

Healing History Conference, Caux, Switzerland

Opening plenary, July 3, 2013

Remarks by Rajmohan Gandhi

It is a privilege to be included on this panel. With so many outstanding Africans and African-Americans present, let me share a few thoughts on the potential in the African-American role in the world. I do so with some diffidence, but as a student of history and an observer of our ever-changing world.

In July 1929, W.E. B. Du Bois asked Gandhi for a message for Black Americans and published it on the front page of his journal, *The Crisis*. Said Gandhi in that message (in 1929):

Let not the 12 million [African-Americans] be ashamed of the fact that they are the grandchildren of slaves. There is no dishonor in being slaves. There is dishonor in being slave-owners.

Seven years later, in February 1936, Gandhi had a meeting with the philosopher Howard Thurman, then Dean of Rankin Chapel at Howard University, Thurman's wife Sue Bailey Thurman, who was a historian and a singer, and another Black couple, Edward and Phenola Carroll. The four African-Americans met Gandhi in a hut in Bardoli in western India.

Mahadev Desai, Gandhi's colleague and secretary for 19 years by this time, reported that Gandhi stepped out of his hut to greet these visitors – this was not Gandhi's usual practice. 'I had not seen Gandhi welcome anyone else so warmly,' Desai added.

According to Thurman's report, Gandhi asked 'persistent, pragmatic questions' about African-Americans. 'How did they survive slavery? Was prejudice against them receding or growing? Did American law recognize marriage between Blacks and Whites?' (This was in 1936.)

The visitors and Gandhi had a discussion on love versus nonviolence, with Gandhi saying he saw his nonviolence as love plus fearless peaceful struggle.

Gandhi asked his American visitors for a spiritual. The four Americans sang two. Thurman said that Gandhi's words to them and the words of the spirituals sounded

similar. Pausing for a few seconds, Gandhi responded, slowly and clearly, with these words:

Well, if it comes true, it may be through the [African Americans] that the unadulterated message of nonviolence will be delivered to the world. (62: 202)

On July 1, 1942, in the middle of World War II and a time when Churchill was complaining to FDR that Indians were obstructing the war against Japan and Germany, Gandhi wrote this letter to the American President:

I twice missed coming to your great country. I have the privilege [of] having numerous friends there, both known and unknown to me... I have profited greatly by the writings of Thoreau and Emerson. I say this to tell you how much I am connected with your country.

Of Great Britain I need say nothing beyond mentioning that in spite of my intense dislike of British rule, I have numerous personal friends in England whom I love as dearly as my own people... I have therefore nothing but good wishes for your country and Great Britain.

I venture to think that the... declaration that the Allies are fighting to make the world safe for freedom of the individual and for democracy sounds hollow so long as India and... Africa are exploited..., and America has the [race] problem in her own home.

So far as India is concerned, we must become free even as America and Great Britain are.

In the summer of 1946, when Indian independence was on the horizon, Gandhi drew a geometric picture of the India he wished to see. This was a picture of equality but also of fraternity, of liberation but also of interdependence. In the India of Gandhi's vision, where – in his words -- (I am quoting now)

the last [would be] equal to the first or, in other words, no one is to be the first and none the last...

[In that India], independence must begin at the bottom. Thus, every village will be a republic... having full powers...

In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever-widening, never-ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex

sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual... The outermost circumference will not wield power to crush the inner circle but will give strength to all within and derive its own strength from it....

Let India live for this true picture, though never realizable in its completeness. (*Harijan*, 28 July 1946; 91: 325-7).

A few months after Gandhi drew this picture, he found himself dealing with serious violence involving Muslims and Hindus in what then was eastern Bengal and is now the nation of Bangladesh. He was camped in a village there when, in January 1947, Stuart Nelson, Dean of Howard University, visited with him.

At a late afternoon multi-faith prayer-meeting that Gandhi held in that village, attended by a largely Muslim audience, Gandhi requested Nelson to sing the hymn, *O God Our Help in Ages Past*. After Nelson presented the song, Gandhi explained its meaning to the Muslim villagers.

An African-American man singing a Christian song to a Muslim audience of women and men in eastern Bengal and a Hindu explaining the song's meaning – that was a glimpse of something out of this world.

One day, God willing, we will have an African-American woman offering a verse from the Muslim tradition to an audience in China, and a Chinese sage explaining it.

A few sentences now from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech on Vietnam, delivered on April 4, 1967 before 3,000 people at Riverside Church in New York city:

We [are] taking... black young men... crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem.

And so we have been repeatedly faced with the cruel irony of watching [black] and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools.

As I have walked among the desperate, rejected, and angry young men, I have told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problems....

But... Communism will never be defeated by the use of atomic bombs or nuclear weapons...

Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies....

Nor does the human spirit move without great difficulty against all the apathy of conformist thought within one's own bosom and in the surrounding world....

Let me read these two sentences again.

Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies....

Nor does the human spirit move without great difficulty against all the apathy of conformist thought within one's own bosom and in the surrounding world....

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Let me end with a few questions.

1. As we look at our world today, what does “overriding loyalty to humankind” demand of us now?
2. Will Islamist extremism be defeated by the use of drones, bunker-busters and wide-ranging surveillance?
3. Who will work to end the bitter divide within the Muslim world, which in some ways is even tougher than the divide between the Muslim world and the western world?
4. If the divide between the Western world and the Muslim world is one of our challenges today -- with ordinary people on both sides of the divide longing for ways of overcoming suspicion, healing wounds, preserving life, and advancing liberty -- is there not a particular role, given their heritage and hard experience, for African-Americans?

(end)

