

# Desert Voices

NDE Newsletter

#2 summer 1988

## TO CELEBRATE GANDHI

by Genie Durland

"Celebrating Gandhi" in 1988 could be a problem; it's too easy and acceptable. Gandhi--safely dead, duly idealized on film--has made it. He's in the "mainstream" history books, and his movement and achievements are too often seen today in terms of a clever political strategy for winning Indian independence from an imperial power which everybody knew was terribly civilized and gentlemanly! After all, the English were kind to animals and always played by the rules.

Once when I was speaking about Gandhi's methods at a peace conference, the inevitable question about Hitler came up. The questioner felt certain that nonviolence, as a tactic, would never "work" with a barbaric demon like Hitler. It only "worked" in

Gandhi's case because the British were "civil and humane" (even in domination!).

I don't agree. Nonviolence on

a mass scale was never tried against Hitler, nor in most other modern conflicts, for that matter. And nonviolence, when undertaken just as a tactic, without a spiritual base and holistic impetus does not necessarily "work." But all this is beside the point of this discussion.

The point here is that what Gandhi was about was not a strategy or a tactic to free India. He was about a way of life. He worked tirelessly to free India from imperialism and his campaigns achieved their goals for the most part. But a study of his writings and life clearly reveals that he saw political liberation as a mere step on the way to

full freedom and personhood for the people of India--especially the starving masses and outcaste "untouchables," or Harijan. And his insistence upon nonviolence as the chosen method towards this goal had little to do with its anticipated effectiveness and everything to do with his devotion to truth and his conviction that "the end is incarnate in the means."

In his own words, Gandhi claims to have rediscovered the East through the West. He became thoroughly westernized through education and acculturation in Britain and southern Africa only to discover his Oriental heart and Hindu spirit on the crucible of his own oppression as a "nigger." It was from that opening that he embraced the struggle of the Indian people, not as a political campaign with himself as leader but as his own spiritual pilgrimage which the Indian people were invited

to join. In his introduction to Gandhi on Non-violence, entitled "Gandhi and the One-Eyed Giant" (New Directions, 1964), Thomas Merton

Desert Voices devotes this issue to Gandhi, whose life and work are models for the non-violent peace movement. In honor of his birthday, Nevada Desert Experience and the Fellowship of Reconciliation are cosponsoring a Gandhi Celebration, October 1-2, in Las Vegas and at the Nevada Test Site.

wrote: "In Gandhi's mind, nonviolence was not simply a political tactic.... On the contrary, the spirit of nonviolence sprang from an inner realization of spiritual unity in himself. The whole Gandhian concept of non-violent action and satyagraha is incomprehensible if it is thought to be a means of achieving unity rather than as the fruit of inner unity already achieved." In short, he realized what we in the West so often fail to grasp--that the spiritual life of one person is simply the life of all manifesting itself in him or herself."

Gandhi's principle of satyagraha (truth force) is inner unity, inner

wholeness, inner freedom. Nonviolent action on behalf of freedom from oppression and degradation for others is the fruit of satyagraha. Violence is incomprehensible to the one who has achieved satyagraha because violence shatters inner unity and relationships. Violence--or even the threat of violence (deterrence!)--destroys all possibility of connection with and affirmation of the sacredness of the other before it ever gets to the point of taking the life of the other. For Gandhi, this sense of oneness with creation and all other people, especially the poorest and most voiceless, instead of providing an excuse for lashing out violently to break the chains of oppression, is precisely the thing that requires total nonviolence in action and taking upon oneself the suffering. It is here that I see clearly the spiritual link between Gandhi and Jesus: Gandhi's "truth force" and the "love force" of the Gospels are the same.

It is said that Gandhi experienced a great sense of failure at the end of his life, and that it arose from his realization that people still saw Ahimsa (nonviolence) as a tactic instead of the basic law of being that it was for Gandhi. Jesus must even now experience the same sorrow knowing how his cross has been reduced by the doctrines of churches to a symbol of sacrificial atonement, when in reality it was his ultimate statement about method. Only by taking nonviolence that seriously, by knowing that evil is only overcome when we take it upon ourselves, is the Gandhian or the Christian reality fully understood.

If Gandhi were here today, I think he would see the bombs tested in the desert, the missile silos like pustules on the farms, and the hubris of star wars as symptoms of a spiritual sickness unto death. He would call for nonviolent resistance as a necessary first step. But he would remind us that our nonviolence will need to grow out of our deep spiritual oneness with each other and with creation if it is to heal the sickness. As we become such people, we become useless, offensive and subversive to the materialistic, exploitive way of life that charac-

terizes our culture and nation.

Gandhi himself observed that the Christians had never followed their Christ nor tried to live by his teachings. The doctrines of the churches have rendered Jesus "safe" because they have made him sterile and unreachable. Is history doing the same with Gandhi? Is he only admired today to the degree that his wrenching, life-changing way of being is denied or misunderstood? In celebrating Gandhi let us dare to reclaim his whole reality.

#### EXPERIMENTS WITH TRUTH

by Patty Ingham\*

Gandhi called his autobiography, The Story of My Experiments with Truth. Whether organizing strikes with mill workers, marching to the sea to gather salt, or speaking to the Indian National Congress, Gandhi refused to cooperate in allowing injustice to continue. His experiments with nonviolent resistance to evil were the seeds of truth he planted.

What is that truth for us as we stand on the defiled desert of the Nuclear Test Site? What truth can powerfully confront the big lie of nuclear "necessity"? What force can withstand the megatons of fear and suspicion that move nations and individuals to strategize destruction? From the experiments of Gandhi's life we know the answer. It is the force of our souls. It is the force of the truth which stands beyond even Gandhi's experiments. And it is the force of our determination to return again and again to the holy ground 65 miles from Las Vegas, holding high the truths of life and trust and nonviolence in the face of suspicion and hatred and the business of war.

We see in Gandhi's life a prototype of our own experiments with

(Continued on p.4)

NDE NEWSLETTER welcomes letters, articles, information, announcements, biographical sketches, poetry and humorous pieces. Send to: NDE Newsletter, Box 4487, Las Vegas, NV 89127

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS  
Denise Stephenson  
Peter Ediger  
Bob Mayberry



To begin with, I am troubled by the term "nonviolence." It's inadequate as a description of what we're trying to do because it describes the absence rather than the presence of something. And the something which is absent, violence, is itself a problematic concept. The question of what constitutes physical violence is complex enough; even more complex are questions of spiritual and emotional violence.

I agree, but if we focus on physical violence at least initially, one litmus test is injury to life. Clearly if someone is injured, that is violent.

What about damage to property?

Well, the question of violence to property is still being debated in the peace movement. NDE has chosen to include a statement about property in our Nonviolent Covenant for the very reason that nonviolent civil disobedience does not necessarily preclude acts against property. For example, NDE's Covenant precludes both pouring nails on the road into the Test Site (which happened last year at a non-NDE action) and hammering nuclear warheads (as in some Plowshares actions). But I think there's a difference between the two. In the case of the nails, indiscriminate destruction occurs to vehicles and potentially to people if they were to lose control of their cars. In the second case, specific destruction of property symbolically prevents the destruction of people. I guess that says I believe any act needs to be judged in part on how predictable the outcome is in terms of injury to life.

I don't think that solves the problem of the ambiguity of the term "nonviolence." Like "peace" and "freedom" and "defense," "nonviolence" is used by both sides to justify their own positions. Institutions promoting nonviolence in personal interactions co-opt the term while advocating massive violence on the corporate or international level. For example, leaders of protests at the Test Site recently met with leaders of the

counter-protests (the pro-nuclear group) to discuss how to keep actions at the Site peaceful. One suggestion was to draft a joint editorial on nonviolence. Another was to conduct joint training sessions in nonviolent actions. How do people so separate their experiences that they can endorse nonviolence as a discipline in the personal realm while advocating the global violence of nuclear weapons?

But people do, and one of our functions is to make them aware of the contradiction. The only way we can do that is to talk to one another. We can learn a great deal in conversation. Truth is not the sole possession of one side or the other. Gandhi believed that none of us sees more than a fraction of the whole, that we each hold a part of the truth. We in the peace movement are occasionally righteous about our piece of the truth, about the inherent goodness of nonviolence and civil disobedience. But truth is a process.

Perhaps that's why Gandhi spoke of his "experiments" with truth and nonviolence, because he conceived of it as an on-going process. And Jesus didn't respond with words when asked "What is truth?" His silence was an invitation to join a quest, an experiment, a dialog.

Our most recent Nonviolent Covenant tries to incorporate that notion of process by saying that we will share our plans with authorities and not misrepresent ourselves. The implication is that truth is an unstated presupposition of nonviolence.

Meaning that lying is a kind of violence?

Yes, and that the struggle to learn and reveal the truth is part of a nonviolent way of life. Which is why we continue to revise the Covenant, because truth is a search, not a given.

It's a kind of calling, isn't it? Not something we can claim as our own, but a way of life.

Which, finally, means that words are inadequate to define nonviolence. We need to make our lives the definitions.

truth. He confronted a British empire, we confront a nuclear one. He marched to the sea, we march to Mercury. He embodied nonviolence in the face of clubs and beatings, we must embody it in the face of anger, impatience and ridicule. Like Gandhi, we commit ourselves and our souls to the ultimate truth of nonviolent resistance to injustice, to evil, to destruction. We proclaim our noncooperation with death-dealing. These are the seeds we sow, at this time, in the desert. And in that sowing, we must confront too our own tendencies to idolize our efforts, or to hate and ridicule those who deny all that we intend.

# CALENDAR

August 5-7  
**August Desert Witness IV, Test Site:**  
 Remembering Hiroshima & Nagasaki

October 1-2  
**Gandhi Celebration, Test Site:**  
 Cosponsored by NDE & FOR

October 3  
**125th Anniversary of Ruby Valley Treaty, near Elko, with Western Shoshone Nation**

February 8 - March 26  
**LDE VIII, Test Site: Seeking Shalom**

## RUBY VALLEY TREATY CELEBRATION

NDE and Citizen Alert are sponsoring a caravan to join the Western Shoshone Nation on the final day of their 125th anniversary celebration of the signing of the Ruby Valley Treaty--Monday, Oct. 3. We leave for the eight hour drive from the Test Site at noon Sunday, following the Gandhi action.

The Ruby Valley Treaty granted the Shoshones territorial sovereignty over 43,000 square miles from Idaho to So. California, including the Test Site. Although the treaty has never been extinguished, the U.S. continues to ignore its own violations of a treaty it signed in 1863.

## NEWS NOTES NEWS NOTES NEWS NOTES NEWS

**N** --The MOCA action brought 750 people to  
**E** the Test Site, with 323 arrests.

**W** --Louis Vitale recently served 24 days  
**S** in the Tonopah jail for NTS actions in 1986, prior to the non-prosecution policy in effect since May 1987.

**N** --During Congressional hearings on nu-  
**O** clear testing, Jim Leach (R-IA) pointed  
**T** out errors made by top U.S. officials  
**E** trying to legitimize continued testing.  
**S** While the past six administrations have  
**N** vowed when the Soviets allow on-site in-  
**E** spections the U.S. would support a Com-  
**W** prehensive Test Ban, this administration  
**S** is now doing otherwise.

**N** --Intern Jill Ansel has left NDE to  
**O** visit friends and attend a peace gather-  
**T** ing in Czechoslovakia. Cindy Pile from  
**E** the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley  
**S** has joined us as a summer intern.

**N** --A pending ACLU case challenges the  
**E** right of Nye County to transport Test  
**W** Site trespassers long distances without  
**S** intent to prosecute.

**N** --Wendy Loomas and Willa Elam were  
**O** fined \$1000 each and sentenced 9 months  
**T** to a year for crossing a "security line"  
**E** at Kennedy Space Center during the  
**S** Mother's Day Action.

**N**  
**O**  
**T**  
**E**  
**S**  
**N**  
**E**  
**W**  
**S**  
**N**  
**O**  
**T**  
**E**  
**S**  
**N**  
**E**  
**W**  
**S**  
**N**  
**O**  
**T**  
**E**  
**S**

small voice in the desert  
**NDE needs fall and winter interns.**  
**Follow in Gandhi's sandalsteps.**  
**Write us, call us, visit.**

*Desert Voices*  
*Nevada Desert Experience*  
 P.O. Box 4487  
 Las Vegas, NV 89127-0487

NON-PROFIT ORG.  
 U.S. Postage  
 PAID  
 Permit No. 1009  
 Las Vegas, NV

Anne Symens-Bucher  
 Terry Symens-Bucher  
 1968 1/2 36th Ave.  
 Oakland CA 94601