

The Violence within Non-Violence

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Arun Gandhi's Story

In his keynote lecture on the Gandhi tradition of non-violence at the 21st annual conference of the Concerned Philosophers for Peace*, Arun Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma Gandhi and former director of the M.K. Gandhi Institute for Non-Violence, relates the following story:

Arun, then sixteen years old, was asked by his father to take him by car to a meeting. During his father's participation in the meeting, Arun was to go to the nearby town, buy groceries the family needed, and bring the car to the garage. At five in the afternoon Arun was supposed to be back, to pick up his father, and drive him home.

The boy fulfilled his duties, and since there were time and money left, he went to the cinema into a John Wayne double feature. He was so mesmerized by it that he forgot time. Much too late he hurried out of the cinema. When he arrived to pick up his father, it was one hour past the appointment. His father had grown very worried by then. Arun explained that the garage had not gotten the car ready in time. He did not know that his father had called the garage to find out about his son's whereabouts. Arun's father reacted to the lie as follows:

He told his son that he, the father, must have done something wrong in bringing up his son, so that his son would lie to him; and that he would not let his son drive him home, but walk all the

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way and think about what he had done wrong in bringing up his son. Arun implored his father to go by car with him, but his father did as he had said. It was a five hour walk. Arun drove behind his father at walking pace until, late at night, they got home.

Arun Gandhi said that after this he never again lied to his father. “That is non-violent parenting!” he concluded.

The Story's Lessons

It would have been interesting to hear what Arun Gandhi's father found out during his walk and whether he ever told his son. But the story had ended there. The audience was obviously supposed to get the lesson without further information. A lesson on non-violent parenting. So the parenting was finished when the walk was finished, and the son was supposed to have gotten the father's lesson by then.

What was the lesson? Arun Gandhi was not explicit about the message sent, and the messages received by his - predominantly western - audience may vary. The following view is also meant to invite others, especially from non western cultural backgrounds.

The aim of the parenting probably was to teach the son that he should not lie when he had wronged his father. And the boy should be guided towards a better behaviour non-violently. A “violent” parental response might have been to get angry and punish him, so that fear for further punishment would stop the son from lying again. What did stop him from lying again instead? What might Arun have felt when crawling along for hours, with his father doing a late, long and exhausting penitence and reflection walk in front of the car, because Arun had lied? Guilt and shame? Arun Gandhi did not comment on his feelings in that situation, but they must have been painful, since the boy beseeched his father to go by car. The lesson that did the job may have been: *Do not lie to your father when you have wronged him. Your father will chastise himself for being a deficient parent, and that will be because of you.* That would be a lesson on the son's faults, not on the father's. And the boy got the message alright: from then on he avoided another five hour misery.

And the lesson for the audience? *Non-violence is to react to offenders so anger-free, so self chastising, so exceedingly good, that the offender will feel bad and never do it again.* Make your reaction a lesson in morality. Be so terribly good that the other will feel terribly bad.

There is something terrible within this non-violence. What is it?

Emotional Violence

I do not wish to argue that there was nothing caring in the father's reaction. In this and other non-violent parenting stories Arun Gandhi tells, it is impressive how much time parents in the Gandhi family invested to instruct their children, on occasions that would not cause much parental

investment in Western culture. And the father convincingly adhered in his own behaviour to the morals he expected the son to adopt: when confronted with a son who lied instead of taking responsibility for something he had done wrong, Arun's father thought of something he might have done wrong himself and drew the conclusions without delay.

My point is that, beside the caring aspects, there was also a violent facet in the father's reaction, something emotionally abusive. Arun Gandhi's father, apparently so non-violent that he was unable to utter a spontaneous anger when wronged, turned his anger against himself, chastising himself with a five hours walk after a long day, and exhibited his suffering to his son. Even though the official message was that it was the father who had wronged the son, bringing him up somehow badly, and that he had to do penitence in meditating about it, the father's self-punishment did punish the son, emotionally, not bodily (if we let aside the fact, that the boy drove until near midnight). But since the punishment was disguised in self critique, the father's slate stayed clean - he stayed the good one - while the son felt the worse: a terribly bad boy with a terribly good father.

One might object that Arun's father did not ask the son to drive behind him and witness his suffering. Indeed, with a mature and independent counterpart, namely one who is able to take responsibility for his own behaviour and feelings but not for the behaviour and feelings of others, the lesson would not have worked. Such a person's answer could have been: "I am very sorry I disappointed you, I will think about why I did it, and we can talk about it (I take responsibility for that). And I am not responsible for any suffering you add by punishing yourself for my behaviour. Well, I am driving home now, do you come?" A five hour walk then would somehow have lost its grandiosity. And it would not have been much of a lesson anymore. But from a boy of sixteen, such a reaction cannot be expected. Children love their parents in a far too dependent way. In that sense children are not entirely responsible for their feelings: in part their parents are. That is why parenting can be emotionally violent.

We do not know whether Arun Gandhi's father really tried to see his own faults when walking home, or whether he was busy with non-violent parenting. But what could he have seen, had he turned his meditation indeed onto where he himself as a parent might be deficient or even violent?

John Wayne

Arun Gandhi's story gives a clue to what Arun unconsciously may have missed in his father's parenting style, that made him misbehave. It was probably not by chance that Arun's initial lapse was induced by a John Wayne movie.** Why was this obedient, dutiful son attracted and fascinated by a figure like John Wayne to such an extent that he let his father down? John Wayne - his screen persona at the time (around 1950), when he had recently performed several of his

*** * I am thankful to Peter Kreisz for drawing my attention on this nexus.

most famous western films - could stand for what Arun missed in his father. Whatever the exact contents of that double feature were, John Wayne's image would rather be that of man who gets angry when wronged. He punishes the offender, not himself. He even uses his fists, instead of keeping a clean slate at any rate. He would probably set direct and palpable boundaries to a misbehaving son instead of manipulating him into a change of behaviour by inducing shame and guilt. And whenever others would dare to behave violently towards his children, they could be sure to be protected, if necessary by violence. Without wanting to make up John Wayne as a parenting ideal: Some of this could be a relief for a teenage son!

If we thus understand Arun's initial lapse as an unconscious rebellion against his father's parenting manner, and perhaps against the family's non-violence tradition, we can understand his second lapse: Arun was not able to tell the truth, when he finally met his father. He unconsciously shielded him instead of confronting him with a genuine fascination for something so much in opposition to the family's truth and values.

Mahatma Gandhi

Arun Gandhi's father was Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi's son. Did his notion of non-violent parenting come from his own father? And does Arun Gandhi truly administer the legacy of his famous ancestor in telling such a model story? I will not discuss these questions here conclusively. Mohandas Gandhi's concept of non-violence has been criticised (Gelderloos, 2007; Nanda, 1985), but surely the present critique of Arun Gandhi's notion of non-violent parenting cannot be applied to the political non-violence concept of Mohandas Gandhi. When chastising himself with fasting to coerce the British Empire, Gandhi did not act as a parent to his dependent child, but as a representative of a suppressed people towards the suppressor. The power asymmetry was inverse. Exhibition of self-induced suffering then aims at intensifying the conflict tension in order to compel a dominant opponent to negotiate structural change (Dudouet, 2008).

Nevertheless the family's non-violence tradition did influence the relation between Arun and his father. According to Mohandas Gandhi's own reminiscences (cited in Erikson, 1978), he was possessed by a wish for absolute moral impeccability already as a boy. He could not endure admonishment, especially when it was justified. And he learned early the power to change, or even redeem, the dominant other by being impeccable himself. He learned it in the relation to his own father, Karamchand Gandhi: according to the psychoanalyst Erikson (1978), a key experience for the boy was, when he moved his usually irascible father to loving tears by handing in a written confession of misconduct with a wish for punishment and a request that his father above all should not punish himself for it. Erikson's suggestion that Gandhi's non-violent struggle against the British rule was a transmitted involvement in a difficult father-son relationship seems plausible.

The mentioned misconduct incidentally consisted in pilfering a bit of gold from his brother to pay back a debt, a debt *of the brother*. When he became a father himself, Gandhi expected

highest moral standards from his own sons. In a letter to Manilal, Arun's father, he sets the age of twelve as the definite endpoint of amusement and urges his son to make incessant conscientious efforts (cited in Erikson, 1978). Under such moral demands, a fascination for John Wayne and a spontaneous anger with a lying child could find only hidden places. As far as we know there was no room for an expression of happiness about the son's safe return either. The need to instantly and efficiently instruct an aberrant child prevailed.

The Systemic View: Too good is bad

Systemic thinking in the tradition of Gregory Bateson, Virginia Satir and others (König & Vollmer, 1993; von Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2000; Franke, 2004) implies the principle of all-inclusiveness. In a healthy system every part has a proper place in the whole, a place to exist. Something suppressed or disowned instead is likely to take a malignant turn and to find evil ways to express itself. Persons who are angry but never express it authentically might get a headache or other conversion symptoms. Disadvantaged parts of society tend to become violent against themselves or others. In a saintly kinship group a bad seed is likely to exist. Systemic family therapists are acquainted with the pattern of children unconsciously taking over unacknowledged feelings of their parents (Ulsamer, 1999). People unable to defend themselves sometimes literally attract aggression from outside, a possible issue in mobbing cases (Hugo-Becker & Becker, 2004). The tendency of the dominant parts of a system most often is to intensify the exclusion and oppression of evil parts. All-inclusiveness means to acknowledge as significant and integrate difficult parts of a whole.

Non-violence adherents are likely to step into the trap - if it is not a fundamental heraclitean dilemma - of entailing destructivity when seeking blamelessness. That applies especially for the principled, rather than pragmatic (Sharp 2005), branch of the non-violence movement, to which Gandhi's *satyagraha* concept belongs. The demand of principled non-violence is not only to act and speak but to think and feel non-violently: "The nonviolent resister not only refuses to shoot his opponent but he also refuses to hate him" (King, 1984, p. 103). Unfortunately that cannot be achieved by pure decision and will. Humans tend to be humans, not saints. The more non-violence devotees suppress or deny feelings and impulses that are incompatible with their commitment, the more they are likely to exhibit hidden and indirect forms of violence: manipulation, passive aggression, conceit, emotional abuse, self-righteousness, ruthlessness against oneself, control, conversion symptoms, perfectionism, narrowness, victim posture, pride, dogmatism etc.. Those who cannot love themselves with their flaws are bound to hate the flawed other.

On the continuous path of (inter)personal maturation there is no sustainable bypass around disowned unpeaceful feelings. But we have an option to meet our shadow (Jung, 1933), the "other" within ourselves (Bar On, 2008). The more we acknowledge it as belonging, the less destructively it will express itself. We can face up to it and may discover needs behind and virtues inside it. But we will not stay innocent in the process. May be the John Waynes among us

are not so bad. A John Wayne hidden in a Gandhi might come out worse. Non-violence has got to make its peace with violence to become peaceful.

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