

# BECOMING GANDHI

*My Experiment Living the  
Mahatma's 6 Moral Truths  
in Immoral Times*

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 **sounds true**  
BOULDER, COLORADO

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## Chapter 1

# Why Gandhi? Why Now? Why Me?

I call him religious who understands the suffering of others.

Mahatma Gandhi

And the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast.

1 Pet. 5:10, King James Version

I cry more often now, frequently triggered by the gravity of the human condition.

But I also laugh more, often triggered by the inherent humor in the human condition.

I feel more.

I empathize more.

Emotion researchers generally define empathy as the ability to sense other people's emotions. One of the last notes Gandhi left behind before his death in 1948 was later published in *Mahatma Gandhi: The Last Phase*. Gandhi wrote something that demonstrates his level of empathy and how pivotal it is to his philosophy of life: "I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much for you, try the following expedient: Recall the face of the poorest

and the most helpless man whom you may have seen and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he be able to gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? . . . Then you will find your doubts . . . melting away.”

A talisman is any object ascribed with religious or magical powers intended to protect, heal, or harm individuals for whom they are made, and this one came to be known as “Gandhi’s talisman,” a moral compass pointing the way toward how people should consider the viewpoint of others, to make ethical decisions and ensure their actions benefit fellow humans in some way.

While I’ve always considered myself an empathic person, with Gandhi’s direction, I now look more closely at the impact of my words and actions.

Nowadays the word *empathy* is bandied about as an important component of emotional intelligence and as a quality that distinguishes good leaders. There are already books that show how following the Gandhi code of ethics makes for good business, such as *Gandhi: The Eternal Management Guru; How Mahatma’s Principles Are Relevant for Modern Day Business* by Pratik Surana and *A Higher Standard of Leadership: Lessons from the Life of Gandhi* by Keshavan Nair.

Empathy is a quality I admire in others, and one I have hoped to embody more. So, on that count, I can declare this experiment a small success. In the past, I often took the me-first approach. How does what you’re feeling affect me? Now I try to remember others’ needs. On a more practical level, like Gandhi himself, I have made strides toward changes that I learned or adapted from following Gandhi’s regimens: I now eat oatmeal for breakfast—me, the kid who felt oatmeal was a punishment when my mother did not let me have my favorite Frosted Flakes, Trix, or Froot Loops. I am now a pescatarian—not a vegetarian like Gandhi but a big step toward better health for me who, like my father and his father and other would-be macho men, took great pride in declaring themselves “meat-and-potatoes men.” (Side note: my grandfather died from a heart attack, and my father had two heart “events,” so certainly there were some life-and-death motivations for me

if I wanted to live a long and healthy life.) I fast regularly, sometimes for long periods, sometimes for short. I have also been intermittently fasting, an approach I only recently heard of, often skipping two meals in a row from time to time.

If these relatively mundane and superficial changes suggest that I'm asking you to go *only* on a self-improvement mission, you are wrong—though that will surely be a byproduct. The goal here is to imagine a world, albeit a utopian world, in which people act, think, and speak with the highest moral sensibilities and aspirations, as Gandhi had hoped of all human beings. And then I'm asking you to assess your life and values, and your behaviors mental and actual, as I have here, to see how they align with and fit into this Utopia. Finally, then, to make adjustments personally if it is indeed of interest to you to do so, as I posit it should be, if you want to live in a place free of violence, free of lies and deceits, where faith, integrity, compassion, and empathy can thrive rather than just simply survive. So far I do not see evidence that enough people have jumped on the moral bandwagon. And I confess this from the start: I have tendencies that preclude me from living in that utopian society. Thus this experiment in change.

Empathy would be one of the last lessons I'd learn by looking at the world and myself through the prism of Mahatma Gandhi. Not that I wanted to be Gandhi. I found the man to be almost inhumanly perfect in his discipline and idealism—not my style. My research also showed me he was not a saint or an avatar or even a mahatma, “great soul,” the honorific title the poet Rabindranath Tagore gave Mohandas Gandhi in 1915.

Mahatma Gandhi fascinated me on almost too many levels. The breadth and depth of the man's interests were daunting. While he was at the forefront of more movements than people realize, he was best known as the nonviolent fighter for India's independence from its colonial ruler, England. That independence was achieved in 1947; a year later Gandhi was assassinated by a zealot right-wing Hindu.

At 5 feet 5 inches tall and weighing approximately 102 pounds, Gandhi nonetheless cast a long shadow as the precursor to a number of

intersecting social and cultural trends: living lightly on the Earth, a.k.a. minimalism or voluntary simplicity; vegetarianism and animal rights; using natural and homegrown fabrics, a.k.a. artisanal products; innovative educational initiatives; and on and on. A who's who of brilliance cutting a huge swath across a wide spectrum, some twenty renowned world leaders and thinkers claimed Gandhi as a major influence.

He innovated, motivated, masterminded, mobilized, moralized, and energized. He inspired many millions not just in India but throughout the world. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of streets and squares in India named after him. The same holds true of streets, avenues, and boulevards in some thirty other countries. A statue of him appears in virtually every Indian city and village. Gandhi statues also have been erected in more than seventy other countries, with the US having the largest number of Gandhi statues, memorials, and busts. He was a writing machine, a prolific author whose books, newspaper articles, treatises, and letters fill one hundred volumes. Equally, he was a voracious reader, having read up to 450 books.

I was fascinated as much by what Gandhi had achieved as by what he had not. He never held a title other than barrister. He was never elected to a political post; he never even campaigned for one. He never held a government position. He never served in the military. He never had an actual full-time salaried job. He never amassed a fortune; his only possessions were so minimal as to be negligible. He never was ordained as a spiritual leader. Yet his face graces every Indian paper currency, to the exclusion of any other leader in India past or present. And despite all the “nevers,” he is one of a very few people in history called the “Father of the Nation” without having been a military leader or president of his country.

The degree to which the odds were stacked against me for becoming anything even close to Gandhi was made clear when I read about a 2012 poll called *The Greatest Indian*, conducted by *Outlook* magazine in partnership with CNN-IBN and The History Channel. The judges decided to disallow Gandhi as a candidate since, as they put it, “it is impossible for anyone to come close to the Father of the Nation when it

comes to Leadership, Impact and Contribution.” So what chance would I ever have of approaching anywhere near the Mahatma?

I simply (simply?) wanted to see if any ordinary person living in the early twenty-first century could follow six of the principles on which Gandhi built the foundations of his morally driven game plan. What drove me to explore this question? I saw myself and society moving further away from a moral point of view. I knew it would be an arduous task. Turns out it was more arduous than I had ever imagined.

The endeavor was so difficult that while the original title of this book was *Being Gandhi*, I surrendered to the reality that the best I could hope for was to eternally strive to *become closer* to what Gandhi stood for. I figured that if I remained always in the state of becoming Gandhi, then each act, thought, and word throughout my days would be enough. The gerundial form—*becoming*—implies perpetually seeking, a good place to be. The folk singer Bob Dylan knew this. As he told Martin Scorsese in *No Direction Home*, the filmmaker’s documentary about the singer, “An artist has got to be careful never really to arrive at a place where he thinks he’s at somewhere. You always have to realize that you’re constantly in a state of becoming. As long as you can stay in that realm, you’ll sort of be alright.”

If it was good enough for Dylan, it was good enough for me. As the chorus of the Jewish ceremonial Passover seder song repeats after the accounting of each of the many blessings God has bestowed on Jews: “Dayenu”—“It would have sufficed.”

Like swimming in an infinity pool, there was no finish line; there would just be endless laps of realization and hopefully self-realization.

Gandhi himself implied he felt uncomfortable with being the object of some sort of goal in itself when he addressed the term *Gandhian*, which many of those who had followed his ideals began to use. As he told a gathering of the Gandhi Seva Sangh in 1936, “There is no such thing as ‘Gandhism,’ and I do not want to leave any sect after me. I do not claim to have originated any new principle or doctrine. I have simply tried in my own way to apply the eternal truths to our daily life and problems. . . . The opinions I have formed and the conclusions I have

arrived at are not final. I may change them tomorrow. I have nothing new to teach the world. Truth and nonviolence are as old as the hills.”

Suffice to say that being Gandhi would turn out to be unattainable—but the journey of becoming him was an effort that will continue to engage me as long as I live. How about you?

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The idea to undertake this experiment first came to me when Barack Obama began campaigning for US president in 2007. Here was the first Black man to be elected to that office, whose campaign slogan echoed the famous line that Mahatma Gandhi was credited with saying (later we will expose who really said it), “Be the change you want to see in the world.”

Obama had adapted it: “Change will not come if we wait for some other person, or if we wait for some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.”

When I read that Obama said he was more influenced by Gandhi than he was by Martin Luther King Jr., I thought that would surprise many, especially young Black Americans who may never have heard of the skinny little man from India with wire-rimmed John Lennon glasses.

In his book *A Promised Land*, Obama wrote,

Gandhi had profoundly influenced my thinking. As a young man, I’d studied his writings and found him giving voice to some of my deepest instincts. His notion of “satyagraha,” or devotion to truth, and the power of non-violent resistance to stir the conscience; his insistence on our common humanity and the essential oneness of all religions; and his belief in every society’s obligation, through its political, economic, and social arrangements, to recognize the equal worth and dignity of all people—each of these ideas resonated with me. Gandhi’s actions had stirred me even more than his words; he’d put his beliefs to the test by risking his life, going to prison,



and throwing himself fully into the struggles of his people. Gandhi's non-violent campaign for Indian independence from Britain, which began in 1915 and continued for more than 30 years, hadn't just helped overcome an empire and liberate much of the subcontinent, it had set off a moral charge that pulsed around the globe. . . . It became a beacon for other dispossessed, marginalized groups—including Black Americans in the Jim Crow South—intent on securing their freedom.

Despite the attention Obama brought to Gandhi, I wondered how many millions of people still knew little more about the Indian leader than perhaps what they had gleaned from seeing Richard Attenborough's multiple Academy Award-winning film *Gandhi*. (It actually surprised me as I traveled in three countries how many times people said that film was the source of their knowledge about the man.)

Failing to identify anyone on the landscape in the past one hundred years who impressed me with a vision of what a moral compass would even look like, I turned to Mr. Gandhi.

There is one other person, a living icon of moral impeccability, who I (and almost every other human being) hold in highest regard and with whom I actually had a most auspicious meeting years back: His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet. I had interviewed him at his home in McLeod Ganj, India, the seat of the Tibetan government-in-exile, while I was on assignment for *National Geographic Magazine*. It was my most unforgettable experience as a journalist and as a sentient being. I flatter myself to think it was memorable to him as well, even some twenty years later.

In a rare moment of brilliance, in the middle of interviewing his nephew in Tibet, which I'd toured before I went to McLeod Ganj, I asked him to leave his uncle a message on my tape recorder that I would take to His Holiness a few weeks later. The message was, "Uncle, every day we Tibetans hope and pray you will come back to your homeland." It was a poignant yet hopeless hope. When I played that tape for His Holiness six weeks later, the head of the Tibetan government-in-exile

knew the futility of that happening better than anyone. His brow furrowed in sadness as he listened. I could feel he was deeply moved by his nephew's desire—a ripple of desire that ran through anyone with a sense of justice. The interview that followed took a sharply different turn, much more intimate and personal than I could have wished.

Thinking that meeting might be stored in his memory, perhaps I could have had an in to follow this living moral compass of exemplary character, now eighty-seven years young as I write this.

But I did not choose him to build this experiment around because, for one thing, such a busy man with so many important people grabbing at his robes for the simple honor of having some of his karma rub off on them would barely have time for lowly me. More so, though, it was because he was a man literally born to such greatness—by virtue of the time-honored selection process of reincarnation that took a two-year-old named Tenzin Gyatso from a nondescript village called Takster, in the Tibetan Plateau of Qinghai province, China, and elevated him to the exalted leader of a country and a figure held in highest esteem around the world, no matter what their religious affiliation—that it would be difficult to relate to his life.

Mohandas Gandhi, by contrast, showed little to no potential for greatness as a young student, even as a young lawyer. He had human flaws. He was at times divisive; not everyone loved him. He was, in short, relatable, especially to me.

But the Dalai Lama himself held Gandhi in the highest regard, as clearly evidenced by his many comments in interviews and in his own writing—to wit, this piece he wrote for the approximately eight million readers of the weekly Indian English-language news magazine *India Today* in August 2021:

For me Mahatma Gandhi symbolizes Ahimsa, or non-violence, as well as Karuna, or compassion. One of my main commitments today is to promote these two principles, and I believe that India is the only country with the potential to combine its ancient knowledge with modern education. Gandhiji exemplified both

Ahimsa and Karuna, and I think of him as my teacher. . . . To me, he remains the model politician, a man who put his belief in altruism above all personal considerations and consistently maintained respect for all great spiritual traditions. . . . Today, in a world where bullying and killing still take place, we need compassion and non-violence more than ever. I am firmly committed to combining these ideals with the best of modern education.

So what was good for His Holiness was good enough for me.

While Obama brought Gandhi back into my consciousness (having traveled on many assignments in India since 2004, of course I saw his face and image all over the place, but he remained a distant figure to me), it was when I hit rock bottom, morally speaking, that I realized I needed to make some changes myself. That came when I could not have found myself in a less than Gandhian moment: I was in Colombia's gorgeous coastal city of Cartagena, as historic as it is hedonistic, on an assignment. One night, wandering the city looking for adventure, I met a woman thirty years my junior at a bar. We danced for hours with intermittent breaks to do shots of tequila washed down with beer. She did things with her hips while doing the salsa that I did not know were humanly possible, smoothly and sensually suggestive, in perfectly syncopated rhythms that spoke to my soul.

Hot and sweaty, we stumbled back to my hotel, quickly turned on the AC, stripped naked, and jumped into the cool shower together. Her hips continued to do wonderful things. After that, all I remember is sliding into the chilled one-thousand-thread Egyptian cotton sheets and falling asleep before my head hit the pillow. It was as decadent a night as a bachelor could want. Yet I woke up feeling empty, sad, and unfulfilled. The pain I felt was palpable within my soul.

Despite all I could and should be grateful for in my life, I still felt like I wanted and deserved more. It was an insatiable desire. I had become what Buddhists call the hungry ghost, a craving for something eternally out of reach . . . yet we keep reaching, even as we have no idea what that is.

As is often the case when you think you've hit rock bottom, there is another bottom below that bottom, which is where the mind takes over. Mine took a downward spiral into the abyss, a bottomless hell realm of self-doubt, self-loathing, and worthlessness, where even my self-effacing charm could not deflect the mistakes I'd made and failures I'd had in my life. And then came an avalanche of thoughts and self-inquiries for which I had no answers. Who am I? Why am I? How many people had I fooled to get to here? How many people had I inadvertently hurt by my own insecurities? When did I display stubborn conviction, all under the guise of my self-righteousness? When will my comeuppance finally crash in my face? How many times have I sabotaged my own opportunities for happiness?

There is great pain associated with taking a cold hard look in the mirror with unblinking eyes. It's a kind of self-inflicted pain that can bring some surcease of suffering—but only when you've reached your threshold and are ready to change. I had reached my limit and hoped this journey could ease my pain.

Dehydrated, recovering from a headache, and nursing pains in a hip muscle (how do salsa dancers not hurt themselves thrusting like that on the dance floor?), over strong Colombian coffee I took stock of myself. My life was headed in the wrong direction, if I aspired to any semblance of a righteous path. That was Day One of my decision to transform according to Gandhi's principles.

My first thought as I surveyed my current environment was that the difference between Gandhi and me could not be more apparent. It was going to be an uphill struggle just to follow the basic principles, let alone presume to attain any kind of Gandhian equivalency.

Really? I'm going to *what*? Give up the way I have been living since consciousness woke me from the depths of blissful ignorance? Detach from indulgences, addictions, rabid consumerism, violent thoughts, selfishness, and plain old mean actions? Tell the truth 24/7, giving up little white lies or big fat falsehoods? Including self-deception—those lies big and small we tell ourselves, those “stories” of unworthiness and inability that become fact in the repetition of them? Give up meat? SEX?! My life as I knew it?