Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Title:
The Freedom Rides & Gandhi’s Legacy

Lesson By:
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Grade Level/ Subject Areas:
11th grade U.S. History

Duration of Lesson:
3 days (135 minutes)

Content Standards:
Massachusetts Department of Education Social Studies Frameworks
US.II.25 Analyze the origins, goals key events of the Civil Rights Movement.

Lesson Abstract:
Students will debate the efficacy of violent action and nonviolent direct action by drawing on historical examples. They will then watch the American Experience film Freedom Riders to learn about the goals, events, and accomplishments of the Freedom Rides of 1961. Following the film, students will compare the Freedom Rides to Gandhi’s Salt March in terms of tactics, strategy, and outcomes and then design their own satyagraha campaign to bring about positive social change in their own lives.

Guiding Questions:
1. How and why was Gandhian philosophy appropriated by African-Americans prior to the Civil Rights Movement?
2. Was Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence vindicated or adulterated in the African-American Civil Rights Movement?

Content Essay: The Freedom Rides & Gandhi’s Legacy

The Intellectual Origins of Nonviolence

In February of 1936, Mohandas K. Gandhi stepped out of his ashram in India to receive some American guests, the most distinguished of whom was Howard Thurman, the Dean of the Divinity School at the historically black Howard University. They discussed over the course of a three hour conversation Gandhi’s regret at having not made ahimsa a more globally visible force for social change. Gandhi encouraged Thurman to use a satyagraha campaign to advance the cause of African American Civil Rights in the United States. As their meeting concluded, Gandhi offered his American guest a hopeful prophecy: “It may be through the Negroes,” Gandhi said, “that the unadulterated message of nonviolence will be delivered to the world” (King, 179). Had Gandhi lived through the 1960s, he would have seen his prediction vindicated.
In the midst of the Cold War, the activists of the African American Civil Rights Movement brought the practice and message of nonviolence to the attention of their fellow American citizens and to the world. The Freedom Rides of 1961 organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) were one of the purest reproductions of Gandhian thought and tactics in America, from the meticulous planning behind the rides to their deliberate strategy and steady execution.

Long before the Freedom Rides, however, African-American intellectuals had been keenly aware of Gandhi’s satyagraha campaigns to effect Indian independence, especially following the Salt March of 1930. Many black intellectuals saw in Gandhi’s tactics a possible path to defeating Jim Crow in the American South— and thus also an alternative to the dogma of communism (Sethia, 166). Several influential African-American scholars had made long voyages by steamship to India to meet with Gandhi prior to his assassination, as well as with his disciples after his assassination. Bayard Rustin visited India in 1948 and had an enormous impact on bringing Gandhi’s strategies to CORE (King, 119). Even before he met with Gandhi’s disciples, Rustin had seen that Gandhi’s tactics might be well suited to the problem of African American civil rights. As early as 1942, Rustin wrote that the African American possessed the “qualities essential for nonviolent direct action,” for he had “long since learned to endure suffering,” could admit “his own share of guilt,” and above all had “a rich religious heritage” (Arsenault, 24).

In 1942, James Farmer, Bayard Rustin, and a handful of other men founded the Congress of Racial Equality in Chicago, Illinois along explicitly Gandhian lines. Farmer had been encouraged by Howard Thurman to read Gandhi, after which Farmer proposed that CORE should be conceived as a way to implement “the creative application of Gandhi’s ideas” to solve a distinctly American problem--Jim Crow segregation (King, 182). Although CORE was involved in nonviolent direct action as early as its founding in 1942, the crowning achievement of CORE activists was the Freedom Rides of 1961, which were conceived as a way to ensure that the Supreme Court decision banning segregation in bus terminals would actually be enforced by South and by the Federal Government. As CORE buses made their way from Washington, D.C. to New Orleans, Louisiana, the riders were attacked by white mobs, arrested, and sentenced to hard labor. The drama that resulted garnered significant media coverage and focused national attention on the violence of Southern racism, which contrasted starkly with the nonviolence of the activists seeking to uproot that racism.

The Freedom Rides as a Pure Expression of Gandhian Thought

In each stage of the Freedom Rides, it is possible to see Gandhi’s influence. In pursuing satyagraha, Gandhi first sought negotiation, then self-purification or training, then nonviolent direct action. Farmer specifically imitated Gandhi’s approach in orchestrating the Freedom Rides. First, like Gandhi prior to the Salt March, Farmer wrote to the authorities—the Justice Department, the FBI, the president, and the Greyhound Bus Company—announcing his intention to start a freedom ride to defy unconstitutional segregated practices in interstate travel in the South starting in May, 1961. He received no reply, but his transparency left him on high moral ground (King, 138). Gandhi chose as his satyagrahis—even in the early days in South Africa—people who had proven their dedication to nonviolence over time and through vows. Even in the early campaigns in South Africa, before Mohandas became Mahatma, Gandhi’s satyagrahis “were to be civil in the case of adversity,” “were not to carry any more things than they needed,”
and “were to endure suffering even in the face of flogging or imprisonment” (Sethia, 53). Farmer, too, worked hard to cultivate a high ethic amongst his Freedom Riders.

Anticipating continued resistance from southern states and a lack of cooperation from the Federal Government, Farmer had already helped to select and to train freedom riders who had the courage to proceed into life-threatening situations and remain nonviolent. CORE required potential freedom riders to submit an application and agree to participate only on certain terms. The application read, in part: “I wish to apply for acceptance as a participant in CORE’s Freedom Ride, 1961 to travel via bus from Washington D.C. to New Orleans, Louisiana. I understand that I shall be participating in a non-violent protest against racial discrimination and that arrests or personal injury to me might result” (Freedom Riders). One of the most well known Freedom Riders was John Lewis, who later became a Congressman representing Georgia. Lewis had been training in Gandhian methods with James Lawson since 1959, a full two years prior to the Freedom Rides (King, 138). The thirteen young men and women who became Freedom Riders, like John Lewis, came to the South ready to sacrifice. When U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy’s aide John Siegenthaler urged Freedom Rider Diane Nash to leave the South before she got somebody killed, Nash replied: “Sir, we all signed our wills and testaments last night before we left. We know someone will be killed. But we cannot let violence overcome non-violence” (Freedom Riders). With transparency of purpose and intense training and dedication, the Freedom Riders imitated Gandhi’s tactics.

Fortified by their commitment to nonviolence, the Freedom Riders still needed to devise a specific strategy to test segregated practices in the South. The Freedom Riders met in Washington, D.C. for one week of training and strategizing prior to the Freedom Rides, during which James Farmer sought to further elevate Gandhian tactics above those employed in the haphazard Montgomery Bus Boycotts or even the more carefully planned Greensboro Sit-Ins. Perhaps better than anyone else in the Civil Rights Movement, Bayard Rustin and James Farmer understood Gandhi’s concept of swaraj—self-reliance as a means of achieving freedom and independence. As Gandhi had written in Hind Swaraj, “If we become free, India is free. It is swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves” (Parel, 71). Farmer, remembering the logic behind the Freedom Rides during a 1994 interview, spoke in words that could have come from Gandhi’s mouth: “How long would segregation last? As long as we permitted it to last, and no longer. If we no longer accepted it, or allowed ourselves to be segregated, then segregation could not be enforced and would be doomed to end” (Farmer). Thus, CORE leaders in their introduction to their Freedom Riders wrote that “We cannot overemphasize the necessity for courteous and intelligent conduct while breaking the caste system,” making an important comparison between Jim Crow and the caste system in India while emphasizing the necessity to rule oneself and one’s passions (King, 137). When Freedom Riders were confronted with violence, they were to remain totally nonviolent and continue to love their oppressor in an attempt to truly transform, rather than dominate or slyly best, their oppressor. They rose to the challenge. Following a brutal beating in Montgomery, Alabama which left him unconscious and hospitalized for days, the white Freedom Rider Jim Zwerg told television reporters from his hospital bed, “We're dedicated to this. We'll take hitting, we'll take beating. We're willing to accept death. But we're going to keep coming until we can ride from anywhere in the South to anyplace else in the South” (Freedom Riders). In controlling themselves to the point of remaining nonviolent in the face of extreme violence, the Freedom Riders were in fact free--free from the unjust laws and practices of Jim Crow as well as from the fear of death.
When some Southern police chiefs and governors realized that the national media attention gained from such severe beatings of nonviolent protesters was bad for their image, they tried quieter methods of dealing with those whom they viewed as Northern agitators. When the riders arrived in Louisiana, the governor ordered the imprisonment of the riders rather than allow them to gain attention by being beaten. The Freedom Riders were ready for this, too. To keep their satyagraha going, they imported more Gandhian tactics when arrests replaced assaults. As the historian Mary King has written, Farmer specifically invoked Gandhi's Salt March of 1930, arguing that “the prevalent method of handling arrests for the sit-ins by posting bond and being bailed out of jail was not sufficiently modeled on Gandhi.” Therefore, when arrested, Freedom Riders were not supposed to seek bail but rather were encouraged to treat their jail sentence as a kind of merit badge in an unjust world. In Farmer's words, “A better tactic would be to remain in jail and make the maintenance of segregation so expensive for the state and the city that they would hopefully come to the conclusion that they could no longer afford it. Fill up the jails, as Gandhi did in India.” (King, 138). This tactic, perfected during the Freedom Rides, would be put to use in much greater volume during the Birmingham Campaign in 1963 that in turn helped to finally turn President Kennedy’s attention away from the Cold War and toward the pressing issue of civil rights.

**Nonviolence as a Model for Personal and Societal Change**

The perfect nonviolence of the Freedom Riders brought success to their cause and helped to elevate the conscience of the nation. Gandhi had insisted on nonviolence rather than violence, because as he wrote of the British in *Hind Swaraj*, that which is taken by force and “granted under fear” can be held “only so long as the fear lasts” (Parel, 76). Furthermore, Gandhi poignantly asked, “Wherein is courage required - in blowing others to pieces from behind a cannon or with a smiling face to approach a cannon and be blown to pieces? Who is the true warrior - he who keeps death always as a bosom-friend or he who controls the death of others?” (Parel, 91-92). The Freedom Riders had absorbed this message and demonstrated this truth, as newspaper headlines and television news reports attested to a global audience.

Ahimsa, or nonviolence, an idea which found its first global expression in India as a model for social change, was adapted and magnified in America in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1959, as CORE was planning the Freedom Rides, the symbol of nonviolent resistance in the United States was arriving with his wife in India. Guests of Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King studied Gandhi’s tactics in India and at the same time found themselves minor celebrities, the Montgomery Bus Boycotts having been well publicized in India (King, 132). What had begun in India was now a full-fledged social movement with interoceanic connections, transforming not only societies but individuals as well. Bayard Rustin demonstrates this transformation better than most. Upon his imprisonment for refusing to move to the back of the bus in Nashville in 1942, Rustin was called to the police chief. Rustin kindly asked the police chief, “What can I do for you?”

“Nigger,” the chief said menacingly, “you’re supposed to be scared when you come in here!”

“I am fortified by the truth, justice, and Christ, so there is no need for me to fear,” Rustin responded.

The police officer, Rustin remembered, seemed confused, and after some delay muttered to another officer, “I believe the nigger’s crazy” (Arsenault, 25).

Of course he wasn’t crazy. He was free.
Teaching Activities
1. Have a discussion about models for social change. Start by having students brainstorm a list of events that have brought about significant change (the Boston Tea Party, the Raid on Harper's Ferry, the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, the American Revolution, the Anthracite Coal Strike of 1902, etc.). Then have them categorize those events into those achieved by violent means and those achieved by nonviolent means. Ask students which events were more effective and justifiable and why.

2. Show students the film Freedom Riders, free online at http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders, to learn about the goals, events, and outcomes of the Freedom Rides of 1961.

3. Students then can familiarize themselves with Gandhi’s Salt March (if they have not already learned about it) by reading an excerpt from Tara Sethia’s Gandhi: Pioneer of Nonviolent Social Change (pages 110-116). When this has been accomplished, students can compare the goals, tactics, strategy, and outcomes of the Freedom Rides with the Salt March. Ask students, which is a better model for social change and why?

4. To extend the activity, teachers can have students create their own satyagraha by identifying a problem of great social concern in their time, designing an appropriate nonviolent response, and predicting obstacles and ideal outcomes.

Materials Needed:
None.