

*We must become the change we want to see. — Gandhi*

## **Weaving a Universal Thread** (Excerpts)

Arun Gandhi

As a budding teenager in the 1940s I was intrigued by grandfather's version of "family," not at all like a conventional family that I was accustomed to. Grandfather was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and his "family" was the human race.

In 1946 my father, Manilal, Gandhi's second son, decided it was time to visit the family in India. I was 12 years old then and all of us needed relief from the hate, prejudice and humiliation of apartheid in South Africa. While I had visited India earlier this was the first time I would be old enough to experience the difference between a conventional "family" and a "Gandhi family" living in an ashram in India.

In 1946 there were close to 150 families living in Sevagram Ashram in Wardha, Central India. Although they retained their family names in all other respects they were part of one ashram family.

This was, in a microcosm, Gandhi's vision of a future human family. Inclusiveness, he was certain, was the only way humanity could be saved from self-destruction. Humanity must breakdown barriers and build bridges to create peace and harmony in this world. A community, he said, is only as strong as the family. If there is love and harmony in a family there will be love and harmony in a community. What happens to one must happen to all.

Love and harmony in a family can only be achieved through strong bonds of relationship built on respect, understanding, acceptance and appreciation. Respect leads to understanding who we are; followed by acceptance and appreciation of our differences.

Teaching tolerance was anathema to Gandhi. People, he felt, should not tolerate each other and their differences, but learn to respect, understand, accept and appreciate each other. Only through a strong and respectful relationship can we have peace and harmony within ourselves and in our society.

Rugged individualism, selfishness, self-centeredness, greed, anger, materialism etc. that dominate our lives today do not contribute to building a community of peace and harmony. What we have today is anything but a community. It is more of a neighborhood or a collection of people living in an area because it is convenient and/or because circumstances have thrown us together. Unless there is "something in it for me," we prefer not to have anything to do with our neighbors.

There must never be, Gandhi said, any double standards in our relationships and our attitude towards each other, our families and humanity in general. What applies to one, must apply to all, he said. For most people this may be totally unacceptable. Perhaps, too high a standard to attain. But Gandhi believed this was the only way to understand and respect each other.

Life in the ashram was designed to be unique and simple. The buildings were constructed with the cheapest material available locally -- mud walls and thatch roof. There were some individual family homes but they were used more to store personal belongings and sometimes a couple slept in them. All other activities were common. Unless someone was ill, old or needed a special diet, all meals were cooked in a common kitchen and consumed in a common dining room.

At the ashram everyone practiced complete equality. There was no such thing as men's work or women's work. Any work that needed to be done was done by whoever was available or free. Batches of men and women were assigned duties, rotating every fortnight. There were groups to clean and cut vegetables, cook all meals, wash the utensils, wash all the clothes, clean the campus, work on the land to produce fruits, vegetables and milk for consumption by ashram inmates and anything else that needed to be done.

The idea was to foster cooperation and understanding. It was not always easy going but people attempted to learn and adjust. Perhaps, the most onerous of all tasks at the ashram was the cleaning of the bucket toilets, which were used by everyone. Gandhi had deliberately not permitted toilets in private homes, so that everyone had to use the row of public toilets at one end of the ashram. Gandhi's reasoning was that cleaning public toilets was the contentious issue on which the caste oppression was based. So, the best way of getting rid of the prejudices, equalizing society and teaching people a lesson in humility was to make them do the work they so despised.

Millions in India are labeled "untouchables" because of the work they are forced to do by the caste system. Only the  
Seven Deadly Social Sins/Pat Carter

low castes must do the lowly jobs like street cleaning, garbage pick-up and cleaning public toilets. Because the jobs are menial and considered “unclean” the pay is negligible, forcing the “low caste” to live in abject poverty and ignorance, the vicious cycle that condemns them forever.

The ashram was open to people of all races, religions, beliefs and other forms of differences. The programs of the ashram were designed to teach respect, understanding, acceptance and appreciation of those differences.

For instance, all ashram inmates were required to assemble for daily morning and evening worship. If it was not raining the prayers were held under the canopy of the open sky. When he was in residence grandfather led the prayer service. Irrespective of what their personal beliefs may be everyone was required to sing hymns from all the major religions of the world – Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism to name a few. It was a one-hour service that included a short sermon delivered by grandfather.

“A friendly study of all scriptures is the sacred duty of every individual,” Gandhi said and taught us the rudiments of all scriptures. When asked he said I am a Christian, a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Muslim, a Jew. In one of his sermons he said religion is like a tree. The trunk represents spirituality, the branches are the various religions of the world and the leaves are the different denominations. In its totality a tree looks beautiful and adds to the glory of nature. However, when the tree is dismembered it leaves behind a stump and everything else becomes dead wood. This is precisely what is happening with religion today. We have chopped up a beautiful tree and now use the dead wood to build our separate centers of beliefs.

Gandhi did not believe in nor did he propagate the melting pot theory. He said we could proudly pursue our different beliefs without undermining or under-estimating the beliefs of others. There is room for all to exist without being competitive. If we want people to respect our right of worship and belief we must extend the same respect to others and join them in celebrating, respecting, understanding, accepting and appreciating our differences.

Although life in Gandhi’s ashram was rigid it did not mean he expected every community to be built wholly on such rigid principles. His ashram was a training institution. Gandhi expected the workers would go out and mould future communities on the concept of “Oneness” – the ability to see ourselves in others and others in ourselves. In other words the inter-connectedness of all life.

An ideal community, according to Gandhi and Socrates, is one that resembles the human body. Different parts of the human body have different functions – some high and some low – and yet in a time of crises the whole body galvanizes to deal with an injury even if it is on the little toe. An ideal community must emulate this response of the human body. The community may be made up of vastly different economic, religious or social groups but in a moment of crises they must come to the aid of the poorest among them. And, when not in crisis the community, like all body parts, must function in absolute synchronicity. We must learn to respect people not for what they are or how much they are worth but for who they are – human beings.

An average American family, it is said, moves 13 times during the span of a career. This means there is no time to establish roots or build relationships anywhere. We end up having a nodding acquaintance with people in the neighborhood. Individualism is our culture and this determines the breath and depth of our relationships. Individualism and community building have an inverse relationship. Only one can flourish and that too at the expense of the other.

In the pioneering days individualism could survive because the objective was to build a homestead and acquire personal property. Now we are faced with the task of building a community and a society, which means interdependence, interconnectedness and integration. Exclusivity must give way to inclusivity if living in peace and harmony are our objectives. The choice before humanity in the next millenium, therefore, is: Learn to respect life or live to regret it.

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