Ahimsa Center- K-12 Teacher Institute

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Title of Lesson:</th>
<th>The Importance of Self-Governance in Changing Laws</th>
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<td>Lesson By:</td>
<td>Deborah Fitzgerald</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grade Level/ Subject Areas:</td>
<td>High School: Law, Government, History</td>
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<td>Class Size:</td>
<td>Any size, small groups between 3-5 members</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time/Duration of Lesson:</td>
<td>Five Days, 45 minute periods (can be adapted depending upon activities used and capabilities of students)</td>
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**Guiding Questions:**

- How can the behavior of an individual change legal systems?
- Why did Gandhi and King place emphasis on the individual in their struggles to change the system?

**Lesson Abstract:** (50-75 words)

While we tend to think of the social justice movements of Gandhi and King in terms of the changes they were able to make in societies and governments, both men concerned themselves with the conduct of the individual. Gandhi emphasizes that a change cannot occur in a community until it occurs in the conduct and belief of the individual members, while King understood that the path to nonviolence lay in the strength and determination of each of the people involved.

**Lesson Content:** (approx. 1000 words)

Both Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. drew upon their understanding of history and the law in their struggles to address social injustice. Gandhi’s focus on what it means to be a law-abiding person extends to what it means to be a law-abiding nation, but begins with the understanding that the power to rule is derived from the consent of the people, so that any change that is desired within the nation must first occur at the individual level. King explains that law is created by those in power, and the people who write and enforce unjust laws are not likely to surrender their political power readily, so that the pressure to change must come from individual members of the oppressed minority, who are willing to suffer to see the change occur in order to not have to continue suffering under injustice. In both men’s minds, the legal system can only be truly changed by individuals who are willing to suffer, but not perpetuate, violence in the pursuit of a just cause.

Gandhi is careful to differentiate between the law and the lawmakers, in that one is the product of a system, and the other is human. The law can be altered through resistance, while the human can be changed through love. This use of soul-force, or love combined with resistance, is described by Gandhi in *Hind Swaraj* when he explains what happens when “the government of the day has passed a law which is applicable to me. I do not like it. If, by using violence, I force the government to repeal the law, I am employing what may be termed body-force. If I do not obey the law and accept the penalty for its breach, I use soul-force. It involves the sacrifice of the self” (p. 90). To this end, Gandhi says in *Hind Swaraj*, “when we do not like certain laws, we do not break the heads of law-givers, but we suffer and do not submit to new laws” (91). If
the focus is shifted from a conflict between people to a conflict between ideas, the potential for physical violence is necessarily greatly reduced. In addition, the attempt to change law requires a willingness on the part of those who find the law unjust to suffer as well as to resist. This means that those who would change the system must not only fight against the idea, but be willing to become the subjects of violence at the hands of those who wish to perpetuate the system.

Because Gandhi identifies the trouble as a result of the system, or the law, he sees that law or system as the thing that must be altered or destroyed, allowing for the human potential for change to affect the lawgiver. This means that it is not necessary to replace the governing party in order to gain justice. “I should be uninterested in the fact as to who rules. I should expect rulers to rule according to my wish otherwise I cease to help them to rule me” (Gandhi, 135), he proclaimed in a letter to Lord Ampthill in 1909. Under the current system of government in America, it is tempting to see this as a call for voters to simply not re-elect politicians whose methods do not correspond with the ideal of the voter. While this is one method of creating change, a focus changing the leadership can distract from the need to change the system or law. One need not wait for an election to “cease to help” a politician to rule. The change in leadership cannot accomplish anything unless it is accompanied by and arises from a change in the nature of that leadership and what the people expect of it. The change that is required in law or any other system arises from and produces changes at the individual level. Indeed, Gandhi emphasizes that the true reformer must change within prior to creating a change without.

Likewise, King’s approach to the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 60s required his followers to commit themselves as individuals to the ideas of nonviolence before they were permitted to enter the struggle. After his own home was bombed in January of 1956, King emphasized the connection between being a lawful citizen and the internalized morality that this attitude required. “We believe in law and order. Don’t get panicky. Don’t do anything panicky at all. Don’t get your weapons… We want to love our enemies. I want you to love our enemies. Be good to them. Love them and let them know you love them” (The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr. p. 80). Although King himself struggled with his own feelings of rage and resentment in the realization that his family could have suffered violence as the result of racial hatred, he explains his autobiography, “I caught myself and said: ‘You must not allow yourself to become bitter’” (90).

As the movement progressed, King’s dedication to promoting the change in self among his followers led to a change in the way that they were viewed by those who initially opposed their ideas. The discipline and self-sacrifice cultivated among the nonviolent followers of King strengthened their resolve to continue fighting battle after battle, from Montgomery to Nashville to Selma and onward, inspiring others to join their cause along the way. Rather than waiting for the government to legislate dignity, their “growing self-respect… inspired the Negro with a new determination to struggle and sacrifice until first-class citizenship becomes a reality” (King, 106). This redefining of themselves on their own terms, unrestricted by the unjust legal code of Jim Crow, allowed the nonviolent advocates of social justice to present themselves as models for the system they wished to change.

Key to the transformative power of nonviolence was the educational opportunity presented by
sit-ins, prayer vigils, mass arrests, boycotts, and marches. As a result of these direct actions, both the participants and their opponents were informed and then transformed. “Those who have lived under the corrosive humiliation of daily intimidation are imbued by demonstrations with a sense of courage and dignity that strengthen their personalities… the millions of Americans on the sidelines learn that inhumanity wears an official badge and wields the power of law in large areas of the democratic nation of their pride” (King, 224). The transformation of both the oppressed and the oppressors was simultaneously the means and the goal of the nonviolent civil rights movement, as that was the only way to address and overthrow institutionalized racial injustice in America. In the words of Dr. King: “A social movement that only moves people is merely a revolt. A movement that changes both people and institutions is a revolution” (220). As a result, those involved in the civil rights movement had ownership and agency in the legislative changes: it was not a gift given to them, but something they had shown was necessary as a recognition of their humanity. “The legislation was not a product of the charity of white America for a supine black America, nor was it the result of enlightened leadership by the judiciary. This legislation was first written in the streets” (245).

State Content Standards:
New York State Standard for Social Studies Standard 5 (Participation in Government):

Understand how citizenship includes the exercise of certain personal responsibilities including voting, considering the rights and interests of others, behaving in a civil manner, and accepting responsibility for the consequences of one’s actions. (Adapted from The National Standards for Civics and Government, 1994)

Analyze issues at the local, state, and national levels and prescribe responses that promote the public interest or general welfare, such as planning and carrying out a voter registration campaign.

Describe how citizenship is defined by the Constitution and important laws.

Explore how citizens influence public policy in a representative democracy.

Materials Needed:
- Photographs from nonviolent protests
- Gilder Lehrman photo analysis worksheets
- Putting Yourself in the Picture handouts
- Handout H: Integrated Bus Suggestions from King and Global Liberation
- Plan of Action handout
- Profile of Participants
- Code of Conduct Handout

Suggested Teaching Activities:
1- Hand out photographs from the Nashville sit ins, the march on Selma, the Little Rock 9, etc., that show both the nonviolent protestors and violent reactions from the opposition. Have students analyze the photographs in groups, using the Gilder Lehrman photo
analysis worksheet, then individually “putting in themselves in the picture”, selecting one individual in the photograph to “become”, explaining who that individual is, why s/he is there, what s/he is thinking and feeling, etc, and producing a short narrative in the first person from that individual’s perspective. Share out narratives and post along with photographs. Emphasize the different types of strength and power that are displayed in those who control themselves and those who do not, and how they are perceived by the viewers of the photographs.

2- Distribute and work as a whole class to analyze the Integrated Bus Suggestions distributed by King following the successful Montgomery Bus Boycott, pointing out specific guidelines for personal conduct and having students explain why those instructions were given. Students work in groups to identify current laws, rules or regulations that they think are unfair and could be addressed by individual direct action. Create a plan of action specific to the individuals who wish to change the law. As a group, students will create a profile of how the group that wishes to change the law is perceived by outsiders: what would their opponents say about them. Students’ plans will then specifically address how the individuals involved in the direct action will be expected by their movement to behave, dress, interact with others, etc. Finally, students will reflect individually on the ways that the changes in individual behavior might affect the potential success of their movement.

Bibliography:
