

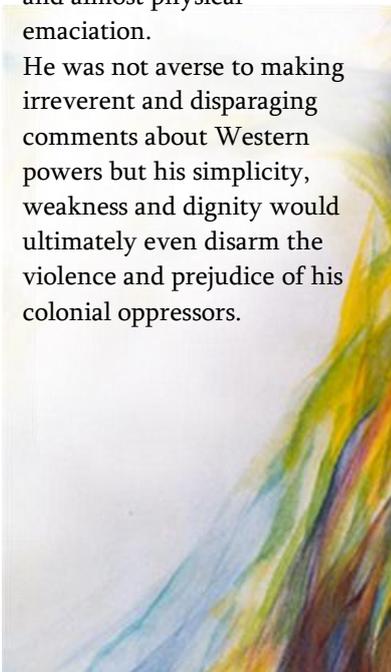
The life of Mahatma Gandhi

The courage to be vulnerable

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Very few people, apart from Mahatma Gandhi, have gone down in history as icons of vulnerability. His image is one of a person dressed in simple clothing which he had woven himself. It was an image that conveyed apparent fragility and almost physical emaciation.

He was not averse to making irreverent and disparaging comments about Western powers but his simplicity, weakness and dignity would ultimately even disarm the violence and prejudice of his colonial oppressors.



Mohandas Kharamchand Gandhi's life was marked by paradox. He was the image of weakness and fragility yet he conveyed a clear and almost unattainable message of peace, courage and moral strength. His style of prophecy was marked by contradiction and a tension between opposite poles: weakness and strength, vulnerability and courage, exploitation and willpower, violence and peace. This was even more evident when he embarked on a hunger strike. As his appearance became ever more gaunt and there was a fear for his life, the power of the Mahatma's spiritual strength had a tremendous impact upon society and the media even though these channels were limited at that time.

However, it was with his martyrdom that the little man of India revealed his full capacity and his freedom to demonstrate vulnerability to the men and women of the world. When, at sunset on January 30, 1947 in the garden of Birla House in Delhi, Nathuram Godse suddenly emerged from the crowd accompanying the Mahatma to prayer, the frail and ageing Gandhi found himself totally helpless in front of the Hindu extremist. The gunshots were followed by the two last words he uttered: *Hè Ram* (Oh God), which were later etched into the black marble of the mausoleum in Raj Ghat where he had been cremated the day after his death. Gandhi had foreseen his death. Years earlier he had said almost prophetically: "The bullet of an assassin could end my life. I

would welcome it. But what is important is to die in the act of fulfilling one's duty until one's last breath."¹ He said, "I'm not afraid to die in my mission if that's part of my destiny."²

Experimenting with truth and countercultural choices

It is obvious that such an attitude cannot be improvised. It grew in Gandhi step by step, year by year, in an original and admittedly somewhat contradictory fashion. As early as

1936, in rejecting the title of "ascetic," he acknowledged arriving at his choices and way of life through a gradual evolution, one in which "every step was well pondered, well considered and decided with utmost determination"³. This prophet of non-violence (*ahimsa*) was clearly conscious of being "on the road", "on the way". His choices and life experiences, often incomprehensible to others and at the very least countercurrent, were nothing more than his own "experiments with the truth".⁴ "I profess to be a simple individual," he admitted, "as subject to error as any other mortal."⁵

He accepted his own human vulnerability and was always ready to both acknowledge mistakes and revise his choices. He admitted still having a long way to go in order to arrive at that moment when he hoped to be reduced to nothing and arrive at salvation, at *moksha*, which for Hindus means freed from the cycle of reincarnations⁶. His awareness of his own weakness and limitations in his personal life led him, as time passed, to "an unshakable faith in God and in his goodness, as well as an unquenchable passion for truth and love."⁷ It led him to live in constant contradiction between his own human narrowness and vulnerability, and the courageous acts and choices made at the level of thousands and millions of his people. Gandhi found a sure guide in what he loved to call: "that Voice". It was the voice of God.

Following 'that Voice'

It would be difficult and perhaps impossible to fully understand who this man was without ever delving into his relationship with what he called "the small, still voice". His approach undoubtedly made many feel uncomfortable. But with disarming simplicity, he admitted that "hearing the voice of God is nothing new [...] His voice became more and more audible to me as years went by. He never betrayed me even in the darkest hour. He often saved me from myself and left no trace of independence. The more I abandoned myself to Him, the more my joy increased."⁸ It is precisely in his courage to follow this voice that Gandhi became who he was, a person unafraid of being "vulnerable," in the sense of having no defenses, neither in front of God nor before others. Yet, it was far from an easy process.

"What I really heard was a kind of voice from afar, and yet very close. It was unmistakable, like a human voice speaking to me decisively, irresistibly. I was not dreaming at the moment I heard the Voice. Hearing that Voice was preceded by a terrible struggle within me. Suddenly, the Voice made itself heard. I listened, to make sure it was the Voice and the struggle ceased. I was calm. Determination came accordingly. I set the date and time of the fast."⁹

Being vulnerable is the pathway to determination and decision. It offers security and courage for fundamental decisions at personal and community levels. It is in this spiritual rooting that we find the motive behind some of Gandhi's actions and initiatives which he himself describes as otherwise "inexplicable"¹⁰. This is the true spiritual and human dimension of being steadfast in truth, of consistently seeking and following the Truth.

Serving all, with attention to the other's vulnerability

Gandhi's proposal, however, is not only limited to the inner dimension nor restricted to the personal spiritual sphere. It is precisely this almost helpless surrender before the face of God, following his will and plan, and listening to "his voice", that reveals his great sensitivity towards the suffering, the exploited, and those experiencing discrimination. Indeed, in this man frequently compared to Francis of Assisi, there was the unswerving conviction that service to every human being was a necessary part of the process of arriving at God. He was

increasingly convinced that the only way to find God is to see him in his creation (in the world and in living beings), by trying to be one with them. In fact, as a true Hindu, he knew everything that exists is an expression of the divine, and living in harmony with all and everything could only be achieved through "service"¹¹. Thus, in the Mahatma there was deep sensitivity to vulnerability and to others' weaknesses, both economic and societal. Caste discrimination and especially the violent exclusion of *dalits* (those considered even to be so low as to be outside of the caste system), the exploitation of peasants and every form of violence against the weak (women, children, etc.) offered Gandhi ample fragilities towards which he felt called to be ever more attentive over time.

As a final confirmation of this, it is worth concluding with a brief confession made by Gandhi in 1938. It speaks to an existential experience at the heart of his fundamental choice of non-violence:

"I learnt the lesson of non-violence from my wife when I tried to bend her to my will. Her determined resistance to my will, on the one hand, and her quiet submission to the suffering my stupidity involved, on the other, ultimately made me ashamed of myself and cured me of my stupidity in thinking that I was born to rule over her and, in the end, she became my teacher in non-violence."¹²

1 Piyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi: the last phase*, Navajivan Publ. House, Ahmedabad, vol. I, 2 1956, vol. II, 2 1958, p. 582.

2 M.K. Gandhi, in «Harijan», April 27, 1947, pg. 127.

3 Id., in «Harijan», October 3 1936, pg. 268, cit. in Gandhi, *Il mio credo, il mio pensiero*, Newton Compton, Roma 2008, p. 33.

4 This is precisely the title of his autobiography. Cf. Mahatma Gandhi, *An Autobiography - The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Blowing Books, Milano 2019⁸⁶.

5 M.K. Gandhi, in «Young India», 6 maggio 1926, p. 164, cit. in *Il mio credo, il mio pensiero*, p. 37.

6 Cf. Id., *An Autobiography - The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, p. 371, cit. in *Il mio credo, il mio pensiero*, p. 33.

7 Id., in «Young India», 6 maggio 1926, p. 164, cit. in *Il mio credo, il mio pensiero*, p. 37.

8 Id., in «Harijan», 6 maggio 1933, p. 4, cit. in *Il mio credo, il mio pensiero*, p. 60.

9 Id., in «Harijan», 8 luglio 1933, p. 4, cit. in *Il mio credo, il mio pensiero*, pp. 60-61.

10 Cf. Id., in «Harijan», 11 marzo 1939, p. 46, cit. in *Il mio credo, il mio pensiero*, p. 61.

11 Cf. Id., *All Men are Brothers: Life and Thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi as Told in His own Words*, Ed. Krishna Kripalani, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad 1970, Reprinting 1971, p. 82, in A. Pushparajan, *The Mahatma and Christian Mission Today*, Asian Trading Corporation, Bengaluru 2020, p. 76.

12 M.K. Gandhi, in «Harijan», December 24, 1938, p. 394, cit. in *Il mio credo, il mio pensiero*, p. 135.