

Gandhi and the Right to Peace

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Address to Mahatma Gandhi Peace Council

Charity Dinner

Ottawa, October 2, 2018

Today, we enter the 150th anniversary year of the birth of Mahatma Gandhi, the father of nonviolence, a man who will be remembered for a thousand years, a leader who never commanded an army but was more powerful than any maharajah or Viceroy. Gandhi inspired today's human rights movement, and wherever peace is found in our troubled world, its roots can be traced to that ascetic man, staff in hand, who challenged the British Empire with conscience his only weapon. After Gandhi's assassination in 1948, Albert Einstein wrote movingly: "Generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth."

I am a Gandhian, though I am personally not worthy to walk in his footsteps. The Mahatma has taught me about the power of nonviolent protest against injustices. All my political career, I have dissented from the anti-humanitarian policies of waging war in the name of peace. On the eve of my 90th birthday, I am not stopping, and I have come here tonight to urge us, in Gandhi's name, to re-ignite the flame of hope for peace with justice and never let it be extinguished no matter the bizarre conduct of modern-day politics.

Gandhi's relentless pursuit of social justice awakened my hopes that society *can* be organized to demand an end to war. There are many reasons to express a realistic hope that a safer world can be built, and my tribute to Gandhi is to express that hope tonight.

I was a young journalist when I first visited India in 1963, traveling around the country for four weeks. The stark contrast between opulence and starvation, the sights and sounds, the crowds, the lush green beauty of Kerala, the noisy confusion of Mumbai all suffused through my body as I tried to comprehend an ancient civilization so recently freed from its colonial masters. India — one-sixth of the world — seems to contain the enchantments and frustrations of the entire planet. One night, my colleague and I were traveling in Punjab and had a flat tire. It appeared to me that we were stranded in isolation, but in a few minutes we were surrounded by villagers who took us into a straw hut, gave us tea and entertained us while someone fixed the tire. That night, I discovered the soul of India, warm-hearted, garrulous, and always questioning.

I returned to India many times over the years and have had the honour of meeting several prime ministers. I was in the United Nations in 1988 when Rajiv Gandhi presented his action plan for the elimination of nuclear weapons. I have witnessed India's leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement and long campaigned for India to receive a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council.

The world needs India's leadership and it certainly needs Gandhi's wisdom. Gandhi had a holistic vision of peace. As UNESCO tells us, Gandhi offered an expanded definition of violence that included oppressive structures that erode and damage human dignity and prevent humans from achieving their full potential. "For Gandhi, deprivation and impoverishment are the visible markers of an unjust and violent social order."

What would Gandhi say today to the violence inflicted on the suffering people of Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, Myanmar, central Africa and other war-torn places?

What would Gandhi say today to the violence perpetrated on the poorest of the world while the rich line their pockets?

What would Gandhi say today to the violence done to the planet by polluters and deniers of climate-change?

Well, we know that Gandhi would not be quiet. The griefs and sorrows of the most vulnerable would be on his lips, in his protestations, driving his actions. When he lived, as his biographer Robert Payne tells us, Gandhi spoke often of “the India of my dreams.” He had a very clear conception of the India he wanted to leave behind him. He wanted a government devoid of the bureaucracy India had inherited from colonial rule. He especially wanted a government responsible to the villagers. He wanted only a skeleton army, a small police force, a government of experts with no powerful political party at the helm. He wanted women to have the same rights as men. He wanted, in short, an egalitarian society shorn of violence.

Gandhi did not see the promised land, yet he never lost his vision. He understood the integral nature of human rights irrespective of the colour, race, religion or social status of a person. A Hindu, he fasted for Muslim rights. He was one with the Buddha and ancient sages. When he heard about Christianity, he wryly observed it was a good idea and ought to be tried. Like St. Thomas More, he was “a man for all seasons.”

I have often asked myself: What would Gandhi do today to address the violence of our time? What would he do for the refugees and the exploited? How would he deal with nuclear weapons? How would he cure the violence against Mother Earth? The globalization that has swept across the world since Gandhi’s day makes modern life far more complicated now. One valiant figure leading a

march on the military-industrial complex is an idea I find deliciously exciting — but, alas, not very feasible.

Much as I revere the Mahatma, I doubt that even he, acting singularly, could overcome the systemic assaults on human life today. I am convinced that Gandhi would look to, and be involved with, the United Nations as the only institution that embraces all of humanity in a collective effort to build a culture of peace.

The United Nations had hardly begun when Gandhi left us. Now the U.N. is preparing to observe its 75th anniversary, and in this three-quarters of a century has formalized the integration of peace and social justice foreseen by Gandhi. The U.N., through a panoply of agencies, conducts wide-ranging programs in which peace, inclusive and sustainable development and human rights are intrinsically intertwined. The very words of the current Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, — calling for “a global response that addresses the root causes of conflict, and integrates peace, sustainable development and human rights in a holistic way, from conception to execution” — echo Gandhi’s pristine thinking.

There are some who think that Gandhi has gone out of fashion, that our world has become too sophisticated for the sarvodaya of the ashram. It is the reverse. Gandhi’s thought is at the core of Sustainable Development Goal 16 — the U.N.’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals hope to eradicate the worst excesses of poverty by 2030 — which aims “to foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies free from fear and violence.” It sets targets for reducing all forms of violence in all countries, ensuring access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions. The U.N.’s Agenda for 2030 states categorically: “There can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development.”

Gandhi’s holistic vision of non-violent activism has led to the emergence of several successful nonviolent movements in many parts of the world, steered by

activists such as Helder Camara, Cesar Chavez, Martin Luther King, Jr., Desmond Tutu and others. In 2007, the U.N. General Assembly declared October 2 the International Day of Non-Violence. Gandhi lives.

Despite the political differences that often cripple the work of the Security Council, the human security approach has enjoyed a broad consensus among governments and practitioners on the wider connotation of peace and security, as UNESCO has noted. Gandhi's visions of intercultural dialogues and transformative education are now considered pivotal within the global peace agenda.

I like to think that Gandhi would be urging all this work on. Whether viewed through the prism of the World Health Organization, UNICEF, the U.N. Development Program, or Peacekeeping —to name but four of the U.N.'s 40 spheres of work —the United Nations is by far the best instrument we have to cope with the common threats the world faces in the twenty-first century. The U.N. should be regarded as a central dynamic organization helping populations everywhere to move forward. It is saving the peace in diverse regions and lifting millions out of destitution. It is trying to prevent nuclear warfare and environmental catastrophe. It is developing everyone's human rights. Its core message insists that seven billion people can live together in a culture of peace and emphasizes nonviolence as a starting point. It is the base for our hopes for a lasting peace.

The peace-building work of the U.N. is undoubtedly hampered by the disunity of the five permanent members — the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France and China — of the Security Council. Where the U.N. has failed miserably and tragically, as in the genocides of Rwanda and Srebrenica, the devastation in Syria, and the oppression in Myanmar, the blame can be placed on the big powers whose vetoes and threats of vetoes paralyze the Security Council. Countries under-fund the U.N., sweep it aside in major disputes, and dishonour the Charter by spending huge amounts on armaments at the expense of the economic

and social needs of people. If the major states were not so selfishly jealous of their powers, the U.N. would be much stronger. Middle-power states such as India and Canada must work harder to reduce the stranglehold the permanent members have on the Security Council. Nonetheless, with all its limitations, the U.N. is the most successful world political body humanity has ever known. No other peace effort in history — including the Thirty Years' Peace between Athens and Sparta in 446 BC, the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, which set up the nation-state system, or the ill-fated League of Nations, established after World War I — has had such a penetrating effect on the human journey.

The full value of the U.N.'s ongoing work in preventing future wars and moving the whole international system towards a culture of peace may not be felt for years to come. But the groundwork for harmony, if not perfect reconciliation, is being laid outside the glare of TV cameras. Unknown to many people, there lies within the U.N. a document known as the Declaration on the Right to Peace, adopted by the General Assembly on December 19, 2016 by a vote of 131 states in favour, 34 opposed and 19 abstentions. The history of this document tells us much about the long arc of influence of Gandhi and the resistance of political machinery to the timeless aspirations of humanity for peace.

Building on Gandhi's ideas of nonviolence, a group of scholars presented to the U.N. a "new vision of peace" constructed by developing a peace culture based on the universal values of life, liberty, justice, solidarity tolerance, human rights and equality between men and women. This work led to the adoption, in 1999, of a Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace, regarded at the time as the most comprehensive program for peace ever taken up by the U.N. A group of Nobel Peace Laureates drew up guidelines on peace values:

- * Respect all life
- * Reject violence.

- * Share with others
- * Listen to understand
- * Preserve the planet
- * Rediscover solidarity.

The U.N. advanced these ideas when it adopted an International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World, 2001-2010. Peace programs were started around the world, but hardly had they begun when they were derailed by the sudden terrorist attacks of 9/11. Overnight, there was a resurgence of militarism, and the U.N.'s political turn to a culture of peace was lost. The bombing of Afghanistan, the Iraq war, and a spurt in terrorism followed. Then a breakdown in world order and a weakening of world institutions occurred with the rise of nationalist populism. The themes of a culture of peace have been drowned out in the chaos of the past few years.

Through all this, the advocates of a culture of peace, lead by the indomitable Ambassador Anwarul Chowdhury of Bangladesh, have never lost heart. In 2012, the U.N. Human Rights Council began a study of a draft declaration stating that all individuals have the right to live in peace so that they can develop all their capacities — physical, intellectual, moral and spiritual — without being the target of violence. The U.S. delegation was forthright in its opposition: “We do not recognize the existence of a ‘right’ to peace.” The U.S. argued that the foundational documents of the U.N. never defined peace as a right, but rather a goal to be achieved. A counter-argument was presented: the U.N. Charter is not definitive enough in banning war.

Just as it was necessary to go beyond the Charter in writing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the proponents of the right to peace assert it is now necessary to wrap the issues of peace and security, development and human rights into a single framework called “the right to peace.” Many states find this appeal-

ing because it reflects a holistic approach to peace, as Gandhi struggled for. But several Western states (unfortunately, Canada among them) vigorously reject this idea, holding that there is no legal basis for peace in international law and that it is impossible to find a common definition of peace grounded in human rights. The drafters compromised and wrote: “Everyone has the right to enjoy peace such that all human rights are promoted and protected and development is fully realized.” It is not a perfect phrase, but it is a step forward.

I am pleased that India voted for the resolution. Gandhi, the prophet, is certainly not without honour in his own country.

The Declaration on the Right to Peace lays the groundwork for a more secure world. Opponents doubtless fear that it will pave the way for a future comprehensive law against warfare. That, of course, is exactly what is intended. The development of public opinion to a higher level in opposing war is a necessary basis for legal prohibition of warfare.

Apparently, we have not yet reached sufficient maturity of civilization to enforce the right to peace. National governments, at least some of them, are still too strong and are able to overcome the wishes of those who have turned against war. But this situation will not prevail forever. It will give way to those who demand the right to peace, just as the forces of slavery, colonialism and apartheid gave way when the opposition became strong enough. That is why developing the elements of a culture of peace — education, sustainable development, respect for all human rights, equality between men and women, democratic participation, understanding and tolerance, free flow of information, and human security for all — is so important.

The seeds of nonviolence sown by Mahatma Gandhi are bearing fruit. But too often today we are bewildered and discouraged by the chaos in international affairs. I dare to think that Gandhi would tell us to look beyond today. It is entirely

possible that a new generation will have a more intuitive understanding that the problems of planet earth can only be resolved in an integrated manner and thus be able to build a new global humanitarianism. Calm assessment of the gains the world has already made strengthens us to fight back against the shrill voices of fear. Focussing on what Mahatma Gandhi did in laying the groundwork for the human security agenda gives us a solid foundation to hope for even more in the years ahead.

