Title of Lesson: The Power of Autobiographical Writing  
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<th>Grade Level/ Subject Areas:</th>
<th>Class Size:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>Any</td>
<td>1-2 periods (can be extended to several days with additional activities)</td>
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Guiding Questions:
- How did Gandhi use narrative to raise awareness of injustice?
- How can autobiographical writing be used to promote justice and nonviolence?
- What is the power in revealing truth?

Lesson Abstract:
In this lesson, students will read an excerpt from Mohandas Gandhi’s autobiography. Students will understand the content of Gandhi’s story and interpret its influence on Gandhi’s work. Students will also explore how Gandhi promotes justice by sharing his experience. Through the act of writing, Gandhi raises awareness and dramatizes the injustice which existed in South Africa. Students will then discuss how sharing personal stories and experiences can promote justice by raising awareness and making injustice visible. Students can then reflect on their own experiences facing or witnessing injustice.

Lesson Content:
Writing can serve as an important tool to promote social justice and nonviolence. Persuasive writing might come to mind first, but narrative writing can be just as powerful. Gandhi shared his experiences facing injustice and employing satyagraha (truth force) through the writing of his autobiography, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. When asked why he was writing such a book, Gandhi replied, “‘I simply want to tell the story of my numerous experiments with truth’” (Gandhi, 1957, xxvi). Gandhi took up writing his autobiography in the hopes of “achiev[ing] greater self-knowledge and com[ing] closer to the goal of self-realization that he equated with truth…” This would require him to describe his experiences in detail and with ruthless honesty, omitting no ugly truths (Box, xiv). This is the power of Gandhi’s autobiography, its commitment to truth.

The truth of the oppressed is often denied by those in power. Their stories are discounted or silenced by the oppressors, which further dehumanizes the victims. Autobiographical writing can reveal truth by dramatizing and personalizing violence and injustice and therefore re-humanize the oppressed. It can raise awareness of injustice occurring in society and enables others to empathize with the writer. As Michael Nagler states, “Satyagraha (truth-force) can often work just by making the violence in the situation visible” (Nagler, 2004, 214).

Gandhi began writing the autobiography in 1925 in his native Gujarati. It covers his life from birth until 1921 and mainly focuses on Gandhi’s time in South Africa. In the excerpt studied for this lesson (see Appendix A), Gandhi recalls the story of when he went to Pretoria, South
Africa to conduct business as a lawyer in 1893. Gandhi would call this particular event the “most creative experience in his life” (Fischer, 1954, 21).

Gandhi was on his way to Pretoria and boarded the train with a first-class ticket. He was staying in a first class compartment when a white man entered. The white passenger demanded that Gandhi leave. At this time, Indians faced much discrimination in South Africa. Laws were passed disenfranchising Indians, who came to work in South Africa first as indentured servants and then for other economic opportunities. Indians were required to pay a tax for a residence permit and they could not own land. In fact legal documents referred to Indians as “semi-barbarous Asiatics” (Fisher, 1954, 25).

Gandhi refused to leave the compartment and protested that he had a first-class ticket. Officials came and insisted Gandhi move to the third class car. Again, he refused. Police were summoned and threw him and his luggage onto the platform in the town of Maritzburg. The officials at the station took his luggage and coat. Gandhi chose to stay at the station shivering in the cold rather than ask the officials for his belongings. He did not want to risk being insulted yet again.

This became a transformational moment in his life. As Gandhi explains in his autobiography, he began to think of his obligation to fight the system of oppression in South Africa. He writes, “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” (Gandhi, 1957, 112) As Fischer explains, “… when Gandhi encountered injustice at Maritzburg he did not bend, he took unavoidable punishment out of which, however, came a resolution to combat the dread disease of color prejudice” (Fischer, 1954, 22). Gandhi saw this event represented the oppression his people faced in South Africa and India. He was determined to take action.

Spurred by this incident, Gandhi organized the Natal Indian Congress and began the newspaper Young India to address the plight of Indians in South Africa. It was also during this time that Gandhi began his experiment with Satyagraha or “soul force”. Satyagraha “is the vindication of truth not by the affliction of suffering on the opponent but of one’s self” (Fischer, 1954, 35). In 1907, he began a nonviolent campaign against an act requiring all Indians to register and be fingerprinted. Gandhi advocated not submitting to the law, and accepting the consequence for disobeying it. He led his people by refusing to register. For this action, he received a jail sentence of two months. Gandhi continued to advocate for nonviolent resistance against the South African system of oppression.

In 1913, in addition to immigration and taxes, a new issue prompted an intensified campaign. The South African court ruled that only Christian marriages would be recognized as legal. Gandhi led thousands on marches demanding improvements in the conditions faced by Indians in South Africa. After months of mass protests and arrests, the government had no choice but to address the concerns. The annual tax was eliminated and non-Christian marriages were recognized. Gandhi, through Satyagraha, won the battle against oppression and discrimination. Fisher writes, “Gandhi could never have achieved what he did in South Africa and India but for a weapon peculiarly his own” (Fisher, 1954, 35). Gandhi would use these same methods again in India as he fought for Indian self-rule (Hind Swaraj) against the British Empire. The encounter at Maritzburg not only transformed Gandhi, it transformed the world. By sharing this
story in his autobiography, he spread the message of satyagraha (truth force) and the power of transformation.

It is important for students to see the value of sharing personal stories – both for the writer and the reader. Nancie Atwell, middle school educator, writes: “Memoir allows us to discover and tell our own truths as writers” (Atwell, 1998, 372). In her book *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching about Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word*, Linda Christensen quotes the Kenyan poet, Mincere Mugo: “Writing can be a lifeline, especially when your existence has been denied, especially when you have been left on the margins, especially when your life and process of growth have been subjected to attempts at strangulation” (Christensen, 2000, 6). Students can use writing to illuminate the truth of injustice in their own lives. Furthermore, students are empowered when their stories are heard and acknowledged by the school community.

**New York State Content Standards:**

English/Language Arts:
- NYS Standard 2: Students will read, write, listen and speak for literary response and expression.
- NYS Standard 3: Students will read, write, listen, and speak for critical analysis and evaluation.

**Materials Needed:**
- Excerpt from Gandhi’s Autobiography (see Appendix)

**Suggested Teaching Activities:**

-Read excerpt from *My Autobiography: My Experiments with Truth*. Discuss why this moment had such transformational power in Gandhi’s life.

-Write in journal about a moment you experienced or witnessed injustice.

-Write a journal entry narrating a transformational moment in your life.

**Bibliography:**


On the seventh or eighth day after my arrival, I left Durban. A first class seat was booked for me. It was usual there to pay five shillings extra, if one needed a bedding. Abdulla Sheth insisted that I should book one bedding but, out of obstinacy and pride and with a view to saving five shillings, I declined. Abdulla Sheth warned me. 'Look, now,' said he, 'this is a different country from India. Thank God, we have enough and to spare. Please do not stint yourself in anything that you may need.'

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 over-coat 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 traveling 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.