Title of Lesson: Gandhi’s Childhood Experience of Truth and Nonviolence

Lesson By: Cara McCarthy

Grade Level/ Subject Areas: Fourth Grade

Class Size: 20-25

Time/Duration of Lesson: 1 – 2 days

Guiding Questions:

- As a child Gandhi made mistakes. What mistakes did he make? How did he learn from those mistakes?
- If violence is defined as actions or words that divide and/or separate people in their hearts or in their actions than which actions of Gandhi’s are violent?
- What is ahimsa? How could we use ahimsa in our classroom?

Lesson Abstract:
The students will explore two pivotal experiences in Gandhi’s childhood that led him to the concept of ahimsa through truth. They will begin to explore the impact of violent solutions to conflict by identifying feelings created by its use: power, powerlessness, anger, control, and frustration. The students will then reflect on the following question “If these are the feelings created by “solving” the problem has the problem been solved?” Students will then be introduced to the concept of ahimsa (nonviolence) by exploring the advent of ahimsa in the life of Gandhi.

Lesson Content:
The legacy of Mohandas K. Gandhi is not measured in wealth or power as that of so many known leaders, nor is it measured in battles fought or won, yet the lasting impact of his legacy rivals that of a Churchill or a Napoleon. Gandhi’s life ended on January 30, 1948 when a shot fired from the gun of his assassin Godse, a Hindu Brahmin, killed him; sobering testimony to Gandhi’s power. In every aspect of the Mahatama’s (“Great soul in peasant’s garb”) (Gandhi, Fischer, 1954, p. 50) life nonviolence was an active spiritual practice that recognized and dignified the oneness, the wholeness of humanity. Our connection as human beings transcends our differences, our divisions and with the practice of nonviolence transcends our conflicts. Nonviolence is not the antithesis of violence. It is not defined in absence but in presence. Gandhi recognized the potential for harm within each one of us but more importantly he recognized the potential for good. The question is not whether we are inherently good or bad; we are both. The question is which seeds will we nurture, the seeds of violence or the seeds of nonviolence?

A life dedicated to nonviolence is not a passive life. In order to grow and nurture the seeds of nonviolence it is the responsibility of each individual to actively strive for nonviolence in action, thought, and words through the practice of compassion, truth, fearlessness, courage, self restraint, trust, forgiveness, and service. Gandhi’s life is living testimony to the power of
nonviolence, his death testimony to the transformative nature of his life for it is through his death that we now study his life as a living text to be read, reflected and meditated on in our own strivings towards ahimsa. Gandhi’s strength and influence came not from weapons, fear, or humiliation but from nonviolence, tolerance and dignity. “His legacy is courage, his lesson truth, his weapon love. His life is his monument. He now belongs to mankind.” (Fischer, 1954, p. 189) A study of the life of Gandhi is also a study of the power of ahimsa (nonviolence) and must be undertaken with a close look at his transformative childhood experiences.

Gandhi the Mahatma did not arrive fully formed like Minerva from the head of Zeus. He arrived at ahimsa through his lived experiences. In his autobiography, Gandhi speaks of his mediocrity as a student, his lack of engagement in his studies and his non participation in sports. However, glimpses of the seeds that grew into his philosophy of ahimsa can be gathered from his childhood experiences. The experiences themselves are not unique but Gandhi’s interpretation and synthesis of those experiences creates an image of a reflective, willful child who heightened his awareness by filtering his experience through a lens of unflinching honesty.

In his autobiography Gandhi inspects his childhood through a lens of unyielding honesty. Often childhood memories revolve around moments of tension created when a child challenges the values or beliefs of his parents and upbringing. This moment happened for Gandhi when his friend convinced him to eat meat in an effort to address the perceived physical inferiority of the Indian in relation to the English who were meat eaters. Gandhi’s friend established a causal relationship between the strength and the size of the British occupiers and their conquest of India, attributing the former to their custom of eating meat. At this time in Gandhi’s life respect for his parent’s beliefs rather than his personal value system was the basis of his vegetarianism. The argument advanced by Gandhi’s friend in support of meat eating preyed on Gandhi’s weaknesses; his lack of physical strength and his fear of the dark and serpents. Gandhi’s friend claimed that his physical strength, his fearlessness and his athletic ability to run and jump were the fruits of eating meat. Gandhi’s desire to overcome his fear and to increase his physical prowess helped convince Gandhi to eat meat in spite of his traditions. Gandhi’s desire for strength and courage along with his awareness of the inequity of the British occupation were not the catalyst for the abandonment of vegetarianism. Gandhi’s willingness to eat meat is indicative of a character trait that created the Mahatma. Throughout his life Gandhi respected all humans – he honored diverse value systems and often assimilated beliefs from other cultural or religious practices when they mirrored his own beliefs. Gandhi was not afraid to think beyond the confines of his own cultural and religious belief system. The Gandhi’s were Vaishnavas and “the opposition to and abhorrence of meat eating that existed in Gujarat among the Jains and Vaishnavas were to be seen nowhere else in India or outside in such strength. These were the traditions in which I was born and bred.” (p.)  Once Gandhi decided to eat meat he committed himself completely to the task at hand even though the action meant deceiving his parents. At first he disliked the flavor of the meat and the act of eating meat. The first night after eating the meat he dreamt that a goat was bleating in his stomach and trying to get out. But once Gandhi had resolved to eat the meat he approached the act as his duty and partook of meat six times over the course of a year. The deception of his parents pained him “if my mother and father came to know of my having become a meat eater, they would be deeply shocked. This knowledge was gnawing at my heart.” (p.) and eventually led him to forsake the experiment “though it is essential to eat meat and also essential to take up food ‘reform’ in the
country, yet deceiving and lying to one’s father and mother is worse than not eating meat.”

This childhood memory indicates how Gandhi interpreted and reflected on his experiences. Although deception is not an admirable quality his resolve once he made the commitment to eat meat reveals unyielding willpower and the courage to engage in a quest for his own value system informed by his culture, religion and parents but not confined by these boundaries. His reasoning for partaking in the eating of meat, that the British colonized India because of their superior physical size is flawed and does not yet point towards nonviolence, yet it reveals his desire for action and self rule. His friendship reveals his willingness to listen to other points of view and to take from them what he likes. Gandhi never confesses his transgression to his parents yet truth transcends deception and ends his days of eating meat.

Truth in Gandhian nonviolence is a spiritual undertaking towards which all adherents of nonviolence must strive; satyagraha, firmness in truth. Gandhi’s understanding of truth evolved with his childhood experiences. As a meat eater the knowledge that he was deceiving his parents was eventually too heavy a burden to carry and he stopped. However, the truth that he arrived at was not transparent. Truth eventually changed his course of action but it did not precipitate a confession of his transgression. If a negative peace is defined as a peace begot by fear, intimidation or violence then this is a negative truth, not transparent. From this experience Gandhi gained an understanding of truth, but this truth was internal not transparent; he never confessed to his parents. Gandhi rectified the lie, both a deception and an omission, by no longer eating meat. The act of eating meat was not immoral because Gandhi did not yet believe in vegetarianism. However the act of deceiving his parents was immoral. Even though Gandhi chose right action over deception his lack of transparency in truth denied him the grace of ahimsa. Gandhi experienced the transformative power of ahimsa when he practiced positive, transparent truth.

At the age of fifteen Gandhi stole a piece of gold from his brother’s armlet. He sold the gold and used the money to help his brother pay a debt. This theft weighed so heavily on Gandhi that he decided not only that he would never steal again but that he would also confess the theft to his father. Gandhi, afraid to confess his theft to his father, wrote out the confession. In the letter he asked for his father’s forgiveness, pledged never to steal again and asked to be punished for his crime. In Gandhi’s autobiography he describes the moment when he handed his father the letter: “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. Those pearl drops of love cleansed my heart and washed my sin away……This was, for me, an object lesson in Ahimsa……When such ahimsa becomes all-embracing, it transforms everything it touches.”

Gandhi’s life-long journey to ahimsa began with his childhood experiences. Those experiences, not unique to Gandhi, connect with most children. He deceived his parents; he stole; he spent time with a friend who had negative thoughts and actions. Yet Gandhi became the Mahatma, the spiritual leader who led India to self-rule through the use of nonviolence. The potential for good and the potential for bad were both present in his childhood. Gandhi nurtured the potential for good by embracing uncompromising, steadfast, truth. This practice of truth led
him to the transformative experience of ahimsa starting Gandhi on his life long journey of nonviolence.

**Massachusetts State Content Standards:**
4.D.4 Ask and answer questions to learn new information relevant to the task or topic of discussion.
4.D.5 Follow specific tasks and meet timelines for group work.
4.D.6 Identify and explain points of agreement and disagreement during or after a discussion.
4.CI.2 Write multi-paragraph compositions (friendly letters, essays, articles) expressing an opinion about a text, performance, or media production that • support the opinion with evidence from the work in question and use grade-appropriate academic and content area vocabulary accurately

**Materials Needed:**
- Mural paper and a variety of drawing and painting materials
- Chart paper
- Writing journals

**Suggested Teaching Activities:**
- Create a class mural that explores how problems are solved by individuals and the community. Have students share out their contribution to the mural. Discuss the choices people make when they solve a problem.
- Role-play a conflict based on common mistakes in the fourth grade (not being able to be the pitcher in kickball and getting into a fight because of it, someone makes fun of the answer you gave during reading group, etc.) and discuss the feelings created by the conflict. Be sure to explore conflict as division or separation – power/powerlessness – winner/loser. How could this conflict be solved nonviolently?
- After learning about Gandhi’s childhood experiences have a class discussion from the following prompt. Mistakes are simply opportunities for growth. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Do Gandhi’s experiences support this statement? Explain.
- Have students keep an ‘ahimsa’ journal. Using Gandhi’s childhood experiences as an example have the students record their journey to nonviolence. Students can respond in the journal to the following questions. What mistakes have you made? How have you learned from your mistakes? How could you learn from Gandhi’s choices?

**Bibliography:**