Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Title:
Talisman: A Transformative Literary Text Understood through Scientific Method and Alchemy

Lesson By:
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Grade Level/ Subject Areas:
9-10; All Subject Areas

Duration of Lesson:
Fifty-five minute lesson with Daily Practice during the school year

Content Standards:
Colorado Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects
Reading Standards for Literature 9-10
Craft and Structure:
4. Determine the meanings of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings, analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone.

5. Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it, and manipulate time create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas.
9. Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work

Lesson Abstract:
Gandhi’s Talisman is explored through the construct of a scientific method. By reading and interpreting Talisman through the lens of a cause-effect model, the transformative structure of the text is revealed. Concurrently, the reader, while meditating on the structure of the text, experientially undergoes a personal transformation. In Daily Practice, teachers and/or students can engage in the activity of meditation on an object of inquiry to bring about transformation and clarity of choice.

Guiding Questions:
Regarding Life . . .
• How can transformation in our thinking lead to social action?
Regarding Content . . .
• How does Gandhi’s Talisman lead to transformation?
An Experiment in Transformation through *Talisman*

Purpose

This essay approaches Gandhi’s *Talisman* through phenomenological research to describe the unique characteristics of one’s own experience in following Gandhi’s prescribed “test” in *Talisman*. This research attempts to understand that perspective empathetically. It hypothesizes that variant experience—“the unique part of the individual’s experience that varies from person to person”—generalizes to a larger population because “commonality in human experience exists” (Johnson, 2012, p. 368).

In phenomenological research, this commonality of experience is called an “essence” or “invariant structure” . . . experience that is common or consistent across research participants” (Johnson, 2012, p. 385). According to Van Manen, essence is “universal and is present in particular instances of a phenomenon” (Van Manen in Johnson, 2012, p. 385). This paper assumes that essence is invariant—unchanging from person to person. Searching for “essences of a phenomenon” is the defining characteristic of phenomenological research techniques. Thus, the purpose of this essay’s experiment is to explore “essence” through a research sample of one to understand a specific phenomenon of transformation brought about through the cause-effect process embedded in a reading of *Talisman*.

Relevance

This study is relevant to the world now because without transformation of our individual perspectives, humans may be entering an apocalyptic future. In 2000, before many of our high-school students were born, four visionaries in *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future* wrote that “We live in a ‘real-life nightmare scenario’: the destruction of our environment; the growing social divide between rich and poor; the potential dangers of things like biotechnology, and escalating violence around the world” (Senge, 2000, p. 21-22). Some fifteen years later, this scenario exists in our own schools, communities and nation as well as across the globe. Specifically, transformation is needed in education where, as in society, teachers must respond to change. Tharp in *Teaching Transformed: Achieving Excellence, Fairness, Inclusion, and Harmony* insists that “new complexities and perplexities, and new members require that even classrooms must continually reinterpret themselves and create solutions to emerging problems” (Tharp, 2000, p. 41). According to Tharp, the classroom is the laboratory where change in students can occur. Teachers can build . . . common classroom/school culture to create high levels of intersubjectivity or shared understanding and respect. In a classroom with intersubjectivity, students share empathy with each other and are able to “understand and experience the other as one much like the self . . . one with feelings and aspirations like one’s own” (Tharp, 2000, p. 58). A close reading of *Talisman* results in and experience of intersubjectivity.

Method

By looking through the metaphor of a scientific experiment at *Talisman*, a cause-effect model emerges that appears very simple but contains an underlying complexity. The narrator in *Talisman* suggests the Reader “apply the following test” (Gandhi, 1948). The” test” is a causal model with four variables. The four variables follow:

\[(A) \rightarrow (B) \rightarrow (C) \rightarrow (D)\]
(A), (B), (C), and (D) each stand for one of the concepts or variables in *Talisman*. The arrows indicate that each variable has a direct effect on the next variable.

In the text, of *Talisman*, the narrator addresses the situation of “doubt” in the Reader’s mind when the “self becomes too much with you” (Gandhi, 1948). The narrator, like a scientist conducting an experiment, directs the reader to “Recall the face of the poorest and weakest man whom you may have seen . . .” (Gandhi, 1948). Thus, the first step is focusing the mind. One could recall a friend who is suffering, or one could recall a threatened animal or even a plant on the verge of extinction. This first step is a kind of re-membering through visualizing. In the text, (A) focus is hypothesized to have a direct effect on the second variable (B).

(B) is the quality of suspension. Varel, a cognitive scientist, coined the term “suspension” to mean ‘removing ourselves from the habitual stream of thought’” (Varel in Senge, 2000, p. 29). In the text of *Talisman*, suspension is implied, as the narrator does not provide directions on how to accomplish this. Rather, Gandhi fast-forwards to the future, referring to “the step you contemplate” (Gandhi, 1948). Gandhi is a very tricky scientist here. If one looks closely, (B) suspension exists in the *space* between the comma (,) and the following word (and). In that textual space exists a synapse, a momentary disconnection of the mind’s thought process. It is there in the text and at that moment, in the mind, that something transformative occurs. Senge refers to it as “a ‘profound disorientation’ in which occur our most taken-for-granted ways of seeing, and making sense of the world can come unglued” (Senge, 2000, p. 38). So in a moment, the way the Reader sees the world shifts. Thus (A) focus through (B) suspension leads to (C) shift.

In the shift lies a question (?). In *Talisman*, the narrator asks the Reader to question if the step he or she is going to take following the shift in perception is “of any use to him” (Gandi, 1948). “Him” refers to the object of contemplation, though the object could be masculine, feminine or gender neutral. Here, Gandhi proposes that the questioning mind, having shifted, considers empowering the Other through “control over his own life and destiny” (Gandhi, 1938). Here, Gandhi is connecting *Talisman* to swaraj or “self determinism and self-development” (Gandhi in Parel, 2009). Swaraj in the modern context of the 21st century does not refer to self-rule only for male human beings, but for all beings, regardless of gender identification, as well as animals and life on planet Earth. Thus, (C) shift also includes not just the individual Self but the infinite Others. The narrator, referring to action, asks “will it lead to Swaraj for the . . . millions?” (Gandhi, 1948). Thus, Gandhi emphasizes the conceptualization of swaraj in both personal and political contexts.

*Talisman* text indicates the direct effects of (A) focus through (B) suspension to (C) shift resulting in (D) transformation of the “Self falling away” (Gandhi, 1948). As Senge, in *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*, explains, “Dissolving the boundaries between seer and seen leads not only to a deep sense of connection but also to a heightened sense of change. What first appeared as fixed or even rigid begins to appear more dynamic because we’re sensing the reality as it is being created, and we sense our part in creating it. This shift is challenging to explain in the abstract but real and powerful when it occurs” (Senge, 2004, p. 29). The ultimate intended effect of *Talisman*, then, is (D) transformation.

In summary, the structure of the text adopts an “experiment,” a construct of science. But, simultaneously, Gandhi calls his “test” *Talisman*. A talisman is 1) an object marked with magical signs and believed to confer on its bearer supernatural powers or protection. 2. Anything having apparent magical powers or protection (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language in Moss, 2013). Thus, Gandhi is juxtaposing two worlds--of rational and magical, of science and religion, of left and right hemispheres of the brain--teasing the dialectical mind into a paralysis. In the profound disorientation, the Reader moves through two stages to become, ultimately, transformed.
Gandhi in *Talisman* is tapping in to a similar transformation or “transmutation” in the historical precursor to modern chemistry, Alchemy. The website of the Chemical Heritage Magazine notes that, “According to the 10th-century scholar Ibn Al-Nadim, the philosopher Muhammad ibn Zakariya Al-Razi (9th century) claimed that ‘the study of philosophy could not be considered complete, and a learned man could not be called a philosopher, until he has succeeded in producing the alchemical transmutation’” (Ferrario, 2013). Alchemy was “long considered fundamentally wrong in its methods, closer to magic and superstition than to the ‘enlightened’ sciences” (Ferrario, 2013). But studies in science, philology and history posit that alchemic experiments created the “foundations of modern chemistry” (Ferrario, 2013). Future scholarship might further explore this relationship between modern chemistry and transformational alchemy in understanding the underlying and overlapping constructs of “science” and “magic.”

**Experiment**

To explore the intent of *Talisman* understood through the causal model \( A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C \rightarrow D \), the last section of this essay offers a playful example of the scientific method applied during the Summer Institute, 2013. This research describes an explanatory, non-experimental approach to demonstrate how the alchemy of transformation operates.

The researcher, myself in an Observer-as-Participant role, conducted a field test using cross sectional data on August 12, 2013, at 11:30 a.m. in a conference room on the eighth floor of the CLA Building on Cal Poly Tech Campus in Pomona, California. Following a presentation by Dr. Andrew Moss on “Gandhi’s Talisman: What Meanings Does it Carry for Us Today? (Parts I and 2),” I applied the causal Abracadabra Model. A description of the phenomenon follows: The researcher takes herself to lunch. On a white plate in a glass cabinet is a round brown piece of matter, which raises doubt in the researcher’s mind. It is questionable if the round brown object is meat. If it is meat, should one eat it? But, if it is not-meat, should one eat it either? Confusion occurs, a disorientation. Following her study, the researcher turns to the incantation *Talisman*. The researcher focuses her attention on Gurt, a remarkable white rabbit, who lives at home in her backyard, whiskers twitching, black eyes bright. As an observer of her own mental phenomenon, the researcher notices that her mind—meditating on Gurt and focusing on him—becomes even more disoriented. The researcher identifies with him. Suddenly, magically, the “essence” of Gurt becomes her “essence.” Alchemically, Gurt contains the same invariant structure that the researcher contains in herself: a desire for happiness. Something shifts: Gurt is no longer Other but Self: the dichotomous dialectic disintegrates into a positive condition of recognition termed *Yo! Gurt*.

Identification through *Yo! Gurt*, however, is not sufficient. Gandhi—who could be considered a Master Alchemist, instructs us through *Talisman* to question the interconnectedness of all beings in the universe. The researcher concludes that through incantation combined with scientific focus—the construct of alchemy—a researcher can resolve doubt. No longer eating real meat will give a rabbit and potentially millions of other animals consumed by humans for food “control over their own lives and destinies” (Gandhi, 1948). The researcher makes a personal commitment to renounce eating meat. Self-control leads to nonviolence. Got *ahimsa*?

**Bibliography**


**Teaching Activities**
Teachers/Students will watch Shadyac’s film *I AM*.
Teachers/Students will discuss the interconnectedness of all being.
Teachers/Students will be introduced to Gandhi’s teachings on *Swaraj*.
Teachers/Students will be given a facsimile of *Talisman* (typed by Gandhi’s hand).
Teacher/Students will read *Talisman* together.
Teacher-Students will explore the cause-effect Abracadabra Model applied to *Talisman* to engage learners.
Following exploration of *Talisman*, Teacher/Students will turn off and put away all technology
Teacher/Students will sit quietly in their chairs or on the floor.
Teacher/Students will engage in a deep meditative process following the 4-step process of (A) *focus* through (B) *suspension* to (C) *questioning* with the outcome of (D) *transformation*.
Teacher/Students will discuss and share the transformative experience through a variety of self-selected media: poetry, story, dance, music, art, etc.

**Materials Needed**
*Talisman*; Self