

PASSIVE VIOLENCE FUELS THE FIRE OF PHYSICAL VIOLENCE BY ARUN GANDHI, PH.D

The following excerpts are from the lecture by Dr. Arun Gandhi at Soka University of America, Aliso Viejo, California, on August 23. Earlier in the day, he also spoke at the dedication of the classroom building named in honor of his grandfather and grandmother, Mohandas and Kasturba Gandhi. Arun Gandhi is President of the M. K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence based in Memphis.

Whenever I speak on nonviolence, everybody wants to know: “What can I do in Ireland? What can I do in the Middle East to bring peace?” But nonviolence is not about one individual going to troubled spots to work for peace. Nonviolence is more about how we behave toward one another, and how we incorporate the philosophy of nonviolence in our own lives. Because all the violence that is taking place all over the world is an expression of the violence that exists within ourselves, and unless we become the change we wish to see in the world there will not be peace anywhere. So, we have to begin with ourselves. I hope that tonight after my talk you will be convinced that nonviolence has to begin with you, and that you will make an effort to make this a part of your attitude and life.

I would like to invite you to participate in a little game with me. I would like each one of you to partner up with the person sitting next to you. Do you all have a partner? I would like one member of the partnership to make a tight fist, and imagine that you have the most precious item in the world in your fist. I’d like the other member to open the fist. Tell me very honestly, how many of you asked the other person to open the fist? Now you see how violent we are. I simply asked you to open the fist, but instead of asking, everybody became physical and started using violence. That’s an indication that we need change in our attitudes and our hearts.



If we analyze the violence today, we’ll find that more than eighty percent of the violence that consumes our society is generated by anger. Something happens or doesn’t happen and people get angry and do all kinds of crazy things. Once it is done there is nothing you can do to change it.

I’ve been in correspondence with some prisoners trying to teach them nonviolence. I got a letter from a drug dealer whose good friend was his partner. One day they had a heated argument and his partner reached under the seat of the car to get something and this person felt that his friend was going for a gun. So, he pulled out his gun and shot and killed him. Of course, he was arrested, tried and put in prison.

At the trial he realized the mistake that he had made and said that he tried to speak to the widow and children of his friend and apologize to them. But they didn’t want to look at or speak to him. The gist of his letter was on nonviolence. He said, “I wanted to apologize and they wouldn’t listen to me.”

I thought it was a very arrogant statement. I wrote to him and explained that we are not talking about slapping somebody and then apologizing. I said maybe they will never forgive you. But you will have to ask for forgiveness every day of your life, every moment of your life. Not only ask for it, you but will have to live it.

I think I touched a chord somewhere in him, and he has begun to correspond with me. We have become friends, and he has become a very transformed human being.

What I want to illustrate with the story is that one moment of madness transformed his life completely. How many such moments do we have in our own lives, when we do something crazy. Maybe not to the extent of killing somebody, but we destroy relationships, we destroy friendships. We don't speak to people because of one little thing. Anger causes a lot of violence. If we can only learn to transform that anger and use it positively, it will be a great help to bring peace in this world. Also we have to remember when we talk about violence, it's not just the physical violence that we see around us. There is much more to it than just physical violence.



Passive violence is all of these little things. All the waste, the precious things we throw away, the over-consumption, the oppression, the suppression, the hate, the prejudice, the teasing, the name-calling, and all the things that hurt somebody are passive violence. All of you, as I demonstrated a moment ago, commit passive violence all the time, consciously and unconsciously. All of that passive violence adds up so that the victims of that passive violence then explode into physical violence. So it is passive violence that fuels the fire of physical violence.

Logically, if we want to put out the fire of physical violence, we have to cut the fuel supply. The fuel supply comes from us, so unless we become the change we wish to see in the world, unless we acknowledge that we are violent people, we won't do anything about it. We will sit back and wait for somebody else to change and so nobody changes. If we become the change, we can bring about peace and understanding in the world.



How can we be nonviolent at home with our children? How do we bring up children nonviolently? When I was six, living with [my grandfather in India] there was another family who had a six-year-old boy, and we became very good friends. This boy had a tremendous sweet tooth. He had to have sweets all the time, and if he couldn't get any desserts or candy he would eat spoonfuls of sugar. The result was a rash all over his body. His doctor said he was not to be given any candy or sweets until he was cured. Yet, his parents would have sweets on the table and they would eat them.

This young boy didn't obey his parents; when nobody was looking he would eat them. After a few days his mother realized that he wasn't obeying her, so she brought her son to my grandfather to speak to him and explain that he should not eat sweets. When grandfather said to come back after fifteen days, and "I'll speak to him," she went away quietly wondering why grandfather couldn't speak to the boy right then.

She came back after fifteen days. Grandfather took the boy aside, spoke to him for less than a minute, and the boy went home and gave up sweets; wouldn't touch sweets anymore. The parents came back and said: "What kind of miracle did you perform? We were trying to tell him the same thing and he wouldn't listen to us. Yet, you were able to speak to him for less than a minute, and he obeys you instantly."

Grandfather said: "It wasn't a miracle. The reason I asked you to come back after fifteen days was that I had to give up sweets for fifteen days before I could ask him to give up sweets. So, all I told him was that I'd given up sweets and I wouldn't eat sweets until he was allowed to eat sweets, so will you please give them up?"

That is what parents don't do. As parents, we want to use our authority to make children do what we want; we are not willing to do it with them. It doesn't work. We have to live what we want our children to learn. It's only when we live by example that they will learn.



We think that justice means punishment, that justice means “an eye for an eye.” We are constantly told this. The media and society drums this into us all the time — unless somebody pays for what has happened to us, we cannot be satisfied. That's not justice. That is revenge. Revenge is not going to help anybody. If we want justice then we have got to think about reformation. We have to recognize that the person has done something wrong, and has done it out of ignorance or lack of understanding. We need to help that person understand, to educate and reform that person. I am a big advocate of prisons being places of reformation rather than punishment.



We have to get to the root of the whole problem. The root of the problem is all the passive violence that we practice in society, and all the disparities that generate out of this passive violence. As long as we have that kind of situation in society, we are going to have more violence. I hope that I have been able to share with you some of the things I learned from my grandparents and parents, which will help you become the change that we all have to be to make this world a peaceful place.

I want to share a few final words from my grandfather. These are some words of wisdom I found a few weeks ago when I was pouring through grandfather's writings, and I brought them along to share with you. I hope that they will help you benefit also.

He says: “Keep your thoughts positive, because your thoughts become your words. Keep your words positive, because your words become your behavior. Keep your behavior positive, because your behavior becomes your habits. Keep your habits positive, because your habits become your values. Keep your values positive, because your values become your destiny.”
Thank you.