

Man of Peace

Mohandas **Gandhi**



"We must be the change
we wish to see in the
world."

—Mahatma Gandhi
(1869–1948)

Imagine this: It's 1893 and you are a twenty-four-year-old Indian lawyer practicing in South Africa. While taking a train, you are asked to leave your first-class compartment and go to the third-class compartment because of the color of your skin. You refuse because you have paid for a first-class ticket. You're forcefully removed from the train, your luggage is confiscated, and you're left in the bitterly cold waiting room of the railway station with only a small suitcase. What do you do? Do you fight for your rights or do you return to India and forget the injustices in South Africa?

Your name is Mohandas Gandhi, and you decide it would be cowardly to return



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to India, so you remain in South Africa for twenty-two years where you fight an ongoing battle for racial tolerance and become one of the most influential and well-respected political and social leaders the world has ever known.

Gandhi was born on October 2, 1869, in Porbandar, India, the youngest of four children and was influenced by his father's politics and his mother's religion.

He was a small, shy boy, afraid of many things, including the dark, and had to sleep with the lights on.

In 1887 his family reluctantly allowed him to leave India to study law in London, and to satisfy his mother he made a solemn vow not to touch wine, women, or meat. Despite his attempts to fit in, he still felt like an outcast in the city.

He felt very much alone, a foreigner in a strange country. To try to feel more comfortable and secure, he transformed himself into an English gentleman—living in fancy rooms and wearing fancy clothes. He learned to speak perfect English, took violin lessons, and even learned how to dance.³⁰

But he still felt a deep conflict between his inner self and his outer self. Remembering the values of his home, he tried to live a simpler life. He gave up his fancy rooms, cooked his own meals, walked everywhere he went, and joined the Vegetarian Society of London. His changes made him much happier, although he still remained awkward and shy.

He finally passed his law exams and, after three years in London, he returned home to India in 1891 to set up a law practice in Bombay. His shyness and problems with the Indian courts, however, led him to accept a low-paying position as a legal adviser in South Africa in 1893 where he experienced racism firsthand.

Traveling by train to Pretoria shortly after his arrival in South Africa, he was told to leave the first class car, for which

he had a ticket, because he wasn't white. When he refused to go to another compartment, he was thrown off the train.

Outraged by the experience, he resolved to fight back legally. Overcoming his shyness, he sued the railroad and won a grudging victory. The law was then changed so that all Indians could sit in the seat to which their tickets entitled them, provided they wore English-style clothing.

Word of this victory spread quickly, and Gandhi soon became a champion of Indian rights in South Africa and, indirectly, a spokesperson for all the powerless.

He remained in South Africa for the next twenty-two years, working to end the country's discriminatory legislation against people of color.

The legal work was hard but rather than quit and leave an unfriendly country, he decided to look on every difficulty as an opportunity for service to others. This was to be the secret of his success for the rest of his life.

He was determined to root out the disease of prejudice, but never to yield to violence. He vowed to bring the peace of heaven to earth.

At the turn of the twentieth century, South Africa was ruled by the Dutch, and on August 22, 1906, the Dutch government passed the Black Act, which deprived black and Indian people of their civil rights. In response, Gandhi formed his first non-violent mass resistance movement, and over five hundred people participated in this movement of civil disobedience.

Gandhi and his followers worked for the rights of black and Indian people and also for the rights of women. He did legal work for free, nursed sick people abandoned during a plague, and comforted the dying. He believed that all people were his brothers and sisters and that their suffering was his suffering.

By believing in the power of love and treating everyone as

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his family, he discovered that he was no longer shy and no longer afraid of anything.

When he returned to India in 1915, he began the struggle for India's independence. He wanted to rid India of its caste system that placed priests at the highest social level, which meant that they were treated better than anyone else in the country. The next level was reserved for princes and soldiers, laborers at a third level, and the poor—the "untouchables"—at the fourth and lowest level.

He also worked to rid India of British oppression. For three hundred years, several thousand British people had ruled over 300 million Indian people. Gandhi spoke to millions of people, asking them to practice the selfless love of *satyagraha*, a word which means truth and persistence.

Indians ceased to cooperate with the British and many were jailed. Many even spun their own cloth so they wouldn't have to purchase British-made cloth. The white, homespun cloth called *kadhi* was worn by millions of people and became the symbol of Indian independence.

From 1920 on, Gandhi organized campaigns of civil disobedience, always based on nonviolent methods.

In 1922 the British imprisoned Gandhi for two years for defying British rule and writing anti-British pamphlets. But his time in prison didn't deter him from his dream to make every man and woman in India free.

The British were so oppressive in India that they even controlled the products Indians bought and used every day. In hot, tropical countries like India, salt is an essential part of everyone's diet. However, British law in India forbade Indians from making their own salt, forcing them to buy salt from the British. Because of these unfair laws, in 1930 Gandhi led the Salt March. Accompanied by seventy-eight people, he began

his walk from Sabarmati to Dandi, a town on the ocean over two hundred miles away.

By the time he reached Dandi and picked up a pinch of sea salt in symbolic defiance of British rule, he had been joined by thousands of people. The British government was forced to acknowledge that it was losing its stronghold on India.

People began to eulogize Gandhi and call him Mahatma, a term of respect meaning the Great Soul.

In 1932 he was imprisoned again and embarked on his "epic fast unto death" to protest British rule and official discrimination against the untouchables. It was a powerful and nonviolent way of threatening the British government. They didn't want to be responsible for Gandhi's death, so after six days, the government agreed to a pact to protect the civil rights of the untouchables. This kind of social change brought about by peaceful means was a great victory for Gandhi.

On August 12, 1947, India finally won its independence from British rule, but the country was divided into two separate countries—Hindu India to the south and Muslim Pakistan to the north.

Gandhi did not celebrate India's independence because of his country's division. He yearned for his people to overcome hatred with love. Just as his *satyagraha* movement had enabled India to overcome British rule, Gandhi hoped this movement would unify the factions that now divided India. But such unification was not to be.

Because he taught unity and the brotherhood of people of all religions, he was hated by those Hindus and Muslims who believed their own religion was the only true religion.

Gandhi remained a firm champion of tolerance to the very end of his life. On the evening of January 30, 1948, as he walked to a prayer meeting where thousands of people await-

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ed him, a young Hindu dissident named Nathuram Godse fired a gun at his heart and Gandhi fell. His last words were of forgiveness to his killer.

Although he died feeling he had failed in his mission to create a free and United India, he had inspired other leaders to pick up his torch. Both Martin Luther King Jr.'s nonviolent civil rights movement in the United States and Nelson Mandela's anti-apartheid movement in South Africa used Gandhi's techniques of civil disobedience and nonviolent, passive resistance to protest racial segregation and injustice.

Gandhi's philosophies of nonviolence and peaceful protest had inspired people around the world and changed the lives of millions.