



This morning I wanted to talk with you about courageous people who have chosen nonviolence as a way of life, and what it would mean for this congregation to follow such a thread in your ongoing efforts to resist evil and overcome violence. My goal is to educate you about the principles of nonviolence as they have been developed and adapted by leaders such as Gandhi, King, and others; and to inspire you to seek out further training in nonviolent direct action, grounded in our own UU principles and values, as leaders in these movement times we are living in.

Those of you who are familiar with the work of the Great Soul, Mohandas Gandhi, know that he brought the arts of nonviolent political action to new heights in India in the first half of the twentieth century, as Matt reminded us in the story today.

Some of you may also know that we are a few weeks out from the (January 30 1948) marks the 70th anniversary of the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by a Hindu nationalist. He believed Gandhi had made too many concessions to India's Muslims. And so on January 30, a few weeks from now, India's political leaders will visit the memorial to Gandhi at Raj Ghat, a black stone platform in a small park, to pay their respects to Gandhi and his legacy of ahimsa, non-violence, and satyagraha, the name he gave to his program of political action.

I last visited this memorial in 1993, in July. My family and I had just moved to India and we were on an American Express tourist bus exploring the most famous sites of the city: the majestic Red Fort in Old Delhi, the Jama Masjid mosque, Humayun's Tomb. Alongside those monuments to India's rich history, the memorial to Gandhi was quite bare and simple. A mirrored, black stone platform, a green park. Right after we visited, as we headed back to our tour bus, the skies parted and our first monsoon poured from the sky. Sheets of rain. Buckets of rain. Walls of rain. Umbrellas were of absolutely no use, we discovered; the rain poured in sideways, or rose up in rivers from below. The roads were instantly flooded, three feet deep with water, and as our bus turned the corner I remember seeing children leaping into the roadway to splash in the waist-deep stream.

The great soul and peace activist Mahatma Gandhi told us,

I worship God as Truth only. I have not yet found Him, but I am seeking after Him. I am prepared to sacrifice the things dearest to me in pursuit of this quest...But as long as I have not realized this absolute truth so long must I hold by the relative truth as I have conceived it. That relative truth must meanwhile be my beacon, my shield and buckler.

Gandhi was a devout Hindu. To him, *Sat*, truth, was the highest dharma, the highest way of fulfilling one's purpose, of supporting not only the way things are (the order of the planets, the coming of the monsoon), but also the way they should be (being a moral person, upholding the law). *Sat* was Absolute Truth, it was God, it was Brahma. But he also thought it was the height of human arrogance to think that any of us actually know what this truth is, that any of us have actually attained this truth in our lifetimes.

In fact, if we were to attain *Sat*, realization, Ultimate Truth, Immutable Truth, within Gandhi's understanding of Hinduism, we would no longer experience the constant cycle of death and birth. We would be liberated from the cycle of death and rebirth, or really redeath and rebirth, and we would be free.

Those of us gathered to consider these words today, then, do not know this Absolute Truth, and so, according to Gandhi, we have to be satisfied with lowercase-s sat, relative truths. It is these relative truths that inform our acting in the world, that help us make decisions, that allow us to act while seeking the highest truth.

Because these small-t truths are relative, because they are not the Ultimate Truth, it made sense to Gandhi that those who are seeking the truth would always be open to the possibility that they are wrong. His life, then, was not an exercise in truth, not an example of truth, but a series of experiments in truth.

And that's what he titled his autobiography, *My Experiments With Truth*.

His political campaigns, too, campaigns that liberated a people from two hundred years of colonial rule, were not truth campaigns. They were satyagraha, grasping for truth, reaching out for truth, seizing truth, in order to persuade others of a series of small-t truths. The goal of a non-violent political campaign was to change the mind of the opponent, to win him over with moral integrity, lead him to see his error and move with the protestor toward right action. That's why before Gandhi led his people to the sea, on the Great Salt March, he wrote the British colonial rulers a letter telling them exactly what they were going to do, why it was just, and what they wanted the British to change. Lord Irwin did not reply, and the historic March continued.

If you hear resonances of how Rev. Martin Luther King led nonviolent political action in this country, you are indeed following this thread; King was strongly influenced by Gandhi and who helped to develop and adapt the powerful combination of religious innovation, meaningful social action, and political strategy to further and transform justice movements in this country. Gandhi wrote to Lord Irwin in 1930, and King wrote to the moderate white ministers of Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. Both knew that to win was not only to win political freedom; it was to win over those on the other side, to eliminate enemies by making them friends. This commitment was so foundational to nonviolent direct action that King enshrined it in his second Principle of nonviolence, writing

Nonviolence seeks to win friendship and understanding.

The end result of nonviolence is redemption and reconciliation.

The purpose of nonviolence is the creation of the Beloved Community.

I am sure you have heard this before, but can you stay here with me a moment? Can you see the combination in these words of political strategy, spiritual discipline, and philosophical commitment coming together? When courageous people engage in nonviolent struggle, they try not to demonize their enemies. They fight hard to keep their enemies from harming self, other, planet, and from amplifying suffering at any level, but in the end, they try to remember that we are all in this together – which is a deeply, deeply theologically Universalist message.

When I attended a training in nonviolence earlier this fall with CLUE, we stayed with this idea for awhile, trying it on for size, wrestling with it. Some of the examples concerned LA traffic. LA traffic pits us against one another in mortal combat, but the answer will never be to get all those other crazy drivers off the road, right? That's just not possible. The answer – if there is one – is to convince all the crazy drivers on the road to start treating one another with more compassion and grace, as if they were friends, not enemies after all. Many years ago my husband and I started calling all the other drivers on the road by the term "friends." So that when we moved to LA and got onto the freeway at rush hour, we'd react not with cursing, but with a greeting: hello, friends! With that word alone, we transform our road enemies into companions, doing exactly what we are doing, which is trying to get where we're going in one piece.

A few months ago my personal commitment to nonviolence as a political strategy, a personal spiritual discipline, and as a philosophy put down new roots in my community. It wasn't my idea, but when a group of white supremacists showed up at a meeting of the Committee for Racial Justice in my neighborhood, it became clear to me that this wasn't only about a justice movement somewhere else or far away. It was about my park, my playground, my nearest neighbors. The goal of the white supremacists was to intimidate and disrupt, and they were extremely successful – the first time they came, that is. The second time it was even worse.

By the third time, though, things had changed. The Committee had gotten more organized and supported, including receiving training in nonviolence and in conflict deescalation. They reached out to the community and organized hundreds of people, including a dozen local clergy leaders, to support their work, and to prevent further disruption of their peaceful meetings. The third meeting opened with songs of freedom, continued with discussion and questions, and closed with a rousing call for commitment to the ongoing struggle for justice. The disruptors never showed. But it was after that experience that I knew I needed more grounding in this commitment I wanted to make – a commitment to resist evil and overcome violence through peaceful, nonviolent means.

When I began this sermon, I said I had two goals: to educate you about the principles of nonviolence as they have been developed and adapted by leaders such as Gandhi, King, and others; and to inspire you to seek out further training in nonviolent direct action, grounded in our own UU principles and values, as leaders in these movement times we are living in. I hope I've been successful, because in our times death-dealing forces are tearing and rending the fabric of community almost faster than we can reweave. In times like these, nonviolence can be – and is already-- the thread courageous people are following, as we seek to fight injustice and overcome violence with a force more powerful.

The poet [William Stafford] tells us,

*There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
...You don't ever let go of the thread.*

May it be so.

Sources

"Six Principles of Nonviolence" are fundamental tenets of Dr. King's philosophy of nonviolence described in his first book, *Stride Toward Freedom*. This summary is from <http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy>

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