Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Title:
Wangari Maathai and the Gandhian principles of Nonviolence and Constructive Action.

Lesson By:
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Grade Level/ Subject Areas:
K-3 Environmental Science and Social Studies
(Lesson is written with K in mind but can be translated through 3rd grade).

Duration of Lesson:
45 -60 minutes, 7-8 days

Content Standards:
Kindergarten Earth Science 3C: Students know how to identify resources from Earth that are used in everyday life and understand that many resources can be conserved.

OUSD Historical Thinking Standards:
Diversity/Multiple Perspectives 2: Using visual cues, students identify differences between their own circumstances and those of people in other times and places.
Diversity/Multiple Perspectives 3: Given a situation or story today, students imaginatively place themselves in the position of others.

Lesson Abstract:
The Gandhian principles of Nonviolence and Constructive Action come to life as kindergarteners explore Wangari Maathia’s work of planting trees of peace to change the landscape of Kenya.

Guiding Questions:
What was similar about the way in which Wangari and Gandhi responded to injustice and unfair situations?
How did Wangari embody Gandhi’s concepts of nonviolence and constructive work?
What problems were the women of Kenya experiencing and what did they do about it? How did their actions change Kenya?
How can we change our schoolyard?

Content Essay/Background Knowledge:

Nonviolence
The inspiring story of Wangari Maathai and The Green Belt Movement offers an effective way to teach children about aspects of Gandhian Nonviolence and Constructive Action. Gandhi’s understanding of Ahimsa, Nonviolence, does not merely entail resistance against violence, but involves generating a positive force and collective culture that uplifts humanity on
a personal and global level. In her lecture entitled *Nonviolence: What and Why?*, Sethia points out that in comparing violence and nonviolence, “the premise, aims, modality of action, sources of power and outcomes are very different.” She further states that “nonviolence is rooted in unity rather than division, aims to transform rather than defeat, involves mindfulness as opposed to unconscious action, underscores the essential role of the individual over the system, is rooted in collaboration and cooperation rather than coercion and control, and brings about human development rather than deprivation.” (Sethia, 2013, *Ahimsa Fellowship Lecture*)

Wangari was especially committed to the unity of humans with the natural environment. She embodied compassion for the environment and the women of Kenya who identified the lack of food, firewood and clean water as their most critical problem. The women, whose poverty was also reflected in the landscape around them, were understandably focused on meeting their immediate needs for survival. Yet Wangari was able to help the women understand that depriving the environment only deepens their poverty in the long run. Over time, the planting of trees brought about a transformation of the outer and inner landscape, changing the hearts and minds of the women and many who witnessed their work, both in Kenya and the world beyond. The people of Kenya saw that as the health of the environment was improving (increased erosion control and clean water, wood, habitat), so was the quality of their lives. Through the conscious choice of planting trees, the women of Kenya seized their individual power instead of relying on the system to solve their problems. Through collaboration and cooperation, they invested in long-term human development. Eventually, Wangari realized that the mismanagement, corruption, injustice and greed of the government were a significant part of the problem. With this awareness, the women began planting trees of peace and demanding “democratic space” to create a democratic government (Maathai, 2004, Nobel lecture). Wangari and many of the nonviolent participants were beaten and imprisoned, but this only strengthened and helped the movement to succeed.

**Constructive Work**

Gandhi’s vision for *poorna swaraj*, complete freedom, was not possible through merely resisting violence and injustice. It was essential that people be continually engaged in what he called the *constructive program*, activities that addressed a variety of social justice issues within communities across India (p.68 Sethia, 2012). One such constructive project involved spinning one’s own clothes, or *khadi*.

When Gandhi sought a symbolic but also dramatically hands-on practice to signify and center the Indian independence movement, he reached for the spinning wheel. This everyday implement was charged by Gandhi with the power of resisting imperialist oppression (spinning one’s own cloth in defiance of a colonial system by which Indian raw materials were transported to English factories and then sold back at markup to the Indian market) and portending a new political and economic future (Butigan, 2011).

Wangari’s large-scale constructive work project, engaged the masses in the positive daily act of planting trees. This one act, collectively carried out, addressed a myriad of social justice issues such as poverty, need for wood, clean water, erosion control, shade, habitat, etc. The Green Belt movement not only succeeded in getting the women to plant trees, but it offered a
small amount of money for each tree that survived, motivating the women to nurture all the trees they had planted. Wangari describes in the video Wangari Maathai and the Greenbelt Movement, that the women were then encouraged to invest the money in community resources that generated more wealth, increasing economic empowerment, and consequently shifting perspectives on women’s position in the family and society. Wangari even speaks of the power of the tree itself as “having a personality”, that, once planted, can have an infectious influence on other people around it to get involved in the movement (Maathai, 2010).

Planting trees was Maathai’s spinning wheel. It directly challenged a system of desertification in Kenya and throughout the continent that had left millions of ordinary people destitute and without resources. In her Nobel Prize acceptance speech she shared how her own activism was rooted in childhood memories of rural Kenya, where she had experienced forests being cleared for commercial agriculture, destroying biodiversity and the capacity of forests to conserve water. At the same time, as the tangled threads of land use, markets, and dictatorial policies became clear, she was also committed to undoing another desert: the lack of a thriving and democratic civil society. “The tree,” Maathai said, “became a symbol for the democratic struggle in Kenya. Citizens were mobilized to challenge widespread abuses of power, corruption and environmental mismanagement.” (Butigan, 2011)

In her Nobel lecture, Wangari explains that while at first they planted trees to improve their environment and quality of life, eventually, “the tree became the symbol for democracy, and later, a symbol for conflict resolution among disputing communities” (Maathai, 2004 Nobel Lecture).

Additional Information sourced from Nobel Prize Biographical Information:

Wangari Maathai, is most well known for receiving the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize for her “contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace.” In her Nobel lecture, Wangari spoke of playing joyfully with nature as she collected clean water from the streams for her mother. In the 1960’s, Wangari traveled overseas to attend Universities in the United States, where she earned degrees in Biological Sciences. Upon returning to Kenya, she was struck by the degradation of the environment she once knew and loved. She became active in the National Council of Women of Kenya in 1976. The women at this time identified their most pressing needs as lack of access to clean water, fire wood, etc., Wangari encouraged them to plant trees. She was elected to Parliament in 2002, and appointed the Assistant Minister for the Environment. (Nobelprize.org, Wangari Maathai Biography 2004)

In 2004, she became the first environmentalist and 1st African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, educating the world about the connection between peace and environmental sustainability. “Just as Gandhi heralded the age of the decolonization, Maathai dramatically signaled the emergence of the age of global indigenous eco-justice” (Butigan, 2011).

According to BBC News reporter Richard Black, The Green Belt Movement has planted an estimated 45 million trees around Kenya…In other words, it's not just planting trees - it's the reasons why trees are planted, it's the social side of how the tree-planting works, it's the political work that goes alongside tree-planting, and it's the vision
that sees loss of forest as translating into loss of prospects for people down the track. (Black, 2011)

**Bibliography:**


**Resources for Teaching Activities:**


Teaching Activities

DAY 1: Learning about Gandhi
Part I: Read aloud and discuss children’s book: Mahatma Gandhi: India’s Great Soul by Maura Shaw (paraphrase as needed for age group/class). Discussion questions to consider: How did Gandhi respond to injustice/unfairness? What is Non-violence? What were some of the things Gandhi did, instead of using his fist, to try to make the world a better place? Do you think non-violence worked?

Part II: Show music video celebrating Gandhi’s life and work entitled, Be the change that u want to see by MC Yogi. Possible follow up questions: How was Gandhi “just like you and me?” What change would you like to see in the world? What actions can you take to help make that change happen?

DAY 2: Read and Discuss Children’s Book: Planting the Trees of Kenya: The Story of Wangari Maathai by Claire Nivola
What was Wangari’s life like as a child? How was different when she returned to her country? What problems did Wangari and the women encounter? What did they do about it? Did it work?

DAY 3: Tree of Gratitude: Thanking Trees for all they provide us: Medicine, food, wood, paper, shade, beauty, habitat, clean air, clean water, etc.

1) In a large group, students generate a long list of all that a tree can provide (10 min)
2) Outside tree ritual: (15 min.)
   -Gather in a circle around a large tree.
   -Moment of Silence
   -Give students an opportunity to thank the tree out loud for what they give us.
   -Touch or hug the tree and return to the classroom.

3) Making a classroom Tree of Gratitude (25 minutes)
   -Each student is given 2 large blank leaves.
   -Students can draw or paste from a magazine, a picture that represents something valuable that a tree offers.
   -Each student can share with the class and add their leaves to the classroom tree of thanks.

DAY 4: Discussion and Drawing a Problem/Action/Change story:
1) Discussion: How did Wangari and the women go about solving their problem? Did it work? Imagine how it would have turned out if…… the women used violence? …If they just waited for the leaders to solve their problem? …if only a few planted trees? Or if they planted the trees but did not take care of them everyday?
2) Students draw cause and effect pictures on paper folded into 3 parts: Illustrating the Problem/Action/Change in Wangari’s story.

DAY 5: Inspired by Nature 60 -75 min.
1.) Discussion: What caused Wangari to work so hard to solve the problem? *She loved the Earth. As a child she played in the streams, etc.* (5-10 minutes)

2.) Rd. Children’s Book: **The Earth and I are Friends** by Frank Asch (15 min)  
- Discuss the many ways you can be friends with the Earth.

3.) Extra Recess! Children go outside to play with the Earth (15 min.).  
- Give boundaries and guidelines for the activity.  
- Each child finds a place in the garden or schoolyard where they visit or play with the Earth.

4.) After gathering up students, **Teacher presents a problem** (a neglected area of the schoolyard) and **engages children to help solve it** (turning it into a growing space/garden). (20 minutes)

   The teacher engages in a dialogue with students, which draws out these 5 elements of  
1) Choosing to be a change agent 2) Choosing the most positive, nonviolent way of going about solving a problem. 3) Making a plan 4) Working together to make it happen 5) Nurturing the plants until they are fully-grown.

DAY 6: Students are agents of change: Planting a garden

   **Suggestions:**
   1.) Teacher works in small groups as students plant seeds  
   2) Each student is called individually by name. The teacher looks over each child’s hands and says, “These are strong hands. You must plant a seed.” The teacher puts seeds into the child’s hand, and they plant the seeds in the garden.  
   3) Upon returning to the classroom, students draw their own 3 part Problem/Action/Change story, envisioning how the garden might turn out.  
   4) Discussion and planning: What will we need to do to make this garden grow? *(it needs protection, water, air, sunlight, etc.)*  
       - Set up a regular schedule for garden maintenance.

DAY 7: Celebration of a Peace Garden (60 min)

   1) Show Video: **I am a Hummingbird – Wangari Maathai**  
      Discuss the story. How was Wangari like the Hummingbird? What challenges did she face? Did she give up? How are we like the Hummingbird?
2) Out in the garden, reflect on and celebrate the story of how the garden came into being, what challenges the students met along the way and how they responded to them. How were they like Wangari and the people of Kenya? Like Gandhi?

3) Return to the Classroom: Paint The Earth and I are Friends pictures.
   - Using a black crayon, draw a picture of how you are friends with the Earth.
   - Paint over the picture with water colors (in a similar style as the illustrations in the book). Describe the painting in words through speaking or writing.

**Possible extension activity:** Paint boards that can be installed in the peace garden that commemorate inspiring Peace Makers (Wangari Maathai, Gandhi, Cesar Chavez, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., etc.)

**Materials Needed:**

**DAY 1:** Children’s book: *Mahatma Gandhi: India’s Great Soul* by Maura Shaw
Music Video: MC Yogi - Be the change that u want to see. [http://youtu.be/efRIdr19YNA](http://youtu.be/efRIdr19YNA)

**DAY 2:** Children’s Book: *Planting the Trees of Kenya: The Story of Wangari Maathai* by Claire Nivola

**DAY 3:** Classroom tree bulletin board and 2 large paper leaves for each child
   Paper, magazines, scissors, glue, crayons and markers

**DAY 4:** Paper folded into 3: Problem/Action/Change for each student.

**DAY 5:** Children’s Book: *The Earth and I* by Frank Asch
   Locate boundaries for playing in nature and future planting area.
   Establish guidelines for playing in nature.

**DAY 6:** Garden equipment: Trowels, watering can, water source, seeds, compost if necessary.
   Problem/Action /Change story paper (fold into 3 parts)

**DAY 7:** Celebrate the Garden when it is full-grown
   Painting project: white paper, black crayon, watercolor set and water for each child