

Remembrance

African Activist Archive Project

Mohandas Gandhi, The Community Church of New York & The American Committee on Africa

**By Rev. Bruce Southworth, Senior Minister
The Community Church of New York Unitarian Universalist**

Elements of the freedom struggle in South Africa in the 1890's came to have enormous impact on The Community Church of New York in mid-town Manhattan during World War I and afterwards. Seeds planted would continue to bear fruit, including contributing to the creation of the American Committee on Africa (ACOA), whose advocacy and action helped shape U. S. opinion and policy in support of a free South Africa.

Beginning in 1918, from the influential pulpit of The Community Church of New York and in numerous national publications, the Rev. John Haynes Holmes embraced Mohandas Gandhi's pacifism and militant nonviolence. Gandhi's South African experiences from 1893 to 1914 led him to develop his liberating tools for social protest and change, long before returning to India to lead the national independence movement there.

Holmes became a leading proponent and American interpreter of Gandhi's little known teachings, which led to a powerful friendship. His ministry also offered prophetic vision across a spectrum of social issues here and abroad with continuing inspiration. In the United States, Holmes' pioneering and energetic support for Gandhi and the independence of India was deeply grounded in those struggles Gandhi led in South Africa. This initial introduction to Anglo-European oppression in Africa that influenced Holmes in 1918 provided a footing for new directions and direct engagement there in the 1950's.

Given Holmes' empowering legacy and the care in choosing a successor upon his retirement in 1949, The Community Church of New York continued its prophetic witness with the leadership of Rev. Donald Harrington. It was not at all inevitable, yet not surprising, that in 1953 when the American Committee on Africa formed (following the Campaign of Defiance against Unjust Laws a year before in South Africa), The Community Church of New York opened its doors. The first offices of ACOA were at this social action-oriented Unitarian congregation on East 35th Street, followed by office space, again donated, for the African National Congress in years to come.

Gandhi's experiences and lessons in South Africa reverberated far beyond his time there from 1893 to 1914, particularly so at The Community Church of New York. This outline recounts the unique connection to those events beginning in the 1890's that influenced support for the South African freedom struggle offered by The Community Church of New York beginning in the mid-twentieth century.

The Founding of the American Committee on Africa

George Houser in *No One Can Stop the Rain* (Pilgrim Press, NY, 1989) describes the initial organizing meeting in May 1953 that led to the formation of the American Committee on Africa. The Rev. Donald Harrington, who was Senior Minister of The Community Church of New York, hosted the planning group in church space. By September, they had become an Executive Committee for the new organization, with Harrington as chair and Houser as secretary. The Committee's goals were to bring issues of African freedom to "America's conscience" and "to help bridge this gap between Africans and Americans." (p. 63)

The Community Church contributed free office space. With a research grant, George Shepherd began part-time paid service assisted by a group of volunteers. Keith Irvine, as editor, began publishing *Africa Today* on the church's mimeograph machine, and in 1955 George Houser moved from his work with the Fellowship of Reconciliation to become ACOA's Executive Director. (p. 64)

In addition to Harrington and Houser, the initial leadership included:

- Roger Baldwin, ACLU founder and leader;
- George Carpenter, Africa secretary at the National Council of Churches'
- James Farmer, a founder of CORE and later its Executive Director;
- Rayford Logan, a professor at Howard University;
- Conrad Lynn, civil rights attorney;
- A. J. Muste, pacifist leader and activist for civil rights and civil liberties;
- Walter Offut of the NAACP staff;
- Norman Thomas, leader of the Socialist Party, and
- Peter Weiss, attorney and Director of the International Development and Placement Association.

From these efforts emerged what would become the leading and most effective anti-apartheid organization in the United States. The Church, its members, and its Ministers provided ongoing support for ACOA and the South African struggle in the decades that followed.

Gandhi: His Early Years in India and in South Africa

Born on October 2, 1869 on the western coast of India, Mohandas Gandhi belonged to the Vaisya caste, neither of highest nor lowest rank in India's cruel hierarchies.

Government service and political leadership were in the family tradition, but Mohandas Gandhi himself did not seem to offer immediate promise. Nonetheless, as a child and teenager, he did seem to have a precocious moral sense, and his family would allow him at times to assume the role of mediator or moral guide.

Gandhi recounts escapades of eating beef (forbidden to observant Hindus), some minor thefts, and two visits to brothels from which he fled, before anything, as he reports, could happen. And he describes his guilt over these wayward steps. His growing up years, however, also included friendships with Muslims as well as Hindus, and he was shaped as well by his parents' open attitudes.

As was the custom, his parents arranged a marriage for him at age 13, and although it lasted over 50 years, his treatment of family - both wife and children - revealed little skill of intimacy or even much affection. His interpersonal skills were on a grander social and political scale, summoning the admiration and affection of millions of his countrymen and women, as well as the intense loyalty of colleagues. [See Howard Gardner, *Creating Minds*, Basic Books, NY, 1993, Chapter 9 "Mahatma Gandhi: A Hold upon Others", as well as his discussion of interpersonal intelligence in Gardner's *Frames of Mind*.]

Gandhi barely passed his entrance examinations to university and left after one semester. Later in life he described himself, "I am an average man with less than average ability. I admit that I am not sharp intellectually. But I don't mind. There is a limit to the development of the intellect but none to that of the heart."

Persuaded by a family friend, he chose to go to England in 1888 to study law, and thus received the censure of many friends and some family, for it was almost traitorous in the eyes of many. Arriving in England, he affected with enthusiasm the life of a dandy, preening himself before going out and enjoying the social life. He took violin, dancing, and locution lessons to enter certain social circles.

After three years, he returned to his wife and family as a barrister, but in no way distinguished himself in his law practice. In 1893, he went to South Africa to help settle a dispute for a client and expected to return immediately thereafter. However, a pivotal event happened that changed his life and gave him a sense of calling.

About a week into his stay, Gandhi was traveling on business from Durban in the south to Pretoria in the north central area of South Africa. A white man entered the 1st class rail car in which Gandhi was traveling and summoned the conductor to remove the darker skinned Indian. Gandhi refused to give up his seat for which he had a ticket. He was thrown off the train at the next stop and had a long shivering night in the cold at the Maritzburg railway station to contemplate his situation.

Gandhi reports this experience (compounded by additional ugly, racist encounters on this trip) as the turning point when he realized he must use his legal skills and oratory on behalf of human rights. An activist was born, and he stayed in Natal where he sought to help the expanding Indian community that worked largely on sugar plantations. He was

soon organizing letter-writing campaigns, creating advocacy groups, and generally badgering for change and Indian rights. The Natal Indian Congress, organized in 1894, was one of his efforts, and beginning in 1896, tools of nonviolent resistance first took shape. In the years that followed, he became the first “colored” lawyer admitted to the Natal Supreme Court.

For Gandhi, this became much more than a political career or an activist's passion. His early moral sense of compassion and justice deepened with a growing spiritual commitment that embraced a vision of social change as he used the tools of his profession. Once unaccomplished as a speaker, he now held his audience by his eloquence. He also contributed his writings widely in England and India to publicize the cause.

He was gaining a reputation as one who could get things done with a minimal amount of hard feelings. There were setbacks, and he was beaten unconscious and almost killed by a lynch mob in 1897. He refused to press charges. He went to jail in a protest for the first time in 1908.

In England he had read much of the Christian Bible and found Jesus' teachings, especially the Sermon on the Mount, attractive. He also recommitted himself to his own Hindu faith with new appreciation of it through the Bhagavad-Gita that counsels us to do our moral duty at all times, without fear for the consequences. Turning to Tolstoy's writings during this South African chapter, he was impressed by the radical ethic of love. He also read works by Unitarian Henry David Thoreau, including his essay on civil disobedience. And he sought to put John Ruskin's socialist philosophy and teachings into practice.

Part of his journey led him to create Tolstoy farm (1908-1914) in the far southwest corner of the Johannesburg municipality. It was a small communal gathering of 70 or so who followed his increasingly ascetic example. In South Africa, altogether for 20 years, Gandhi experimented with truth and non-violence and sought justice.

As well as the marches and efforts at legal reform, his experiments began to include acts of civil disobedience against what he felt were unjust laws. His work earned headlines in England and India. He began to see an active power, a transcendent liberating power in what he called Satyagraha: militant non-violence, truth-force, and soul-force. His resistance campaigns were winning at least some minimal gains, such as recognition of marriage rights and elimination of the poll tax, for Indians in South Africa. It was a spiritual commitment and activist life.

In 1914, he chose to return to India with his family. One of his goals was to apply the lessons learned in South Africa against the British in his homeland. Soon there were non-violent protests, but much of it went on hold during the First World War, only to resume with greater intensity thereafter. He also took up the cause of outlawing the cruel caste system, which deemed some persons as untouchables.

Gandhi, Holmes and The Community Church of New York

John Haynes Holmes' debt to Gandhi and his teachings that emerged from that South African chapter was enormous. During World War I, Holmes had searched his soul and declared that he was a pacifist – much to the consternation of many in his congregation, which was not surprising given the widespread American popular support for this conflict. In Gandhi, he found a mentor and spiritual guide who strengthened him in his own activism and pacifist views.

In his 1953 book depicting his encounters with Gandhi, Holmes writes that his qualms about being against that war were few, given, as he says, that it was “not in any sense an idealistic struggle, but rather a sordid contention of modern empires, like those of ancient empires, for world mastery and dominion.” But deeper questions nagged at him: “Under what conditions, if any, was war justifiable? What were the differences between a justifiable and an unjustifiable war? How may one feel sure of a defensive as contrasted with an aggressive war? Can a conspicuously bad means, as a resort to arms, serve and save the interest of any good end? ... How can war be reconciled, on any terms, with religion [especially the ethics of Jesus]?” (*My Gandhi*, 24)

As clear as he was about that conflict, Holmes writes,

... the end of the war saw no end to my perturbation. I pondered the price I had paid for my pacifism. Was such a price necessary? The loss of friends and comrades, my isolation from public life, my sacrifice of influence and leadership, the sheer ineffectiveness of what I had tried to do, the stress and strain upon the very fibers of my being – were these things my fate or my folly? (25)

Though few in the congregation agreed with his pacifism, to its credit the congregation affirmed the freedom of the pulpit and, equally important, the freedom of the pew to disagree.

Holmes traces his own first encounters with Gandhi to a small pamphlet of Gandhi's writings and to a journal article written by Gilbert Murray, both of which he read in the winter of 1918. Murray wrote just a couple of pages about Mohandas Gandhi's success in South Africa in organizing the Indian population there and in winning certain legal rights and status for them through non-violence. Gandhi's response to his own experiences of discrimination and abuse, as noted, propelled him into a larger freedom struggle. Gilbert summarized all this, and Holmes describes how after nearly twenty years of organizing, resistance and action, Gandhi had made a profound difference by virtue of “spiritual force” (Holmes' words) rather than resort to arms.

“Moved by Gandhi's success in South Africa” and his emerging leadership in India, Murray in seeking practical examples of non-violent success, wrote,

Persons in power should be very careful how they deal with a man who cares nothing for sensual pleasure, nothing for riches, nothing for comfort or praise or promotion, but is simply determined to do what he believes to be right. He is a dangerous and uncomfortable enemy – because his body, which you can always conquer, gives you so little purchase upon his soul. (Quoted in *My Gandhi*, 22)

Holmes had found a spiritual mentor who addressed his anguished self-doubts and who touched him in heart and soul. Gandhi's new disciple embarked on a mission to spread knowledge about Gandhi's teachings in the United States.

In addition to Holmes' widely circulated 1921 sermon, "The Greatest Man Alive Today", Holmes had begun to write about Gandhi in a Unitarian magazine that he edited. His friend W. E. B. DuBois, the editor of the NAACP magazine *The Crisis*, also began to print installments of Gandhi's autobiography as they became available. Soon thereafter Chicago's "Daily Defender" and other black publications came to write about Gandhi's success in non-cooperation. Ultimately, Gandhi's autobiography would be titled *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* and covers the years from his birth in 1869 to 1921, when he had become a national leader in India and a fierce advocate of independence from British rule.

On February 1, 1948, a few days after the assassination of Mohandas Gandhi, John Haynes Holmes spoke about his first meeting with this revolutionary religious figure this way:

How clearly do I remember the first time I saw Gandhi, in 1931, at Folkestone, on a cold, foggy and rainy day, when I waited with a few others on the pier to greet him, when, crossing the English Channel, he landed upon English shores to take his seat at the famous Round Table Conference of that day. I found myself talking with an English policeman, who suddenly pointed up the coast to the chalky cliffs of the channel, and said, "Do you know, just 'round those cliffs, is the place where Julius Caesar came when he invaded Britain?" Then, after a moment's silence, he turned in the other direction, and said: "Only a few miles down the coast there, beyond that fog-bank, is the place where William the Conqueror landed just before the Battle of Hastings."

Just at that moment, or so it seemed, the prow of the Mahatma's ship came poking through the fog. And for once in my life I had an inspiration. I said within myself, "Here comes the third and greatest conqueror of Britain."

Little did I realize at that time that it would take only sixteen years for Britain to retire from India, and for Mahatma Gandhi thus to stand the conqueror of the greatest empire the world had seen since the decline and fall of Rome.

He was a curious looking conqueror! I can see him now as he came from the ship and went pattering up the wet and foggy pier to the train that was waiting to take him to London. Julius Caesar and William the Conqueror had been clad in mail, but Gandhi wore only his loincloth, and a small kaddar shawl drawn closely around his shoulders. Caesar and William had been followed by armed legions of trained soldiery to wreak havoc on the land, to lay waste the fair island of Britain, but Gandhi was surrounded only by a little company of men and women, his disciples who were accompanying him to London.

What a strange, and I say again, grotesque panorama it was! But I saw Gandhi on that happy and memorable day, as I did not know at that time, the conqueror not only of the British Empire, but also of the world.

Holmes on that occasion again spoke of the importance of Gandhi in his own spiritual growth and the impact upon his own pacifism thirty years earlier and ever since. As it turns out, at the time of his death, amidst the handful of personal belongings that Gandhi had with him (which included his spinning wheel, his glasses, a Bhagavad-Gita, a Christian New Testament, and his loin cloth) was a medallion presented to him in 1932 by The Community Church of New York. It remains on display in New Delhi at the Gandhi Museum.

The pulpit of The Community Church was dedicated to Gandhi in the fall of 1948 when the congregation dedicated its new building. Today a bust of Gandhi is among the exemplars of spiritual wisdom and the pursuit of justice who face the congregation every Sunday. (A copy of this sculpture is also at the Indian Consulate in New York.)

The friendship between Gandhi and Holmes was cemented over the years by many letters, and one given to the Church in 2007 includes a handwritten note at the end. Dated February 8, 1945, sent to Rev. John Haynes Holmes, the more than two-page, single-spaced letter reflects upon the Indian independence efforts, Gandhi's disputes with the British colonial government, the death of Romain Rolland (Nobel Laureate in Literature and pacifist), and updates on members of Gandhi's close circle.

At the end, in his own hand, it reads, "You are doing good work. Love, M. K. Gandhi."

Seeking to honor every revelation of spiritual truth, the congregation welcomed Gandhi's insights. First through Holmes and then Harrington, and continuing today, his teachings resonate with and amplify Unitarian Universalist teachings. Gandhi's militant non-violence, for example, included a radical faith in the divine potentials within every human (a premise congenial to Unitarian Universalism).

Gandhi declared, "My optimism rests on my belief in the infinite possibilities of the individual to develop non-violence. The more you develop it in your own being, the

more infectious it becomes till it overwhelms your surroundings and by and by might oversweep the world.”

“I am part and parcel of the whole, and I cannot find... (God) apart from the rest of humanity. ... If I could persuade myself that I should find... (God) in a Himalayan cave, I would proceed there immediately. But I know that I cannot find... (God) apart from humanity.”

Seeds Planted

In 1893, Gandhi had a rude awakening, a spiritual transformation, and the impetus to hone tools of civil disobedience and soul-force (Satyagraha). The trip from Durban north to the Transvaal was interrupted. He awakened. He reacted. He organized. He mobilized. He won some victories. And word spread, slowly, but inexorably.

John Haynes Holmes began his service in 1907 with a Manhattan church that he described as a chapel for the rich. He offered captains of industry lessons from the Social Gospel, and then a vision of the Beloved Community. The Second Congregational Unitarian Society in the City of NY, known as the Church of the Messiah, responded to his leadership and became racially inclusive and economically diverse. It renamed and rededicated itself in 1919 as The Community Church of New York – “knowing not sect, class, nation or race, welcoming each to the service of all”.

Gandhi’s spirit suffused Holmes’ ministry and his transformation – in large measure because of those partial and limited, yet inspiring successes in South Africa. The Community Church of New York had an increasingly wider view and its Ministers continued this prophetic spirit.

In 1952 in South Africa with the Campaign of Defiance against Unjust Laws, some in the United States wondered how they might help. In the spring of 1953, Rev. Donald Harrington and George Houser organized the meetings that would lead to the American Committee on Africa.

Seemingly disparate decisions and events, as we know throughout history, may have small ripple effects that contribute to larger progress. Such is the case that connects Gandhi’s South African “Experiments with Truth” to Rev. John Haynes Holmes and The Community Church of New York, which became the first home of the American Committee on Africa. The congregation continued its support for the next 40+ years, including providing office space for the African National Congress in the 1970s.

Part of the larger world-story surely is the linkage and kinship between Mohandas Gandhi and Nelson Mandela. Great leaders inspire and mobilize. Yet, there is equally the essential role of more mundane connections: ideals that are transmitted and embraced must also be incarnated in movements and organizations of social change. Then, with faith and perseverance, the world awaited does indeed become more nearly the world attained.

At The Community Church of New York, such connections are symbolized in its Hall of Worship today. Facing those who enter the worship space is a large photograph of Nelson Mandela speaking from the front of that sacred space. Mandela is addressing an ACOA conference of anti-apartheid activists from across the country in June of 1990, at the time of his first trip to NYC following his release from prison in February. Not in the picture but nearby in the unseen background is the bust of Gandhi. Together they invite us to continue the good work. *A luta continua.*

Copyright 2008 Bruce Southworth