Title of Lesson: Beauty and Modern Civilization Through the Eyes of Gandhi

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Guiding Questions:

- How does modern civilization shape our culture?
- How does modern civilization shape ideas of beauty?
- What is Gandhi's view on women’s role in modern civilization?
- How does it shape what is important in life in order to reach our full potential as human beings?

Lesson Abstract:

Civilization enables its citizens to live together under a collective set of rules and customs that can be both explicit and implicit. The concept of beauty in our modern day civilization can be constraining and oppressive to individuals within the society. In the United States of America, children at a very tender age, are bombarded by the importance of beauty and what lengths one may go to attain it. Newspaper articles, advertisements, magazines, and television help to indoctrinate young kids with concepts of beauty which may in fact be more detrimental to health and self-identity. Gandhi believed that modern civilization should concentrate less on material matters, and more towards self growth. Throughout history, women have been viewed as a commodity that presently in our western culture has enabled a growing market for various beauty regimes, exercise programs, cosmetic surgeries, etc. The Gandhian vision of modern civilization sees other important qualities, away from physical appearance, that both men and women can contribute.

Lesson Content:

According to Dr. Anthony Parel, editor of Gandhi’s Hind Swaraj, a “civilization helps followers to understand the ‘objects of life’ (Parel, Lecture, 7/15/09). These “objects of life,” explain why we live and what are objectives in life are. Dr. Parel, further explains that these objects of life, derived from Indian philosophy are: Wealth, pleasure, ethics, and spiritual transcendence. Modern Civilization in its current state places great emphasis on wealth, power, and pleasure. Within the American society today, the greatest aspirations one can hope to attain is a job rewarded with an abundance of money and prestige. Many avenues of life open up once an individual is wealthy. Happiness seems to go hand in hand with the amount one earns.

One other value of modern society is the idea that the more beauty an individual possesses, the more fulfilled he/she may be. In fact, many a times, beauty is linked to wealth, luxury, and happiness. In particular, children are socialized at a very young age of what the road to happiness is. Girls and boys are conditioned on what it means to be beautiful and how it can
lead to material success. This often translates into happiness and fulfillment. Very early on, Gandhi stated that, “Wives should not be dolls and objects of indulgence…” (Gandhi, p. 176). Women are particularly objectified within our society to fit a particular concept of beauty. For example, the classic example of beauty for women in the American culture is to have long blond hair, to be tall and slender, big busted, and complimented with a small waist. Children and adults alike see images such as these repeatedly on television, magazines, etc. These frequent exposures of what it looks like to be beautiful can be damaging to an individual’s perspective of what is important (love, empathy, kindness, etc). In Gandhi terms, this is a violence committed upon women and society.

Within our modern civilization, those of us who differ from the iconic images of beauty, choose a terrible cycle of upgrading ourselves with the belief that we can achieve eventual satisfaction. Within our current culture, satisfying our needs is something that is expected to be immediate. For people who are dissatisfied with their physical appearance, quick remedies could range from large and extensive lines of beauty products to non-invasive procedures that are currently in high demand. Most recently, an article in the Los Angeles Times Newspaper, ran a section on cosmetic procedures being done despite the problems with our economy in the image column. It was called, “Nip, Tuck, and Pony Up,” and was featured alongside advertisements with young women dressing in the latest fashions. In fact, a 64 year old teacher decided to get a non-invasive face-lift to bring back a youthful energy to her face. The procedure costed $6,000. A doctor commented that despite the economic woes, “baby boomers are aging and getting ugly.” Thus, the demand for cosmetic surgery will still remain high (Los Angeles Times, P1,P4). Unfortunately, our perceptions of beauty is based solely on physical appearance, and negates all of the other important qualities that one should possess. For example, kindness and compassion while appreciated, is not something one may consciously sought after within the realms of media and culture.

Throughout his life, Gandhi spoke out for women’s rights, and the importance of her role within society (Lal, Vanay).

Woman is the incarnation of *ahimsa*. *Ahimsa* means infinite love, which again means infinite capacity for suffering. And who but woman, the mother of man, shows this capacity in the largest measure?... Let her translate that love to the whole of humanity... And she will occupy her proud position by the side of man... She can become the leader in *satyagraha*...(Kapadia, 1995).

Gandhi thought highly of women. Although he felt that women should tend to the home and family, he had a deep sense of respect and appreciation for it. In fact, Gandhi felt that matters such as hygiene and sanitation were even more important than the job of a scientist and other professionals. Furthermore, Gandhi envisioned that modern civilization would include the importance of both men and women (Lal Vinay).

Gandhi thought of women, upon whom fell the role of nurturing the human race, as naturally prone to non-violence in conduct and thought, and more adept at the art of persuasion. Far from being the weapon of the weak, non-violence was the weapon of the strong, and Gandhi held firm to the view that women had
greater powers of resilience and resistance than men. The rules of politics were the rules laid down by men, and only women were capable of humanizing this public sphere and rendering it more accountable to the conscience of men and women (Lal, Vinay).

Gandhi believes that there is a path of duty that civilization provides that encompasses “a morality…that attains mastery over our mind and our passions” (Gandhi, 67). This in essence is the swaraj or self rule that he felt was needed in order to truly live a life which can allow for satisfying growth. “Swaraj as self rule is the rule of the self by the self. More precisely, it is the rule of the mind over itself and the passions…” (Parel, p. lii). Gandhi believed that happiness comprised much more than beauty and wealth. How one lived his/her life was far more important. Our children should begin to understand that kindness, love, and honesty are qualities that are not only beautiful, but enduring as well.

**California State Content Standards:**

Health:

Standard 2.1: Explain how culture, media, and other factors influence perceptions about body image, gender roles, and attractiveness.

Language Arts:

Standard 2.4: Draw inferences, conclusions about text.
Standard 2.5: Distinguish facts, supported inferences, and opinions in texts.

**Materials Needed:**

- Health Videos provided by school/district
- Dove Campaign for Real Beauty Workshop for Girls
- Newspapers/Magazines

**Suggested Teaching Activities:**

1. Using Thinking Maps such as a circle map to define beauty. Discuss the definitions, as well as the point of reference (where do these definitions come from).
2. Dove Campaign for Beauty website:
3. Discuss how media portrays beauty, and why so much money goes into advertising?
4. Provide graphic aids of what constitutes beauty in various cultures.
5. Bring in newspaper clippings and articles pertaining to beauty.
6. Create individual/class collages of what beauty can be before and after lessons.
7. Analyze the amount of advertisements that are placed in magazines/newspapers that sell beauty products and/or essentials.

**Bibliography:**


