

Gandhi and King: A Comparison

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As Activists Committed to Nonviolence

Gandhi and King had a philosophical commitment to nonviolence. Nonviolence here is defined as the exercise of power based on “the principle which comes increasingly to motivate a human being as he or she transforms the desire to injure others into its positive counterpart.”¹ Activists who hold a philosophical commitment to nonviolence employ this principle in all aspects of their life and at all times. It is a creed that calls on adherents to not only avoid harming others but to work positively to uplift others, including opponents. The idea is not to avoid the exercise of power, but to use power, such as economic or moral power but not military power, to create change without injuring the opponent or at least by inflicting as little harm on the opponent as possible.²

Gandhi and King were both men of action who wished to agitate for change without harming others. For them nonviolence is not about passive resistance to evil, which is a form of inaction that neither countenanced. Rather, nonviolence is resistance that is active, creative and dynamic, but also not violent in its implementation. Gandhi and King did not seek conquests, they sought converts. They used power not to defeat opponents but to win their hearts and minds through a loving, albeit forceful, process of nonviolent conversion based on purity of means. Nonviolent activists, therefore, refuse to give in but neither do they strike back in vengeful anger. This principled stance begins to raise questions in the opponent’s mind that eventually (not always) leads the opponent to change his or her ways. Gandhi called this process *satyagraha* or truthforce and King called this soulforce and referred to it as the marvelous new militancy.³ It is this power, or force, that could peacefully transform a conflict, leading to a truly just resolution.

Gandhi and King made use of similar nonviolent strategies that initially relied on negotiations with the opponent that had to be conducted openly and in a spirit of goodwill and faith. If negotiations fail, gentle persuasion comes next, usually in the form of public declarations based on moral arguments. If that fails, the strategy calls for increasing the pressure on the opponent by first using nonviolent noncooperation, such as economic strikes and boycotts, and then using nonviolent civil disobedience, which involves openly breaking unjust laws and willingly accepting the punishment, often a prison sentence, in order to draw attention to the injustice.

But it is no small surprise that King’s philosophy and strategy of nonviolence was similar to Gandhi’s. During his academic pursuits, King was influenced by African Americans, such as Howard University’s President Mordechai Johnson, who had traveled to India to study Gandhi’s form of resistance. Moreover, King visited India in February 1959, shortly after the Montgomery Bus Boycott made him a household name. King’s trip to India “consummated his conversion to nonviolence.”⁴ He acknowledged Gandhi’s influence on him when he said that the trip for him was akin to encountering famous heroes of the American Revolution, such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.⁵ While he traveled to other countries as a tourist, King declared that he came to India as a pilgrim.

On a personal level, King’s trip to India prompted him to try to adopt some of Gandhi’s practices as his own, such as fasting, meditation and material dispossession, but he was not as successful at this as was Gandhi. King did not attempt to copy Gandhi’s vegetarianism, confessing a weakness for barbecue.

On a broader scale, King was impressed by the Indian government’s considerable efforts to improve the plight of India’s oppressed classes, such as its so-called Untouchables. Upon his return to the United States, King made special U.S. federal government aid to blacks one of his cardinal goals. He also wished that U.S. presidents, such as Dwight D. Eisenhower and Lyndon B. Johnson, had the moral courage to work on improving the condition of blacks in America the way he observed India’s national leaders working to uplift its Untouchables.⁶

As Political Leaders of Nonviolent Resistance Movements

Leading Adherents and Followers

Neither King nor Gandhi sought the mantle of leadership. If not for Gandhi’s rude exposure to white racism on a train in South Africa, he may not have ever tried to organize Indians there. Instead, he probably would have become South Africa’s richest “colored” attorney. Moreover, upon his return to India after a twenty-year absence, Gandhi was not initially a prime mover in Indian politics. Nor did he deliberately seek out injustices against which to launch nonviolent resistance campaigns.⁷ The same can be said of King who was a reluctant leader at first.⁸ Upon his return to the South after years away at northern schools, King planned

on having two careers, first as a pastor at some respectable middle class church in the South and second, as a university professor. Leading and organizing a mass nonviolent resistance campaign for 13 years was not among his plans.

Both Gandhi and King were newcomers to the movement whose leadership reigns they assumed. Gandhi had only been in South Africa a very short while before he began organizing the Indians. Likewise, King had only been in Montgomery a short while before he was nominated to head up the bus boycott effort. He was not a long-time member of Montgomery's established black elite. King was chosen as the boycott's leader because he was well educated and an articulate speaker, which appealed to Montgomery's black professionals, and also because he was a Baptist minister, which appealed to Montgomery's largely Baptist churchgoing blacks.⁹

King's leadership of his adherents and followers contrasts sharply with Gandhi's. King was not the administrator Gandhi was. While Gandhi kept scrupulous books and financial records, King did not possess this attention to detail. But King's closest aides, who shared his philosophical commitment to nonviolence as a way of life, did not expect King to be a great administrator: He was a dreamer, an orator and a holy man of faith. According to one aide,

what else does he need to be? He's a symbol that there needs to be a moral voice in America talking about the injustice and the inequity.... He doesn't need to know how to answer a telephone.¹⁰

King did not like to make personnel decisions, especially those involving somebody's dismissal. He was steadfastly loyal to close friends and advisers, like Stanley Levison and Jack O'Dell. Levison was King's close friend who, among other things, helped King write his books. O'Dell, who helped run King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) office in New York and had an affinity for numbers, had built a substantial donor list. When the U.S. Justice Department admonished King to jettison Levison and O'Dell because they were thought to be communists, King balked, demanding to see proof. But when the government failed to produce any shred of evidence, King demurred, his sense of loyalty to Levison and O'Dell trumping whatever political calculus the federal government was trying to get him to make. Eventually, however, direct pressure from President Kennedy and his brother Robert compelled King to fire O'Dell, which was one of the most agonizing decisions he ever had to make. Nevertheless, King maintained close contact with Levison despite the Kennedy brothers' entreaties. And when King finally succumbed to intense pressure to force the resignation of yet another controversial aide, Bayard Rustin, he nevertheless maintained close contact with Rustin, so much so that the "firing" was official in name only.¹¹ He even had to be convinced to fire a SCLC staffer after it was clear the staffer was stealing from the SCLC's treasury.

Unlike King, Gandhi was not reluctant to abandon even the oldest of relationships. When he discovered a childhood friend, who was living with him in South Africa and to whom he felt he owed a debt, in bed with a prostitute, Gandhi immediately expelled him from his house and never welcomed him back again. And Gandhi was less averse to wading into the middle of difficult and controversial matters that arose within his movement. Although his was an inclusive type of leadership, Gandhi also had authoritarian, even dictatorial, traits when it came to getting his way in the Congress Party.¹² Gandhi knew how popular he was and how essential his participation in Congress was in order for Congress to obtain mass support. However, if Congress began to veer in a direction that Gandhi opposed, he would threaten to resign. Gandhi was able to force Congress into choosing one leader over another and to force Congress into adopting his *satyagraha* methods as official party platforms, even though many, if not most, of the Congress leaders did not share anything near his philosophical commitment to nonviolence. Despite their intense love for him, some leaders, including Jawaharlal Nehru, thought Gandhi's ideas about nonviolence, village spinning programs and a simplistic life of labor without heavy industry were not just quaint and quirky, but downright dangerous to the security of an emerging modern India.

Neither was Gandhi reluctant to involve himself in the personal confrontations among his followers. A famous example of this is the feud between two of Congress's greatest leaders, Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel. Both men were headstrong, stubborn and possessed great force of personality and they disagreed on many policies and programs within the Congress Party. Their feud grew so bad at times that they could not even stand to talk to each other. After independence, both leaders would write to Gandhi offering to resign so that the other could assume unquestioned leadership over the Congress Party and the country's government (which were virtually one and the same thing just after independence). Yet Gandhi would have none of that, taking an active role in urging them to work together to iron out their differences. Nor was he reluctant to take sides in these feuds, agreeing with one person (usually Nehru) and opposing the other (usually Patel).

In King's case, when differences among staff emerged, he often remained silent, seemingly aloof. He appears to have had no stomach for settling disputes between people in the movement. He often procrastinated when he was called on to make a difficult decision. He didn't like to confront antagonistic personalities among the black leadership. When it came to debating, arguing or otherwise doing battle within the movement, "he was at a loss," said trusted confidante Rustin.¹³ Since Montgomery, King presented "an almost galactic remoteness" to those around him and, according to David J. Garrow, "combat with people outside the movement was one thing, but head-to-head unpleasantness was something King avoided consistently," adopting a passive stance instead.¹⁴

This is ironic when considered against the backdrop of King's active nonviolence, which calls for increasingly confrontational forms of intervention in government functions. Some saw King's passivity and gentleness amidst rowdy office gatherings as a fault while others saw it as a valued blessing. He would quietly sit through raucous sessions and then, in Hegelian fashion, he would reach a synthesis among all the different viewpoints, trying to appeal to everyone.¹⁵ Aides said he never got angry and demonstrated unusual patience.¹⁶ Perhaps that is exactly the type of leader the Civil Rights Movement needed, given its many discordant voices.

As moral spokespersons, both felt strongly about people taking the initiative for their own self-improvement. Both used their leadership roles to reform their own people from within as much as they sought to confront oppression from without. King argued that blacks "must assume the primary responsibility" for making changes that would improve their status.¹⁷ If blacks believe that others will be more concerned about their rights than they are themselves, then they will contribute to their own victimization and marginalization. In criticizing blacks for becoming cynical and disillusioned with American society, King said they,

have so conditioned themselves to the system of segregation that they have lost that creative something called *initiative*. So many [blacks] use their oppression as an excuse for mediocrity.¹⁸

Gandhi was a tireless reformer of Indian society. His three part social welfare program—weaving homespun cloth (*khadi*), attaining Hindu-Muslim unity and ending Untouchability—reveal his passionate desire to reform India. In constantly preaching that people should make and wear *khadi*, Gandhi sought *economic* reform to revive each village to help make it self-sufficient. In preaching Hindu-Muslim unity, Gandhi sought *political* reform to ensure the survival of a united Mother India. And, in launching his controversial attack on Untouchability, he sought *spiritual* reform in an effort to save Hinduism from self-decay. These issues were far more important to him than was political independence from Britain, for what was the point of changing political leadership in Delhi if village life remained so hopelessly destitute, if India was brutally divided and if Hinduism remained an oppressive system?

Neither Gandhi nor King hesitated to criticize those with whom they had philosophical disagreements. Of Malcolm X's aggressive rhetoric about using any means necessary in defense of black rights, King argued that such an approach was neither morally nor strategically sound. Of the white clergy who gave sympathetic lip service to black civil rights, King chastised them for too often being a taillight rather than a headlight. He said they were "more cautious than courageous" and content to remain silent "behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass."¹⁹ Of the black activists in the Civil Rights Movement, King complained that it was populated with too many middle class people and not enough

activists from the grassroots in the rural south or the northern ghettos.²⁰ Of the Federal Government, on which he relied so much in his confrontation with local and state governments in the South, King was critical of its snail-like pace in introducing civil rights legislation. King was also a vocal opponent of the Federal Government's foreign policy in Vietnam.

For his part, Gandhi issued a contemptuous indictment of Western Civilization in his short book *Hind Swaraj (Indian Home Rule)*. In it, he condemned Western Civilization as immoral and godless and predicted it would self-destruct.²¹ He also published articles criticizing the Congress leadership. He accused it of being corrupt and venal. He charged Congress with being more concerned with protecting its privilege of power than with helping India's destitute masses. He wrote forceful articles railing against ancient Hindu traditions, like child marriages and Untouchability, calling for an end to both.

One of the most important issues to discuss in this regard is the challenge both Gandhi and King faced in their efforts to mold their constituents into a unified front. Neither man was successful in this. The black community, as with the Indian, suffered from internal divisions, not least of which were those arising out of religious differences. Not all blacks in America are Christians, just as not all Indians are Hindus. Even though virtually all blacks and Indians experienced the humiliation of white oppression and racism, this shared experience proved to be an insufficient base on which Gandhi and King could build a lasting united front. Interestingly, both were subjected to withering critiques from the Muslim leaders in their respective communities. To be sure, it must be a coincidence of history that both men confronted an increasingly hostile population that did not practice their faith, but instead practiced Islam and from which were issued challenges to their legitimacy.²²

The so-called black Muslims in America, especially Malcolm X, leveled scathing criticisms against King and the nonviolent resisters. Most of Malcolm X's vitriol was reserved for whites, but Malcolm X was almost as unsparing in his attack on King's nonviolence. He condemned nonviolence as a "cowardice-producing narcotic" and proclaimed that King, with his nonviolent love-thy-oppressor-philosophy, was speaking a language that the violent white man could not understand.²³ Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the powerful and charismatic leader of the Muslim League in India, had strong disagreements with Gandhi and blamed Gandhi for some of the Hindu-Muslim problems. Jinnah became such a powerful force in Indian politics that he was able to thwart all of Gandhi's efforts to keep India united.

Both Gandhi and King were beloved by the masses. But this is no small wonder since both so heavily identified themselves with the poor and disenfranchised. Despite coming from privilege, Gandhi and King had an intimate understanding of, and could implicitly relate to, the needs of the common folk.²⁴ On marches, both drew throngs of people who just wanted to get a glimpse of them or to somehow

participate in a historic moment. Like Gandhi, King was swarmed by onlookers trying to get closer to him, to touch him. A white reporter covering a march in Mississippi marveled at the impact King had on the rural, uneducated blacks, even bringing five-year-old girls to tears.²⁵

Both identified with the poor masses and worked tirelessly on their behalf. They lived like the poor, Gandhi in primitive rural huts, King in tenements in the Chicago ghetto. They traveled like the poor, Gandhi by third class rail or by bare feet, King by bus or mule. They dressed like the poor, Gandhi in his simple white loincloth, King in his signature farmers' overalls. They worked like the poor, Gandhi toiling in the hot fields or at his spinning wheel, King bending down during the harvest with migrant farm laborers. And both furnished their people with the potent weapon of love attached to nonviolence, a weapon that empowered them and gave them hope against their despair.²⁶

Finally, both were master communicators, King seemingly born to the bully pulpit while Gandhi had to learn to overcome his shyness in front of large groups. Both became effective public speakers, able to use rhetoric, metaphor and, in King's case, anaphora to great effect. While King was the more accomplished speech-giver, both had a knack for dramatizing, in stark and vivid imagery, the injustices that their people suffered. Both had a flair for the theatrical drama necessary to lead a mass nonviolent movement. Gandhi's Salt March, for instance, struck a chord deep in the psyche of diverse sectors of the Indian population. King's harnessing of both Christian and constitutional principles resonated not only with black Americans, but with white Americans as well.

Confronting the Opponent

Interestingly, both Gandhi and King had their activism forged in the burning humiliations they suffered on public transportation. Gandhi was forcibly thrown off a train in South Africa because he refused to give up his first class seat. As a high school student, King had to give up his bus seat on the way home from a debating competition. Seething with anger as he remained standing during 90 mile bus ride home, King at that time vowed to hate all white people. And on a train ride back home to Georgia from graduate school in Boston, King had to dine behind a curtain, so that whites wouldn't see him, as his train crossed the Mason-Dixon Line.

Moreover, both confronted a white power structure that was extremely resistant to change.²⁷ Like many others, they saw the essential hypocrisy of the whites. On the one hand, whites proclaimed adherence to a noble philosophy based on liberty and equality. On the other hand, whites denied these same rights to people of color.

Of course, both used nonviolence to resist their opponents, but for different ends. Gandhi sought to overthrow his opponent's governing system, arguing that to cooperate with the British system of government in India was to cooperate with evil. By contrast, King did not seek to over-

throw the system of government in the United States. Rather, by exposing its shameful conduct, he sought to compel it to live up to its declared creed that all men are created equal and enjoy the same unalienable rights. King believed in American society and the American system of government. He believed the United States was truly an exceptional country and wanted blacks to be able to freely and equally participate in its many opportunities.

In confronting their opponents, Gandhi and King also used nonviolent resistance to popularize jail-going. They knew that provoking their white opponents into imprisoning them would raise a groundswell of popular support. Jail-ing nonviolent resisters, with the cameras rolling, would demonstrate to the world how desperate and morally bankrupt the governing authorities were. Indeed, at times the British government refused to accept Gandhi's invitation to arrest him, knowing full well this would turn the people against it. King had similar experiences, as when he was mysteriously bailed out of jail in Albany, Georgia: he suspected it was the very same sheriff (or his cronies) who had arrested him in the first place.

Gandhi and King changed the nature and image of imprisonment. King gave beautiful speeches about transforming prisons from "dungeons of shame" into "havens of freedom and human dignity."²⁸ Gandhi made jail-going "the hallmark of integrity and national commitment rather than an experience of degradation and public shame."²⁹ While in jail, both would engage in extensive prayer and study. Each would also take to writing, King's "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" being the most famous. Moreover, imprisonment served yet another purpose, especially for Gandhi. He had become so popular and beloved that he welcomed jail as the only way to get respite from the throngs of admirers who flocked around him wherever he went.

As Religious Devotees

Both Gandhi and King were driven the most by their strong faiths. Their faiths informed their philosophical commitment to nonviolence and also compelled them to social activism. These were not politicians trying to be holy men; these were holy men trying to be politicians. In both cases, a spiritual man is entering politics because he feels his religious beliefs compel him to do so. Despite their moments of doubt, despite their bouts with depression and despite the hatred, chaos and violence that enveloped them, neither lost faith. As their careers progressed, through failures and successes, it appears that they grew even stronger in their respective faiths. According to C. Eric Lincoln,

the peculiar genius of Martin Luther King is that he was able to translate religious fervor into social action, thereby creating political leadership under the rubric of his religious ministry.³⁰

But these same words could just as easily be written about Mohandas Gandhi.

During their nonviolent resistance campaigns, God and religion were constantly invoked. For instance, in South Africa, Gandhi told the *satyagrahis* that God was with them.³¹ King made similar proclamations such as, in 1955 during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, when he proclaimed in his best preacher's baritone voice, that "if we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong!"³² Moreover, King cited a broad range of authoritative theologians to bolster his arguments. He did this to masterful effect in his "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" when he cited both St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas to argue that unjust laws must be disobeyed.

Both leaders put themselves and their movements on the side of a just and merciful God. Both invoked love as a pillar of their faith-based struggle. King's use of *agape* brought "Gandhi's spirit of inclusiveness into an American context more than any other aspect of King's philosophy."³³ King liked to say that Christ furnished the spirit of love, justice, redemption and bearing the cross of suffering while Gandhi furnished the method of nonviolent resistance.

Some of Gandhi's critics point out that his near fanatical devotion to God, expressed primarily through Hinduism, actually helped fan the flames of religious intolerance between Muslims and Hindus. Despite his own Herculean efforts to attain Hindu-Muslim unity, Gandhi's constant emphasis on religion and religious piety may have contributed to an increase in religious intolerance, which wasn't so hard to do in the first place since Hindus and Muslims had a shaky relationship for decades. At first, Jinnah, the Muslim League's leader and future "father" of Pakistan, was a powerful and influential member of Congress with staunch unionist sentiments. However, Jinnah turned away from Congress as he began to believe that the party was becoming increasingly a *Hindu* nationalist party, as opposed to an *Indian* nationalist party. Jinnah blamed this evolution in part on Gandhi who was constantly emphasizing religion in his speeches and actions. Jinnah and many other Muslims feared that Gandhi's emphasis on religion in politics would end up replacing the British *Raj* with a Hindu *Raj*.

Gandhi and King's religious devotion elicited very strong responses, both from people who adored them and from those who reviled them. To his followers, Gandhi was *Bapu* (father) or *Mahatma* (great soul). But to his detractors, especially the Hindu extremists who feared he was giving away too much to the Muslims, Gandhi was not a Mahatma, nor even did they refer to him by his given name, Mohandas. Instead, they referred to him as Mohammed Gandhi, an alliterative play on the term Mahatma and meant as an insult to Gandhi, since Mohammed is a very popular Muslim name. To his intractable British adversary, Winston Churchill, Gandhi was nothing more than a

seditionous middle temple lawyer, now posing as a *fakir* . . . striding half-naked up the steps of the Viceregal palace . . . to parlay on equal terms with the representative of the King-Emperor.³⁴

King's followers referred to him as LLJ for Little Lord Jesus, or just Little Jesus. Upon his arrival somewhere, his admirers shouted, "King is King!" or "Hail to the King!" His black opponents, however, referred to him derisively as "Da Lawd," and white racists referred to him as Martin Luther Coon, or Martin Loser King.³⁵

In comparing Gandhi and King against the backdrop of religion, it is also useful to point out a paradoxical combination of values they both possessed. In the first instance, each was a staunch nationalist, which gave their work an essentially exclusivist flavor. Gandhi was fiercely proud of India and its impressive civilization. He thought India, with its rich ancient history, had much to offer the world. After all, as the birthplace of two of the world's most widely practiced religions, India can be considered The Holy Land to hundreds of millions of Hindus and Buddhists. Gandhi was proud of the faith into which he was born and which was born of his beloved Mother India. He wanted India to be run by Indians, not by an alien power.

Like Gandhi, King was a patriot, a quintessential American who believed that America was ordained by God to be special, even unique among all other countries. This is called the Doctrine of American Exceptionalism and is shared by many Americans. King saw the United States as a beacon on a hill, providing a guiding light for the rest of the world to follow. Even his opposition to the Johnson administration's Vietnam War policies was couched in patriotism: King said he opposed the U.S. war in Vietnam because of his love for America. Furthermore, he believed that black Americans in particular could set a fine example for the rest of the world to follow. Because of their unique role in history, black Americans could teach the rest of the country and the world about the transforming power of nonviolence. By bearing the cross of others' shame, by acting out their resistance using nonviolence and self-suffering, black Americans could redeem the soul of the entire nation, which would then serve as a shining example for the rest of the world to follow.³⁶

So, as lovers of their own countries, both Gandhi and King possessed a nationalist vision that was essentially exclusivist in its patriotic fervor. Gandhi's Indian nationalism led him to demand independence from Britain and the exclusion of whites from Indian rule because, unlike white Americans, white Britons in India were foreigners. King's American nationalism led him to demand the inclusion of blacks in the American Dream.

Yet, and in the second, paradoxical, instance, their exclusivist nationalistic sentiments were offset by their universalistic visions for humanity. Fueled by their deep religious convictions, each envisioned a kind of global inclusiveness that called for human oneness, regardless of nationality. For Gandhi, everyone is a child of God and must be treated thusly. Each person is spiritually connected to everyone else: to hurt one person is to hurt oneself. For King, his philosophy of Personalism meant that every human be-

ing had worth under God, and therefore must be loved and treated as part of a single, unified garment of human destiny. King's Personalist vision did not apply only to Americans. Since he believed that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," the whole world must be redeemed, not just the United States.³⁷ He developed an all encompassing global vision. The Poor Peoples' Campaign that he was organizing when he was murdered is a good example of his inclusive vision for bringing justice to all who suffered, not just blacks.

As religious devotees, both men insisted on living the totality of their lives informed by a single, unifying creed, nonviolence. Gandhi's nonviolence was acquired through his deeply held Hindu beliefs, reinforced through the influences of Jainism and his Jain friend, Raychandbhai, and then leavened by European and American influences, such as Leo Tolstoy and Henry David Thoreau. King's was acquired through his deeply held Christian beliefs, then reinforced by the influences of Gandhi, Bayard Rustin and others. All aspects of their lives were filtered through the demanding prism of nonviolence. In Gandhi's case, all his experiments with diet, celibacy, non-possession and even his maddeningly frequent about-faces on issues, were all conducted under the unifying rubric of *satyagraha*, which had as its most exigent endeavor the desire to see God through the pursuit of Truth.

For King, his faith dictated not only his nonviolence in the Civil Rights Movement, but also his views on other issues, especially poverty and the Vietnam War. His opposition to the war alienated the Johnson administration, cost him considerable financial support among white liberals and angered many black leaders who turned their backs on him. But King, irrevocably bound by his faith, refused to yield on these issues.

While both were men of intensely held religious convictions, their faith was not confined to the cloister. They were also men of action, believing that their faith demanded their presence at the ramparts of an epic historical struggle. Both were keen at taking the best moral and spiritual tenets of their faiths and turning them into political action that was high minded. Such action was thus so profoundly symbolic that it struck the peoples' deepest psychological chords and transformed many of them into sympathetic adherents if not active resisters. This is what Robert King calls "engaged spirituality." Gandhi, for instance, used the fast to demonstrate to Hindus the extent he was willing to suffer for his principles. King used not only the symbol of the cross, but also Negro spirituals to fuse political action with a holy message:

The spirituals did for the Civil Rights Movement what Gandhi's fasts did for his own reform movement: they brought people together and gave them the courage to resist oppression, while also affecting the consciences of the people outside the movement.³⁸

As Men

Both Gandhi and King had relatively privileged youths, at least by comparison to other Indians and blacks of their time. Although both were scarred by white racism, both were fortunate to come from stable families that were relatively economically secure and insulated from the worst that racists had to offer. Both of their fathers were "strong and ample providers who exercised considerable influence within their respective communities."³⁹ Gandhi's grandfather, then father, then brother, all had good positions in the local government. King's father was a self-made business entrepreneur and preacher. His family was solid middle class.

As young boys, however, Gandhi and King had strikingly different personalities. Young King was athletic and liked to play rough games. Although he did not like to fight, he was willing to settle playground disputes with his fists by suggesting to his opponent that they duke it out on the grass. Few childhood rivals accepted King's offer. King was short and stocky and very physical: he could give a hit as well as absorb one. By his own recollection Gandhi, who was much more slender, even by Indian standards, did not have much interest in athletics at all. There are few, if any, accounts of Gandhi brawling as a youngster.

Moreover, both appear to have had mild suicidal tendencies in their youth. In his frustration at having to do what his elders told him, Gandhi and a childhood friend made a suicide pact but they failed to muster the courage to go through with it.⁴⁰ King made a couple of half-hearted attempts at suicide. The occasion both times involved the grief-stricken boy and his beloved grandmother. On the first, when his grandmother was accidentally knocked unconscious, King thought she was dead and leapt from a second-story window. He did it again sometime later upon hearing the (correct) news of his grandmother's death.⁴¹

Although both had expensive high-powered educations, Gandhi was not much of a student compared to King. His schooling, from early childhood through law school in London, was not marked by any significant or outstanding academic achievements. Later in life, however, Gandhi proved to be an adept intellectual, a voracious reader and prolific writer. King, by contrast, was an exceptional pupil and a well respected and promising young scholar (although not the best of writers). Perhaps King's academic rise was due to the post-World War II need to fill the schools and colleges. However, it is unlikely that this alone, especially in the segregated Deep South of the 1940s and 1950s, would have been enough to propel an African American all the way through to his Ph.D. King was, indeed, an intellectual. What is paradoxical about King's obvious intellect is the plagiarism he committed in writing his dissertation at Boston University. If King was an intellectual lightweight, this would have been easily discovered in the classroom or at the many salons he and his housemates hosted in Boston. Few doubt King's intellect or academic acumen, which was evident from early childhood, so why did he plagiarize parts of his doctoral thesis? Did he cut corners in his haste to

finish? Was he becoming academically lazy? Was he insecure about his writing skills? Or was it simply an outgrowth of the common and widely accepted practice among black preachers to borrow material from one another without giving attribution?

Unlike King, Gandhi was painfully shy. As a young barrister, Gandhi had difficulty mustering the courage to speak up in a court case, even though it was his turn and everyone was waiting for him to speak. By contrast, King won a debating contest while he was in high school and was already accomplished at the pulpit before he graduated from college. Neither was King shy in his pursuit of women. He was quite the ladies' man, while Gandhi hardly even understood the impact of his childhood marriage to Kasturba. King was a galavanter while Gandhi sought to achieve celibacy at an early age. Even as she agreed to marry him, Coretta Scott's friends warned her about young King's reputation as a womanizer.

What they both did share, however, was a strong moral center. As a little boy, King seemed to know instinctively that something was immoral about how his best friend's parents no longer allowed Martin to play with their son because of Martin's skin color. And King was outraged by having to give up his seat to a white person on an overnight train ride. For his part, young Gandhi refused to obey his teacher's instructions to copy off of another pupil's exam so that a visiting school official could see that the teacher's students had all achieved a 100 percent mark. Even in his rebelliousness, Gandhi's moral center eventually overrode his youthful impulses. After stealing and lying, the young *Mahatma*-to-be could not overcome the sense of guilt and shame he felt and thus confessed his sin to his father. And once Gandhi made a promise, as a young law student in London or as an accomplished barrister in South Africa, there was absolutely no going back on it.

That said, neither Gandhi nor King can be considered excellent role models as family men, at least in the traditional sense. Unlike the conventional father and husband, Gandhi's attachment to and love of family did not supercede his love of others. Gandhi made no distinctions in how he treated people, whether they were blood relations or not. He virtually disowned his eldest son, Harilal, after he learned of Harilal's drinking, cavorting and public conversion to Islam. Gandhi instructed other family members not to share anything with Harilal. Is this the proper approach a votary of love and nonviolence takes toward another person, a son no less? Furthermore, in correspondence with family members, Gandhi was harsh, refusing to send them money, proclaiming that all his resources were devoted to his social uplift programs and that relatives did not deserve his largesse just because they were kin.

Gandhi was strict with Kasturba too, rarely giving in to her wishes. He forbade her from keeping gifts. He also dictated to doctors what medicines she could have in times of illness. Even though he eventually eased up on trying to control every aspect of his wife's life, "he refused to give

any credence or respect to her opinions or intellect,"⁴² remaining patrician toward her until she died. That is not to say that Gandhi did not love "Ba" because he did. It's just that his love for her did not conform to conventional notions of spousal fealty.

And King loved Coretta, but he was strict with her also. Right at the end of their first date, King shocked Coretta by expressing his desire to marry her. But this proposal was conditioned on Coretta's willingness to accept the traditional role of the housewife who would keep the home and raise the children. Despite her considerable prospects as a professional singer, Coretta acceded to King's insistence that she remain home. Once they were married, he even forbade her from partaking in nonviolent resistance campaigns. Coretta once said, "I've never been on the scene when we've marched. . . . I'm usually at home because my husband says, 'you have to take care of the children.'"⁴³ Moreover, King was, by today's standards, an absentee father, not seeing his children for weeks at a time. King was also unfaithful to his wife.

When it came to gender relations and the treatment of women overall, Gandhi was arguably far ahead of his time while King was behind his. Although he started out as a young male chauvinist in the first years of his marriage, Gandhi ended up calling for an end to child marriages because of the heavy burden it placed on young girls. Gandhi wanted to liberate women from their social shackles. He called for an end to *purdah* (screen or veil) and the seclusion of women because women must exercise their right and duty to serve outside the home as well as inside it.⁴⁴ He called for equal treatment of women and insisted that men share in the housework at his *ashrams*. He even called on women to join the men as equals in the nonviolent *satyagraha* campaigns.⁴⁵ He felt women had a special strength of character and a great capacity for self-sacrifice and nonviolence. He also believed that women were perfectly situated to help him carry out his major reform programs, including spinning, ending untouchability, improving home hygiene and even building friendships across communal boundaries.⁴⁶

By contrast, King looked down on professional women and did not think that women could be effective leaders.⁴⁷ According to James Lawson, a high-ranking member of the movement, "Martin had real problems with having women in a high position."⁴⁸ But even if King insisted that Coretta's place was in the home, other women played key roles in the movement. From Rosa Parks's famous "no" on that Montgomery bus, to Ella Baker's leadership in saving the SCLC from financial ruin,⁴⁹ to Diane Nash's remarkable ability to keep the Freedom Rides, which were on the verge of collapsing, intact and nonviolent, women played a prominent role and were very much the "backbone" of the Civil Rights Movement.⁵⁰

Even as a national figure, King's views about freedom and equality did not extend to women. In the late 1950s, he wrote a column for *Ebony Magazine* called Advice for Liv-

ing. In it, he wrote that the “primary obligation of the woman is motherhood.”⁵¹ In one column, a woman wrote in asking for advice about her cheating husband. Rather than hold the husband responsible for his despicable behavior, King suggested that it was the wife’s fault. He asked her to consider what the other woman had to offer her husband that she did not: “Do you nag?” he asked.⁵² While King’s traditionalist views of women may have been similar to some other men of his time, they certainly clashed with the major theme of his movement. Moreover, the women’s liberation movement was in full swing during King’s last years, so he must have been fully cognizant of women’s issues.

Gandhi and King share similarities and differences in how they tried to cope with human passions, including their materialist, culinary and carnal desires. Despite the objections of their spouses, Gandhi and King both sought to overcome what many consider a natural human desire, to acquire material possessions. In Gandhi’s case, he gave up virtually all worldly possessions, save a pair of spectacles, a walking stick, a few articles of clothing, some writing implements and some crude dining ware. At a very early age and much to the consternation of his wife, Gandhi began divesting himself of his and his family’s possessions, putting them in trust for the poor. After his visit to India, King also tried to shed his desire for material things, although he was less successful at this than Gandhi. For the longest time, he resisted Coretta’s pleas and delayed buying a new car and a new home, despite the fact that the family had clearly outgrown the old ones. He felt that he did not deserve to keep the monetary award that came with his Nobel Peace Prize while Coretta argued that he should. He won that argument. Although King’s taste for fine suits stayed with him, by his last days, he was increasingly turning to the idea of complete denial of material possessions.

When it comes to the palate, Gandhi and King diverge considerably. Judging that he must overcome all desires in order to see God face to face, Gandhi engaged in a lifelong experiment to conquer his palate. He was a strict vegetarian by his law-school days. In later life, he conducted diet experiments in order to determine how little and how simply he could eat. Gandhi’s repeated fasts were also tied to his desire to conquer his palate. For his part, King does not appear to have had any interest in conquering his palate. A little bit overweight, King was a meat eater who definitely enjoyed a good meal. He was known to make sudden outbursts at SCLC meetings proclaiming he could not continue without first having something to eat.

Regarding their sexuality, Gandhi and King show differences as well as similarities. On the one hand, both were nearly consumed by their preoccupation with sex. Gandhi and King both felt immense guilt about their sexuality. King was haunted by his infidelities, while Gandhi never fully recovered from the shame of running off to his wife’s bed just as his father was about to die. On the other hand, they came to terms with this preoccupation through sharply contradictory practices, with Gandhi essentially denying his sexuality through the austere practice of *brahmacharya* (celi-

bacy), while King repeatedly succumbed to his sexual appetite. Despite his guilt and self-loathing, King’s urges, perhaps coupled with his loneliness for being away from home so much, led him to break his marital vows on numerous occasions. According to Ralph Abernathy’s book *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down* (1989), written long after King died, King engaged in a sexual liaison even on the night before he was assassinated. By contrast, Gandhi achieved celibacy at the young age of 37. Yet, despite finally keeping his vow of celibacy for more than four decades, Gandhi remained preoccupied with his sexuality until his death. He clearly enjoyed the company of young women, writing to one, “The sexual sense is hardest to overcome in my case.”⁵³ Once Gandhi had an involuntary discharge while sleeping and awoke traumatized by the incident. So, to be absolutely sure of his celibacy, Gandhi conducted a controversial experiment by sleeping naked alongside nubile young women.

As Heroes

If a hero is someone who, knowing the danger, demonstrates bravery and courage in the fearless service of others, then surely Gandhi and King are heroes. King defined courage as the power of the mind to overcome fear.⁵⁴ To be sure, both King and Gandhi demonstrated fearlessness in the face of repeated death threats and several assassination attempts. King was spat upon, jailed, beaten, hit with bricks, bombed and stabbed, yet he retained the courage to continue struggling for his beliefs.⁵⁵ In seminary school, a white racist pulled a gun on King and threatened to kill him. King calmed him with his words. Later, the student admitted he was wrong and publicly apologized to King.⁵⁶ At a signing ceremony for his first book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, a crazed woman stabbed King in the chest. Once while King was giving a speech, a white supremacist rushed the stage and punched him in the face and then began to pummel him. When King lowered his arms and looked calmly at his attacker, one witness said that she never again doubted King’s complete philosophical commitment to nonviolence.⁵⁷ King’s house was firebombed and he and his family were constantly receiving death threats. Yet he remained eerily calm amidst this maelstrom. After the firebombing, King confronted an angry black mob outside his home that wanted revenge. King calmed them, saying “we must love our white brothers, no matter what they do to us. . . . We must meet hate with love.”⁵⁸ When hooded Ku Klux Klansmen rode through his neighborhood to try to terrorize him, he went out on his front door step and remained there until the horsemen left. In the closing words of his last speech, King expressed this fearlessness eloquently:

Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t matter with me now. . . . Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. . . . [because] I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with

you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight! I'm not worried about anything! I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!⁵⁹

For his part, Gandhi received many death threats and in fact experienced several close calls. In South Africa, Gandhi was almost beaten to death by an angry mob of whites. After a burly Indian threatened to kill him, Gandhi showed no fear in defying his compatriot. True to his threat, the husky man clubbed Gandhi on the head, seriously wounding him. During the communal riots in Calcutta, Gandhi deliberately waded into the thicket of violence, residing in the abandoned house of Muslims. An angry mob of Hindus broke into the compound, demanding that he leave at once. They trashed the place, swinging clubs and sticks. Gandhi was nearly hit in the head with a brick. Gandhi's life was in danger yet he remained calm and eventually talked the crowd into putting down its weapons and going home. On another occasion, a bomb exploded near the dais where he was conducting his prayer meeting. This was a failed attempt on Gandhi's life, conducted by members of the same group who would in fact succeed the next day, this time with three bullets to the chest. When the bomb exploded Gandhi remained calm, soothing the crowd by resuming his prayer session. And, true to his wish, when Gandhi was shot by the Hindu extremists the next day, he said *Hey Ram* (Oh, God) three times and then fell to the ground.

Gandhi and King are also heroes because of how they lived their lives in the service of others. Although both could have been rich and successful as private citizens, both chose instead to sacrifice great career potential, and the comfort it would bring them and their family, for a life of service to others. Both men gave up promising and lucrative careers for a life of voluntary poverty. Indeed, both were far more concerned with caring for and serving others than they were for themselves.

So what of their legacies? Do Gandhi and King's non-violent visions dominate Indian or American society today? Does today's India reflect Gandhi's vision? Has the United States fulfilled King's dream? In short, the answer is mostly no. Overall, since India did not follow Gandhi's lead on the issues that mattered most to him, such as nonviolence, *satyagraha*, Hindu-Muslim unity, *khadi*, reviving village life and ending Untouchability, there is little to suggest that Gandhi is the father of contemporary India.⁶⁰ Contrary to what Gandhi wished, India evolved into a modern country with a strong central government, a sophisticated military and heavy industrial and agricultural sectors. And King's eloquent dream of creating a beloved community in the United States remains a dream. In the twenty-first century, people still are too often judged by the color of their skin and not the content of their character. America remains very much segregated. Racial profiling of blacks on the streets, on the highways, in the malls and in the restaurants still

exists and the problem of America is still the problem of racism.⁶¹

Nevertheless, there is evidence all around of Gandhi and King's influence and enduring legacy in the twenty-first century. Both men are the subject of numerous continuing studies and books. Both men have many Internet websites dedicated to their memory and teaching. Both men are the subject of numerous international conferences and symposia. Both men have been the subject of multiple film documentaries and cinematic movie productions. Both men have monuments and museums dedicated to their life and work. Both men have national holidays honoring their memory. Both men have left behind a wealth of admirers and followers who today carry on their work all over the world. Both men have their words reproduced and replayed countless times in countless venues. Most important, their style of nonviolent resistance is still practiced throughout the world.⁶² Indeed, both men are more than historical figures—theirs is a legacy of timeless applicability and boundless potential, one for all the ages.

Endnotes

1. Michael Nagler, "Nonviolence," in *World Encyclopedia of Peace*, vol. 2, ed. Ervin Laszlo and Jung Youl Yoo (New York: Pergamon Press, 1986), p. 72.
2. Joan V. Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 9.
3. *Satyagraha* also translates as the strength that comes from adhering to the truth.
4. James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1986), p. 31.
5. William Robert Miller, "The Broadening Horizons," in *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Profile*, rev. ed., ed. C. Eric Lincoln (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984), p. 63.
6. Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), pp. 142–44.
7. Judith Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 108.
8. Donald T. Phillips, *Martin Luther King, Jr. on Leadership: Inspiration and Wisdom for Challenging Times* (New York: Warner Books, 1999), p. 41.
9. David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: W. Morrow, 1986), p. 20.
10. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound*, p. 286.
11. Rustin was a remarkably gifted organizer and instrumental in influencing King's turn to philosophical nonviolence. He was also openly gay

- and a former member of the Communist Party, both factors that made him a serious liability to King.
12. Dennis Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 96.
 13. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 343.
 14. Marshall Frady, *Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 46 and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 343, respectively.
 15. German philosopher G.F.W. Hegel's (1770–1831) notion of synthesis, which was the product of the clash between a thesis and its antithesis, appealed to King's intellectual sensibilities.
 16. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, pp. 464–65.
 17. Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Rising Tide of Racial Consciousness," in *A Testament of Hope*, p. 148.
 18. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
 19. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," in *A Testament of Hope*, p. 299.
 20. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 540.
 21. Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Indian Home Rule*, second improved edition (Madras, India: S. Ganesan, 1922), pp. 22, 53. More than 30 years after he first wrote the book in 1910, Gandhi said he stood by the remarks in it.
 22. This is especially poignant in Gandhi's case since he went to great lengths to maintain good relations and a productive dialogue with India's Muslims. See David Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Time and Ours: The Global Legacy of his Ideas* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. 158–74.
 23. James H. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm in America: A Dream or a Nightmare?* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 176.
 24. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound*, p. 290.
 25. *Ibid.*, p. 399.
 26. *Ibid.*, p. 290.
 27. Interestingly, while Gandhi confronted whites as a member of the majority group, King confronted them as a member of a minority group.
 28. "The Sermons of Martin Luther King, Jr.," Retrieved 13 July 2005 from [MLK Papers Project Sermons: "The American Dream" website: http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/sermons/650704_The_American_Dream.html](http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/sermons/650704_The_American_Dream.html), no date.
 29. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, p. 17.
 30. C. Eric Lincoln, ed., *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Profile*, rev. ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984), p. xiii.
 31. D.G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Kormachand Gandhi*, vol. 1 (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1951), p. 88.
 32. "MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church," Retrieved 10 July 2005 from [MLK Online website: http://www.mlkonline.net/mia.html](http://www.mlkonline.net/mia.html), no date.
 33. Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action*, p. 183.
 34. Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Time and Ours*, p. 238.
 35. Frady, *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, p. 96.
 36. Gandhi made prophetic reference to this in the 1930s when he said, "it may be through the [American] Negroes that the unadulterated message of nonviolence will be delivered to the world" (Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action*, p. 182).
 37. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," in *A Testament of Hope*, p. 290.
 38. Robert H. King, *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh: Engaged Spirituality in an Age of Globalization* (New York: Continuum, 2001), p. 158.
 39. Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action*, p. 177.
 40. Gandhi, Mohandas K., *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, trans. by Mahadev Desai (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), p. 26.
 41. Lerone Bennett, *What Manner of Man: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co, 1968), pp. 18–19.
 42. Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Time and Ours*, p. 97.
 43. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 308.
 44. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, p. 210.
 45. Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Time and Ours*, p. 111.
 46. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, p. 59.
 47. Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), p. 232.
 48. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 141.
 49. This, despite King's vocal opposition to giving her the position, and then acquiescing only if it was agreed Baker's position in the SCLC would be temporary.
 50. Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action*, p. 178.
 51. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 99.
 52. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
 53. Stanley Wolpert, *Gandhi's Passion: The Life and Legacy of Mahatma Gandhi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 186.
 54. Phillips, *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, p. 306.
 55. *Ibid.*, p. 287.
 56. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound*, p. 30.
 57. Branch, *Parting the Waters*, p. 654.
 58. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), pp. 137–38.

59. "Memphis: We remember: I've been to the Mountaintop," Retrieved 18 September 2002 from American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees website: <http://www.afscme.org/about/kingspch.htm>, no date.
60. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, p. 389.
61. To this can now be added racial profiling of Muslim and Arab Americans.
62. See Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Time and Ours*, pp. 198–293, for an excellent discussion of Gandhi's legacy not only in India but throughout the world.

