

GRANDFATHER GANDHI

by Arun Gandhi and Bethany Hegedus

He is known as Mahatma, Great Soul.

I know him as Grandfather.

After an eighteen hour train ride across India, we arrive at the Wardha station. Mother, Father, Ela and I. Grandfather is still ten miles away.

Father hires a horse and buggy. He places our bags and Ela in the carriage. There is room for me, but at ten I am no longer a child. Being beaten on the streets of South Africa has made me a man.

“If you walk, I will walk with you,” I say to Father. He nods.

My feet make clouds in the road. The dust cakes and settles. We are not far when the leather of my sandal rubs. Like a sand crab, it pinches. Father does not complain. Nor does Mother. Each step is a step closer to Grandfather.

A heat haze wavers; it shimmers in the distance. As we walk, I think of the Salt March. Thousands followed Grandfather to the sea. All to protest British rule.

Grandfather's work is tireless. He uses peace and prayer instead of guns and knives to change laws.

My breath catches. What will he think of me? Think of me now?

I last saw Grandfather when I was six. Before those University boys circled me. For what? For whistling in a white neighborhood.

"It wasn't me," I said.

"Lying m'kula." He threw me to the ground. He and his friends played a game of kick the coolie. Right there on the street.

Later, in another part of town, five Zulus jumped me.

The beatings don't leave me. Neither does the rock I keep in my pocket, ready to hurl at any who wish me harm. In South Africa, my skin is too dark for some, too light for others. Brown like the dirt is how I am treated.

No more.

Finally, we arrive. At uncle's hut, we wash and snack. Then, we make our way to Grandfather's.

As we approach, I fear we must be mistaken. This cannot be where Grandfather lives.

There are no lights. No fans. I imagined a large desk; a dozen bustling secretaries and attendants. Grandfather is an important man. All of India, if not the world, knows the name Gandhi.

Inside the small mud hut, he sits.

Ela and I bend to touch his feet in traditional greeting, but Grandfather pulls us to him, showering us with kisses. He smells of peanut oil.

“Bapuji,” Ela giggles, squirming.

Father does as I had hoped. He tells Grandfather that I, like most of his followers, chose to walk the long walk from Wardha on my own two feet. A test of character.

Grandfather smiles his toothless grin. “Arun,” he says, thumping my back, “I am impressed.”

We settle into life at Sevagram, Grandfather’s service village. Three hundred and fifty live here; many more than at Phoenix, our ashram in South Africa.

Together we work as one family. I help wash dishes and clothes. Our chores rotate weekly. Soon, along with my team, I clean the toilet buckets that must be carried to the field, emptied, washed and put back for use. It is a dirty job. An “untouchables” job, but we all do it. Even Grandfather.

Of course, there is playtime, too. Soccer with Suman and the other ashram children. Running, I remember the faces of those ugly men and the feel of their fists and feet.

My anger doesn’t leave me. It runs inside me. It kicks the ball.

Only I know it is there.

Several months pass, when I am told Mother, Father, and Ela will continue to travel without me.

“Son, I have seen the change in you.” Mother strokes my hair. Without my saying a word, she has seen my secret.

Father pulls me to him and we hug. “The soil at Sevagram is rich with forgiveness,” he says. “It will do you good to be planted here.”

So I stay. I stay to learn the lesson Grandfather teaches the world over. Peace.

Waving goodbye, I worry I will not be a good pupil. My belly has grown full with anger. Like sugar, I have come to crave it.

I adhere to the schedule Grandfather has set. It is rigorous, but no more so than the rest of the ashram’s.

I awake at 4 am. Morning prayers begin at 4:30.

At 5:30, Grandfather takes his morning walk. Sometimes I accompany him. Sometimes I do yoga with Kanu, my cousin. Then there is breakfast, chores, and washing before my lessons begin at 10:00.

Bhanasali-kaka, one of my tutors, has taken a vow. He will not enter any man-made structure. He will not come inside, no matter how hot the sun. No matter how cold the day. His hair blows in the winds. He does not notice the rains. I do.

One morning, the rains pelt us side to side. My paper is soaked. I cannot write. Surely my lesson is over.

Bhanasali-kaka continues. He asks questions. I answer.

Conversation is now my pencil.

The next morning, there is a change. Not in the weather. In Bhanasali-kaka. He

hands me an offering. An umbrella. I don't waste time asking why. I open it. The rain drips off and hits the ground. The earth soaks it in. A sponge.

The same may be said for me and my learning. My real learning.

Grandfather, it is said, is a most beloved teacher.

Despite his many meetings, Grandfather makes time for me. One hour a day.

In the late afternoon, we talk. He checks my lessons. We spin khadi~~kadhi~~. It is Grandfather's idea to have competitions. See who can spin the tiniest and tightest cloth. I win! Often!

He tells me stories. Kings and seeds. Grains of wheat. Sharavan, the modest peasant. Parables of peace.

In my palm, my rock grows cold, but I must keep it close.

In the evening, there is dinner, then prayers. When the sun sets, the ashram grows still. Under the night sky, we roll out our mattresses. The long days end in sleep.

Grandfather's work continues. There is always more to do. He travels to New Delhi. Calcutta. When he returns, Grandfather fasts in protest. He will not eat until the violence ceases.

The world takes notice. I do, too.

By my second year at Sevagram, my daily activities have become like rituals. My mind and heart feel connected. Father was right. It has done me good to be planted here.

Then, one day after tuitions, a group of us take to the soccer field. We play. We play hard. The ball is mine. I see Suman running. Running. He runs but he does not stop. His body bangs into mine. His feet steal the ball. My ball.

“No, no. He pushed me. The ball is mine,” I yell to the others. No one sides with me. They all side with Suman. My hand reaches for my rock. I hurl it to the ground and run from the field.

Grandfather turns from the window. “Let us spin,” he says.

I nod. I rub my tears dry and go to my spinning wheel.

We are silent; the spindle whirs.

He saw. I know he saw.

After my heart has stopped its fury, after it has quieted and slowed in my chest, Grandfather speaks.

“Suman meant you no harm. He is not your enemy. No one is.”

Grandfather is right. Suman is my friend. But those men, the men from the streets, they hurt me. Hurt me for no reason.

I tell Grandfather everything. The whites. The Zulus. My rock.

Grandfather moves from his wheel. He wraps his arms around me. No doubt he has heard the story from my parents when we first arrived, but he listens to it again, straight from me. When I am done, his voice is soft. “Those who harmed you acted out of ignorance. They did not know what they were doing.”

“I don’t care. I did nothing and they beat me.” I hang my head. Grandfather is a peacemaker, and I am anything but at peace.

Lifting my chin, Grandfather speaks. “Do not be ashamed, my child. We all feel anger.”

“Even you?” I ask.

“Most certainly,” he says. “Once I was thrown from a train for no other reason than the color of my skin.” He sits ever straighter. “I was angry. Am angry now at what you endured but anger is my cue to seek change.”

A saying of Grandfather’s floats before me. We must be the change in the world we wish to see.

I have no clue how to do that. How to be the change I wish to see. But Grandfather must.

I do what I haven’t done before. I ask. “How?”

“Anger is like electricity,” Grandfather says. He is not one for riddles, but he is one for stories. None comes. He goes back to spinning. He holds the thin cotton thread between his thumb and forefinger.

How? I want to ask again. But I do what Grandfather does. I spin.

It is quiet, the same whirling of the spindle as before when Grandfather says, “Imagine a bolt of lightning striking a tree.”

I close my eyes. My mind catches a glimpse. A flash of lightning splits the sky, a tree splinters in two. The tree will not survive.

“And now, a lamp?”

I see a hand tug a chord. Light appears.

I do not understand. What use is a light-bulb? A bent and a broken tree?

It takes me a moment more, but when I open my eyes my choice is clear. Wild

anger— like lightning — strikes, but if channeled it may shed light. Dark to dim. Dim to brighter.

“An eye for an eye,” Grandfather has said, “only makes the whole world blind.”

There, beside Grandfather, I vow to see.

THE END

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Much is known about Mohandas Gandhi's achievements as a political and spiritual leader but little is known about his role as husband, father, grandfather. While the timeline has been condensed, and some dialogue reconstructed, Arun did travel to see his grandfather in late 1945 and stayed at the Sevagram ashram until the end of 1947.

Arun's grandmother, Kasturba died in prison in 1944. Due to WW II, the sea lanes between South Africa and India were closed to civilian traffic. The family was unable to travel to India to pay their respects. In late 1945 once the sea-lanes opened, a trip was finally made. Only Arun's older sister, Sita, did not go. She was already in India enrolled at university.

By the time Arun arrived at Sevagram, Gandhi had transformed himself from an English barrister to a major political figure. He worked tirelessly for India's independence from Britain. He did so by non-violent means, developing his theory of Satyagraha—passive resistance. On several occasions when protests erupted in violence, Gandhi practiced penance for the people's actions. He fasted for days, sometimes weeks on end, in an effort to make right the wrongs of the world.

Life at Sevagram was rigorous and highly structured. Gandhi's principals led ashram life. Prayer time was essential, as was religious freedom. Kadhi, home-spun cloth, was made and worn. Those who lived at the ashram were encouraged to use each and every item to its fullest, including Arun. Once he tossed a nub of a pencil into the brush on his walk home from his lessons in Poona, only to have his grandfather send him back in the dark of night to find it. Duties were divided evenly in defiance of India's caste system, where certain unpleasant jobs, such as the emptying of toilet buckets which was usually given to the lower "untouchable" class of Indian society.

Like his grandfather before him, Arun experienced racial discrimination first hand. The beatings Arun endured in Durban were not a family secret, but the scarring, and lust for revenge Arun carried with him were. Over the course of his stay at Sevagram, Arun learned many lessons. However, none had a more lasting impact than Gandhi's comparison of anger to electricity.

By November of 1947, Arun's time at Sevagram had come to a close. As he returned to South Africa, Arun worried that Gandhi's hunger strikes, an act of political defiance, would one day cause his death. However, it was not a peaceful protest that caused Gandhi to lose his life, but an act of violence. Two months after Arun returned home, on January 30, 1948, at Birla House in New Delhi, Gandhi walked the garden on his way to the evening prayers. There, he was shot in the heart by a Nathuram Godse. Gandhi's last words, "Rama, Rama, Rama" ("I forgive you, I love you, I bless you.") embodied his life's legacy. Forgiveness, truth, and compassion.

Due to the turmoil Gandhi's assassination caused in India, it was decided his cremation would take place the very next day. On January 31, 1948, six thousand or so

devotees followed the funeral procession to pay their last respects — Arun and his family were not among them. They could not travel to India in time. However, at the Phoenix ashram in South Africa they released a special issue of the *Indian Opinion*. Arun did the typesetting, a labor intensive task on the primitive printing press used to put out the paper.

Today, Arun continues his grandfather's work. He serves as the founder/director of the M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence and has written nine books, including the memoir, *Legacy of Love: My Education in the Path of Nonviolence*. He frequently speaks before the United Nations, throughout the United States and abroad, furthering the work of peace.

GLOSSARY

Ashram: in Gandhi's terms, a community where individuals and/or families come together to live and work as one family. All chores are done collectively in the spirit of embracing others, even newcomers and strangers, as a family member.

Bapuji: (Baa-poo-jee~~PRONUNCIATION~~) Indian term of address. Bapu means father. The "ji" is added to mark honor and may mean Grandfather or a term of respect for an older gentleman.

Bhansali-kaka: (Bhun-saali-ka-ka~~PRONUNCIATION~~) Tutor of Arun's. "Kaka" signifies paternal uncle.

Caste system: Complex class system practiced in India that one is born into. The five main levels of the system are: **Brahmans**-upper class, priests, **Kshatryia**-landowners, **Vaishya**-merchants, **Shudra**-~~art~~isans and ~~farmers~~sweepers, street cleaners, **Harijan**-(once known as the **Untouchables**) lower class that perform duties such as cleaning public toilets that deemed them untouchable. Gandhi's requirement, that all those who lived at the ashram performed "untouchable"

duties, was in defiance of this system. Gandhi called the Untouchables-the Chosen Ones.

Coolie: (koo-lee) A lackey. Someone who is subservient, such as a baggage carrier at a railway station. Used as a derogatory term by the English in India and South Africa to describe Indians.

Khadi: (khaa-di) handspun, handwoven cotton cloth. As part of the Freedom struggle Gandhi urged Indians to make their own clothing and not to purchase garments made and imported by the British.

Kanu: (~~PRONUNCIATION~~ Ka-nooo) a cousin of Arun's. Son of Narandas Gandhi, "Mahatma" Gandhi's brother.

Phoenix: Gandhi founded this ashram in South Africa in 1904. It comprised of one hundred acres of land and was located four miles from the nearest town, Phoenix. Arun Gandhi lived here from his birth in 1934 to 1956 .

Salt March: Or the Dandi March. On March 13, 1930 Gandhi began his march to the Dandi sea-beach to break the Salt Law, which made it illegal to manufacture salt in India. By the time Gandhi ceremoniously picked up a pinch of salt, on April 6, 1930, thousands followed him to the sea.

Sevagram: (Sewah-graam) Gandhi founded this ashram in India in 1921 outside the small village of Shegaon (shay-gown). The ashram name was composed of two words. Sewa meaning service. Gram meaning village. The ashram became known as Service Village.

Spinning wheel: hand-held portable instrument designed for the making of cloth. The spinning wheel became a symbol of protest, as all over India, Indians began to spin their own cloth and refused to buy British garments.

Tuitions: time spent with a tutor; lessons.

Wardha Station: (war-dhaa) the railroad station nearest to Sevagram in the town of Wardha. This station is still in service today.

Zulu: (Zoo-loo) An African tribe living in the eastern coast of South Africa.

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