



We Must Be the Change We Want to See in the World

Arun Gandhi

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Born and brought up in South Africa, Arun Gandhi faced a lot of prejudice because of the color of his skin. "It filled me with a lot of anger," he says. "I wanted an eye for an eye. I began to go to the gym to learn how to fight back and defend myself."

Thankfully, his parents recognized the seriousness of the situation, and thought it wise to bring Arun to India to live with his grandfather, Mahatma Gandhi. There the 12-year-old could learn from the great teacher himself, before he let anger take control of his life.

Arun's parents knew that the temptation to respond to prejudice with violence and anger had occurred in their family before. In fact, the great Mahatma himself had had a very similar experience early in his life.

As a young lawyer, Mahatma Gandhi had been the victim of racial prejudice upon arriving in South Africa. He'd been thrown off the first-class car of a train, since people of his color were banned from traveling first class. This humiliation made him really angry. Initially he felt compelled to react to this treatment with anger. However, before lashing out, he stopped himself, realizing that using anger would only perpetuate a cycle of violence—and would ultimately turn into something even worse. He vowed right then and there to dedicate his life to doing whatever he could to stop this cycle of violence, beginning with himself. And he famously went about creating a practice of using nonviolence to resolve sociopolitical and interpersonal conflicts.

He delved deeply into studying *Ahimsa*, the principle of nonviolence toward all living things. *Ahimsa* is a central tenet of many eastern religions, found in the ancient codes and texts of Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Little did this angry young man know that one day his life, and his message of the power of nonviolent response to oppression would influence the world's greatest civil rights leaders, including Dr. Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez—and would ultimately lead to a massive improvement in the lives of millions of people around the world.

When Arun arrived in India, his grandfather shared the teachings of *Ahimsa* with his grandson. And he talked to him openly about his own difficulties in controlling his anger. "*Ahimsa* extends far beyond physical nonviolence; it must include all forms of passive nonviolence," Arun explains. "It doesn't simply mean 'Don't hit, don't hurt, don't kill, don't harm.' *Ahimsa* extends to the negative things we say to one another. Our destructive actions. It even extends to our thinking, like the negative patterns of thought we find ourselves in, or the anxieties we fixate upon."

Arun's grandfather told him to write every day in an anger journal, to help him learn how to manage his anger and search for positive solutions. "This helped me understand my anger, and learn how to channel the energy of anger into something positive," Arun says. "That's the most powerful lesson he taught me: to use the energy constructively, rather than destructively."

Arun sees an analogy between the power of anger, and the power of electricity. "It's just as useful, and just as powerful, but only if we use it intelligently," he says. "It can be just as destructive too: so we must channel this energy to be in service of the good of humanity." He pauses, then adds, "I believe this type of training should be compulsory education for young people. So much pain and violence in the world could be avoided if youth understood how to channel their anger."

Arun fondly remembers walking by his grandfather's side as they traveled through the villages of India. There he could sense the greatness of this man he called Grandfather. After dinner each night he had a nightly practice of self-analysis with his grandfather. "He made me draw a genealogical tree of violence, like a family tree. In the tree, violence was a grandparent, and physical violence and passive violence were the two offspring."

Every night before Arun went to bed, he would do this self-analysis, thinking about what had made him angry during the day, and putting it on the tree. "Physical violence we know about and understand. We see it and we can see that it hurts," he says. "Yet we don't think about passive violence when we are young. There are many things we do that we just don't think of as being violent. Anything we do that hurts somebody or something, directly or indirectly, is violence. Hoarding resources. Overconsumption, when so many are going hungry. And of course, the way we treat the natural world around us; the environment." He adds, "All this analysis made me realize that passive violence fuels physical violence; so we must cut off the fuel supply, which comes from each one of us. It is just as my grandfather said: we must be the change we want to see in the world."

Mahatma Gandhi was one of the first to recognize the dangers of the global climate situation. He spoke out against violence against nature in all its forms. He stressed that when we don't live in harmony with the natural world, it's inevitable that we will destroy nature - and ourselves. For today's youth leaders in the environmental movement, Arun believes that his grandfather's message would be the same.

"My grandfather always tried to convince people to bring about a change," he says. "Our leaders preach, but they don't practice. If we want to seriously deal with the climate situation and get the people of the world to stand hand in hand, the leading countries must follow their own advice. Even children learn more from what they see than what they hear. It's the same message for adults in this movement, who are working either on their own efforts, or in support of their children: *you must live what you want others to learn.*"

As a self-described "peace farmer," Arun has taught countless numbers of people over the years how to abide by the principles of *Ahimsa*. In 1987 he and his beloved wife Sunanda were invited by the University of Mississippi to study racial prejudice in South Africa, India, and the U.S. Then in 1991 they founded The M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence. They spent decades traveling back to India to work with orphanages and homelessness in India. Over the years Arun has been increasingly troubled by the destruction of the environment, in both South Africa and India. In impoverished communities, he was disturbed seeing mining operations with little or no regulation, and heavy deforestation. Wherever he goes, the main thread he sees linking this destruction of the environment is poverty.

"Everywhere I go I see the same thing. Wherever there is poverty, there is more pollution. If we don't eradicate poverty in the world, we won't be able to stop this environmental degradation. Millions of people in India and Africa live in such poverty that they are forced to use up any resource they can just to survive. Miners wear out their land to sell coal and oil to rich countries. When they don't have the money for cooking or heating oil, people go into the forest, and chop down trees to use as fuel. When the forest gets used up, they must burn things like plastics and garbage to keep themselves alive in winter, and this causes massive amounts of pollution." He pauses, and sighs. Then he adds, "This sort of problem can't be addressed without addressing poverty. Unless desperately poor people have an alternative, we can't really save the environment. There has to be a balance between materialism and morality."

Arun's global travels have caused him to focus his energy on compassion as a necessary part of any healing. "Some of the most devastating social problems in the world, like homelessness and poverty, can't be solved by government. Government does not have the capacity to deal with the issue of compassion. Simply pouring money into an issue does not eradicate it. It can only be solved by rebuilding self-respect and self-confidence in people - and that can only be done by people like you and me," he says. But he adds that those who are attempting to help need to maintain a sense of humility. "We must listen to the people with these problems. Sit with them, talk with them, and try to understand from *their* perspective how their problems can best be resolved. This is what nonviolence teaches us: humility, and compassion, and love. And understanding."

Today, 86 years old, Arun is still inspiring people. After his beloved wife passed, he moved to Rochester, New York to be near his daughter and her family. He is often invited to lecture and talk to people, and to write about climate change and nonviolence. In 2015 he traveled to Martha's Vineyard to be with youth leaders from around the world at the Stone

Soup Leadership Institute's Sustainability Summit. They were awestruck by Arun's stories of his grandson. “Young people today are hungry for a deeper level of authenticity,” he says. “They are longing for us to take the time to listen to them, and work together with them to solve some of these challenging issues facing our world.”

Perhaps they are the ones who will be able to implement more of the noble tenets of *Ahimsa*, so that the world will truly be able to forge a path through this climate crisis with balance, perspective—and most of all, humanity.

The day the power of love overrules the love of power, the world will know peace.

Mahatma Gandhi

Call to Action: Become involved with Arun’s work to create a better, safer, more humane world by visiting The M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence at <https://gandhiinstitute.org> .

Stone Soup Leadership Institute
www.stonesoupleadership.org
www.soup4youngworld.com