CHAPTER 10

Being the Change: A Hero’s Journey and Legacy

“My life is my message.” —GANDHI

INTRODUCTION

What are the distinguishing marks separating holistic leaders from ordinary ones? How are great leaders fashioned at the hands of destiny? Are there any visible outer signs? Or is it an intangible presence that defines their abiding influence? How do they carry out the fourfold process of learning, living, loving and leaving a legacy? What milestones and crucibles do they encounter on their journey from self-mastery to self-fulfillment? How do they forge their authentic self in the “crucibles” they face? And finally, how do they consciously “triumph” various human frailties and “transmute” them through self-discipline into strengths? In short, what are the defining moments on a hero’s journey towards self-leadership? These are some of the questions that we will explore in this chapter with reference to Gandhi’s development as a leader.*

We all need heroes who can awaken us to the best in people and who can inspire us to be what we know we can be. Given the current leadership crisis, there is a greater need for the role models that embody and illustrate value-based, holistic leadership. In this chapter, we explore the leadership journey of Mahatma Gandhi, the quintessential holistic leader.

From the pages of recent history, Gandhi emerges as a grand strategist and exemplary leader with a keen understanding of human nature. His life and leadership embody the synergistic energy fashioned by the coming together of the self, spirit and service—the three foundational dimensions of holistic leadership.

This chapter traces the alchemy of Gandhi’s greatness and highlights the important crucibles in Gandhi’s development as a leader. Applying a values-based holistic approach, it explores and unravels the leadership secrets of Gandhi based on the tenets of truth, nonviolence, humility, self-discipline and selfless service. Effectively weaving together biography, history and anecdotes, it offers practical steps and advice for applying the spiritual and moral principles that brilliantly defined Gandhi’s leadership. His leadership style was “follower-centric” and “contextual”. The chapter explores the moral and spiritual-philosophical mainstay and context of Gandhi’s approach to leadership and reveals how Gandhi, beginning as a “one-man boundary force,” became “a century’s conscience.”

Alchemy of Exemplary Leadership

What are the hallmarks by which exemplary leaders should be identified and judged? John Quincy Adams, the nineteenth-century American President, provides a succinct touchstone of judging a leader: “If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.” Judged against these criteria and in terms of his abiding influence, Gandhi emerges as one of the most remarkable leaders of all time. He led the greatest anti-colonial movement in history peacefully, showed how to lead successful political life without compromising integrity, revealed a rare model of morally sensitive political leadership and provided politics a much-needed spiritual basis.

Nature gives very few the great honor of becoming legends in their own lifetime. In 1930, Gandhi was named Time magazine’s Man of the Year. Seven decades later, he was second only to Albert Einstein as a favorite for Person of the Century. On the occasion of Gandhi’s 75th birthday, Einstein paid tribute to Gandhi by noting, “Generations to come will


2 Cited in Rajmohan Gandhi, Gandhi: The Man, His People, and Empire (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), xii.
scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth.”

Originally a timid and taciturn soul, he grew into a paragon of visionary leadership, helping to secure the liberation of a fifth of the world’s population from the rule of the largest empire on earth. As Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote in 1958, “Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale.”

Simply put, Gandhi’s legacy became the harbinger of freedom to many countries in Southeast Asia and the rest of the world. In addition to Dr. King, he inspired exemplary leadership in other historic figures, ranging from Nelson Mandela and Aung San Suu Kyi to US President Barack Obama. While receiving the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1989, the Dalai Lama accepted it as a tribute to “the man who founded the modern tradition of non-violent action for change, Mahatma Gandhi, whose life taught and inspired me.”

The measure of Gandhi’s gentle influence transcends all logical explanations. He lived, suffered and gave his life to the noble cause of peace—perhaps the most important source of his greatness.

DEFINING MOMENTS OF GANDHI’S LIFE AND LEADERSHIP

How are great leaders fashioned at the hands of destiny? What milestones and crucibles do they encounter on their path to holistic leadership? This section will chronicle some of the defining moments of Gandhi’s life and leadership. Since Gandhi’s development as a leader is inexplicably linked to his unique set of life events, this chapter will carefully trace the key guideposts in Gandhi’s life and make explicit their leadership relevance. It draws largely upon Gandhi’s autobiography which contains a detailed and honest “self-portrait of his mind, heart, and soul.” Gandhi aptly subtitled his autobiography as The Story of My Experiments with Truth. Gandhi clarified that the nature of these experiments was essentially moral since he considered morality to be the very basis of spirituality: “The experiments I am about to relate”, Gandhi wrote, “are spiritual, or rather moral, for

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essence of religion is morality.”7 This seminal quote represents the defining paradigm of Gandhian ethics and spirituality. Gandhi used these two frames as lenses to examine the existential realities of life and leadership. In the following sections, we recount the milestones on Gandhi’s journey to leadership.

**Early Formative Years (1869–1888)**

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born on October 2, 1869, at Porbandar, a coastal town in western India. Gandhi was the fourth and the last child of his father’s fourth and last marriage.8 His saintly, austere and religiously devout mother, Putlibai, and his equally devout nurse, Rambha, were major spiritual influences on him. Gandhi inherited his profoundly religious nature, devotion and asceticism from her. His father, Karamchand, was honest, generous and fair but short-tempered. He had little formal education, but had “rich experience of practical affairs.”9 He served as prime minister of the small princely state of Porbandar.

Gandhi grew up in a household of austere discipline and religious tolerance. In his autobiography, Gandhi wrote that at school, from the age of six or seven through sixteen, he was taught “all sort of things except religion.”10 The religious tenor of his home, however, made up for the lack of such instruction at school. In school, Gandhi was a “mediocre student” and earned average grades. He did not enjoy the usual sports such as cricket or football. For exercise, he liked to take long walks—a habit he kept throughout his life, which contributed to his sturdy frame. He would walk straight home from school to be with his ailing father. He was a shy, diffident lad, as he himself reported in his autobiography:

>I used to be very shy and avoided all company. My books and my lessons were my sole companions. To be at school at that stroke of the hour and to run back home as soon as school closed—that was my daily habit. I literally ran back, because I could not bear to talk to anybody. I was even afraid lest anyone should poke fun at me.11

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9 Ibid., 2.
10 Ibid., 28.
11 Ibid., 4.
During an annual inspection of the school, twelve-year-old Gandhi refused to copy the correct spelling of the word “kettle” from his neighbor’s slate even though his teacher tried to prompt him with the point of his boot. As a result, everyone else in the class, except for Gandhi, spelled every word correctly. Later on, the teacher tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to bring home the point of expediency to Gandhi. “I could never”, Gandhi said, “learn the art of ‘copying.’” This “moral rectitude”—of placing means above desired ends—would become a cornerstone of Gandhi’s character and defined his approach to every action that he undertook in his personal and professional lives.

During this time, Gandhi also learned about the *Rāmāyana*, one of the two major Hindu epics centering on the life of Rama, the quintessential embodiment of *dharma* (duty) in the Hindu theistic pantheon. Gandhi later described the *Rāmāyana* of Tulṣīdās to be “the greatest book in all devotional literature.” The poet par excellence, Tulṣīdāsa, presented the ideal of a saint as a person who does good to those who do harm to him:

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\begin{align*}
\textit{Uma sant kai ibai badaai} & \\
\textit{Mand karat jo karai bhalai} & \textit{||} \\
\text{—Sundarkand, Doha 40.8}
\end{align*}
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This verily is the majesty of a saint—
That he returns good for the evil.\(^{14}\)

This principle of returning good for evil would become a core value for Gandhi in the form of nonviolence—one of the two most important tenets of his life and thought.

### Playing the Tough Husband

Gandhi was married to Kasturba when they were both 13 years of age, an experience which later made Gandhi a bitter critic of child marriage. Initially, Gandhi was a passionate and possessive husband. In his own way, he wanted to make Kasturba an ideal wife. This was normal and no different from other Indian couples of the same age. What was unusual was that

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 4.  
\(^{13}\) Ibid., 29.  
\(^{14}\) *Śrīrāmacaritamānasa*, Sundarkānd, doha 40.8, author’s translation. Literally, *Rāmacaritamānasa* means “the lake of life and deeds of Lord Rama”.

Kasturba was illiterate and Gandhi would soon become a British-trained barrister. In order to make good his authority as a husband, Gandhi felt that it was his duty to teach her. Despite his persistent efforts throughout their long marriage of 66 years, Kasturba never learned to read or write anything but elementary Gujarati, her native language. This created constant tension in their relationship. Later on, Gandhi realized and acknowledged his own “folly” and confessed that it was actually Kasturba who had been his teacher by example through service, humility, simplicity and patience.

**Father’s Death: The Beginnings of Transformation**

Gandhi was also a devoted son. Throughout his father’s illness in 1885, Gandhi would rush home to spend time with him. At night, he would massage his father’s legs. One night as he was taking care of his father, his uncle who was visiting, sent Gandhi to bed. Gandhi left his dying father under his uncle’s care to go to bed with his wife. His father’s death during that brief absence hurt him profoundly. As he poignantly wrote in his autobiography: “I felt deeply ashamed and miserable. I ran to my father’s room. I saw that, if animal passion had not blinded me, I should have been spared the torture of separation from my father during his last moments.”

Gandhi felt a deep sense of remorse over this incident. He thought that he had failed in discharging his allotted duty to his father. Gandhi never forgave himself for this mistake. As he regretfully noted, “It was a blot I have never been able to efface or forget, and I have always thought that, although my devotion to my parents knew no bounds and I would have given up anything for it, yet it was weighed and found unparдонably wanting because my mind was at the same moment in the grip of lust.”

To make matters worse, his wife was pregnant at the time of his father’s death and the child did not survive. This sense of shame and guilt would not leave Gandhi until he was 36 and took a Hindu vow of celibacy in 1906 for reasons of spirituality, self-discipline and commitment to public

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17 Fischer, *The Essential Gandhi*, 16.
service. However, to “get free from the shackles of lust”, Gandhi “[would] have to pass through many ordeals.”

If exemplary leadership is forged in a “crucible”, then his father’s death and the existential angst he experienced over it represented the first major “crucible” in Gandhi’s life that affected him to the very core of his being. Gandhi resolved that since he had not been a good son to his father, he could at least try to be a good son to all of humanity. This habit of consciously “internalizing” the human frailties and “transmuting” them through self-discipline into strengths formed a cornerstone of Gandhian life and leadership.

London Years (1888–1891)

After giving a pledge to his mother that he would stay away from wine, women and meat, Gandhi left India for London to study law in 1888. The practice of taking a vow to sustain one’s determination and keep one steadfast in discipline was a serious commitment, something which would define Gandhi’s difficult undertakings in later life. In England, among other things, he tried to live the life of an English gentleman and took lessons in dancing, elocution and violin. His friends tried to compel him to eat meat, but he abstained, adhering very rigidly to a vegetarian diet and upholding his pledge not to eat meat. He joined vegetarian clubs and very soon became an advocate of vegetarianism. He was also elected to the Executive Committee of the Vegetarian Society, but he always felt tongue-tied at its meetings. But this brief and modest experience did provide Gandhi some training in organizing and leadership.

Here we get yet another important clue to the Gandhian modus operandi: he was not content just to abstain from meat himself; he wanted to champion the cause of vegetarianism. This habit of universalizing a personal virtue or hurt would remain at the core of Gandhi’s leadership and served him well throughout his life. It was in England that two Theosophists first introduced Gandhi to Edwin Arnold’s English rendering of the Bhagavad Gītā, a text that became his “spiritual dictionary” and provided the basis for his moral and social actions.

Gandhi joined the bar in 1891 and returned to India immediately to practice law. Although Gandhi tried to establish his own practice, his legal career in India was unsuccessful. He was too shy to speak in court, and his

19 Ibid.
first case was a complete disaster. As Gandhi was struggling to establish his career, help came from a totally unexpected quarter that led him to take up a case in Durban. He sailed for South Africa in 1893 with a plan to live there for one year, but he eventually remained for 21 years. Gandhi could have never guessed what the future held for him in South Africa.

**South Africa Years (1893–1914)**

In 1893, a 23-year-old, British-trained Indian lawyer arrived on the shores of South Africa. He did not know then that he would stay for 21 years, during which he would encounter humiliation and injustice on a scale that would force him to challenge not only the oppressive power and authority of the South African government but also himself. Nor did he know that this would serve as a testing ground, a laboratory, for his struggle for independence later on in his home country. Throughout his life, Gandhi would look back on South Africa as the “God-forsaken continent where I found my God.”

This period of Gandhi’s life (1893–1914) set the stage for what he would accomplish in the remaining years of his life. It was in South Africa that he discovered his most powerful weapon of nonviolent resistance—*satyagraha*—and put it to several rigorous tests; it is also here that he experimented with his idea of community living (*śāram*), discovered the power of journalism as a powerful ally, and fashioned himself into a future leader of India’s independence movement.

Within a week of his arrival, he had an experience that changed the course of his life. The lawsuit required Gandhi’s presence in Pretoria, the capital city of Transvaal. A first-class ticket was purchased for him at Durban, where he boarded the train for the overnight journey. According to Gandhi, this trip led to a “conversion experience,” which he later dubbed as “the most creative experience of my life.”

The train reached Maritzburg, the capital of Natal, at about 9 p.m. … [an] official came to me and said, “Come along, you must go to the van…

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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.”

Gandhi’s refusal to leave the first-class compartment of the train revealed two important things about his nature. First, as a trained barrister, he knew his legal rights. Second, and even more important, his spirit revolted against anything unfair and unjust. Eventually the constable was called, and Gandhi was removed from the train. Gandhi spent the extremely cold winter night in the train station’s waiting room. His luggage was outside, but he did not dare ask for it for fear of being insulted again.

Without a blanket, and shivering, Gandhi thought about his duty and contemplated his options. To quit and go back to India would be an act of cowardice. On a superficial level, it was merely a personal hurt, but Gandhi felt that it was also symptomatic of a deeper racial prejudice. As a result, Gandhi formulated a game plan: “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 color prejudice.”

What is significant about Gandhi’s take on this defining experience of his life is that he did not view it just in terms of a personal insult. Instead, he was able to perceive the problem’s universal dimension, which is normally hidden to ordinary people. Above all, he did not want to press his point further than what was necessary.

THE CHRYSALIS OF GANDHI’S TRANSFORMATION AS A LEADER

The cold night that Gandhi spent at the railway station became the most significant experience of his life. Gandhi became a different man after this transformative incident at the Pietermaritzburg railway station. He resolved to stay and fight against racial prejudice, not for personal reasons but on behalf of all and only to the extent that would be necessary. He wrote in his autobiography that he had made it a rule not to go to court

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25 Ibid., 96–97.
in respect of any personal grievance. According to Eknath Easwaran, it would take years for Gandhi to forge this “matchless weapon” of nonviolence, based on his dogged determination “never to retaliate but never to yield”. Gandhi discovered first-hand that strength does not come from brute force but from an indomitable will. On that night in Maritzburg, “faith entered his heart.” This is the chrysalis of Gandhi’s transformation.

Gandhi took the next available train to Pretoria in the morning. On the way to Pretoria, he experienced further insult and humiliation—the driver of the stagecoach that carried him to Johannesburg humiliated Gandhi and even beat him. Some months later, he was kicked into a gutter by a sentry for daring to walk past President Kruger’s house in Pretoria. Gandhi was always intrigued by the vicarious enjoyment that humans derived from the abject humiliation of their fellow beings. His tender spirit could not understand this sadistic tendency. “It has always been a mystery to me”, wrote Gandhi in his autobiography, “how men can feel themselves honored by the humiliation of their fellow beings.”

In April 1894, after almost twelve months in South Africa, Gandhi was about to return to India for good. At his farewell party, however, his friends urged him to stay and to lead the fight against the Natal government’s proposed bill that would have taken away Indians’ right to vote. Gandhi consented to stay for a month and remained 20 years fighting the battle for Indian rights. Although he eventually won, triumph was slow in coming. His mostly successful campaigns in South Africa taught Gandhi how to motivate the masses, and, as noted before, it was in South Africa, that he found his “vocation in life.” Although such triumphs were slow in coming, these hard-won victories provide ample evidence of Gandhi’s effective leadership and organizational abilities.

It was in South Africa that Gandhi honed his strategy of peaceful resistance in the form of satyagraha. When Gandhi left South Africa for good in 1914, he wrote nostalgically: “it was a great wrench for me to leave South Africa, where I had passed twenty-one years of my life sharing to the

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26 Ibid., 113.
27 Cited in Fischer, The Essential Gandhi, xx.
28 Gandhi, Autobiography, 100.
29 Ibid., 100.
30 Ibid., 135.
31 Fischer, The Essential Gandhi, 38.
full in the sweets and bitters of human experience, and where I had realized my vocation in life.” Gandhi believed that the method of satyāgraha that he had developed in South Africa was India’s best chance at independence from Great Britain.

Inspired by a broad range of readings—including the Bhagavad Gītā, the New Testament, Tolstoy’s The Kingdom of God is Within You, and Thoreau’s Civil Disobedience—Gandhi launched a movement of nonviolent resistance against the oppressive government of South Africa and the society’s widespread bigotry and racial injustice against darker-skinned people.

Back in his homeland, he came to the attention of the country’s politicians and multitudes of pious souls who had begun to regard him as the political and moral leader of India in its long road to Independence. The hero had won a decisive victory and was ready to come back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons (gifts) on his fellow beings!

**Gandhi’s Momentous Years in India (1915–1948)**

Gandhi’s work in South Africa had made him famous back in India, and he was warmly welcomed by old friends at home. The Bengali poet, Sir Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian to win a Nobel Prize, bestowed on him the title of “Mahatma” (meaning “Great Soul”) and “the crown sat forever on the politician-saint’s head.” Gandhi’s “political guru”, G. K. Gokhale, greeted him warmly and “commanded” him to spend a year travelling throughout India with “his ears open but his mouth shut” and “to feel the pulse” of the country he had been away from for 21 years. Gandhi heeded the advice to travel but did so with both ears and mouth open.

As a result of Britain’s response to the atrocities in Punjab, Gandhi became increasingly convinced that the colonial government system that

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36 Ibid., 53.
he had been trying to improve needed to end. He was now ready to move to the next level of his strategy: seeking complete independence for India through a nonviolent, noncooperation movement.

The Power of Salt: The Famous 1930 Dandi March

The British had placed a high tax on salt, and it was illegal to use salt not sold directly by the British government. All Indians were adversely affected by this tax since salt was frequently used due to India’s tropical heat. Gandhi, who had not used the spice in six years, called it a “nefarious monopoly” of the colonial government. Gandhi chose salt for other strategic reasons as well. It affected all Indians—Hindu and Muslims—equally, burdened the poor most heavily, and highlighted the inhumanity of the colonial government in the cruelest way. This shows the genius of Gandhi in choosing his battles, a trait that helped Gandhi to gain leverage against his opponent.

On the eve of launching the salt march, Gandhi made a strong appeal for a truly nonviolent struggle to an assembly of more than ten thousand people during his evening prayer meeting at the Sābarmati Āshram. The next morning, on March 12, Gandhi, then 61 years of age and oldest among the group, along with 78 followers, started his 24-day march on foot to the sea coast of Dandi, a total distance of 241 miles. Everyday Gandhi walked between 10 and 15 miles while keeping his daily routine of waking up at 4 a.m., conducting prayer meetings, spinning for an hour, writing for weekly magazines, and keeping his daily diary—and requiring each āshramite to do the same. Walking on the winding dirt roads from village to village, Gandhi kept reminding the protesters, “We are marching in the name of God.”

As the marchers approached the seashore on April 5, people from all over India joined the march, and by the time Gandhi arrived in Dandi, the Salt March procession numbered several thousand. In the early morning of April 6, Gandhi picked up a handful of salt in a symbolic gesture of defiance of the mighty empire. The entire nation was galvanized by Gandhi’s dramatic act and followed his exhortation to break the salt law. Men and women, young and old, marched in thousands in an attempt to get arrested. Gandhi, too, was arrested on May 4, shortly after midnight.

38 Fischer, The Essential Gandhi, 227.
39 Ibid.
in violation of the salt tax laws—for touching salt he had not purchased and on which he had not paid a tax. Within a few weeks, as many as 60,000 men and women were in jail, and the people had initiated a mass boycott of British goods. Gandhi continued to exert influence even while he was in prison, and the campaign remained nonviolent. With his consummate political skills, the Mahatma had peacefully elevated his campaign to the international level and sparked global sympathy for his cause. His move was simple, dramatic, and symbolic, and ultimately, it sounded the death knell of British rule in India.

Gandhi learned that properly executed civil disobedience could be a formidable force, and the colonial government realized that India’s independence was inevitable. Gandhi was featured on the cover of Time magazine for two years in a row, 1930 and 1931. The magazine also named him as its 1930 “Man of the Year.” A success 35 years in the making, Gandhi had emerged as a powerful moral force both within India and around the world. Eventually, the colonial government could not cope with the mass protests and its declining revenues.

The British realized that they were once again facing mass protests in India and began deliberating possible ways to create an independent India. Although Winston Churchill vehemently opposed the idea of losing India as a British colony, the British announced in March 1941 that it would free India at the end of World War II. This was not acceptable to Gandhi, and he organized a “Quit India” campaign in 1942. In response, the British once again imprisoned him. When Gandhi was released from prison in 1944, Indian independence seemed well in sight.

**DISAGREEMENTS, DIVISION AND THE TRAGEDY**

Unfortunately, as before, there were fierce disagreements between Hindus and Muslims. Since the majority of Indians were Hindus, the Muslims feared not having enough political power if there were an independent India. Therefore, the Muslims proposed that the six provinces in northwest India with a majority population of Muslims should become an independent country. Gandhi greatly opposed the idea of partition and tried his best to bring both sides together. In the end, however, the decision was beyond his control.

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On August 15, 1947, India’s first day of freedom, Gandhi was conspicuously absent from the public ceremonies. He was deeply troubled, for independence had brought in its wake the partition of India and terrible Hindu-Muslim riots. Much of his life’s work appeared to be in vain. “Yet”, as Whitman rightly states, “ahead of these days of tragedy lay his pilgrimage of reconciliation to the blood-soaked riot areas and his fasting for communal harmony.” This is the beginning of a very sad period of Gandhi’s life as his worst fears about Hindu-Muslim hostilities were soon to be realized.

Gandhi saw most of this coming and greatly despaired. It pained him deeply to see 32 years of his selfless work come to “an inglorious end” and “to watch India being torn apart into two bleeding fragments.” He could not prevent the partition of India because religious divisions were stronger than nationalistic cohesion. Massive violence ensued, including widespread slaughter, rape and the burning of entire towns. Gandhi toured India, hoping his mere presence could check the violence.

Although violence did stop where Gandhi visited, he could not be everywhere at once. “Yet without Gandhi”, writes Rajmohan Gandhi, “the violence would have been even greater, the parts more than two, and the future unity, pluralism and democracy of the Indian part far more vulnerable.” This is not a small achievement by any standard. Even when Gandhi did not succeed in preventing the partition, he was certainly able to contain its destructive power. The British, apprehensive of what seemed sure to become a violent civil war, decided to leave India in August 1947. Before leaving, the British were able to get the Indian National Congress, against Gandhi’s wishes, to agree to a partition plan. On August 15, 1947, Great Britain granted independence to India and to the newly-formed Muslim country of Pakistan.

As 15 million Indians became uprooted from their homes, Hindus and Muslims attacked each other with a vengeance. At no other time in history have so many people become refugees in so short a period.

The lines of refugees stretched for miles and miles, and countless people died along the way from illness, hunger and dehydration. To stop this

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43 Fischer, Gandhi: His Life and Message for the World, 176.
widespread violence, Gandhi once again went on a fast. He would only eat again, he stated, once he saw clear plans to stop the violence.

The fast began on January 13, 1948. Realizing that the frail and aged Gandhi could not survive a long fast, both sides worked together to create a peace plan. On January 18, a group of more than a hundred representatives approached Gandhi with a promise for peace and ended Gandhi’s last and perhaps “greatest fast.”

Unfortunately, this final fast also alienated many among his own community of Hindus who resented what seemed to them as Gandhi’s unjust treatment of Hindus and his unfair concessions to Muslim interests. There were even a few radical Hindu groups who believed that India should never have been partitioned and partially blamed Gandhi for the Indo-Pak separation. “How is one to explain the fact”, asks Krishna Kripalani, “that the Mahatma’s many fasts, sublime penances, to use Tagore’s words, not unoften embarrassed and irritated those for whose moral benefit they were undertaken?”

Gandhi’s Assassination

Gandhi spent his last day discussing issues with various parties and individuals as usual. At a few minutes past 5 p.m., when it was time for the prayer meeting, Gandhi began his last walk to the Birla House in Delhi, where he had spent the last 144 days of his life. A crowd had surrounded him as he walked, supported by two of his grandnieces. In front of him, a young Hindu named Nathuram Godse stopped and bowed. Gandhi bowed back. Then Godse rushed forward and fired three shots point-blank at Gandhi’s chest. Two bullets passed right through and the third was found lodged in his right lung. Gandhi sank to the ground. The only sound that escaped his lips was the word, “Rama”, his favorite name for God. Before the crowd realized what had happened, he was dead.

On hearing the news of Gandhi’s assassination, E. Stanley Jones, the well-known missionary evangelist to India who had worked with Gandhi for over 40 years, said that it was “the greatest tragedy since the Son of God


47 Kripalani, Gandhi: A Life, 196.
died on a cross.”

Even Gandhi’s assassin, Nathuram Godse, stated at his trial at which he was sentenced to be hanged: “Before I fired the shots I actually wished him well and bowed to him in reverence.” Thus ended the life of perhaps the greatest champion of peace that the world has ever seen.

The real tragedy of Gandhi’s life, as Lelyveld, one of his recent biographers, maintains, was “not because he was assassinated, nor because his noblest qualities inflamed the hatred in his killer’s heart. The tragic element is that he was ultimately forced, like Lear, to see the limits of his ambition to remake his world.”

Perhaps as humans we can never truly succeed in fashioning the world to fit our personal designs and desires. Lao Tzu was right:

As for those who would take the whole world
To tinker as they see fit,
I observe that they never succeed:
For the world is a sacred vessel
Not to be altered by man.

Lao Tzu’s words emphasize the poignancy of human life and the vainness of human effort to mold the world. Perhaps, the glory of the human is not in the conquest of the universe but in being an integral part of it.

Gandhi’s life shows that by the force of divinity inherent within all of us, it is possible to live a life of total selflessness and harmlessness, a life completely dedicated to the service of the divine through the service of humanity. Selflessness, obviously, comes at a price—an ultimate price at that—of the giving up of the self. Perhaps Gandhi’s greatest legacy is that he became the voice of social conscience for the world through his singular selflessness and steadfastness to truth and nonviolence. The strength of Gandhi’s moral conviction lay in his understanding that “morality is the basis of all things and truth is the substance of all morality.”

Gandhi lived and died as he had always wished to—without a groan and with God’s name on his lips. Less than 20 hours before he was shot on January 30, 1948, Gandhi had said:

Note down this also that if someone were to end my life by putting a bullet through me—as someone tried to do with a bomb the other day—and I met

49 Fischer, Gandhi: His Life and Message for the World, 189.
50 Lelyveld, Great Soul, 27.
his bullet without a groan, and breathed my last taking God’s name, then alone would I have made good my claim.53

God heard his prayer and honored his wish, and Gandhi now belongs to all humanity. “His legacy is courage, his lesson truth, his weapon love.”54 “Gandhi was prepared to die: this was his most powerful weapon.”55 The assassin’s bullets did not and could not kill the Gandhi who had the name of God on his lips at the time of death—“Ram, Ra … m.” That Gandhi lives on.

I close this section with the tribute of E. Stanley Jones in the following memorable words: “I bow to Mahatma Gandhi and I kneel at the feet of Christ. … A little man … has taught me more of the spirit of Christ than perhaps any other man in East or West.”56 No higher tribute can be written for the man who is as great in death as he was in life. Indeed, “[m]en like Gandhi do not happen very often—no oftener perhaps than men like Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed.”57 Nature will most likely have to wait a few centuries to send one like him again.

THE ALCHEMY OF GANDHI’S GREATNESS

The history of humankind is testimony to the fact that the making of great leaders requires them to make great sacrifices. “What is to give light”, said Victor Frankl, “must endure burning.”58 For Nelson Mandela it meant a struggle of over 50 years, 27 of which were spent in jail. For the Dalai Lama, the struggle continues after 56 years in exile from his homeland, Tibet. “Give me six hours to chop down a tree”, Abraham Lincoln said, “and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe”. Gandhi worked long and hard in sharpening his axe—3 years in England, 21 years in South Africa, and 33 years in India!

In his book Greatness: Who Makes History and Why, Dean Keith Simonton states, “To achieve success of the highest order, a person may have to suffer first.”59 He further points out that orphanhood has

54 Fischer, Gandhi: His Life and Message for the World, 189.
55 Payne, The Life and Death of Mahatma Gandhi, 14.
57 Opinion cited, Whitman, “Toward an Understanding of Gandhi.”
been seen to spur the development of eminent people in world history. Biographies of a number of historic figures show upsetting circumstances, such as parental loss, in the early part of their lives.

Simonton quotes a study of 699 historic figures, of whom 61 percent lost a parent before the age of 31; Gandhi lost both of his parents early—his father died when he was 16 and his mother when he was 22. However, two other groups, juvenile delinquents and depressive or suicidal psychiatric patients, show similar orphanhood rates. This shows that some people are able to rise above their early traumatic experiences while others lack the inner strength to cope; in other words, orphanhood is not a precondition for achieving greatness. It all depends upon what we do with what happens to us. The same fire that purifies gold also burns down wood.

GUIDING LIGHTS ON GANDHI’S LEADERSHIP JOURNEY

Holistic leaders mature slowly and steadily amidst the vicissitudes of life through myriad interactive processes of nature and nurture. Where did Gandhi draw his inspiration about life and leadership? Which role-models did he revere? Which books served as the fonts of wisdom for him?

Gandhi’s saintly and devout mother, Putlibai, and his equally devout nurse, Rambha, were early spiritual influences. Stories of three legendary figures from the Purānas—Shravana Kumar, Harishchandra, and Prahlada—instilled in him the values of parental devotion, unconditional adherence to truth and steadfast faith in the Lord.

Among the key influences on Gandhi’s life and thought, pride of place must go to the Bhagavad Gītā—the moral and spiritual anchorage of Gandhi. Gandhi’s firm and sustained belief in mokṣa (spiritual liberation) and self-realization were almost entirely shaped by the teachings of the Gītā. The key Gandhian concepts of selfless service (nīśkāmakarma), nonviolence (abhimsā), steadfastness in truth (sthitaprajñātā), and nonpossession (apari-graha) proceed directly from his unique interpretation of the Gītā.

60 Ibid., 153–155.
61 Purānas (Sanskrit: “of ancient times”) denote sacred lore of Hinduism that depict various myths about various Hindu deities. According to the online Merriam-Webster Dictionary, Purānas represent “a class of Hindu sacred writings chiefly from AD 300 to AD 750 comprising popular myths and legends and other traditional lore”. Retrieved February, 12, 2016, http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/purana.
Gandhi tells us that the Gītā “opened to me a new view of life … I had found at last, as I believed, the light I needed.”\(^{62}\) Gandhi was convinced that self-realization is “the only ambition worth having”, and to him the Gītā appeared to show “the most excellent way to attain self-realization.”\(^{63}\) The Gītā soon became the guiding star of Gandhi’s life and leadership. From the Gītā, Gandhi also learned to approach every act in a spirit of sacrifice that aims for the welfare of all beings, in a spirit of offering to the Supreme.

Of all the heroes in Gandhi’s pantheon, Gujarati jeweler and saint–philosopher, Raychand, would unquestionably rank first—the only living example to inspire Gandhi in the spiritual realm. Gandhi regarded Raychand as his friend, philosopher and guide. Gandhi writes about him in his autobiography: “In my moments of spiritual crisis … he was my refuge.”\(^{64}\) Gandhi further tells us that Raychand had been a constant influence on him all his life and that among the religious people that he had met, he had not found another person to equal Raychand in religious perception.\(^{65}\) Gandhi revered him for “his wide knowledge of the scriptures, his spotless character, and his burning passion for self-realization. I saw later that this last was the only thing for which he lived.”\(^{66}\) These spiritual qualities combined to become a light in Gandhi’s life and the foundation for his future role as a leader. Gandhi’s own quest for self-realization was inspired by Raychand’s.

What were some other formative influences on Gandhi? Gandhi was a practical moralist and imbibed his ethical values from many sources. He was influenced by religious and moral writings from both East and West. Gandhi imbibed the virtues of both cultures, by-passing their vices for the most part. He read abundantly during his days in England as a law student and later during his long stay in South Africa as a political activist. In particular, he was influenced by the writings of Leo Tolstoy, John Ruskin and Henry David Thoreau. In his autobiography, Gandhi tells us about his heroes:

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\(^{64}\) Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 77.


Three moderns have left a deep impress on my life and captivated me. Raychandbhai by his living contact; Tolstoy by his book, *The Kingdom of God is within you*; and Ruskin by his *Unto this Last*.67

Elsewhere he tells us that of these three great influences, “I give the first place to Raychandra Kavi, second to Tolstoy and third to Ruskin.”68

All of Gandhi’s teachers in life and spirit hold one thing in common—they had the courage to live according their convictions. There was no distinction between what they preached and what they practiced. This quality—*living the teachings*—became the hallmark of Gandhi’s life and leadership. If there is one characteristic that sets him apart from most leaders of the past and the present, it is this. Since Gandhi practiced what he preached, he did not have to preach it. His very life became the personification of his ideals—a living testimony to steadfastness in truth and nonviolence. He became the living embodiment of the change he wanted to see in the world. “To be or not to be” was never an option for Gandhi.

**Lessons From the Hero’s Journey**

Joseph Campbell, the renowned American mythologist and author of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, held that various myths from different times and places share certain fundamental stages and patterns, which he described as follows: “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons [gifts] on his fellow man.”69 Campbell’s theory divides the journey of the archetypal hero found in world mythologies into a schema of 17 distinct steps. These steps are commonly organized into three classic stages or rites of passage: Separation, Initiation, and Return.

The first stage of the journey is about the separation or departure of the hero from the normal world. Separation has the figurative echo of an infant transitioning away from the mother. During the primary part of the journey, the hero is initiated into true heroic stature and cleansed by various trials, tribulations, and rites. Persevering courageously through inner battles, the

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hero’s true character emerges, and the hero receives the ultimate boon of his quest: self-mastery. After the rite of initiation, the hero returns home in triumph to share with his fellow travelers the knowledge and gifts acquired during the journey, although this stage may have its own challenges.

The life stories of mythological characters such as Prometheus and spiritual leaders like Moses, Jesus and the Buddha follow this sequence of a soul’s journey quite closely. We can perhaps add Gandhi to this select list. The three stages fit neatly into Gandhi’s story as well in terms of his years in England (1888–1891), South Africa (1893–1914), and India (1915–1948). Gandhi left for London to study law at the age of 18, and shortly before his return to India from England in 1891, his mother died. This formative period, which laid the foundation for his life’s spiritual quest, may be regarded as the phase of departure or separation in his journey. It was in England that Gandhi discovered, for the first time, vegetarianism, the Bhagavad Gītā, the Sermon on the Mount, and the teachings of the Buddha.

The 21 years that Gandhi spent in South Africa represent the vital phase of his initiation, where he was fashioned into true heroic stature. As we saw earlier in this chapter, it was in South Africa that Gandhi had what may be called a spiritual conversion experience. The final phase—the 33 years Gandhi spent in India, until he was assassinated—marks the hero’s return to his homeland to share the knowledge acquired during the transformative phase of the journey. Thus, we see that Gandhi’s leadership development follows the three stages of a hero’s journey—Separation, Initiation, Return—that Campbell described.

Gandhi had embarked upon a hero’s journey in England, conquered his demons in South Africa, and returned to India in a state transformed, to bestow his gifts on his brothers and sisters. Gandhi was beset with challenges through all three phases, but he persevered courageously every day in his quest for truth and self-realization. “Gandhiji, it has been well said”, wrote J. M. Upadhyaya, “could fashion heroes out of common clay. His first and, undoubtedly, his most successful experiment was with himself.” It is true that self-exploration is the greatest journey that we take. This is a journey of self-realization in which we thoroughly become who we are. This is the journey Gandhi avowed to take, eventually paying the price with his own life.

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Gandhi’s Legacy

Gandhi viewed his life as an undivided whole, and his political work was an extension of who he was as a person. He practiced what he preached and struggled relentlessly to live up to his principles. He “humanized politics” by approaching his life-work in an utterly selfless manner, renouncing the usual trappings of outer title, authority and position. Every time Gandhi confronted human frailties in the outer world, he turned his search light within (a phrase Gandhi loved using) to find answers in the deeper recesses of his soul. This spiritual and moral anchorage was the key to Gandhi’s political potency and innovation, and it became his most important discovery: a person’s capacity for self-control enhances his capacity to influence the environment around him. And no power on earth can make a person do a thing against his or her will. *He who disciplines himself gains the strength to shape the environment.*

These are all valuable lessons for modern leaders to emulate.

“He did not preach about God or religion”, writes Louis Fischer, Gandhi’s pre-eminent biographer, “he was a living sermon ... His greatness lay in doing what everybody could do but doesn’t.”72 What sets Gandhi apart from most leaders of the present and the past is the spiritual and moral anchorage of his leadership. Gandhi chose politics for deeply spiritual reasons. He viewed his life as an undivided whole. In fact, his “politics” was deeply rooted in morality and spirituality.

Gandhi relied on the power of inner resources to effect change outside. By his own life’s example, he showed that a person’s capacity for self-control enhances his capacity to influence the environment. He maintained that indomitable individual will can bring about social and political change. His innovation as a leader lies in placing the right means above the desired ends.

Dispelling Some Myths About Gandhi

Myths about Gandhi abound. While he possessed many unusual qualities of head and heart, there was no mystery about his faults and failings. We need to reclaim Gandhi as a human being apart from the myriad myths surrounding him. At least two of those myths require some active dispelling.

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Myth 1: Gandhi was a Saint

Perhaps one of the most common (and most dangerous) myths about Gandhi is that he was a saint. First, “Mahatma”—or great soul—was not Gandhi’s first name. “Mahatma” is an honorific he received from the poet and Nobel laureate Sir Rabindranath Tagore. Commenting on Gandhi’s role in India’s independence movement, Will Durant wrote: “We have the astonishing phenomenon of a revolution led by a saint.” But was Gandhi really a saint? Gandhi did not like to be regarded as a “saint”, a characterization implicit in the title “Mahatma”. He noted in his autobiography that the title “Mahatma” often pained him deeply; in fact, he writes with characteristic humility, “There is not a moment I can recall when it may said to have tickled me.”

In the West, it has become a fashion to put Gandhi on a pedestal as a saint and thereby deny the practical significance of his vital contribution in the political arena. We need to reclaim Gandhi in totality—in moral, spiritual, and practical realms all at once. In Gandhi’s view, the term “Mahatma” was too sacred to be applied to a simple seeker of truth. Writing for the weekly journal that he published, Young India, he explained: “I myself do not feel a saint in any shape or form. But I do feel I am a votary of Truth in spite of all my errors of unconscious omission and commission.”

Gandhi never felt comfortable being viewed as a saint. In fact, he objected when people called him “a saint trying to be a politician”. He said that he was instead “a politician trying to be a saint”. We ought to take his word for it. Religious conviction was an integral part of Gandhi’s being, but to call him a saint would be to do him a disservice: it would make his virtues too lofty to be emulated and his vices too glorified to be instructive. “If we label Gandhi a perfected being”, observed Mark Shepard in his book Mahatma Gandhi and His Myths, “we lose our chance to view his life and career critically and to learn from his mistakes.”

73 Durant is reported to have said this during his visit to India.
74 Gandhi, Autobiography, viii. It is generally believed that the honorific title “Mahatma” was first applied to Gandhi by Tagore. “Great Soul in peasant’s garb”, the poet wrote,” says Louis Fischer, “and the crown sat forever on the politician-saint’s head”. Louis Fischer, Gandhi: His Life and Message for the World (New York: A Mentor Book, 1982), 50.
75 Young India, January 20, 1927, 21.
Myth 2: Gandhi Single-Handedly Wrought the Miracle of India’s Independence

Before Gandhi arrived on India’s political scene, the struggle for India’s independence had been progressing for several decades, and this very likely would have borne tangible results of its own accord. That is why it isn’t accurate to say that Gandhi wrought the miracle of India’s independence. However, “the extraordinary manner in which it was achieved can be pointedly ascribed to him.”77 It is one of the great ironies of history that the country that Gandhi led peacefully to freedom in 1947 came to be brutally divided amid communal chaos and violence into two nations, India and Pakistan. Gandhi did not want this “two-part independence” achieved in August 1947 and announced that he “cannot participate in the celebrations.”78 How could he?

It pained him deeply to see 32 years of selfless work come to “an inglorious end”—“to watch India being torn apart into two bleeding fragments.”79 He could not prevent the partition of India because religious divisions were stronger than feelings of nationalistic cohesion.80 This writer has spoken with countless people who witnessed the inhuman slaughter that took place during partition. Those bloody days are some of the most minutely documented facts in the history of the Indian subcontinent. “Yet without Gandhi”, writes Rajmohan Gandhi, “the violence would have been even greater, the parts more than two, and the future unity, pluralism and democracy of the Indian part far more vulnerable.”81 The following tribute by Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of British India and first Governor-General of Independent India, sent in a letter to Gandhi, is living testimony to the saving grace of Gandhi’s nonviolent power:

My dear Gandhiji, in the Punjab we have 55 thousand soldiers and large-scale rioting on our hands. In Bengal our forces consist of one man, and there is no rioting. As a serving officer, as well as an administrator, may I be allowed to pay my tribute to the One-man Boundary Force.82

81 Rajmohan Gandhi, *Gandhi: The Man, His People, and Empire*, xi.
LEARNING FROM MISTAKES

Perhaps Gandhi underestimated the toxicity of warring religious factions. Perhaps he let his idealism and optimism get the better of him. Perhaps his constant use of Hindu symbolism alienated Muslims irrevocably. Perhaps he pushed his dietary practices and his experiments with celibacy beyond scrupulously reasonable limits. Or perhaps humanity was not evolved enough genuinely to embrace Gandhi’s creed of love and nonviolence. It is no wonder that none of Gandhi’s campaigns of civil disobedience won by bringing about a “change of heart” in his adversaries—not directly at least. A “change of heart” they did bring—but of the public, not his opponents.

There are some great leadership lessons to be learned here. For example:

1. Not all people share the same values. Leaders need to understand their own and others’ values and intentions. It is not always wise to be good to a fault; discretion is indeed the better part of valor.
2. When dealing with racial diversity, it is not prudent to overplay certain ethnic themes. And one needs to be moderate about moderation, too. To know when enough is enough is the hallmark of wisdom.
3. Perfection is not given to us mortals; nor does nature give us the ability to see our flaws as others see them.

Perhaps, in our yearning for perfect heroes, we place our leaders on a pedestal and thereby do them a great disservice. “Perhaps he will not succeed”, Tagore wrote of Gandhi. “Perhaps he will fail as the Buddha failed, as the Christ failed, to wean men from their inequities, but he will always be remembered as one who made his life a lesson for all ages to come.”83 History has borne out the wisdom of Tagore’s precise assessment of Gandhi the leader. And unquestionably, “no myth raking can rob Gandhi of his moral force or diminish the remarkable importance of this scrawny little man”, as Time magazine declared in its millennium issue on December 31, 1999. How so? Because by the very definition, myths cannot match, let alone surpass, the truth. Gandhi’s moral truth will always sparkle brighter than any scathing myth.

Today Gandhi’s critics call him idealistic, impractical, and even politically naïve. But much of what is written today about Gandhi by his most bitter critics reveals more about the critics than it does about Gandhi. The

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propensity to find faults with others—by trying to light one’s torch on others’ candles—should eventually bring one back to contend with one’s own faults. Great leaders, like great teachers, act only as mirrors, faithfully revealing the truth, goodness and beauty that dwell in the hearts of us all. After all, the image reflected by the mirror cannot be any different or better than the original.

Providing an essential key to the understanding of Gandhi as both a person and a leader, E. Stanley Jones wrote: “After you have looked at him through a microscope, you have to look at him through a telescope to get the total man. For he stands against a background of the ages and must be interpreted with that background to get the full stature and meaning of the man. … Many get caught in subsidiary statements and miss the sum total of the meaning of his teaching.”84 Future researchers and readers of Gandhi would be well served by this advice.

We can learn some key leadership lessons from Gandhi’s successes and failures. “I have worked hard”, said the great composer J. S. Bach, “anyone who works just as hard will go just as far.” Gandhi agrees: “I claim to be an average man of less than average ability. … I have not the shadow of a doubt that any man or woman can achieve what I have, if he or she would make the same effort and cultivate the same hope and faith.”85 The life example of Gandhi shows us that we can also achieve what great leaders have achieved, if we are willing to put forth the necessary effort and to cultivate the values that such exemplary leaders embodied. Herein lies the real purpose of studying the lives of great leaders.

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time.86

Gandhi’s life and thought embodied a truth applicable to humanity as a whole. His leadership effectiveness proceeded from his categorical adherence to his ideals and principles. It was a value-based, principle-centered leadership. Commenting on the uniqueness of the living fire that was in this man of peace and humility, India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, wrote, “The amazing thing about Gandhi was that he adhered, in all its fullness, to his ideals, his conception of truth, and yet he did succeed in molding and moving enormous masses of human beings.”

The amazing thing was not that Gandhi succeeded. The really amazing thing was that he strove to be steadfast and to adhere to his ideals and principles without compromise or concession.

In the foreword to D. G. Tendulkar’s eight-volume magnum opus *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, Nehru wrote, “No man can write a real life of Gandhi, unless he is as big as Gandhi.” Perhaps even when an author is as exalted as his subject, the truth of the subject’s greatness will always elude him. This is true of the life and work of all great masters. Artur Schnabel, an Austrian pianist, having played Beethoven’s piano music all his life, is reported to have said: “This music is better than it can ever be played.” Gandhi’s majestic harmonies likewise have a quality that exceeds all accounts of them.

**LEADING HOLISTICALLY: SEVEN EXEMPLARY GANDHIAN VALUES**

Values represent the heart of leadership and guide behavior and performance. As Samuel Blumenfeld has clearly pointed out, “You have to be dead to be value-neutral.” Values are like a lighthouse; they do not change. It is the ship of practices that has to find its way guided by the lighthouse of values. Can an evil leader be an effective leader? The answer to this question depends on whether we consider ethics to be a necessary condition for leadership. It also begs the fundamental question, “What good is leadership if it is not ethical?.”

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88 Ibid.

In his seminal essay titled “Notes toward a Definition of Values-Based Leadership”, James O’Toole calls Gandhi the “most manifestly values-based of all leaders.”

Besides Gandhi, the author’s shortlist of such leaders includes Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, Vaclav Havel, Mother Teresa, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Jean Monnet.

Since leadership is an expression of who we are, in discovering, living, and sharing our deepest values lies the fulfillment of our life and leadership.

Gandhi consistently embodied the perennial values of authenticity/personal integrity, transparency, harmlessness (abhinsā), truthfulness (satyāgraha or truth-force), humility, self-discipline and selfless service in and through his life and death. He believed that the universe is not amoral and that it has a structural bias toward good. His leadership effectiveness proceeded from his categorical adherence to these values and his openness to learn from his own mistakes. Gandhi’s innovation lies in extending them from the personal to the public arena. His was essentially a values-based, principle-centered approach to leadership. Despite his faults, or perhaps because of them, we find there is much to learn about Gandhi’s development as a leader—who lived and died for the values he held most dear.

**Authenticity and Transparency**

An authentic leader operates from a strong personal and moral stance embodying the unity and purity of thoughts, words, and deeds. Gandhi underscores this alignment by noting: “I say as I think and I do as I say”. He viewed his life and work as an undivided whole and approached his lifework in an utterly selfless manner, renouncing the usual trappings of title, authority, and position. If true living or leadership is an expression of who we are, authenticity becomes the most essential value in life and leadership. According to Warren Bennis, “The ‘Dean’ of Leadership Gurus,” the real task of becoming a leader boils down to becoming an authentic

90 James O’Toole, “Notes Toward a Definition of Values-Based Leadership”, *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership*, 1(1), Article 10 (2008): 4.
91 Ibid., 6–7.
individual first: “At bottom, becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself. It’s precisely that simple, and it’s also that difficult.”

Authenticity does not mean being perfect. It is accepting oneself (and others) as one truly is, warts and all. It is about being aware of one’s flaws and learning from them. In fine, it is about leading from within. Gandhi led from within—from the deep moral and spiritual core of his being. His life and leadership were inseparably one. His life was an open book for all to see. His autobiography is an exemplary model of candour and transparency. Such a level of “transparency” has not been observed in the life of any other public leader before or after.

**Harmlessness or Nonviolence**

Gandhi believed that the only test of truth is action based on the refusal to do harm—*ahimsā*. The commonly used English equivalent “nonviolence” may be misleading as it seems to give the impression that *ahimsā* is just a negative virtue. *Ahimsā* is not mere abstention from injury in thought, word and deed; it also implies the positive virtues of compassion and benevolence.

For Gandhi, *ahimsā* was a positive force of love. In addition, nonviolence is not a cover for cowardice. Gandhi has said that “where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence.”

Gandhi’s distinctive contribution in this area lies in his unique interpretation of “passive” forms of violence such as hatred and anger. The passive violence that we commit consciously and unconsciously every day causes the victims of passive violence to get angry, and their anger eventually leads to physical violence.

We have been told by experts that anger instigates almost 80 percent of the violence that we experience either in our personal lives or as a society or nation. Anger leads to conflict and conflict to violence. Learning how to use the powerful energy of anger intelligently and effectively is the foundation of Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence. When used properly, rightly channeled anger can go a long way to reducing the passive violence

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at the workplace. Nonviolence is both the end and the means. For Gandhi, nonviolence was the means and truth was the end.

**Truth**

Truth and nonviolence are interrelated; for there is no spirituality without morality. Taken together, truth and nonviolence constitute the alpha and omega of Gandhi the man, as well as Gandhi the leader; every form of discipline or vow that Gandhi observed in his life was just a variation on these themes. And based on all the available evidence, Gandhi remained true to both of these vows in both letter and spirit.

For Gandhi, there was the “relative truth” of truthfulness in human interactions, and the “absolute truth” of the Ultimate Reality. This ultimate truth is God (as God is also Truth) with ethics as expressed in the moral law as its basis. Gandhi was humble enough to acknowledge that the truth we experience at the level of human interactions is “relative, many-sided, plural, and is the whole truth for a given time. Pure and absolute truth should be our ideal.”\(^95\) This humility gave Gandhi the understanding to be on the side of the truth rather than insisting for the truth to be on his side. Such humility and courage of conviction are object lessons for contemporary leaders. Even while committing to truth and nonviolence as the absolute ideals, leaders should remain open to the fact of many-sidedness of truth encountered at the level of human interactions.

**Humility**

Many spiritual traditions speak about the need to “be poor in spirit and pure in heart”. Of all the leadership qualities, humility is perhaps the most difficult to develop. Ben Franklin tells us in his legendary *Autobiography* that the reason humility as a virtue is hard to cultivate is because by the time one gets to be good at it, one becomes proud of it!

Gandhi strongly believed that the “truth is not to be found by anybody who has not got an abundant sense of humility. If you would swim on the bosom of the ocean you must reduce yourself to a zero.”\(^96\) In fact, humil-
ity is both the means and the goal. In the field of leadership, the importance of humility can hardly be overemphasized. Only humble leaders can serve a cause higher than themselves. Howard Schultz, the founder and chairman of the Starbucks chain of coffee shops, says that the great leadership expert, Warren Bennis, once told him that to become a great leader you have to develop “your ability to leave your own ego at the door, and to recognize the skills and traits that you need in order to build a world-class organization.”

“True humility”, said C.S. Lewis, “is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.” The power of humility and gentleness is illustrated through the life of this “little brown man in a loincloth” who brought the mightiest empire on earth to its knees.

**Self-Discipline**

Gandhi once said, “Our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world as being able to remake ourselves.” Every time Gandhi confronted human frailties in the outer world, he turned his moral searchlight within (a phrase Gandhi loved using) to find answers in the deep recesses of his soul. This spiritual and moral anchorage was the key to Gandhi’s political potency and innovation and became his most important discovery: A person’s capacity for self-discipline enhances his capacity to influence the environment around him. And no power on earth can make a person do a thing against his will. He who disciplines himself gains the strength to shape the environment. Peter Senge concurs and regards self-mastery to be the key aspect of growing as a leader.

“The call to lead India”, Gandhi tells us, “did not come to me in the nature of a sudden realization. I prepared for it by fasting and self-discipline. *My political work grew out of my spiritual preparation.*” Through prayer, contemplation, self-abnegation and self-purification, he cultivated his

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being to such an extent that it emanated a gentle soul-force that endeared him even to his severest critics and detractors. Even Gandhi’s critics agree that his strength lay in his towering spirit that resided in his frail frame. With his indomitable spirit Gandhi was able to win his ideological wars in the long run, even when he seemed to be losing his battles in the short run.

**Selfless Service**

A leader’s true inspiration comes from doing selfless work. Selfless work brings equanimity of mind which in turn contributes to leadership effectiveness. Exemplary leaders are not motivated by personal desires or interests. They recognize that selfless service is the highest principle of life and leadership. They become instruments of the Whole and selflessly work for the well-being of all beings. This is where their true fulfillment lies. Gandhi was right: *the best way to find oneself is to lose oneself in the service of others.*

Gandhi believed that only by not regarding anything as their own can leaders truly devote themselves, body and soul, to the selfless service of others. For, unless mind is purged of personal desire and attachment, even service is but an inflation of the ego. These are all valuable lessons for contemporary leaders to emulate. The path to leading others starts with self-awareness through self-discipline and ends with self-transcendence through selfless service. It is paved with authenticity, humility and compassion.

**Gandhi’s Talisman**

This was Gandhi’s advice to a fellow seeker, given five months before his assassination:

I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man [woman] whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him [her]. Will he [she] gain anything by it? Will it restore him [her] to a control over his [her] own life and destiny? … Then you will find your doubts and yourself melt away.101

This admirably sums up Gandhi the humanist. Gandhi lived his life by this acid test of whether an action would benefit the poorest of the poor. The *Bhagavad Gītā* talks about a person of steady wisdom who is deeply immersed in the welfare of all beings. Such a person no longer has any personal desire or ambition left to fulfill. His very existence becomes a boon to society. Gandhi was one such person.

**Concluding Thoughts**

History bears testimony to the *distinctive and authentic voice* of Gandhi. Even his greatest critics agree that Gandhi was one of the handful of human beings in history to experiment with the application of nonviolence on such a large scale. At a time when the human conscience was tarnished by the holocaust and nuclear war, his was a solitary voice vehemently opposing the horrors of violence in any form. Gandhi has come to be recognized as the archetypical moral force whose appeal to humanity is both universal and lasting.

Gandhi’s greatness lies in stirring the conscience of humanity, in demonstrating the power of spirit over material things, in turning his moral searchlight inward, and in extending the gospel of love and peace from personal level to the social arena. “Perhaps never before”, writes Robert Payne, “on so grand a scale has any man succeeded in shaping the course of history while using only the weapon of peace.”

Gandhi believed that life is one single unitary movement. The moral and spiritual reality that we encounter is but a reflection of who we are. The world we live in is a grand existential mirror, faithfully reflecting our very own reality:

> We but mirror the world. All the tendencies present in the outer world are to be found in the world of our body. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. This is the divine mystery supreme. A wonderful thing it is and the source of our happiness. We need not wait to see what others do.  

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102 Robert Payne, *The Life and Death of Mahatma Gandhi*, 16.
Thus, if we want to bring about any change in the world, we have to begin with ourselves: We have to be the change that we wish to see in the world. This was Gandhi’s most important discovery and his greatest gift to humankind. He inspired emulation not so much by his professed set of values and beliefs as by the exemplary nature of his life and conduct. He made his life his message.

Gandhi had his failings and favorites. Yet for his abiding passion constantly to “remake” himself until his last breath, his dogged determination to walk the straight and narrow path of truth and nonviolence, his exceptional ability to reduce his personal self to zero, his disarming humility, and his excruciating self-honesty, he will continue to shine as a beacon for humanity as long as might oppresses right.

Aldous Huxley once said that the central technique for humans to learn is “the art of obtaining freedom from the fundamental human disability of egoism.” Gandhi achieved that freedom. Only those who dare achieve this freedom can truly serve.

**Being Change: Reflection Questions**

1. What qualities or traits you admire in a leader and why? How are these qualities important in contemporary organizations?
2. Are these traits inborn or developed? Take an example of a leader that you admire and briefly discuss these traits.
3. From the various defining moments of Gandhi’s life discussed in this chapter, select two “crucibles” that directly contributed to Gandhi’s development as a leader.
4. Was Gandhi really a saint? How effectively did he address his failings? What did you learn from Gandhi’s mistakes?
5. How did Gandhi succeed in shaping the course of history while using only the weapon of peace? What was the real source of his moral and spiritual mainstay?
6. How relevant is Gandhi’s leadership message today? Briefly discuss how contemporary world leaders might secure peace through his primary method of nonviolence?
7. Did Gandhi succeed in his life’s mission? What is his greatest legacy to humanity?

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