on prayer, seeking greater solitude, even taking one day a week in total silence for the last two decades of his life. His commitment to prayer and his devotion to the spirit working in his heart through prayer, transformed Gandhi from a politician into a saint, someone who does God's will, through whom God speaks and moves and touches the human race.

Sixth, Gandhi held that radical purity of heart bears enormous positive ramifications for the entire world. This message was one of the most shocking and consistent core beliefs I discovered as I read through his collected works. He firmly believed that the more we purify our inner lives, the more our lives will serve God's work to end war, poverty and injustice. He taught that personal integrity was necessary for an authentic spirituality, for nonviolence. To this end, he suggested regular fasting throughout one's life, and became an advocate and proponent of fasting as a way to repent of one's personal sins and the sins of those we love. He would tell all politicians, activists and religious leaders to get their own hearts in order, to let God disarm their hearts, if they wanted to be of any help to others.

Seventh, Gandhi practiced a living solidarity with the poor and oppressed. Long before liberation theology, Gandhi gave away his money and personal possessions, renounced his career, moved to a communal farm, made his own clothes, dressed like the poorest Indian peasants, and shared their meager diet of fruits and vegetables. His

willingness to go to jail and his defense of the untouchables were other ways to share in the poverty of the masses. “Self-realization I hold to be impossible without service of and identification with the poorest,” Gandhi wrote. If we want to find God, he said, we must go to the poor, walk with them, serve the poor, learn from them, be disarmed by them and become one with them. The poor will teach us the truth, show us God, and share God’s reign with us. Gandhi’s solidarity with the poor echoes the Beatitudes and Jesus’ own unity with “the least,” as outlined in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25. Ask yourself if the next step you contemplate, Gandhi taught a friend, is of any use to the poorest person on the planet. Do whatever is most helpful for that person, and you will do God’s will.

Eighth, Gandhi advocated powerlessness as the path to God. Though he mingled with kings and viceroys and was hailed as the father of India, he preferred the company of the poor and urged everyone to avoid attaining power over others. “Have nothing to do with power,” he told journalist Vincent Sheean a few days before being assassinated. Gandhi believed that people of faith and nonviolence should not hold any position of authority over others because domination and the nation-state systems are rooted in violence. He himself could easily have become the first president of India, but he chose instead the path of downward mobility. He saw how power corrupts and blinds even the best people. He realize too that it sets us against the God of the poor. Since he sincerely wanted to do God’s will most of all, he knew he had to seek the powerlessness of the poor, just as Jesus did. If we all tried to become powerless, instead of powerful, he taught, we would discover our common identity as equal sisters and brothers of one another, and begin to serve one another. Then, peace would grow among us.

Ninth, Gandhi taught that each of the world’s religions has a piece of the truth and



deserves our respect. By advocating tolerance and the equality of religions, Gandhi suggested that we all share the same common ground of nonviolence and can live at peace with one another, even while holding different faiths. With this basic wisdom, Gandhi paved a new path to peace. He understood that most wars and injustice have religious roots in ethnic hatred, pride and idolatry. Just as the violence he witnessed in India was based in religious division and hatred, so will future wars be rooted in division and ethnic hatred. The remedy is simple: Our peacemaking efforts must begin with interreligious dialogue and cooperation, regionally and nationally. This will not only hasten the coming of peace, but model the peace we seek. This new interfaith peacemaking becomes possible when people of different faiths discover the common ground of nonviolence in all faiths.

Tenth, Gandhi held that the spiritual life, as well as all political and social work, requires a fearless pursuit of truth. Indeed, he consistently said that he worshiped God not just as the God of nonviolence, but as the God of truth. He came to the startling conclusion, as a devout Hindu, that Truth is God. In this journey, he demonstrated that power of John's Gospel declaration that, "The truth shall set you free." Over and over again he spoke the truth publicly, fearlessly, openly, and in total disregard of the consequences. He told the truth about poverty, war, racism, imperialism and nuclear weapons, when few could barely imagine it, much less speak it. Gandhi's spirituality was not rooted in any feel-good, warm-fuzzy, new age, false piety. It was based in truth and spoken openly with love. Rarely has any public figure spoken as boldly as Gandhi did. He knew that if he clung to the truth, he was clinging to God, and that the truth once proclaimed would do its own work and lead to new freedom and peace.

Eleventh, Gandhi urged that we let go of results, and simply trust in the goodness of the struggle for peace itself. Renunciation of results was a hallmark of the Bhagavad Gita and became the centerpiece of Gandhi's personal theology. Every day he reflected on this spiritual requirement, and over time, grew freer from the compulsion of having to be successful or effective, even though he worked hard to change the world. "Our task is to work away on behalf of what we consider to be right and just," he said, "and to leave the result to God, without whose permission or knowledge not a blade of grass moves." This spiritual path is particularly challenging for Americans, socialized as we are in a culture that idolizes success, achievement and effectiveness. But Gandhi's own life exemplifies the teaching: the more he pursued the truth of justice and peace through active nonviolence, and the more he let go of his desire to achieve these goals and placed the results in God's hands, the more that happened in his life. Here lies one of the mysteries of the spiritual life: The more we give ourselves to the struggle, but give the results to God, the more good fruit of peace and justice we receive as a gift from God. God was able to do more through him, Gandhi said, the more he left the outcome in God's hands.

Twelfth, Gandhi understood these basic principles of truth and nonviolence not just as romantic ideals or pious platitudes, but as actual laws of the universe, with the same palpable hold as the law of gravity. If we pursue truth and nonviolence, our lives will bear the good fruit of truth and nonviolence, Gandhi said. But he added that this outcome was as sure as Newton's discovery, that if we let go of an apple, it will in fact fall to the ground. Similarly, he observed, violence can only lead to further violence. Violence is not only immoral, it is always impractical. With this insight, Gandhi teaches

that there are no just wars, just revolutions, justified executions, or justified weapons of deterrence. Likewise, every action rooted in prayerful, peaceful, loving, committed nonviolence will bear good fruit. Again, he was simply explaining the Sermon on the Mount: You shall reap what you sow.

“Whether humanity will consciously follow the law of love, I do not know,” Gandhi wrote. “But that need not disturb me. The law will work just as the law of gravitation works, whether we accept it or not. The person who discovered the law of love was a far greater scientist than any of our modern scientists. Only our explorations have not gone far enough and so it is not possible for everyone to see all its workings.”

### **Gandhi's Writings**

“My writings should be cremated with my body,” Gandhi once wrote. “What I have done will endure, not what I have said or written.” Happily, the government of India disregarded his advice and spent over twenty years collecting every statement, letter and word written by Gandhi, in one of the most exhaustive publishing projects ever undertaken. In 1983, India completed the publication of the ninety-five volumes of *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, a massive undertaking with over 43,000 pages of letters, speeches, essays, telegrams, memos, and books by Gandhi himself, every piece of writing they could find. (There are probably thousands of letters scattered around the world still to be added.)

Gandhi's writings comprise one of the largest collections by a spiritual and political figure ever gathered. For this book, I read through those ninety-five volumes, as well as dozens of other collections and biographies. It has been an exhausting, eye-opening, and inspiring experience. But any effort to distill all that material into a slim

volume of essential writings will be incomplete. For further study, I recommend reading Louis Fischer's outstanding, definitive biography, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*; Thomas Merton's own collection, *Gandhi On Nonviolence*; and the recently published biography by Stanley Wolpert entitled, *Gandhi's Passion*.

Gandhi was not quite a literary figure, like Thomas Merton; or a theologian, like Karl Rahner; or an intellectual, like Simone Weil; or a poet, like Thich Nhat Hanh and Daniel Berrigan. He was a man of action, and though he wrote for hours every day, it was always in haste, as a duty--to urge others on to the spiritual life and political work of nonviolence. So his writings should be considered in the context of a life in turmoil.

I have broken down Gandhi's writings into a few key groupings, beginning with his autobiographical writings and followed by sections on "The Search for God," "The Pursuit of Truth," "The Practice of Nonviolence," "The Disciplines of Prayer and Fasting," "The Urgent Need for Nuclear Disarmament," and "The Life of Steadfast Resistance," which features several key speeches and a sampling of his letters.

### **Conclusion**

In the end, Gandhi challenges each of us to seek God through our own active pursuit of truth and nonviolence. He invites us to pursue the spiritual, political, economic and social depths of peace with the same fierce determination and sacrifice that he undertook. Gandhi urges us to let go of our desire for fame, fortune, power and ego, and instead to walk with the poor, simplify our lives, pray to God each day, practice nonviolence in every area of our life, and work publicly for the abolition of nuclear weapons, star wars, war itself, poverty, racism, sexism, hunger, the death penalty, abortion, the sanctions on Iraq, handguns, environmental destruction, homelessness,

religious bigotry, animal exploitation and violence of any kind. He calls for nothing less than the total transformation of our lives and our world. In this call, he stands with Francis of Assisi and Dorothy Day, as a messenger of God and a model of faith and peace.

“We are constantly being astonished these days at the amazing discoveries in the field of violence,” Gandhi once observed. “But I maintain that far more undreamt of and seemingly impossible discoveries will be made in the field of nonviolence.”

Gandhi would want anyone who reads his words to undertake similar “experiments with truth” in their own lives, in pursuit of new discoveries in the field of nonviolence, so that a new day of peace with justice will soon dawn and we can all rejoice to see God face to face. May his hope and prayer come true.

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