Title: Narratives of Gandhi, King, and You

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Grade Level/ Subject Areas: 10th Grade Humanities
(an integration of English and history)

Lesson Context: I teach at High Tech High Chula Vista, which is a project-based learning charter school in the San Diego area. Because we are a project-based school, we don’t just plan individual lessons without a connection to a larger project. This lesson will be a part of a larger project on violent vs. nonviolent revolutions, where students will analyze the effectiveness of violence compared to nonviolence in creating a long term positive change. This lesson will incorporate primary sources and give students a voice in thinking about how their own lives relate to the subject matter. According to Jose Calderon, professor at Pitzer College, “In addition to the content of the curriculum, we have to question the dominant traditional style of teaching in the classroom that often has left out the voice of the student. If we are serious about creating a diverse and engaged democracy, we have to begin where we have the most influence” (60). I agree with Calderon and believe that it is important for students to relate their own life experience to the curriculum and find their voice within the classroom.

Duration of Lesson: 4 days
Day one: read part of assignment by Gandhi
Day two: read part of assignment by King, begin to brainstorm for narrative
Day three: Socratic Seminar
Day four: begin writing narrative

Content Standards: California State 10th grade World History Standards
10.4.3 Explain imperialism from the perspective of the colonizers and the colonized and the varied immediate and long-term responses by the people under colonial rule.
10.4.4 Describe the independence struggles of the colonized regions of the world, including the roles of leaders, such as Sun Yat-sen in China, and the roles of ideology and religion.
10.10 Students analyze instances of nation-building in the contemporary world in at least two of the following regions or countries: the Middle East, Africa, Mexico and other parts of Latin America, and China.
Lesson Abstract:
This lesson focuses on heroes of nonviolence, specifically Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Students will read an excerpt from *An Autobiography: My Experiments with Truth* written by Gandhi and “My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence” written by King. The excerpts focus on moments of life for each of these leaders that defined them as people. After reading and discussing the sources, students will write a short narrative on moments of their lives that have defined them.

Guiding Questions:
- What life defining moments did leaders of nonviolence such as Gandhi and King experience?
- What life defining moments have shaped you?

Content Essay:

Ordinary people have made change throughout history. What has transformed ordinary people into heroes is the small everyday decisions they made to choose nonviolence. Even Gandhi himself said, “I claim to be no more than an average man with less than average ability… I have not the shadow of a doubt that any man or woman can achieve what I have, if he or she would make the same effort and cultivate the same hope and faith” (Sethia 1). We all have moments in our life where we have to make choices, and sometimes it is these moments, the smaller moments in life, that really help to define us. Both Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. experienced moments like this in their life where they chose to be nonviolent, and it was these smaller moments, before they were famous leaders of social change, that helped define who they were.

One moment that defined who Gandhi became happened when he first went to South Africa, and he experienced discrimination like he never had previously in India. Gandhi was traveling to Pretoria, and got on the overnight train with his first class ticket. At one of the train stops, a white passenger came in, and demanded that Gandhi leave the first class seating area. Gandhi was resolute in staying on the train, but a police officer came and forced Gandhi off of the train with his luggage. He sat outside the rest of the cold night (Sethia 33). Dr. Tara Sethia, in her book *Gandhi: Pioneer of Nonviolent Social Change*, includes this story in her chapter entitled “Transformative Years.” According to Sethia, at this point, Gandhi had a choice to make about how he would react: “Should he return to his native country? Should he press his rights and seek justice for his unfair treatment? Should he proceed to Pretoria to pursue his assignment without paying attention to what had just happened? Would it not be an act of cowardice to return to India without completing the assignment?” (Sethia 33). Ultimately, Gandhi decided that instead of taking the racism personally, he would commit to searching for the root causes of what he experienced, and work to address it. This was a turning point for Gandhi, and one of the defining moments of his life. “Later, Gandhi regarded this night as ‘one of the most creative experiences’ of his life. It was on this night that he began to formulate his thoughts about rights and duties, about justice and courage, and about approaches to enduring transformation and change” (Sethia 34). This was a transformative moment for Gandhi, and was part of the beginning of his journey to nonviolence as both a way of life and a method for social change.

Gandhi writes of this incident in *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. The story he tells coincides with the one Sethia writes of in her book. Gandhi experienced
discrimination on the train and contemplated returning to India because of how he was treated. Ultimately, he decided to stay in South Africa and fight against the injustice he experienced. He writes, “It would be cowardice to run back to India without fulfilling my obligation. The hardship to which I was subjected was superficial—only a symptom of the deep disease of colour prejudice. I should try, if possible, to root out the disease and suffer hardships in the process” (Gandhi 112). Further, Gandhi’s granddaughter, Arun Gandhi, emphasizes the importance of this experience for Gandhi. She writes about how without this experience of discrimination that Gandhi experienced in South Africa, he may have just been another lawyer who sought out success and made a decent living. However, it was this experience of prejudice that shaped him and enabled him to define his purpose. When he was removed from the train because of the color of his skin, according to Arun Gandhi, he had three choices of how he would respond. The first choice was to respond in anger, and the second choice was to return to India. However, he didn’t ruminate on these options for too long. Arun Gandhi writes, “And that’s when the third response dawned on him—the response of nonviolent action. From that point onwards, he developed the philosophy of nonviolence and practiced it in his life as well as in his search for justice in South Africa. He ended up staying in that country for twenty-two years—and then he went and led the movement of India” (Covey 187-188). Arun Gandhi’s reflection on this experience shows how transformative this moment was for Gandhi and how it shaped the rest of his life as a leader for social and personal change through nonviolence.

Martin Luther King, Jr. had a similar moment when he first experienced and witnessed injustice as a child and this helped define who he was and who he became. In his “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” he writes about his experience as a child when he made these realizations and how they were a part of his journey to nonviolence: “It is necessary to go back to my early teens in Atlanta… I had passed spots where Negroes had been savagely lynched, and had watched the Ku Klux Klan on its rides at night. I had seen police brutality with my own eyes, and watched Negroes receive the most tragic injustice in the courts. All of these things had done something to my growing personality. I had come perilously close to resenting all white people” (King 380). He goes onto write about how he also became aware of economic injustice and how it was inextricably linked to racism. Although he grew up in a financially comfortable situation, he witnessed poverty around him, both among whites and blacks. In this, he realized that exploitation went beyond racism, and he became aware of the many injustices that were present in the United States at that time (King 380).

King developed this viewpoint that questioned society and began to learn about nonviolence through reading authors like Gandhi, Thoreau, and others. However, he did not have a practical grasp on nonviolence until he became a pastor in Montgomery in 1954 and became a part of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. According to King, this took place kind of by chance: “When I went to Montgomery as a pastor, I had not the slightest idea that I would later become involved in a crisis in which nonviolent resistance would be applicable. I neither started the protest nor suggested it. I simply responded to the call of the people for a spokesman” (King 390). King goes on to write about how he relied on his background and readings he had done. He remembered the Sermon on the Mount and Gandhi’s philosophy on nonviolence, which both focus on love. It was through this protest that King was a part of when nonviolence “became a commitment to a way of life” (King 390). Both his experiences growing up and his interaction with the bus boycott were defining moments for him on his journey to nonviolence. Like Gandhi,
through these experiences, King committed to nonviolence as both a method for social change and a way of life.

For Gandhi and King, these were two of the defining moments in their life, moments where they had the choice to be courageous, and they rose to the challenge. Cesar Chavez writes about the importance of making the choice to commit to nonviolence, and how this individual choice can transform society, which both Gandhi and King did. In an article he wrote on Martin Luther King, Jr., Chavez states: “Nonviolence has exactly the opposite effect [as violent revolutions]. If, for every violent act committed against us, we respond with nonviolence, we attract people’s support. We can gather the support of millions who have a conscience and would rather see a nonviolent resolution to problems...the greater the oppression, the more leverage nonviolence has” (Chavez 159-160). It was in the small decisions that Gandhi and King made in these smaller moments that allowed them to become leaders of nonviolent movements that created social change in the world they live in.

Bibliography:


Teaching Activities/ Materials Needed:
The following handouts will be used with students. Examples of student narratives will also be shown in class.
Defining Moments of Gandhi and King

Directions: We all have moments in our life where we have to make choices, and sometimes it is these moments, the smaller moments in life, that really help to define us. Both Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. experienced moments like this in their life where they chose to be nonviolent, and it was these smaller moments, before they were famous leaders of social change, that helped define who they were.

In this lesson, you will read excerpts written by Gandhi and King, and then you will write a short narrative about what moments in life have defined you. Read the following excerpts and annotate as you read. Be prepared to participate in a Socratic Seminar.

Gandhi’s defining moment:
The following is an excerpt from *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* by Gandhi.

“On the seventh or eighth day after my arrival, I left Durban. A first class seat was booked for me… Abdulla Sheth warned me. 'Look, now,' said he, 'this is a different country from India.'

I thanked him and asked him not to be anxious.

The train reached Maritzburg, the capital of Natal, at about 9 p.m. Beddings used to be provided at this station. A railway servant came and asked me if I wanted one. 'No,' said I, 'I have one with me.' He went away. But a passenger came next, and looked me up and down. He saw that I was a 'coloured' man. This disturbed him. Out he went and came in again with one or two officials. They all kept quiet, when another official came to me and said, 'Come along, you must go to the van compartment.'

'But I have a first class ticket,' said I.

'That doesn't matter,' rejoined the other. 'I tell you, you must go to the van compartment.'

'I tell you, I was permitted to travel in this compartment at Durban, and I insist on going on in it.'

'No, you won't,' said the official. 'You must leave this compartment, or else I shall have to call a police constable to push you out.'

'Yes, you may. I refuse to get out voluntarily.'

The constable came. He took me by the hand and pushed me out. My luggage was also taken out. I refused to go to the other compartment and the train steamed away. I went and sat in the waiting room, keeping my hand-bag with me, and leaving the other luggage where it was. The railway authorities had taken charge of it.

It was winter, and winter in the higher regions of South Africa is severely cold. Maritzburg being at a high altitude, the cold was extremely bitter. My overcoat was in my luggage, but I did not
dare to ask for it lest I should be insulted again, so I sat and shivered. There was no light in the room. A passenger came in at about midnight and possibly wanted to talk to me. But I was in no mood to talk.

I began to think of my duty. Should I fight for my rights or go back to India, or should I go on to Pretoria without minding the insults, and return to India after finishing the case? It would be cowardice to run back to India without fulfilling my obligation. The hardship to which I was subjected was superficial only a symptom of the deep disease of colour prejudice. I should try, if possible, to root out the disease and suffer hardships in the process. Redress for wrongs I should seek only to the extent that would be necessary for the removal of the colour prejudice.

So I decided to take the next available train to Pretoria.

The following morning I sent a long telegram to the General manager of the Railway and also informed Abdulla Sheth, who immediately met the General Manager. The Manager justified the conduct of the railway authorities, but informed him that he had already instructed the Station Master to see that I reached my destination safely. Abdulla Sheth wired to the Indian merchants in Maritzburg and to friends in other places to meet me and look after me. The merchants came to see me at the station and tried to comfort me by narrating their own hardships and explaining that what had happened to me was nothing unusual. They also said that Indians travelling first or second class had to expect trouble from railway officials and white passengers. The day was thus spent in listening to these tales of woe. The evening train arrived. There was a reserved berth for me. I now purchased at Maritzburg the bedding ticket I had refused to book at Durban.”

The train took me to Charlestown.”

*Arun Gandhi, Gandhi’s granddaughter, writes about how this moment defined Gandhi:*

“Ironically, if it had not been for the experience of racism and prejudice, he may have been just another successful lawyer who had made a lot of money. But because of prejudice in Southern Africa, he was subjected to humiliation within a week of his arrival. He was thrown off a train because of the color of his skin… His first response was anger… The second response was to want to go back to India and life among his own people in dignity… And that’s when the third response dawned on him- the response of nonviolent action. From that point onwards, he developed the philosophy of nonviolence and practiced it in his life as well as in his search for justice in South Africa. He ended up staying in that country for twenty-two years- and then he went and led the movement of India” (Covey 187-188).

King’s defining moment:

The following is an excerpt from “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” written by Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1958.

“Often the question has arisen concerning my own intellectual pilgrimage to nonviolence. In order to get at this question it is necessary to go back to my early teens in Atlanta. I had grown up abhorring not only segregation but also the oppressive and barbarous acts that grew out of it. I had passed spots where Negroes had been savagely lynched, and had watched the Ku Klux Klan on its rides at night. I had seen police brutality with my own eyes, and watched Negroes receive the most tragic injustice in the courts. All of these things had done something to my growing personality. I had come perilously close to resenting all white people.

I had also learned that the inseparable twin of racial injustice was economic injustice. Although I came from a home of economic security and relative comfort, I could never get out of my mind the economic insecurity of many of my playmates and the tragic poverty of those living around me. During my late teens I worked two summers, against my father's wishes-he never wanted my brother and me to work around white people because of the oppressive conditions-in a plant that hired both Negroes and whites. Here I saw economic injustice firsthand, and realized that the poor white was exploited just as much as the Negro. Through these early experiences I grew up deeply conscious of the varieties of injustice in our society...

When I went to Montgomery as a pastor, I had not the slightest idea that I would later become involved in a crisis in which nonviolent resistance would be applicable. I neither started the protest nor suggested it. I simply responded to the call of the people for a spokesman. When the protest began, my mind, consciously or unconsciously, was driven back to the Sermon on the Mount, with its sublime teachings on love, and the Gandhian method of nonviolent resistance. As the days unfolded, I came to see the power of nonviolence more and more. Living through the actual experience of the protest, nonviolence became more than a method to which I gave intellectual assent; it became a commitment to a way of life. Many of the things that I had not cleared up intellectually concerning nonviolence were now solved in the sphere of practical action.”

Your defining moment:

Ordinary people have made change throughout history. What has transformed ordinary people into heroes is the small everyday decisions they made to choose nonviolence. Even Gandhi himself said, “I claim to be no more than an average man with less than average ability... I have not the shadow of a doubt that any man or woman can achieve what I have, if he or she would make the same effort and cultivate the same hope and faith” (Sethia 1). We all have moments in our life where we have to make choices, and sometimes it is these moments, the smaller moments in life, that really help to define us. Both Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. experienced moments like this in their life where they chose to be nonviolent, and it was these smaller moments, before they were famous leaders of social change, that helped define who they were.

Think about your life. What moments have defined you? What is your defining moment?
Socratic Seminar Notes:

Brainstorm for your narrative: