FREEDOM FROM THE MADNESS

Told by Arun Gandhi

Souren Bannerji had always thought of himself as a peaceful man. But when his wife, son, and daughter were raped and murdered by a hate-filled crowd of Muslims in Calcutta, Souren found himself thinking, then doing, the unthinkable. He joined violent Hindu mobs, seeking revenge. He was involved in the massacre of a Muslim family. Having killed a child, Souren knew he'd be haunted forever.

Souren knew of only one man who could return him to a path of peace. His name was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, but people called him *Mahatma*, which means "Great Soul." At the same time, Gandhi was trying to teach total nonviolence to the people of India, and in some ways it was working. His active nonviolence freed India from British imperialism in 1947; like Souren, many needed to believe that the Mahatma had at least one more miracle.

Gandhi knew all too well that anger, unchecked and uncontrolled, turned people toward mindless violence. He described anger as an energy as potent as electricity itself, and warned that if anger was abused, it could destroy and kill. But, used intelligently, that same energy could enlighten human lives.

Gandhi had had to face his own anger when, as a young lawyer, he met with racial prejudice in South Africa. One fateful day, a white man refused to share a railroad compartment with a "blackie." Railroad officials physically threw Gandhi off the train. His humiliation burned, but he maintained his self-control and with deep, meditative breaths and some chanting, peace descended upon him. As he calmed himself, he concluded that justice was not revenge but enlightenment, and enlightenment could not be beaten into people, it could only be revealed through active nonviolence. Throughout his life, Gandhi came

to see nonviolence as more than just a means toward conflict resolution. It was the basis of his spirituality, the sacred oneness of humanity.

However, just because his soul was great didn't mean things came easily to him. In 1946, when the British left, and the country was divided—India for Hindus and Pakistan for Muslims—hundreds of thousands of people were uprooted from the homes and lands they had occupied for generations, and in their anger, murder, mayhem, and rape prevailed. Gandhi was profoundly discouraged. His efforts to teach people to live as one family, peacefully, to put religious and personal prejudices behind them, seemed forgotten.

"If inhumanity is what my countrymen want, I have no desire to live," the anguished leader said. He embarked on a fast unto death. "I tried to teach people humanity, but they prefer bestiality," he lamented. "It is better that I die than live to see this carnage." Although he was a Hindu, the Mahatma chose to fast in a little hut in the poorest Muslim ghetto of Calcutta.

If the people did not stop fighting, Gandhi would most certainly die. At seventy-eight, he no longer had the strength or the stamina to sustain starvation for a prolonged period. Hindus and Muslims alike realized that if Gandhi should die, they would carry a burden of guilt. As much as he had cared for them through the years, now each Hindu and Muslim felt as though his or her own father were about to die for the wrongs they had done.

Souren Bannerji, for one, knew he could not let the Mahatma die. In his heart, he knew his own worst act of violence had been committed just the day before Gandhi announced his fast. Now this news about his hero was exactly the motivation he needed to detach himself from the mob. After about a week of soul-searching, he summoned up the courage to approach Gandhi face to face.

Souren hiked to the hut where Gandhi barely hung on to life. Quietly, reverentially, he entered the room where a medical doctor, an old friend, was patiently rubbing the Mahatma's forehead. Souren placed his head on Gandhi's feet and sobbed uncontrollably, asking forgiveness. "*Bapu* [father], forgive me. I am a sinner and deserve to die, but you must live," Souren pleaded.

"We are all sinners, my son," Gandhi answered, his voice barely audible. "Come close and tell me about your sin."

Souren let the words tumble out in a torrent. "I have committed a heinous crime. I murdered a Muslim family after my family was killed. My life has become a living hell. I can't accept the additional burden of your death on my conscience, *Bapu*. Please give up your fast."

"If you want to save my life, go and work for peace and harmony. And if you want to atone for your sin, I have a suggestion," Gandhi said.

"Tell me, *Bapu*," Souren said. "I will do anything you say. I want peace and I want you to give up your fast."

"First, for yourself. Go and find an orphan Muslim baby and nurture the baby as your own. You must allow the baby to grow up in its own faith." Gandhi was finding speech exhausting. He lapsed into silence, then added, "We are one human race. Religion must unify us, not divide us." With these words, Souren went away, thinking about the great man's counsel.

Word spread of Gandhi's fast and his appeal for unity and harmony. Whether the people stopped fighting because they understood his message of oneness, or simply because they wished to save his life, it is difficult to say. In any case, peace came quickly.

Souren did not forget the promise he had made to Gandhi. In his search for an orphaned Muslim child, he found a young Muslim mother with an infant baby who had miraculously escaped death. Her husband and family had been killed, she had been repeatedly raped, and now she was an outcast.

As they told each other of their suffering, Souren and Miriam found they had much in common. Slowly they came to trust, then love, each other. One day Souren shared with Miriam the last words he had heard from Gandhi: "We are one human race. Don't let religion divide us."

Souren and Miriam were married. In the spirit of Gandhi, they decided they would study both of their religions and absorb the good each had to offer.

I met Souren in Bombay several years later. He and Miriam had two children: Miriam's son, whom Souren had adopted, and a daughter. They never forgot my grandfather's role in bringing them together, in making love and new life triumph over a past scarred by hatred and violence. Before we parted that day, they told me how they had learned an important lesson from Mahatma. Looking at each other, and at their two precious children, they confided, "We understand what Gandhi meant when he said, "Change can come only one life at a time."

Experience the power of nonviolence as a proactive tool to build and maintain human relationships and avoid conflict. Call the **M. K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence** at 901-452-2824; e-mail gandhi@cbu.edu; or visit the institute's Web site, www.gandhiinstitute.org.