

Remarks given by Dr. Andrew Blom at the Raising of the Peace Flag at Central Michigan University
April 18, 2019

One of the great joys of my job as a professor here at CMU is that I get to work with students who are learning to engage in deep, meaningful dialogues with each other across social divides--across race, nationality, social class, gender identity. The learning that is made possible in the intergroup dialogue classroom at CMU is fostered by collaboration among a team of educators that includes faculty, staff, and undergraduate peer facilitators. I see quite a few of these students here today who have been on their own journey through an intergroup dialogue class or who have trained to facilitate these kinds of dialogues for their peers.

I have been reflecting, in this year we commemorate Gandhi's birth, on Gandhi's technique of satyagraha and how it relates to dialogue and peace education. When we think of the transformative power of the nonviolent movement that ended British colonial rule in India, it is natural to understand satyagraha as a powerful method for resisting oppression and bringing about social change. Yet Gandhi understood it as more than that. When we think of the disciplines Gandhi applied at his ashram to instill nonviolence in thought, word, and deed; to embody the dignity of physical labor and the economic independence of relying on homespun cloth; it is natural to think of satyagraha as a commitment to a nonviolent way of life. Yet Gandhi understood it as even more than that. At its core, as Gandhi understood it, satyagraha was a method for seeking truth. This was no mystical quest, but a method of experiment. By engaging in a disciplined confrontation with others, we put our ethical and political commitments to the test. Gandhi called these confrontations his experiments with truth.

As a teacher of philosophy, I think about the classroom not as a place where we just learn a subject but where we practice it. An intriguing question for peace education is: What kind of learning environment makes it possible to conduct experiments in truth? Here I have learned a great deal from working with the team of faculty, staff, and students who foster an environment where dialogue across social divides can take place; who turn the dialogue classroom into a kind of laboratory for peace and democracy. And learning through dialogue shares principles with Gandhi's great method of seeking truth.

Gandhi talked about three core principles in satyagraha: *satya* (truth), *ahimsa* (nonviolence), and *tapasya* (self-suffering).

SATYA

Gandhi's concept of truth is holistic. One cannot test the truth of one statement held in isolation from others. A single opinion or assumption needs to be evaluated within the whole web of human knowledge and experience. Seeking truth as a satyagrahi means remaining unceasingly open to the process of learning and changing.

In dialogue, we work to create an environment where students can really examine not just the assumptions behind their view of the world but also the pressures that make those assumptions hard to shake.¹

In a recent dialogue about race and racism, a white student who had been struggling to square what he had been hearing from his peers of color with that he had been taught all his life, began to wonder. If he is only learning now, in college, that the Civil War did not end racial slavery, that the Civil Rights Movement did not end racial discrimination, then what he is now coming to hold as true is going to be very different from the way many of his friends and family understand the world. He is facing not only a change in perspective but a change in how he relates to himself and to others.

¹ David Bohm emphasizes that dialogue unearths the 'process of thought' behind assumptions, so that we can understand not only the rational support, or lack of it, for our assumptions but also the ways in which we have personally invested in these assumptions. See primarily his essay "On Dialogue," in *On Dialogue*, Routledge (2014), p. 9.

This is what I sometimes call "courageous critical thinking." Like this student, we can cultivate the habits of listening to and really taking in perspectives that are different from our own. Like the satyagrahi, we can practice holding the truths of our personal experience with integrity without letting fear of the unknown or of social pressures shut down our willingness to rethink those experiences in a new light.

AHIMSA

The second principle of Gandhi's satyagraha is ahimsa (nonviolence). Truth, for Gandhi, must be tested through action. It is not enough to hold a belief in my mind, convinced of its rightness. And yet imposing that belief on others through force is no test at all of its truth; all it teaches me is whether I have enough power or not to make someone accept it. The only test of truth, argued Gandhi, is action based on the refusal to do harm.²

It might seem obvious that the learning that takes place in a university classroom is nonviolent. Yet Gandhi reminds us that violence takes more than just physical forms.

The Sanskrit word "ahimsa," contains a negation "a" of the word "himsa," roughly meaning injury. But non-injury does not capture the fullness of the principle's positive meaning.

Gandhi wrote: "Ahimsa is not the crude thing it has been made to appear. Not to hurt any living thing is no doubt a part of ahimsa. But it is its least expression. The principle of himsa is hurt by every evil thought, by undue haste, by lying, by hatred, by wishing ill to anybody."³

The process of learning through dialogue requires us to pay attention to the ways that violence, or the seeds of it, show up in normal interactions. Consider what happens in a classroom if I treat the sources of another person's trauma flippantly; or, being angered by someone's views, try to humiliate them through argument. Violence pervades social relations that have been rooted in domination and exploitation.

In dialogue, the spirit of ahimsa is reflected in a resolution to engage patiently, to pay attention to hidden biases, to work on unlearning prejudices, to distinguish between evils to be opposed (racism, sexism, transphobia) and the people who have internalized these.

TAPASYA

In satyagraha, the third principle of tapasya (or self-suffering), follows from the refusal to do harm even if your opponent does intend harm. Here it might seem obvious that taking on self-suffering has no place in a university classroom. Indeed, for Gandhi, this was the most serious vow of the satyagrahi and one not to be undertaken without a great deal of self-reflection and preparation.

Again, the dialogue classroom is a laboratory. The student facilitators who guide their peers through dialogue learn how to help their groups set up healthy boundaries for safety while embracing discomfort. This exercise in boundary-setting is itself a crucial skill for navigating disagreements in personal life, work life, and civic life beyond the classroom. The boundaries also help to create a learning environment where participants in dialogue can practice vulnerability. Since dialogue is a mutual process of creating shared meanings, I cannot rely on someone else to be my educator; I have to be equally willing to examine how my experiences have shaped me and the meanings I make.

² I draw here on the analysis of Joan Bondurant in her excellent study of Gandhi's thought, *The Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict*, new revised edition, Princeton University Press (1988), ch. 2.

³ M.K. Gandhi, *From Yeravda Mandir: Ashram Observances*, translated from the original Gajarati by Valji Govindji Desai, 3rd ed., (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1945), p. 7.

PEACE EDUCATION

Peace education is not about learning to shape our world into one form or another. Gandhi himself never claimed to know the truth about how human societies should be governed or structured. "I am but a seeker after truth," he wrote. "I claim to have found way to it. I claim to be making a ceaseless effort to find it. But I admit that I have not yet found it."⁴ If we take satyagraha as a model of peace education, we can recognize that this education is not about the ends but about the means. Satyagraha recognizes that the ends will take on the character of the means. The world will take on the character of the ways we practice engaging with each other. And this is what give me hope: that students who learn to create dialogues in CMU classrooms will shape the character of our world.

⁴ M.K. Gandhi, *Young India*, Nov. 17, 1921.