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THE DUALITY OF SEPTEMBER 11

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By ARUN GANDHI

Founder/President, M. K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence

Not many are aware that while for all American people September 11, 2001, is a black day of mourning and hopelessness, for some it is a day of hope and harmony. It was on September 11, 1906, that my grandfather, Mohandas K. Gandhi, launched the first major, public nonviolent campaign against race prejudice in South Africa thereby demonstrating to the world that nonviolent resolution of most conflicts is possible. He later elevated his philosophy to a higher level and called it Satyagraha - pursuit of Truth - because he believed human beings needed to be aware of the many forms of violence that we practice knowingly and unknowingly.

Thus, September 11, 2006, will mark the centenary of a positive event, a truthful way of life and one inspired by Faith, Hope and Harmony. I have been agonizing over whether we Americans should continue to observe September 11 every year as a black day that we wish never happened or can we transform it into a day of hope and harmony. Can we change it to a day of introspection to accept that we individually and as a society need to radically change our lives and our relationships if we wish to avoid the recurrence of terrorism in the world? I don't mean to devalue the sacrifice made by the 3000-plus people who perished in the WTC towers, or the 2000-plus young men and women sacrificed in the hope of teaching the bad guys a lesson, nor the 50,000-plus Iraqi men, women and children consumed because of what happened on September 11. It is an enormous sacrifice the world is paying for the mistake of 20 people.

In deference to what Gandhi taught us can we observe September 11 as a Day of Prayer for Peace and Harmony? A day when we can all pledge first to create peace, harmony and respect at home and then pledge to work for peace, harmony and respect in our societies and eventually in the world? Gandhi's vision of nonviolence was not a pipe-dream. He demonstrated that we can practice it effectively if we "become the change we wish to see in the world."

Gandhi realized more than a century ago that we humans have made religion divisive and detrimental to peace and harmony. As a young boy growing up with grandfather I remember him saying that religion "is like climbing a mountain. If we are all seeking to get to the same peak why should it matter to anyone which side of the mountain we choose to climb up from?" When asked he would say he was a Hindu, a Muslim, a Christian, a Buddhist because he respected them all and he took nuggets of wisdom

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from each to enhance his understanding of God. He was distressed by the modern belief that each religion “possesses” the Truth. He believed no religion possessed the Truth but that religion practiced with humility can lead to the pursuit of Truth and a true understanding of the meaning of God. Possession leads to arrogance and disrespect for others while Pursuit leads to humility and respect.

It may be arrogant, naiveté or even stupidity on my part for believing that we can transform this world. But, I do believe like my grandfather did that Faith in God can only become meaningful if there is Faith in Humanity. We cannot hate and destroy what God created and still profess to love God as the Creator.

I propose that as a nation we resolve to observe September 11, 2006, and every September 11 thereafter, as a Day of Prayer for Peace and Harmony. We ought to begin the day with each family saying a short prayer for peace and harmony and resolving to work as a family to bring peace and harmony at home.

I then propose that as a community every neighborhood or town or city hold a multi-faith prayer for world peace and harmony as Gandhi did. Ever since I can remember Gandhi's prayers, every morning and evening, were held on an open field or in a neutral hall where no symbols of any religion were displayed. At the most there would be a candle burning and everyone assembled would together sing the prayers of every major religion of the world. Those who attended by the hundreds, if not thousands, came from all different Faiths.

Can we not replicate that? Can we not invite every religious group in town to come with their congregants to a multi-faith prayer at a neutral venue? Many years ago, after the Rodney King episode that tore Los Angeles apart my Institute organized such a prayer in Memphis, Tennessee, since tensions between African Americans and whites had reached breaking point. Some 36 local religious leaders came to the soccer field at Christian Brothers University with more than 600 black, white, brown believers and non-believers and each religious group adhered to the stipulation that they say a five-minute prayer of peace according to their tradition. It was a beautiful ceremony and many believe that it went a long way in dissipating the anger that seethed in the city. For months thereafter the people of Memphis could not stop talking about this great spiritual experience. Can we replicate this nation-wide? Or world-wide? Or, are we so steeped in the ways of violence that peace has become meaningless?

[P.S. Copies of the Gandhian inter-faith prayers and the individual and family pledges can be ordered from the M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence]