

## Be the Change You Wish to See

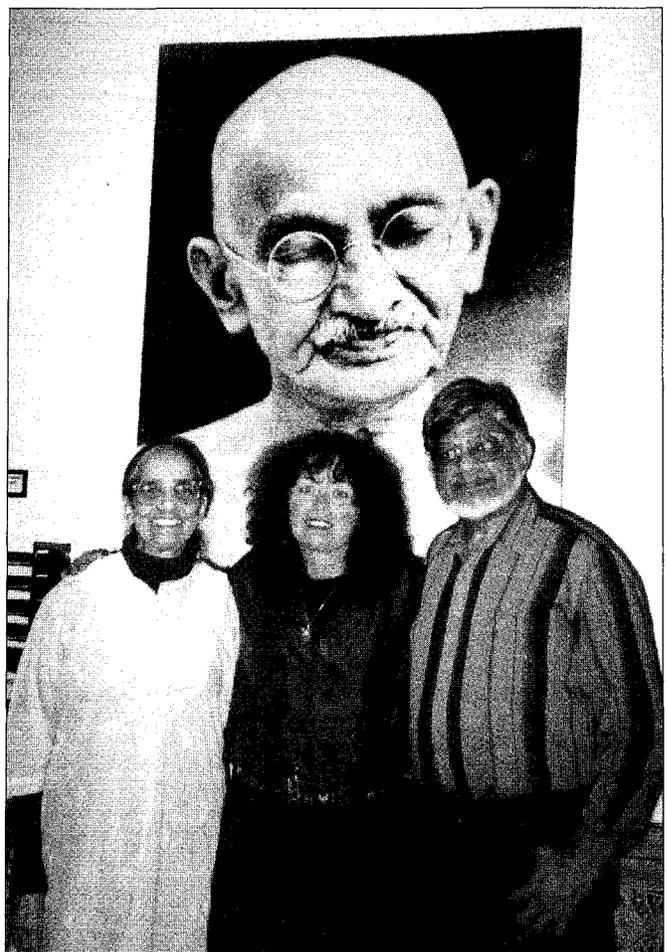
### *An Interview with Arun Gandhi*

Carmella B'Hahn

*Arun Gandhi was taught well by his legendary grandfather, Mohandas K. Gandhi. In this interview, he weaves his wisdom about facing adversity, anger, and prejudice with his personal stories of life's challenges, including the assassination of his grandfather.*

**T**he cabby expected to be taking my dear friend Linda Lantieri and me from the airport in Memphis, Tennessee, to Graceland and, in a way, he was right. It was January 1999, and we were on our way to interview Arun Gandhi for a book, *Mourning Has Broken . . . Into a New Paradigm*, on which I was working. The book is about personal transformation set in the context of social change, exploring whether those individuals who experience the greatest hardships in life have the greatest opportunities to stand strong in the face of further challenge. I carefully chose my interviewees so that I could glean from their wisdom a composite role model that would reflect a new emerging paradigm of human consciousness. Arun Gandhi exemplifies this consciousness, and his philosophy is an example of a nonviolent paradigm of thought in which punishment and zero tolerance have no place. I will expand more on the new paradigm as I see it in relation to safe schools, but for now we will stay in Memphis.

At our destination, the Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence, Arun and his wife, Sunanda, both of whom are totally dedicated to helping youth avoid violent conflict, graciously received us. Around the walls hung a series of enormous photographs of Mohandas K. Gandhi, Arun's grandfather, which were on loan from an exhibition. They depicted scenes from his life, scenes into which we felt as if we had walked. There was a still, peaceful presence in the room that remained as Arun began to tell his story in his soft, lilting voice. At one point, he admitted to feeling that his parents and grandparents were guiding him, and we felt profoundly connected to history and the wisdom of his ancestors.



Sunanda Gandhi, Carmella B'Hahn, and Arun Gandhi  
at the Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence

## *Arun Gandhi Tells His Story*

I WAS BORN IN 1934, in Durban, South Africa. My father, Manilal, was the second son of Mohandas K. Gandhi's four children. My mother, Sushila, and father adopted voluntary poverty and devoted their lives to nonviolent and political change in South Africa—a movement started by my grandfather in 1893.

During the most tumultuous period in India's struggle to free herself from British rule, my parents took me to India to live with Grandfather for 18 months so he could tutor me. I had a lot of anger about prejudice because I was living daily with the prejudice of apartheid, but his love was overpowering, and he practiced the values he wanted me to learn. "Be the change you wish to see," he used to say.

When we left to come back to South Africa, it was heartbreaking because we knew that he was old and that maybe he would not be there when we came back. India was torn with violence, and Grandfather was in the thick of the fighting. He made it his mission to bring about peace there. We had been back [in South Africa] for 2 months before the dreadful day came that will be etched in my mind forever. We lived in the Phoenix Center for Nonviolent Living, which was the ashram that Grandfather had started in 1903. I was 14 and my little sister, Ela, was 8 years old. We were on our 2-mile trek back from school, through dusty, muddy roads and across sugar cane plantations, having an argument about whether I should carry her, when I saw in the distance an old gentleman from the Phoenix ashram who never went out. So when I saw him walking hurriedly toward us, I was surprised and intrigued. He had a very agitated look on his face and he told me, "Run home immediately; your mother wants you. I'll bring your sister." I realized there was something very urgent, so I ran home . . . fast.

I saw my mom on the phone, tears streaming down her face. She was sobbing and trying to explain something. I just stood there, silently, not knowing what all the commotion was about until she put the phone down and told me, between sobs, that Grandfather had been shot dead. He had been shot at point-blank range and fell to the ground with his hands together in prayer, saying, "Ram, Ram"—the Hindu name for God.

I was totally stunned. In that moment I could see the 18 months I had spent with him flash across the screen of my mind—all the lovely moments, the love he showered on me, the lessons he taught me. I could not understand how anybody could want to kill somebody who had so much love for human beings. My immedi-

ate reaction was one of tremendous anger, and I wanted to throttle the person who had committed this heinous crime. I remember saying, "Wish I was there; I would strangulate that person." That's when both my parents reminded me of the lesson that I was taught by Grandfather about using anger positively. They told me that Grandfather would have wanted me to forgive his assassin, that he wouldn't have wanted me to abuse my anger and take it out on him. I said, "Yes, I must find a more positive way of dealing with my anger, rather than destroying the person, but I don't know how to forgive him." I saw the wisdom in forgiving, but I could have carried hate in my heart forever.

My father, and his brothers in India, were able to forgive, and they wrote a letter to the government requesting them not to punish the assassin but rather to forgive him, because that is what Grandfather would have wanted. The government refused to do that. They said that the law of the land had to be observed. The assassin was tried and hanged, but my family had forgiven him, and it was said that Grandfather had looked at him with love and forgiveness in his eyes as he fell to the ground.

At the time, I think what really helped all of us get over the tragedy was becoming immersed in creating a special memorial edition of the *Indian Opinion* to commemorate Grandfather's life. That really diverted our attention from the tragedy, and we were able to do something constructive.

In South Africa, we were made aware that we were second-class citizens of the wrong color from an early age. I recall simple things like going out shopping with the family and there being no public toilets for us. I remember that the best part of the beach was always reserved for the Whites, and the amusement parks were always in White areas, so we couldn't go there. White South Africans beat me for being too Black and Black South Africans for being too White, and it affected me very deeply. I felt terribly inferior, and my self-esteem was very low. Of course, I was lucky my father was against all of this, and so he continuously campaigned against it, spending 14 years of his life in prison. The majority of the non-White community were content to accept the prejudice—just trying to keep away from it—but Father used to often tell us to stand up to injustice and never accept it. This is what he was doing. Too often though, he was the only person defying the injustice and being taken away by the police, and I could see that most people, even the non-Whites, were trying to ridicule the idea. "What do you gain out of it? Just wasting your time. Follow the mainstream," they seemed to be saying. These extremes tore me up during my teens,

but later, in my early 20s, after reading a lot of Grandfather's writings, I realized my father had done a tremendous thing. Even without support, he had refused to bow down to injustice. I realized the power and the potential of nonviolence, and it began to strengthen me.

I think we need to get back to morals and ethics in life. We have become so involved in our pursuits of materialism and greed that we are willing to sacrifice just about anything for monetary gain. We must reverse this trend and put back morals and ethics as esteemed values. We should never accept injustice just because we are gaining from it. Grandfather and my father stood apart from the rest because they took a stand for justice. Grandfather said, "Materialism and morality have an inverse relationship. When one increases, the other decreases." So, there is this race to gain as much, materially, as possible. Those that have it want to protect it for themselves. Those who do not have it want to steal it from those who do. There is this conflict, which takes a violent approach, so we are going to see more violence occur unless the rich decide they want to share their wealth, including their technology, with the rest of the world and help attain a better standard of life.

## **"We should never accept injustice just because we are gaining from it."**

I went back to South Africa when my mother was dying, and not only did I lose my mother on that visit, but I saw the total destruction of the Phoenix ashram, the place where I was born. I had a tremendous attachment to that place, and it was in ruins—the buildings burned to the ground by arsonists—an act instigated by the apartheid government. That was a major shock and another source of anger, but I was now mature enough to understand what Grandfather meant by using anger positively. One could so easily scream and shout and be violent toward people who have perpetrated that kind of crime, but the positive use of anger is to turn things around and initiate change.

We used the energy of the anger to start the Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence as a continuance of the work that Grandfather started. We came to the United States in 1987, primarily to do a study of racial prejudice in this country and compare it with the caste prejudice in India and the color prejudice in South Africa. We were hoping that we would be able to go back to South Africa to start the Institute, but we found that the government

and the people were not interested, so we said, "Why not here?" We started by using nonviolence as the basis of a conflict resolution program and developed some programs to help children resolve conflicts creatively. One day I felt, coming from within the spirit, that this was not enough. We had to discover where conflicts start, get to the root of them, and show how to avoid conflict. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that many of our conflicts come from two main sources:

1. Our inability to deal with anger positively.
2. Our inability to build meaningful relationships.

Relationships are so fragile because they are built on selfishness where people say, "I want something from this relationship, and if I don't get it, then I don't want the relationship." Or, we base it on tolerance.

From Grandfather's writings and my father's experiences, I found that ideal relationships must be built on the four principles of *respect*, *understanding*, *acceptance*, and *appreciation*. We have to respect ourselves, each other, and our connection with all of creation. We have to purge our minds of the thought that we are independent individuals and can do whatever we like. We are all interdependent and interlinked, one way or the other, so whatever happens to one person eventually also happens to the others. If we respect that, we reach an understanding of who we are and what our roles are in life. We are here to do something good for humanity. When we reach an acceptance of the differences that exist among people, then we begin to see them simply as human beings, not by their genders, skin color, race, or religion. We have created so many labels that we cannot see through them to the soul of the human being. It is a tough sell, but we have been able to explain this to thousands of young people. They do get caught up in everyday life, so not much of it really sinks in, but I think the seeds will eventually germinate and make a difference.

We need to learn to be both verbally and physically nonviolent toward self and others, and one of the cardinal principles of the philosophy of nonviolence is developing compassion. We generally act out of pity but think it's compassion. We are often willing to give to somebody who is distressed or hungry, saying, "Here, take some money and get yourself something to eat, but don't bother me. I don't have time to be involved with you." That is acting out of pity. If you were acting out of compassion, you would wonder why that person is suffering, and you would share some of your time, talent, and resources to help create an infrastructure to enable him or her to rebuild self-respect and self-confidence and to stand on his or her own feet. Showering charity on people cripples them and makes them dependent on

us, but by making them worthy citizens who can fend for themselves, we are lifting them up. When we have a home and are well fed and cared for, we do not really understand the suffering of the hungry. We think we do, but we don't really know what hunger or homelessness is. Compassion requires a lot of humility, and that's what Grandfather was trying to do when he chose to travel third class on the trains at great personal discomfort. He was coming down to the poorest of the poor and reaching out to them. That is one of the reasons why he touched the hearts of the poorest distressed people in the world.



## B'Hahn: In Reflection

As we think about creating safe schools, Gandhi's interview leaves us much to reflect upon. What occurs to me is that we cannot hope to help students use anger positively, forgive others, drop prejudice, return to morals and ethics, build good relationships, or have humility and compassion until we, as their role models, are authentically committed (like these three generations of Gandhi's) to becoming the change we wish to see—in all the small details of our lives. We know that to be true, and yet it means making time in our busy days to focus on exploring the territory of our inner lives and questioning ourselves deeply as to what effect our behavior has on others. We can no longer avoid the truth that safe homes, safe schools, and safe societies are the result of the belief systems and behavior patterns of those in a position of influence unless, of course, we hold a belief that some babies are born bad. We are each an important presence in the society we are so tempted to blame for our problems, and we have exactly the same potential as Mohandas Gandhi, who made a huge difference simply by following his principles with integrity and dedication.

We are all born into a particular legacy of human consciousness, a common vision of reality held by the civilization of our time. Different aspects of this paradigm of consciousness permeate our countries, societies, schools, and families in varying intensities, which we, from the moment of birth, absorb and repeat until such time as it becomes restricting and ineffective, the tension causing us to break through to a new framework of perception.

It is time for that breakthrough, and the tide of consciousness is turning. As we begin en masse to digest the scientific information that on a quantum level our bodies and all external matter are indistinguishable, we begin to move in the direction of which Arun Gandhi spoke—toward recognition of our interdependence. The dominant paradigm into which we were born asserts that we are three-dimensional beings, separate from all other living things. Logic, reason, and control are highly valued, and moral judgment of others as "good" or "bad," "right" or "wrong" is the accepted norm. It is a (sometimes very subtly) violent paradigm that justifies revenge and hurting others as "righting the balance." Anyone who commits a "wrong" is on the other side, and the enemy deserves punishment.

A new, emerging paradigm is creating a nonviolent climate naturally. It asserts that we are multidimensional beings who are all interconnected, and therefore, if we help someone else, we help ourselves. This wider perspective sees life as one great tapestry, a unified system in which each thread affects the whole picture and is equally valuable, whatever its color and texture. The heart, intuition, and the spirit are highly valued, along with the head, and there is recognition that we are all capable of the highest and the lowest actions in life. Expressions of violence are seen as a calling to fulfill unmet needs that deserve a firm, compassionate, and supportive response. The response of Arun Gandhi's family toward the assassin—forgiveness—is humbling and sets an example for us all when we face incidents of violence in our own lives.

It is my belief that the truly effective and practical ways of facing the challenges in our schools are being and will be revealed to those who have attained an inner climate of nonviolence, such as the Gandhis, where compassion resides and blame is an unwelcome guest.

*Carmella B'Hahn, a writer and workshop leader from Devon, England, has been committed to developing holistic approaches to birth, life, and death for almost two decades. She is the author of *Benjaya's Gifts*, which challenges the traditions and taboos around the ageless mysteries of birth and death and is available on [www.amazon.com.uk](http://www.amazon.com.uk). *Mourning Has Broken . . . Into a New Paradigm* is her second book. She is active in her 7-year-old son's school, which is devoted to a holistic education for children in Grades K–8. The author may be reached at: 11 Wellington Square, South Brent, Devon, TQ109AG, United Kingdom; e-mail: [carmella@appleonline.net](mailto:carmella@appleonline.net)*