Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Title:
Shifting the Boundaries of Self through Understanding Deep Patterns in Nature and Art

Lesson By:
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Grade Level/Subject Areas:
9-12

Duration of Lesson:
3 weeks

Colorado Content Standards:
Common Core for Literacy and Technical Subjects

CC9.3 Follow precisely a complex multistep procedure when carrying out experiments, taking measurements, or performing technical tasks, attending to special cases or exceptions defined in the text.

CC9.9 Compare and contrast findings presented in a text to those from other sources including their own experience, noting when the findings support or contradict previous explanations or accounts.

Colorado Model Content Standards for Art
1. Observe and learn to comprehend.
2. Invent and discover to create.
4. Relate and connect to transfer.

Lesson Abstract:
Gandhi’s framework around the Canonical Aims of Life teaches that even though each of us perceives oneself as an individual, disconnected from the whole, understanding that Self is a part of a Whole Design creates a shift in understanding. Students can explore this central idea of Hind Swaraj through exploring connections between Self, Society and Nature, with a culminating task of using geometric principles and knowledge of the color wheel to make free-form and tessellated designs in clay representing themselves and their connection to the whole. Thus, through art, students come to an understanding of the Self as part of Community through underlying design.

Guiding Questions:
Regarding life…
• What does pattern in nature and art teach us about the interconnection of Self with Society?

Regarding content...
• How do shape, color, and complexity create beautiful, interconnected patterns?
• How can we reveal the individual building blocks of a complex structure or organism so as to see it as a whole?

Content Essay:
Purusharthas or the “canonical aims of life” are goals in Gandhi’s philosophical intellectual framework which focus on the human purpose of “life-affirming, world-accepting, goal-setting and goal-pursuing beings” (Parel, 2009, xxi). This is an Indian or Eastern whole rather than a Western construct of separate parts and may be challenging for a Western mind to understand: a Western approach seeks to understand the whole through the dialectic. “Our normal way of thinking … leads us to think of wholes as made up of many parts, the way a
car is made up of wheels, a chassis and a drive train (Senge, 2004, p. 5). Thus, to understand Gandhi’s framework with a Western lens, the whole model must be divided or diced up into separate parts.

At the center of Gandhi’s framework is Truth. Truth, like a many-faceted prism, contains the essential teachings of all religions and, thus, the “canonical aims of life” are pluralistic with an “equal respect for all historical religions” (Parel, 2009, p. xxii). For example, at the center of each of the world’s great religions is a shift in awareness, named differently in each religious tradition. In Buddhism, this is called enlightenment; in Christianity, grace or revelation; in Taoism, the “transformation of vital energy (qing) into subtle life force (qi)”; and, in mystic Islam, the “opening of the heart” (Sende, 2004, p. 14). In Gandhi’s framework, this Truth is God, for he writes of “a self-existent, all-knowing living Force which inheres in every other force known to the world . . .” (Gandhi in Parel, 2009, p. 182).

The framework of purushartha is “a system of goals” (Gandi in Parel, 2009, p. xxi). The four aims or goals of aretha, karma, dharma and moksha each operate in their own spheres. As Parel explains this, each goal has its validity and relative autonomy” (Parel, 2009, p. xxi). Artha includes the world of wealth and political power, politics and economics” (Parel, 2009, p. xxi). Kama is the sphere of pleasure and aesthetics (Parel, 2009, p. xxi). Dharma is the sphere of ethical integrity, citizenship, equality, liberty, fraternity and mutual assistance (Parel, 2009, p. xxviii). Moksha is “spiritual transcendence” through asceticism (Parel, 2009, p xxi). According to Parel, each of these spheres interact and influence each other (Parel, 2009). When the four aims of life are in balance, when artha, dharma, kama, and moksha are equalized, one sphere not dominating the other, the individual is in balance, and the political/social community becomes a balanced reflection of Self. In Hind Swaraj, this balanced pursuit of higher goals, Parel says, “should inform the lives of individuals, nations and civilizations” (Parel, 2009, xxi). Thus, Gandhi calls for a balance in both individuals and in the world.

Swaraj or “self-discipline and self-transcendence” is a concept in Ghandi’s philosophy, Parel notes, which embraces both self-realization and social justice in the world (Parel, 2009, xix). Though swaraj is sometimes confused with moksha (the realm of the spiritual and transcendent), Parel says that swaraj, rather, operates in both arenas of the individual self and the civic. In other words, this the context of rule and discipline of Self as well as the self-rule of India, which was then under British rule. “If we become free, India is free. And in this thought you have a definition of Swaraj. It is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves” (Gandi in Parel, 2009, p. 71). Gandhi encourages Indians to seek swaraj in self-rule through “the moral regeneration” of the individual (Sethia, 2013, p. 58). Thus, Gandhi is calling for action in the individual and for the community. Gandhi writes about self-discipline, self-restraint, and self-control over one’s passions . . .” (Sethia, 2012, p. 64). Thus, swaraj is no less than self-transformation and a way forward to a “participatory democracy driven by self-rule and self-reliance” (Sethia, 2012, p. 65).

Gandhi posits swaraj—the idea of self-rule in both the inner and outer manifestations—in the here and now. Gandhi says, “It is, there, in the palm of our hands. . . . The Swaraj that I wish to picture before you and me is such that, after we have once realized it, we will endeavor to the end of our lifetime to persuade others to do likewise. But such Swaraj has to be experienced by each one for himself” (Gandhi in Parel, 2009, p. 71). Therefore, it appears Gandhi is advocating for a transformation in consciousness which is “experiential” in nature (Parel, 2009, xx). When an individual has the experience of swaraj, he or she awakens: “A man, whilst he is dreaming, believes in his dream; he is undeceived only when he is awakened from his sleep” (Gandhi in Parel, 2009, p. 34). Gandhi means awakening both the unconscious Self in its most intimate spheres as well as the political context of awakening Indians to the limitations of modern civilization under British rule.

The means to this end of political swaraj is contained in the concept of satyagraha. Gandhi “searched for an appropriate term that would embody . . . the highest moral courage, or soul-force. Subsequently, Gandi coined the term satyagraha (literally meaning holding onto truth), . . .” (Sethia, 2012, pp. 46-47). Gandhi’s thoughts concerned the positive attributes of ahimsa or nonviolence, but ahimsa does not mean sitting still: it means understanding one’s duty and taking action. In Gandhi’s framework, this is in the intersection between the two spheres of moral/ethical dharma and worldly artha (Sethia, 2012). In English translation, Gandhi translates satyagraha into the concept of civic nationalism (Sethia, 2013).

Satyagraha, or civic nationalism, is “rooted in one’s inner strength. The force of the inner spirit is truth. Truth for Gandhi was the soul. The power of satyagraha, therefore, began to be known as ‘truth-force’ or ‘soul-force’” (Sethia, 2012, p. 47). But, satyagraha demands more: moral action through non-violent resistance.
When Gandhi began to move Indians through this force of satyagraha, he “unleashed a revolutionary force for constructive and positive social change” (Sethia, 2012, p. 47).

Thus, Gandhi calls the reader of Hind Swaraj to consider his argument, understand his framework, and awaken from a self-interested dream to the authentic Self. Once awakened, each must bring oneself—and one’s world—into balance where each circle of influence—artha, karma, dharma and moksha—intersects with each other, moving fluidly to create morally-informed well-being. This sum of the parts in Hind Swaraj is a symbolic, indivisible whole, and the text is “meant to be read transformatively” (Parel, 2009, p. xxiv). Thus, my personal understanding of Gandhi’s philosophical and transformative framework, a non-Western construct, follows in an allegory:

Picture a concrete swimming pool at high noon on a windless day, a tranquil turquoise pool or pure liquid, quiet and still. At the bottom of the pool, in the center, lies a crystal prism, many-faceted, refracting light in rainbow hues. At each corner of the pool, a tree grows from the earth: the leaves of their branches form a canopy around the perimeter. Above the pool, equidistant from each other, hover four hummingbirds, appearing motionless and still in a golden sphere of light created by the aura of their innumerable and infinite energetic wing beats. Each hummingbird holds one droplet of golden nectar at the lip of her beak and, in the space between heartbeats, simultaneously, the droplets fall. As the four drops touch the surface of the water, four circles ripple outwards. Each ripple intersects with the other adjacent to it. The pool is a shifting play of motion and light, a dance on the water. Now, imagine oneself floating in the swimming pool as an embryo might be in the amniotic fluid of a mother’s uterus. Imagine the quiet. Imagine the deep deep stillness. Imagine the Self. The Self is water.

Truth lies at the center of the deep waters of swaraj or Self, and Self reflects the four spheres of dharma, kama, moksha, and artha in the nonviolent soul-force of satyagraha in the world. Thus, enlightened, the Self is fluid, an “oceanic circle,” no longer encased by physical ego-bound walls (Gandhi in Parel, 2009, p. 182). Recognizing the interconnectedness of all beings, one is freed from the ego-bound self and moves fluidly with others, engaging in relationships without a sense of separation.

Bibliography:


Shadyac, T. 2000. I am. Shady Acres Film.

Teaching Activities
• Students will view the film I AM and explore images of artist Andy Goldsworthy.
• Students will share perceptions about the interconnectedness of Self and Nature in free-writing and in discussion.
• Students will view a presentation of principles in interconnected designs to understand how pattern interconnects with each individual part to create an interconnected whole, demonstrating that sum is more than parts.
• Students will identify and label concepts of design.
• Students will follow multi-step directions to tessellate designs on paper.
• Students will create individual mosaics in clay using tessellated designs.
• Students will fire the clay to make ceramic pieces.
• Individual ceramic pieces will be connected to create a visual whole mosaic.
• Students will analyze their shifts in perception about the connection of Self to Society through writing a reflective paper.

Materials Needed:
Film: I AM; presentation on principles of design; rulers; pencils; paper; clay; glaze; kiln.