Ahimsa Center K-12 Lesson

Title of Lesson: Ahimsa Transformations for Gandhi and for Students

Lesson by: Nancy Johnson, Hoover High School, San Diego, CA

Grade Level/Subject Area: High School: 11th Grade American Literature; Visual & Performing Arts Academy Students

Duration of Lesson: 55-minute class periods for 1 week

California State Language Arts Content Standards:
- Reading Comprehension 2.5: Analyze an author’s implicit and explicit philosophical assumptions and beliefs about a subject.
- Writing Strategies & Application 2.3: Write a reflective composition, demonstrating an understanding of the elements of discourse, argumentation, and proof, purpose, audience, and genre.

Lesson Abstract: Students read pages 1 through 36 of Gandhi: Pioneer of Nonviolent Social Change by Dr. Tara Sethia, tracking the transformations in his life from age 13 through age 25, recording their thoughts in concept maps. In following the lessons of Gandhi’s life, they evaluate their own lives, and discover the meaning of ahimsa.

Guiding Questions:
- How can we stand strong for justice without violence when a situation is unjust, oppressive, or exploitative?
- What emotions are present when a person is feeling/experiencing violence?
- What were the fundamental properties of ahimsa for Gandhi? For your life?

Content Essay:
Gandhi believed himself “to be no more than an average man with less than average ability” – the same way many of us feel as students and teachers. However, Gandhi believed that any man or woman could achieve what he did “if he or she would make the same effort and cultivate the same hope and faith” (Sethia Intro.).

It is significant that in his lifetime, Gandhi went through many transformations.

Mohandas K. Gandhi was only 13 when his family married him to his wife, Kastur Makanji, also 13. He had already been married six years when he left India to attend college in England. His entire life was before him just as it is for every student who graduates from high school and tries to look past reality to his or her dreams. You can imagine that he made many mistakes and learned many lessons. You can imagine what he must have gone through to transform from a high school graduate to one of the most powerful advocates of nonviolence, human rights, and social justice the world has ever known.
Dr. Sethia tells us, “Gandhi assumed his roles in public life gradually, and grew in them as he faced the challenges of his world. His actions in these roles unfolded in ways that mirrored his own evolution and the development of his thought” (2). It will be a powerful lesson for students to study the character development of Gandhi as a teenager and young man, comparing his lessons of life to their own.

One of Gandhi’s first transformations came as a young man when he had stolen some money from his brother to pay off the brother’s debt. He decided to confess to his father through a note that he personally handed his father. Gandhi said about this incident, “I was trembling as I handed the confession. He read it through, and pearl drops trickled down his cheeks, wetting the paper. For a moment he closed his eyes in thought and then tore up the note…I could see my father’s agony. If I were a painter, I could draw a picture of the whole scene today. Those pearl drops of love cleansed my heart” (Sethia 17). Sethia makes the connection to Gandhi’s own autobiography where he called this lesson “his first ‘object lesson’ in ahimsa as love and forgiveness…Gandhi concluded that an honest acknowledgement of one’s mistake followed by a promise never to repeat it again is the ‘purest type of repentance’” (Sethia 17).

Just after high school, Gandhi left for England to pursue his education as a lawyer. Away from home, he became enamored with many English customs that he could not necessarily afford. His second transformation came after a period of time when he spent more money than he should have on buying clothes, learning French, and taking dance, violin, and elocution lessons. He moved to a single room, cooked at home, and saved money. He wrote, “the change harmonized my inward and outward life…it was also more in keeping with the means of my family. My life was certainly more truthful and my soul knew no bounds of joy” (Sethia 21).

Another transformation came after reading Henry Salt, Howard William, and Anna Kingsford on vegetarianism. He came to believe that it is the duty of humans to not prey on fellow animals, but to protect them. He noticed that humans lived to eat instead of eating to live.

When Gandhi read a new author or met a person in his life that influenced him, he grasped the moment from the inside out, and remained transformed by the knowledge. The book, The Kingdom of God is Within You by Leo Tolstoy, as well as John Ruskin’s writings on social/political issues and principles for an ideal society, made an enduring impact on Gandhi. The third person that transformed Gandhi was Raychandbhai, who was a poet and a scholar of Indian scriptures. He was only a few years older than Gandhi, but became his spiritual guide and mentor.

Because his older brother, Laxmidas had made it possible for Gandhi to attend law school, Gandhi felt obligated to help him whenever Laxmidas asked; however, the things Laxmidas asked him to do sometimes went against Gandhi’s principles. Two things he disagreed with were giving commissions to another lawyer if a case was referred to him, and making connections with acquaintances solely for political
reasons. A transformation came for Gandhi when he resolved to never again place himself in a “false position.” These incidents helped him see what he did not want to do in his life.

Gandhi experienced several incidents of prejudice as a young Indian man. In the beginning the injustice of these incidents made him angry. One of his mentors told him to “pocket the insult.” Although angry, Gandhi followed the advice and profited by learning to be alert to racial arrogance, yet striving to focus on the act and not the individual. After being thrown off a train in South Africa because he was Indian, Gandhi had the choice of being bitter and returning to India or staying in South Africa to complete his duty. This was a transformation in Gandhi because he decided “instead of taking the incident as a personal assault and humiliation, [to dig] deeper to find its root cause in the wide-spread problem of color prejudice in Africa. He resolved to address the problem of color prejudice and endure suffering in the process” (Sethia 33). The process he went through that evening was a process of reflection (we'll call it the FAIRR process):

- **Focus on Individual:** Man on the train who had him removed
- **Act:** Personal assault
- **Identify Emotion:** Humiliation
- **Reflection:** The individual was not the issue; the root cause was widespread color prejudice in South Africa.
- **Resolution:** Address the problem of color prejudice and endure suffering in the process.

All of these transformations happened to Gandhi before he was 25 years old. Students and teachers alike often see great leaders in history as mahatmas or saints. Gandhi experienced all of the stages of life we all go through. Gandhi received his values and influences from parents and friends, made mistakes, asked forgiveness, became less self-absorbed, and transcended his own immaturity and youth. He transformed further when he realized that his own behaviors sometimes did not match his teachings. In doing an in-depth analysis of Gandhi’s life, students will be learning that his struggle is their struggle. In his humanness, if he could achieve *ahimsa* (nonviolence), then each of them...and their teacher...have the potential to strive for the same.

Gandhi’s own grandson, Arun Gandhi, spent time with his grandfather as a 13-year-old. Gandhi worked with Arun on his rage because of the acts of discrimination Arun had endured. “To be beaten up at the age of ten by white youths because they consider you too black and then by black youths because they consider you too white is a humiliating experience that would drive anyone to vengeful violence” (Rosenberg xiii). Gandhi had his teenage grandson draw “a family tree of violence” acknowledging and analyzing every act of violence he saw on a daily basis. “Everything that I experienced, read about, saw, or did to others...[I] put them down on the tree either under ‘physical,’ if it was violence where physical force was used, or under ‘passive,’ if it was the type of violence where the hurt was more emotional”
Gandhi shares another story that is relatable to our students in *Hind Swaraj*. He is making the point that history tends to record only war and bloodshed, rather than the force of love that he believes has had a more powerful presence in history. He says, “the force of love is the same as the force of the soul or truth” (Parel 87). No one records the acts of love in history. Gandhi says that in a family if “two brothers quarrel; one of them repents and reawakens the love that was lying dormant in him; the two again begin to live in peace. Nobody takes note of this” (Parel 88). However, if one brother took out a gun or took the argument to court, that would be recorded. “History, then, is a record of an interruption of the course of nature. Soul-force being natural, is not noted in history” (Parel 88). These are stories our students can connect to, and they will be challenged to notice the soul force instead of the violence.

There are many stories of Gandhi’s transformation. I am thinking of a project where students record the transformation Gandhi experienced as he learned to be aware of his emotions and follow the principles of ahimsa. Students can then transfer that knowledge into their own personal transformative journey. What if they looked at the circumstances they have experienced which have caused them emotions of anger, disappointment, humiliation, or fear, and reflected on their responses? Would they be able to find the cause of their reaction and transform? Is this too much to ask? Was it too much for Gandhi to ask thousands of individuals in India and South Africa to change their responses from violence and anger to nonviolent acts of civil disobedience? Is it possible for our students to change their world?

**Bibliography:**


**Teaching Activities:**

1. *(Into)* Students can be put in several groups and each will be given a scenario from Gandhi’s life where he could have reacted violently. Students will discuss what they would do in the same circumstance and prepare a presentation that could include a poster showing the FAIRR process they went through. The teacher will divulge what Gandhi actually did in the same situation as presentations are made.

2. Vocabulary enrichment: Students will define *ahimsa* and define passive vs. physical violence. Teacher will share excerpt from Gandhi’s grandson where he recorded passive and physical acts of violence that he saw around him.
Homework for the next four days: Students will replicate Gandhi’s assignment for his grandson on a chart provided by the teacher.

3. Students will jigsaw pages 1 through 36 of Gandhi: Pioneer of Nonviolent Social Change by Dr. Tara Sethia, annotating for both passive and physical acts of violence and discrimination, but ultimately for the transformations in Gandhi’s life as a result of those acts. Students will record the transformations on an argument concept chart, listing claims and quotes as supporting details. Teacher will model and develop a concept map to assist students in tracking claims and details. (Six groups of six students will each be assigned different sections of pages 1-36; i.e. Group 1: pgs 1-6, Group 2: pgs. 7-12, etc.).

4. Students will teach their six pages to the class via their argument concept chart. Homework: Students will develop a thesis and outline a reflection about their observations of violence and the process of transformation for both Gandhi and themselves. Teacher will provide samples.

5. Timed writing prompt (open notes) about the students’ personal journeys through the previous two weeks, including any information from journals, charts, and presentations.

Materials:
- Copies of Sethia text, pgs. 1 through 36.
- Chart to record student observation of passive/physical acts of violence.
- Argument concept maps.
- Poster paper.
- Timed writing prompt.