

What Would Gandhi Do?

by Eileen Barker

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While the rewards are great, working as a mediator can be very challenging. We are called upon to help people navigate some of life's most difficult problems. I sometimes think: If I could seek guidance from any wise person, past or present, who would it be? My thoughts sometimes turn to great political leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King, Jr., or noble spiritual beings such as Mother Teresa and the Dalai Lama. However, I invariably select Mohandas Gandhi, a man who was a master of both the political and spiritual realms, and who inspired each of these other individuals.



While not himself a mediator, Mohandas Gandhi was certainly a peacemaker par excellence. He successfully fought discrimination and political oppression on two continents using only nonviolent means. So I ask myself: What would Gandhi do? What lessons can mediators and others in the field of conflict resolution learn from his extraordinary life?

Gandhi's Life

Gandhi was born in 1869 in Porbandar, a small village on the west coast of India. After studying law in England, he accepted a job in South Africa. There, for the first time, Gandhi experienced rampant, institutionalized racism. Gandhi rallied the Indian community with community meetings, marches and boycotts. He was imprisoned on numerous occasions. Yet, he was steadfast in his willingness to sacrifice his freedom, and even his life, if necessary, in his stand for social justice and racial equality. During this time, Gandhi coined the term "satyagraha" to describe the pursuit of justice on a massive scale, by an entire people or nation. He defined satyagraha as "holding to truth" or "truth-force." He set out to prove that love, truth and nonviolence could transform political and social institutions.

After nearly 20 years in South Africa, Gandhi returned to India and committed himself to a life-long fight for India's independence. Over the next 30 years, Gandhi waged his legendary and successful campaign of non-cooperation against Great Britain. Early on, he called for a day of national prayer and fasting throughout India, bringing the country to a complete standstill. Years later, he led thousands on a 240-mile march to the sea to mine

salt in violation of British law, again demonstrating the true power of the Indian people. As in South Africa, Gandhi recognized that the pursuit of change would require suffering and sacrifice, and he endured long periods of fasting and imprisonment. Throughout, his commitment to nonviolence was unwavering.

Gandhi's Legacy

What is remarkable about Gandhi are not just his accomplishments, although they are extraordinary. What is truly remarkable are the means through which Gandhi achieved these results. Gandhi was not a political ideologue, and he was not motivated by personal ambition. Rather, his life was devoted to a spiritual quest. Gandhi recognized early on that all of the ancient religions convey the same essential truths. He concluded that love, truth and nonviolence were synonymous with each other, and synonymous with God.

Gandhi's gift to the world was in applying the spiritual truth of love and nonviolence to political and social struggles. As Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in *Stride Toward Freedom*: "Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale." King concluded: "If humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable. We may ignore him at our own risk."

Gandhi's life thus offers us a treasure trove of profound teachings, each of which is directly applicable to the work of any conflict resolution professional:

Lesson One: Focus on the Inner journey

The focus of Gandhi's life was his quest for self-realization. He had a daily practice of meditation and prayer and often said that his sole goal was to come "face to face with God." The rewards of the ego, such as power, wealth and fame, were of absolutely no interest to him. In light of his accomplishments, it is noteworthy that Gandhi never held a political office or official title. Gandhi began his career as a lawyer, but later disavowed his profession and claimed as his occupation "farmer and weaver." While others clamored for power and wealth, Gandhi purposely lived in a region of extreme poverty, in a simple home with few possessions, choosing to serve the poorest of the poor. Ironically, his detachment from worldly pursuits, and his inward focus, were the source of his immense power and effectiveness.

In contrast, think of all of the time and energy many of us spend worrying about our careers: how to gain recognition and prestige, how to attract more business, how to earn

more money, how much to charge, and so on. Gandhi teaches that it would behoove us to focus far less on these external trappings, and instead, concentrate on our inner development. Gandhi shows us that as we learn to increase our patience and compassion, develop our courage and authenticity, and focus on how we can best contribute to others, we will be more far more effective and successful professionally.

Lesson Two: Practice Nonviolence

In Gandhi's view, there is no cause that justifies the taking of another life or harming of another living being. This follows from Gandhi's realization of spiritual unity. Gandhi believed that one cannot not harm another without harming oneself. Gandhi recognized that if God is in everyone, as he deeply believed, then he would have to love everyone, even his enemy. He taught that nonviolence must imbue one's words and thoughts, as well as one's actions. Even in the throes of the life and death battles in South Africa and India, Gandhi was uniformly considerate of and respectful to his oppressors and opponents, often winning both their admiration and friendship.

As conflict resolution professionals, treating each person with respect and consideration is fundamental to our creed. Can we go a step farther, and work to eliminate negative thoughts, beliefs and judgments? What about the difficult person, the one who seems to be blocking resolution? What about the person who is threatening, or deceptive, or unreasonable, or petty? Gandhi teaches that there can be no exclusions; we must learn to practice nonviolence - in our words, thoughts and actions - with each and every other human being.

Lesson Three: Serve Others

Gandhi believed that God is in every person, without exception. Therefore, he devoted himself to serving humanity, especially the poor and outcast. Gandhi once settled in a poor village and began serving the needs of those who lived there. A friend asked if Gandhi's objectives in serving the poor were purely humanitarian. Gandhi replied, "Not at all. I am here to serve no one else but myself, to find my own self-realization through the service of these village folk."

One of Gandhi's most profound messages is embodied in this talisman. "Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest person whom you have seen, and ask yourself if the next step you contemplate is going to be of any use to that person."

Gandhi challenges us to consider, at a deep level, whom our work is serving. Are offering our services to those in the community who most need them? Are there ways we can contribute to those whose problems are often unseen and whose voices are often unheard? Rather than view the poor as separate from ourselves, Gandhi challenges us to see our oneness with the poorest among us. He beckons us to serve the poorest and weakest, and in so doing, to serve ourselves.

Lesson Four: Be the change

In large and small matters, Gandhi would not ask another person to do something he himself was not willing to do. This is best summed up in the Gandhi's famous quote "Be the change you want to see in the world."

Most of us in the conflict resolution field would of course like to see lots of change in the world. Our life's work is aimed at helping others learn to resolve conflict peacefully, to communicate more effectively, to be listen with an open mind, so on. Yet Gandhi's admonition counsels us to concentrate on changing ourselves. Taken to heart, this is much easier said than done. It means in our own conflicts, we must learn to approach the situation as an opportunity for growth and learning, practice our listening skills, and be willing to see both sides. It means we must each become a model for the behaviors that we are asking of others.

Lesson Five: Experiment with Your Deepest Values

Gandhi viewed his entire life as an experiment. In his autobiography, aptly entitled "The Story of My Experiments with Truth," he says: "Truth and nonviolence are as old as the hills. All I have done is to try experiments in both on as vast a scale as I could do. Life and its problems have thus become to me so many experiments in the practice of truth and nonviolence."

Gandhi challenges us to use our own lives as a laboratory in which we apply our deepest values and, in doing so, discover what is possible. Gandhi did not want followers. He wanted others to join his search for self-realization and for realization of the truth. He wanted others to pursue their own experiments. What is your deepest value? What will your experiment be?

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