



SECTION I: THE GANDHIAN FIGHT



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Fighting a Gandhian Fight

In my opinion, the beauty and efficacy of *satyagraha* are so great and the doctrine so simple that it can be preached even to children.¹

The basic idea of Gandhi's approach to fighting is to redirect the focus of a fight from persons to principles. Gandhi called it *satyagraha*, "grasping onto principles," or "truth force."²

He assumed that behind any struggle lies another clash, a deeper one: a confrontation between two views that are each in some measure true. Every fight, to Gandhi, was on some level a fight between differing "angles of vision" illuminating the same truth.³

This means that most of the ways that you and I fight simply miss the point. We either grapple with the person who represents a position or else try to accommodate that person, without struggling with the position itself. That, to Gandhi's mind, leaves the real conflict unresolved. It simmers in the background, ready to boil over on another occasion.

Let's take an example. Ms. A, let's say, is having a rather nasty chat with Mr. B. It could be any everyday conflict—a tension in their personal relationship or a battle over organizational policy. But in this case it's a backyard quarrel over where a fence should go. Ms. A thinks the line is on the far side of the tree that stands between her house and his, and Mr. B is convinced that the line is several feet back toward Ms. A's house, beside the rhododendron bushes. Because of an old surveying error, neither claim can be made with absolute certainty. Their conflict has all the ambiguities and charged emotions that fuel old feuds, and there are several possibilities for its outcome.

In this as in any conflict, the simplest resolution is *forced victory*.

Let's say that Ms. A seizes a moment when Mr. B is away and places the fence exactly where she wants it, securing the posts with poured concrete.

Mr. B returns to a *fait accompli*, and an uneasy calm prevails. The uneasiness is due to the fact that there has been no real resolution. What appears to be the end of the dispute may be just the opening in another chapter in the conflict. Like the legendary wars of Appalachian families, such endless skirmishes may be passed from generation to generation in a continuing blood feud. The issues underlying the tension remain, and each time one of the sides suffers a defeat the old conflict is compounded with a new one. The loser resents being bludgeoned into submission.

So instead of providing a real resolution, Ms. A's presumptuous fence may only set the stage for an even more vicious conflict to come. That battle, like many that you and I have fought, will be only the reappearance of an old fight, regardless of the pretext over which it may be waged. Like the wars that have plagued Europe in the past several centuries, the unneighborly hostilities of A and B may issue in repeated outbreaks of old conflicts that were never quite resolved.

But the factors contributing to the European wars were complicated. The conflict between A and B is apt to appear to its participants to be a much simpler affair. Ms. A, for instance, may be quite certain about which side is undeniably correct and which side is absolutely wrong. She knows exactly where the boundary line falls, and feels that the sheer obviousness of the truth of her claim is reason enough to justify her forced triumph over Mr. B.

This is fine enough if she is right. But what if she is wrong, even the tiniest bit wrong? Her measurements may be slightly off, her memory of the original line a bit faulty.

A look at history shows what can happen when large groups of people act with an unbending but unwarranted sense of certainty like hers. The very terms we use to refer to moral presumptuousness—a crusading attitude, an inquisitorial style—remind us of those sad episodes when assaults were mounted with an absolute convic-

tion of truth. Only later did history judge the zealots who undertook them to be seriously misguided.

It may appear that Gandhi also acted with an unswerving conviction that what he was doing was always right. And frequently his sense of resolve did border on what his adversaries, and even members of his own family, regarded as stubbornness. But this bullheadedness was tempered by an important Gandhian insight. This is the notion that even though one position may have more truth than another, each side has some portion of truth in its possession. This, it seems to me, is a basic premise of the Gandhian approach.

Stubborn though he may have been, Gandhi made a point of looking at both sides of issues. For example, even though he came to feel that British rule in India was not right for either the British or the Indians, he strongly defended what he felt to be the value of British civilization wherever it appeared. And, although he led the fight that threw the British out of India, he did not want to toss away the good things their presence had brought.

So Ms. A and Mr. B will have to look carefully at their conflict, and see if it isn't possible that both of them are at least partially right. Ms. A may remember that although the tree has always been on her side, it now bends slightly toward his. And Mr. B may recall that when the line went beside the rhododendrons, the rhododendrons were rambling in an odd direction, and anyway they were much smaller bushes then. The seeds of doubt in each of their minds indicate that perhaps there is something to be said for both sides.

I suspect that this is often so. Most of the arguments that you and I know are like this—not a matter of black and white, but of competing shades of gray. Even when one position initially appears to be faultlessly true, flaws are apt to emerge in its facade. If they do, the first option we are considering, the forced-victory solution, is doubly damaging: it fails to mend the underlying differences, but by appearing to do so, it masks the conflict that remains. For these reasons, the Gandhian logic regards it as fundamentally wrong.

Fortunately there are other ways these neighbors can resolve their conflict. If Ms. A and Mr. B are in a civil mood they might negotiate

their differences and come to a *compromise*. Mr. B, in a magnanimous gesture, might offer to forgo half of his demands if Ms. A will agree to do the same. Perhaps he suggests a boundary line that looks like the letter z. With it, each of them seems to win a little, and the two can live together in a certain degree of harmony. There will be no victims, and no one will harbor resentment over being forcibly conquered.

Yet even though they both appear to win a little in their compromise, both lose a little as well. Both neighbors fail to get exactly what they want. Even if Ms. A agrees to Mr. B's proposal, she may never really accept his point of view. In her heart she knows where the boundary line lies. She agrees to live with this zig-zag fence for the sake of harmony, but the harmony that results is really only the cessation of their verbal battle.

The uneasy quiet that results may be the best outcome they can hope for—and a better ending than many that you or I have known—but it still leaves them somewhat unsatisfied. The underlying conflict is still unresolved, and like the arrangement between Chamberlain and Hitler at Munich, their compromise could lead to disaster. At some point in the future Mr. B could go digging for a sewer line in what Ms. A still regards as her soil, and the two would be at each other once again.

Compromise is not always a happy solution, and Gandhi seemed ambivalent toward it. Sometimes he urged fighters to compromise, and sometimes he discouraged them from doing so. When he disdained compromise it was usually the kind of compromise I have just been describing: accommodation. The other kind, to which he was more favorably disposed, involved an agreement over principles, and I will come to that in a moment. But accommodation is quite different from that. It involves only a superficial adjustment for the sake of coexistence; when this type of compromise is relied on, the lingering differences between opponents often remain. The tensions stay and fester. Sometimes they explode.

So it is good that Ms. A and Mr. B can choose still another means to resolve their conflict. They can take their case to court and appeal to the *law*. Ms. A, for instance, can hire a lawyer who will state her

side of the case eloquently before the bar, and Mr. B, if he is fortunate, will find one equally as talented. Ultimately a judge or a jury will make a decision based on what is considered an impartial body of legal precedent, a store of judgments applicable to everyone on an equal basis.

But is the law always so fair? Martin Luther King, Jr., was sent to the Birmingham jail precisely because he felt that certain laws were unjust. And a century earlier Thoreau was put behind bars because of a similar refusal to accept a legal code that he regarded as immoral. Gandhi read Thoreau when he was young, and like him went to jail willingly to protest unjust laws.

Gandhi also broke other laws—not because they were unjust but because they were minor regulations that were enforced with disproportionate severity to place obstacles in the path of a Gandhian campaign. Nuclear protestors in the United States and Europe have confronted similar legal hindrances. Many of the protestors have been arrested on charges of trespassing and disturbing the peace—laws they ordinarily would respect, but in times of necessity disobey.

At the same time that he broke the laws he considered unjust or unjustly applied, Gandhi professed great respect for the concept of law. He had been trained in London as an attorney, and had a high regard for the codes of propriety and morality that legal strictures represent. But he believed that beyond all laws lies the ultimate law, the law of God, and one must respect it before one can even consider breaking the lesser ones. “No man should become a law unto himself,” he cautioned.⁴

Yet the lesser laws, the human ones, cannot always be relied on as resources for overcoming conflicts between opposing sets of principles. They are less helpful in judging which side is right than in judging which side is wrong; they are better at curing the symptoms of conflicts than assessing the cause of them; they cannot be easily adapted to the peculiarities of each situation; and they seldom allow for a judgment to which both sides can agree with equal satisfaction.

In the case of *Ms. A v. Mr. B*, for instance, resorting to the law might indeed prove that an old surveyor’s error is at the heart of the problem. If that happened, it would be difficult for the court to rule

precisely for one side or the other. A judgment in favor of Ms. A might leave Mr. B steaming mad. He might feel that the truthful aspects of his point of view were not acknowledged. From his perspective, he might feel that Ms. A reaped the same benefit that she would have if she had forced her victory by building her own version of the fence.

If the judge were in a more conciliatory mood, he or she could award a split decision to both A and B. But that might make both of them unhappy. They might each feel as wronged as the mother of the child King Solomon decided to divide. Such a decision, like those forged through an accommodation type of compromise, might allow for the worst of both worlds, rather than the best. A fence right down the middle of the neighbors' disputed land might anger both of them and, for that matter, obliterate the rhododendrons. Even at their most conciliatory, laws may not produce the sort of solution that will satisfy both plaintiffs and defendants all of the time.

But that, I believe, is precisely the goal of the Gandhian approach of *satyagraha*: to satisfy both parties to a conflict that their positions have been honored. In Gandhi's view, both Ms. A and Mr. B should win. The Gandhian approach holds out hope for a resolution that is better for each of them than if either one had forced a victory on the other.

How can this happen? First, Ms. A and Mr. B must stop attacking one another. Then they must abandon their narrow positions, and hunt for a resolution sufficiently broad that it can incorporate both sides at the same time.

Is this an impossible goal? One might wonder why anybody would abandon a position in an argument unless forced to do so. But Gandhi often did just that, claiming that it was more enriching to search for a broad solution than to defend a narrow one.

But there are other, more practical reasons for abandoning a position. Let's say that Ms. A and Mr. B simply become exhausted with the sheer effort of waging the fight. Their conflict, like many of yours and mine, begins to collapse on itself and becomes a protracted war in which both sides lose and lose and lose. In such stalemates both sides may crave a reconciliation more desperately than they desire

to vindicate their old positions. Ms. A and Mr. B may wearily but willingly abandon their old stances and join in a search for a more harmonious alternative.

If they do so, they may be tempted to accept any settlement that presents itself, but the kind of alternative that would really please them (and Gandhi, for that matter) is an arrangement that would allow each side to gain as much as, or more than, it had bargained for in the first place. If this is to be the case, and both sides are to win, some sort of synthesis between their old positions is required. In creating it, the combatants will have to leave their old positions behind and come to a higher order of agreement.

In abandoning their old positions, Ms. A and Mr. B must put aside their claims to the disputed land, and with them the basis on which their claims are made: that each has the right to possess the land as his or her own private property. As they search for a broader area of agreement, they may consider several alternative bases for landownership, including the principle of shared property. If they come to agreement on that principle, then down comes the fence. The result may be a shared garden on the contested land.

This way of arriving at a solution is the Gandhian ideal, and it presents a cozy image. Both neighbor A and neighbor B are happier, we assume, than if either had won the battle outright, for each has now gained the resources of the other in the partnership. Ms. A has access to Mr. B's rake and hoe, and Mr. B can use Ms. A's garden hose.

Yet we can think of many reasons why the neighbors may not be pleased, and in other chapters we will look at these. For instance, even if we can imagine them happy with the solution over the land, what happens when it's time to pull the weeds? The Gandhian answer is the same that you or I might give: most likely, a new conflict will arise. If so, the process of working things out begins all over again.

This new Gandhian process would proceed in just the way that the one before did. In it, three steps were taken, steps one must take in any Gandhian fight. One must:

- 1) *examine the principles of both sides* to come to an agreement over which are valid and deserve to be a part of the solution;

2) *create a Gandhian alternative* to what presently exists by sorting through all imaginable options until finding a resolution that enhances both points of view;

3) *begin doing the alternative*, and discard any previous notions about how to win the fight for one's own side.

There are still a number of questions to be asked about this process: How do you know there is a Gandhian alternative? How can you tell when you have one? And what if you want to take the Gandhian approach but your opponent does not? If you have already raised these questions, bear with us. We will take them up as we go along. They are practical problems as well as theoretical concerns, and Gandhi had to deal with them all.