Gandhi’s Lessons in Leadership: Life as a site of learning  
Gandhi Jayanti 2nd October 2012, Antwerp

Honored guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

“Generations to come...will scarce believe that such a man as this one ever in flesh and blood walked upon this Earth.”

Thus spoke Albert Einstein on Gandhi’s 70th birthday in 1939. Today, we can say that Einstein was wrong: we are one of those generations, whose coming he spoke of, and us being together today shows that we continue to admire, seek inspiration from and stand in awe in front of Gandhiji. In fact, Einstein’s words have lost none of their appeal since the nineteen thirties. Days like today, which celebrates 143 years of Gandhi’s birth, enable even the generations to come to retain the memory of Gandhi.

Speaking about Gandhi is both a challenge and a blessing.

It’s a challenge because so much has already been said about Gandhi by wise and respected men and women. This makes it hard to say something new, which in itself is a challenge. But what makes it especially challenging is that all such attempts fail to express the uniqueness of this human being and his effect on humanity as a whole. We hardly have the words or even the idiom to do justice to Gandhi and his actions.

Let me explain. Of course we all agree that he was a great person: morally, intellectually, and spiritually. But what makes for his greatness? Many have said much about Gandhi’s

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1 Albert Einstein, statement on the occasion of Gandhi’s 70th birthday (1939); Einstein archive 32-601, Out of My Later Years (1950).
ethics, politics, religion, etc. Many books and studies have appeared on these topics. There is a great deal of literature on the satyagraha movement, on Gandhi’s swaraj, and on how he understood swadeshi in the context of religion. This is one possible way to approach the question of making sense of him.

However, such studies make it even more difficult to assess and understand how Gandhi inspired and touched millions all over the world, his and our own contemporaries.

In the 50’s and ‘60s Gandhi inspired people like Martin Luther King, who visited Gandhi’s birthplace and, by visiting India, deepened his understanding of non-violence. Or Nelson Mandela. In 2007 Nobel Laureate Lech Walesa said: “We failed when we tried to combat Communism with weapons, but when we took up Mahatma Gandhi’s tactics and strategy, we emerged winners! Truly, the whole world should be a disciple of Gandhi.”

Thousands of examples could be given of people who connected their lives to Gandhi, who felt inspired by him, and were touched by his way of being in the world. This inspiration can take many very different forms: leading sober lives, being non-violent or a vegetarian, engaging oneself politically, striving for a better society, fighting racism or criticizing aspects of modernity, being truthful and so on. One could call for a “Gandhi-day”, or wear a T-shirt which says ‘be the change you want to see in the world’.

However, what does it mean to be ‘inspired’ by Gandhi? What binds people, people with different histories and pasts, a variety of dreams for the future, and many divergent values? How could Gandhi inspire them all?

Why are these questions important? Not simply because the answers are relevant to understanding Gandhi better. But also because they help us appreciate the contribution
of Asian cultures, like Indian culture, to the world. India does not just have a man like Gandhi; her culture produced him. What, in India, allowed for this?

Furthermore, would not the answer to this question help us in understanding the nature of leadership, including political leadership? One person who motivates people around the globe to perform ethically good actions (even after death) is as good an example of successful leadership as any.

Even in his own time, people did not know how to understand and explain this. Take Jawaharlal Nehru, for instance. He greatly admired Gandhi whom he considered his mentor and teacher. Still, he often found himself at a loss to understand Gandhi’s impact on the people of India and on himself. In his autobiography *Towards Freedom* for example, he puts it this way:

“How came we to associate ourselves with Gandhiji politically, and to become, in many instances, his devoted followers? The question is hard to answer, and to one who does not know Gandhiji, no answer is likely to satisfy. Personality is an indefinable thing, a strange force that has power over the souls of men, and he possesses this in ample measure, and to all who come to him he often appears in a different aspect. He attracted people, but it was ultimately intellectual conviction that brought them to him and kept them there...Often they did not understand him. But the action that he proposed was something tangible which could be understood and appreciated intellectually."

This is interesting: there is something in Gandhi’s actions that people can understand. Nehru is often amazed by Gandhi’s capacity to feel the needs of the people of India. “Always,” Nehru says, “we had the feeling that, while we might be more logical, Gandhiji knew India far better than we did, and a man who could command such tremendous
devotion and loyalty must have something in him that corresponded to the needs and aspirations of the masses...” So, Nehru too feels what he cannot explain: Gandhi touches the hearts of the people...he resonates with the people....

This is typical: many, friends and foes of Gandhi alike, did not know what to think of or how to respond to Gandhi’s actions. Yet, very often, despite their skepticism, they had to admit that Gandhi touched people’s hearts. In this context, consider the famous salt march. Gandhi’s decision to focus on salt evoked ridicule. In 1930, The Statesman wrote: “It is difficult not to laugh, and we imagine that will be the mood of most thinking Indians.” Even the Congress leadership was ambivalent of Gandhi’s plans. Jawaharlal Nehru and others were initially unpersuaded or skeptical. Yet, “the march that culminated at Dandi on April 6, 1930 is regarded as the most electrifying of all Gandhi’s satyagraha campaigns, with Jawaharlal Nehru saying ‘it seemed as though a spring had been suddenly released’.”

This is what Gandhi did and still does to people. So, once again: What does it mean when people say they are ‘inspired’ by Gandhi?

One things is clear. It does not mean the taking over of Gandhi’s doctrines; still less does it mean that we imitate specific actions (like the salt march or fasting). Gandhi did not elaborate a doctrine that his followers could follow. Asked about his teachings, he answered: I don’t have a message; my message is my life. It is not about doctrines or teachings, but about actions in life. Further, his so-called teachings become vibrant only through their connection with actions and experience.

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What connects all stories about Gandhi is that his actions and life somehow transform people: people are compelled to join in, they cannot but respond. They are engaged to listen, to change their lives, to change society, to go into politics, to start social movements, etc. Gandhi’s actions are not purely symbolic either. They transform people by involving them. He was not merely striving for freedom; he was realizing freedom. He did not call for Independence; he made Indians Independent. And this continues: Gandhi does not call us to be moral; he makes us moral. In other words, Gandhi’s life and actions have a transformative power. More, he teaches us that actions—moral, ethical actions—transform people. And he invites us to set the example, with new actions, in new contexts.

Let’s put this thought in the words of an Indian scholar, Vivek Dhareshwar: somehow Gandhi transforms life into a site of ethical learning. Dhareshwar argues that this is a move to preserve the integrity of experience. Another scholar, who is also my teacher, calls it experiential knowledge. Experiential knowledge emerges by systematically reflecting on our (human) experiences in the world. Balagangadhar argues that this form of knowledge has been systematically developed in the Indian culture and traditions. Knowledge that emerges by reflection on experience presupposes multiple learning sites, many diverse perspectives and different kinds of intellectual skills. Indian culture encouraged the production of such knowledge. It also produced (or gave birth

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See also discussions on this yahoo-group: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/TheHeathenInHisBlindness/
to) people who could teach other people to act thoughtfully in the world. I submit that this is an interesting description of Gandhi.

Perhaps, this is what it means to be inspired by Gandhi: his person, which is his life and actions as a whole, embodies experiential knowledge and is a vision. A vision for life, for being human (satyagrahi’s), and for the society at large (freedom). In such a vision, he reestablishes the connection between a people and their traditions. A bridge is built by making experiential knowledge come alive again.

He did this in a way that transcends the specifically Indian situation. It has the force of synthesizing or bringing together actions and experiences. People who are inspired by Gandhi experience this whole and this helps them formulate and realize certain aims and goals in their lives. It did so for the people under British colonial rule; it did so for the people living under the apartheid regime; it did so for the Blacks in the US suffering from racial segregation; it continues to do so for all those who fight to make the world a better place.

Gandhi’s force as a leader must now be clear: *his life and actions invite actions (new actions) that transform lives*. That is why dreams can become true. Gandhi is one of those who bridge the gap between dreaming and creating a better world.

Therefore Martin Luther King is very right when he says: “If humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable. He lived, thought, and acted, inspired by the vision of humanity evolving toward a world of peace and harmony. We may ignore him at our own risk.”
Ladies and gentlemen, as I said, speaking about Gandhi is not only a challenge, but also a blessing. It’s a blessing because it allows us to be a part of the long and rich tradition of people world-wide who feel touched and inspired by Gandhi’s life and deeds.

It has been an honor and a privilege for me to be part of this beautiful *Gandhi Jayanti* celebration and contribute to preserving Gandhi’s legacy for the future generations so that he may continue to inspire all of us in our daily life. I am very grateful for this opportunity.

To you, the audience, and especially to the Indian community present here, I would like to say a last word: you must be proud...Not merely because you have *had* a Gandhi, but especially because your culture could *produce* one; because it could give a Gandhi to the world.

Sarah Claerhout
2 October 2012