

# ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

By Arun Gandhi

There are few among the 20<sup>th</sup> century leaders who can measure up to the standards set by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in the practice of ethical leadership. He not only won independence for India but ultimately brought down the British Empire without firing a bullet, which in itself was a remarkable achievement that could only be done with ethics, morals and a transparent sincerity in leadership. Through his example he gave the world an alternative to violent conflict resolution - a comprehensive philosophy of nonviolence - the practice of which requires high moral standards.

The answer to the often asked questions how and why he succeeded in his nonviolent campaign lies in understanding his philosophy of nonviolence. It will be my humble attempt in this chapter to share with you my interpretation of his philosophy and to connect nonviolence [or what Gandhi preferred to call *Satyagraha*, the Pursuit of Truth] with ethical leadership.

Clearly for Gandhi the word nonviolence meant much more than the absence of war or the absence of violence. He proved that the true practice of nonviolence is also about people's attitudes, behavior and relationships not only with each other but with nature and earth as well. A more understandable definition is the "culture of violence" that has so obsessively dominated human life for centuries. Gandhi's life mission was to help change the "culture of violence" to a "culture of nonviolence;" the only way humanity could be truly civilized. Gandhi preferred the term *Satyagraha* because it gave the philosophy greater breadth and depth. He always maintained that only positive thoughts could lead to a positive destiny and he defined positive thoughts as love, respect, understanding, compassion and other such positive actions and emotions. He would classify the violence that humankind practices today into "physical violence" and "passive violence"; the first being the kind of violence that requires the use of physical force and the latter the kind of violence that we commit consciously and unconsciously when we hurt people through selfishness and insensitivity often without even touching them or seeing them. We are taught from childhood to be successful in life by any means possible and success is always measured in terms of material possessions. We, therefore, succumb to our egos and become extremely selfish. Gandhi set himself very high standards in his practice of ethical leadership, standards that we often find difficult to practice.

His ideal in life was the story from the *Mahabharata*, a Hindu mythology, where Lord Rama is depicted as the epitome of ethical leadership. Even when the action hurt him, Lord Rama did not flinch from the Truth. As a crown prince expected to inherit the throne of his father's kingdom, Lord Rama was told instead that in a moment of weakness his father had promised to banish him to the forest for 14 years. Without seeking an explanation or showing any hesitancy or bitterness Lord Rama renounced everything, left the Palace, the kingdom and his beloved family and spent the next 14 years in absolute wilderness. This sacrifice for truth and for his father's dignity was

what impressed Gandhi the most. Gandhi tried to model his leadership according to these standards. In fact Gandhi often talked of creating a “Ramrajya” [rule of Rama] in India after independence. Many people, even some of his close colleagues, misunderstood it to mean he was aspiring to create a Hindu India. Gandhi did not envision Lord Rama as a Hindu deity but as a model human being and when he talked of a “Ramrajya” he meant an administration based on such high ethics and morals.

In the modern world leaders believe otherwise. Ethics and morals are issues to exploit for personal aggrandizement and peace can only be achieved through brute force. Consequently, nations are vying with one another to build enormous stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction. Gandhi believed the peace that is achieved by holding a gun to someone’s head is a peace that comes through fear and lasts only as long as one is able to maintain a high level of fear. Similarly impossible is the belief that one can be highly ethical and moral while still being selfish and greedy. The connection between ethics and nonviolence is the same as between a seed and a tree.

Let us look at Indian history of a couple hundred years ago and even something that has happened in the recent past to see the consequences of discarding ethics and morals in our everyday actions and relationships. In 1857 the British Indian Army decided to introduce Ensign Rifles as a weapon of choice. The British were aware that the ammunition for this rifle had to be bitten before it could fire. Displaying total lack of ethics or concern, the ammunition distributed to the Indian soldiers was smeared with beef tallow and pork fat. The former were distributed among the Hindu soldiers and the latter among the Muslim soldiers. It sparked off a violent conflagration that ended in a massacre just as the more recent event where a Belgian Editor decided to publish cartoons depicting Prophet Muhammed as a terrorist. This has nothing to do with freedom of expression. Gandhi would have considered both incidents highly immoral, insensitive and totally unnecessary. In the same breath he would have condemned the ensuing violence as being equally unethical, insensitive and unnecessary.

The bloody revolution of 1857 convinced Indian leadership [prior to Gandhi] that they would not be able to match British power to commit violence. The Indian struggles for independence between 1857 and 1915 were nonviolent but without ethical leadership that abhorred non-physical violence as much as physical violence. As a result, they met with no success. Gandhi’s early experience in South Africa convinced him that violence can only be combated by nonviolence, as hate with love and anger with compassion. It meant that nonviolent struggle must not only be totally nonviolent but the leadership must be wedded to a high standard of ethics and morality. Understandably, there was a great deal of anger among the people of India because of British oppression which reflected in the Indian leadership so that the first casualties were ethics and morals. When Gandhi came to India in 1914 and was entrusted with the leadership of the Indian struggle he took a leaf from Napoleon’s treatise on war – the General who holds the initiative wins the war. Gandhi decided if the British held the initiative of military power he was going to wrest it from them by displaying superior moral power.

At no time in any of his struggles whether in South Africa or in India did Gandhi consider his opponents “enemies” nor did he allow others on his side to ever speak of the opponent as an enemy. He always maintained that in the practice of nonviolence

there are never any enemies, they are friends who are misguided. General J. C. Smuts, the South African Prime Minister who had to suffer the brunt of Gandhi's nonviolent campaign, confessed to Gandhi in 1914 that he could deal with angry railway employees who struck work because they were angry and hateful and he did not mind using crushing violence against them. However, he said, he had a hard time dealing violently with Gandhi because he was always so loving and considerate.

General Smuts held Gandhi in high esteem because he saw that although Gandhi opposed his policies of discrimination, as a person Gandhi also held Smuts in high esteem. During World War II when the Conservative British Government led by Sir Winston Churchill unleashed a vilification campaign against Gandhi and called him a traitor, General Smuts publicly denounced the British saying he cannot accept anything bad said about Gandhi. Sir Winston is, perhaps, the only person whom Gandhi failed to impress with his ethical leadership.

Gandhi proved that moral and ethical behavior is inexorably linked to the sincere understanding and practice of the philosophy of nonviolence. Those who claim that nonviolence is a strategy that can be used when convenient and discarded would also believe that ethical and moral behavior too can be used when needed and discarded when not. Gandhi would totally disagree with this point of view. He would say both ethics and nonviolence must become the law of the being so that one becomes imbued with positive thoughts, positive deeds and positive attitudes culminating in a positive destiny. In other words, to be effective nonviolence must be internalized.

Since nonviolence really dawned on Gandhi at the age of 37 does it mean that ethics and morals also came to him at that age? There is no evidence to suggest that ethics and morals have anything to do with genes or the way he was brought up. Early childhood experiences would play a significant role in awakening the good within them and help one to nurture that good. I recall a significant bit of advice that he once gave me. He said, "Childhood experiences and lessons learned in school amount to the acquisition of knowledge. The important thing is how one transforms that knowledge into wisdom." Gandhi looked at life as a staircase to ultimate civilization and salvation which one had to climb assiduously one step at a time. This ascent must be the commitment of every individual.

To make his point, Gandhi emphasized over and over again that he came from a very ordinary family. He had the same experiences as anyone else and, also like everyone else, he became a victim of friends who tried to waylay him. From his early childhood Gandhi was interested in ways to free India of British oppression. He was most disgusted to find a Christian missionary standing by the roadside denouncing Hinduism in loud and vulgar terms. Gandhi writes in his autobiography of how he and his best friend in school often discussed ways to seek independence and the conclusion always was that the British are tall and strong because they eat meat. The conclusion, obviously, was that Indians would have to start eating meat if they valued independence. The proof of this observation was, of course, Gandhi's friend who, being a Muslim, ate non-vegetarian meals. He was, Gandhi concluded, physically bigger and stronger than others and always excelled in physical activities. All of this convinced

Gandhi that he had to start eating meat so that he could successfully fight the British when he grew up. This activity had to be clandestine because his family would be very upset if they found out. To buy these non-vegetarian meals he had to steal money from home had to often eat two dinners or lie to his mother that he wasn't hungry. We know how lies have a tendency to multiply. Eating meat led to smoking cigarettes because that, again, was what the British did. More money had to be stolen for cigarettes or, worse still, he picked up stubs from the gutters to salvage whatever tobacco he could and then roll his own cigarettes. This experience went on for about a year and the guilt haunted Gandhi until finally he decided he had to confess. However, he did not have the courage to speak to his parents so he wrote out his confession and one evening, finding his father alone and relaxing Gandhi stole into the room and slipped the letter into his father's hands. Although he wanted desperately to run from the room he found himself rooted as his father read his confession. When he saw tears trickle down his father's cheeks he began to cry too. The father tearfully forgave his son. The confession, the son says, helped cleanse him of the guilt. This experience made him aware that one must be more discerning and not indulge in wrongful activities.

There was a woman in Gandhi's early life who introduced him to spiritualism and, more importantly, to the need to be firm in one's convictions. The woman was his mother. His mother was a very religious woman wedded to the Hindu tradition but very open-minded and respectful of other faiths. Like most Hindu women she often took strange dietary vows. The idea is to give something up that one loves the most and since food plays an important role in one's life the vows that she took related to skipping a meal, eating only two items a day and, the one that troubled her son the most was the vow not to eat until she saw the sun. She took this vow during the monsoon season when the sun was often covered by grey clouds for days. His mother would continue to attend to all her household chores with a smile, cook and feed the family and never once regret the fact that she could not eat. As a little boy Gandhi would often sit at the window praying for the clouds to disperse so his mother could see the sun and eat her meal. When on rare occasions this did happen he would scream for his mother to come quickly to the window but often when she could leave what she was working on and come to the window, the clouds would again cover the sun. When this happened she would smile and go back to her chores and tell her son "God does not want me to eat today."

It is important to remember that Gandhi was the youngest of six siblings - two were from a different mother - but he was the only one who was concerned about his mother's vows. This experience taught Gandhi the need to be firm and committed in the practice of anything one undertakes and, importantly, to firmly adhere to whatever one sets out to do. His desire to study all religions grew out of his experience at home. His parents were genuinely interested in learning about other forms of worship and often invited diverse religious leaders to join them for dinner and a friendly discussion of their beliefs. This experience convinced Gandhi that a friendly study of all scriptures is the sacred duty of every individual. Gandhi concluded there is only one God and that different people know God by different names. This, he believed, is the foundation on which the sincere practice of ethics and values is based.

Evidently Gandhi was more sensitive to and accepting of these little experiences at home which did not appear to have influenced the other siblings. Gandhi's scholastic record does not indicate exceptional brilliance. He struggled with many subjects yet was more receptive to what his parents did at home. Gandhi, it must be said, made a conscious effort to convert the knowledge that he gained at home into wisdom by his determination and commitment.

When Gandhi claims in his autobiography that there was nothing special about his family or the manner of his upbringing he was attempting to dispel the notion that the family was extraordinary or that he was exceptionally gifted. He did all he possibly could to convince people that they can become the change they wish to see in themselves. However, he did miss one important point: That the family - especially his parents - was extraordinarily compassionate, loving, respectful and committed. Stories of his father's truthfulness and compassion as the Prime Minister of an important and sizeable Princely State in India are legendary. In spite of wielding absolute authority over all aspects of administration, there was not a single instance of nepotism or personal aggrandizement against him. In fact, he was the epitome of modesty and compassion that he was known to give freely to anyone who came to him for help. His mother was the same which is why on the premature death of his father the family was reduced to poverty. They did not save nor did they possess any property that could sustain the family through the difficult times. This might appear to be irresponsible but Karamchand Gandhi believed that someone's immediate need was much more important than his family's long term need.

It was this positive attitude - love, respect, compassion, understanding, and acceptance - that ultimately became the foundation of Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence. The world, according to him, is consumed by selfishness and greed leading to other negative attributes which, taken as a whole, leads to the "culture of violence." It is this culture that not only leads to conflict, war and violence but eventually to the deterioration of relationships, exploitation, discrimination and the hundreds of ways in which we feed the fire of violence in society. Is this attitude inevitable because it is human nature? "No," says Gandhi. Instead of putting out the fire of violence we have been feeding it for generations. If humanity makes the attempt, we can change the culture of violence to a culture of nonviolence. "Positive thoughts," Gandhi said, "lead to positive words; positive words to positive habits and eventually positive habits to positive destiny."

If anything, Gandhi's life proves that while a compassionate family and early experiences provide one with the means to acquire greatness, it is primarily the responsibility of the individual to convert those experiences into something positive. The assumption that someone from a "good" family will necessarily be "good" is wrong. In the modern sense it might be said that a good family would ensure a good education and that would ultimately lead to success. This is true, but only in the material sense. According to Gandhi material success leads to moral degradation since materialism fosters selfishness and greed.

This leads to the inevitable question: Whose morals and ethics are we talking about? There are two parts to this question. The first is the belief that ethics and morals are different in different religions and the second is the belief that what may be good for one is not necessarily good for another. Since ethics and morals, according to Gandhi, have their roots in love, respect, understanding, acceptance and compassion they have to be common to all religions. But then, Gandhi would ask who in this world can say that they do not have their own personal code of morals and ethics. Of course those who swear by materialism would be selfish in their interpretation while those who hold morality sacred would look at ethics and morals in the universal sense.

There is another important attribute to ethical leadership and that is humility. Many years ago I met an eminent Indian politician, Dr. Shriman Narayan, who later became the Governor of the State of Gujarat in India. He shared with me a transformative experience which, he said, is important for leaders to remember. He was a scion of a very wealthy Indian family privileged to do his post-graduate studies at the London School of Economics in the early 1930s. When he received his doctorate in economics he was so proud of his achievement that he returned to India full of grandiose schemes to transform India's economy.

"Give me your blessings so I can change India," he told his parents.

An ardent follower of Gandhi his father said: "First seek Gandhi's blessings before ours."

Young Shriman soon headed for Gandhi's ashram in Sevagram, Central India, which was as primitive as a Gandhi ashram could be. There were several hundred families living a simple, nonviolent life-style. On arrival Shriman went straight to Gandhi and enthusiastically narrated his achievements and briefly outlined his grand economic scheme.

"I am here for your blessings," he said expectantly.

After a few minutes of unsettling silence Gandhi said: "Tomorrow morning I want you to join the group that cleans the toilets."

Shriman was shocked. However, he held Gandhi in high enough esteem not to question him. Instead he thought as he left Gandhi's room: "I will perform this odious duty and satisfy Gandhi and get his blessings."

Carrying buckets of urine and night-soil to the fields, emptying them, washing the buckets and replacing them for use again is the most humbling duty one can perform. For someone who had not even picked up a glass of water this experience was particularly unpleasant. He just could not understand why a doctor from the London School of Economics had to do such work. Reluctantly, he finished the work, had a bath, changed into fresh, clean clothes and reappeared at Gandhi's door for his blessings.

Gandhi said: "Not yet, young man. You will have to first convince me that you can do this work with the same zeal and enthusiasm as changing the economy of India. Only then will I give you my blessings."

It took Shriman several weeks to acquire that humility to regard the cleaning of bucket toilets as important as changing the economy.

It seems clear to me that a deep understanding of nonviolence, or satyagraha, is essential to practice true ethical leadership. Without an acceptance of nonviolence, conflict resolution today has become, for the most part, an exercise in futility because the conflict keeps recurring. I fear the same could happen to ethical leadership, for only with a foundation in the philosophy of nonviolence can leaders inspire a destiny based in love, respect, understanding, compassion and other positive emotions and actions.  
END