

What Does Responsibility Mean To Me?

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It is safe to say that not many people in the 21st Century are as committed to responsibility as my grandfather, Mohandas K Gandhi, was during his life time. As we all know responsibility is a very broad term, almost without limits, and requires a genuine desire to practice. It begins with the self and radiates outward to encompass as much of the world as one wishes.

If we examine Gandhi's life we will see that like all children his early life was full of irresponsible behavior. One could say he was a thief because he stole money and a bit of gold to pay for cigarettes and meat; he was a liar because he lied to his parents about his nefarious activities. While most of us would slide into irresponsible behavior using "peer pressure" as an excuse, Gandhi heard his conscience and decided lies and betrayal were not the road maps he wanted for his life. He took the responsibility of confessing his crimes and sought forgiveness.

As a young Indian man in the 1800s he was among the very few privileged to study law in England. This was reason enough for an inflated ego. In Gandhi's case, however, he wanted acceptance by the "Whites". Gandhi was aware of the prejudices that the whites harbored against people of color. He was appalled, he writes in his autobiography, to hear white priests denounce Indian culture and the Indian way of life on street corners as he walked to school. As a young man in England he thought if he adopted British culture and customs he might be accepted by the whites. Thus, when he returned from England, he was what Indians derisively called a "brown Englishman," with a highly inflated ego.

Although the responsibility of paying back the loan the family had taken for his education in England and the fact that his extended family depended on him for economic sustenance were issues of which he was aware, his priority was to anglicize the Indian culture in their joint family home. He demanded a change in dress codes and dining habits. No more squatting on the floor for meals; a dining table and chairs were introduced. He was so obsessed with this reform that his wife Kastur had to remind him that his first priority should be to earn money. All of these changes you want are costing money that your brothers don't have.

His older brothers, Gokuldas and Laxmidas, decided to have a frank talk with him about his responsibility to the whole family. In the Indian joint family system all the brothers and family live together in one large home and all income is pooled together. It was only when he was chided by his wife and brothers that Mohandas realized his responsibility and began to set up a legal practice. At some level are we not all guilty of this behavior?

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In spite of his educational qualifications Gandhi could not overcome stage fright. The first time he appeared in court to defend his client he could not utter a word when it was time for him to get up and build his case. He refunded his client's fees and walked out in shame. While he was conscious of his responsibility towards his family, he just could not overcome this weakness. It seemed as though he was destined to fail as a lawyer. In desperation he started doing clerical work of writing briefs and petitions for a nominal fee. During this period in his life, when he was expected to shoulder the responsibility of the entire family, he became so desperate to earn a steady income that he applied for a position as an English teacher. The British administration said he was not qualified enough to teach English and rejected his application. Perhaps it was just as well that he did not get the teaching job because he would have opened himself to a lot more ridicule. If he could not speak in front of a judge in court how would he have fared in front of a class full of students?

The point of this reflection on Gandhi's life and travails is to see how his sense of responsibility was honed by circumstance and grew from the self to the family. It is difficult to say what would have happened to his life if he had not received the fortuitous invitation to South Africa to be an interpreter for an Indian merchant who was embroiled in what seemed to be an endless legal battle. The problem was the Indian merchant could not read or speak English and the only lawyers qualified to take the case were white Englishmen. There was a major communication problem. It was certainly a professional step down for a lawyer to take the job of an interpreter but his sense of responsibility forced him to accept, even though the job paid far less than a British qualified lawyer should receive. It was his sense of responsibility that made him swallow his pride and grab any opportunity he could get.

Gandhi's visit to South Africa turned out to be another nudge towards greater responsibility. In the first week of his arrival Gandhi became a victim of brutal racial prejudice when he was literally picked up and thrown off a railroad carriage because a white man refused to share a compartment with him. As it turned out this was a major turning point in his life. When he shared the experience with other Indians he was appalled to learn that they had all accepted injustice quietly. The general refrain was: "If the whites don't want us to travel first class we should not go." If we examine our lives we will find we often do the same thing. Find an easy way out because the responsibility of taking action could jeopardize our security.

Gandhi thought about this attitude and concluded it was not responsible behavior. Gandhi was faced with quietly submitting to racial injustice and pursue making money and supporting his family, or sacrifice security and take a stand against injustice and face the consequences. He was finally able to convince the Indian community that the alternatives they had were either to sink deeper and deeper into the pit of apathy or to stand up for their rights whatever the consequences. This was the birth of nonviolent political action.

At first, the struggle took the form of legal action and petitions and only when this did not seem to work he decided on launching protest

movements by defying unjust laws. This marked the expansion of his sense of responsibility from the needs of his family to the needs of the community. Often, in our daily lives, we are called upon to make similar decisions but more often than not we make excuses and confine our sense of responsibility to the needs of our families. Gandhi realized injustice against one is eventually injustice against all and, what was worse, injustice had the tendency to multiply if not nipped in the bud.

Obviously Gandhi's struggle was confined to injustices against the Indian community. This was not because he was a racist and did not care about the Native Africans as some historians have recently suggested. The fact is at this point in his life he was still somewhat naive and uncertain about the philosophy of nonviolence. He was naive because in the early years he referred to the Native Africans as "Kafirs," a term used by the whites and everyone else in South Africa. When he realized this was a derogatory term he stopped using the term. It must be admitted that although he had ample opportunities in succeeding years to erase such remarks and clean up his writings he did not do so because he was wedded to Truth and because he wanted people to see the conscious changes that took place in his life. All the negativity that historians are now bringing out to demean him and besmirch his reputation they have found in his writings. When he said, "My life is an open book," he really meant it. He kept the good, bad and ugly for everyone to see as evidence that anyone could achieve what he did if they have the commitment and compassion to raise oneself higher up the ladder. It is not enough for one to rise up materially. Gandhi chose to go up the moral ladder because he was convinced materialism is the road to corruption, hate, prejudice and violence. This is an indication of yet another aspect of shouldering his responsibility by recognizing his weaknesses and making changes to become a better human being.

What did Gandhi mean by becoming a better human being? And why do we need to do this? Scholastic education alone does not make one better, nor does it result in a society becoming civilized. Education takes us halfway to civilization by giving us knowledge; the other half of the way can be traversed only when we figure out how to use the knowledge to become morally upright human beings. I have often heard people say: "Oh well, I was born that way and will just have to live with it." That is not true. No one has to live with weaknesses. We have to learn to recognize the weaknesses and do something to transform them into strength. The ultimate goal of every human being should be to make an individual effort to build a cohesive society living in harmony and wedded to positive attitudes like respect, understanding, acceptance, appreciation and compassion instead of all the negativity that dominates our thinking and attitudes today. This is the only way to build a peaceful society.

Gandhi believed what he did can be done by any one of us if we take the responsibility of making ourselves better than we were when we were born. Gandhi saw his life as a vast "experiment with Truth" and his writings were in the form of scientific notes for subsequent generations to follow and grow upwards. But our responsibilities anchor us to material pursuits and individualism which is why we don't create communities but rather a

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collection of individuals. To get into the question of what is a community or a nation will detract from the present subject so I will leave it for another occasion.

But, of course, it must be said that humanity survives and thrives only when individuals expand their sense of responsibility to include building a cohesive community and nation. When we have disparate individuals doing their own thing and pulling in different directions it only tears the people apart giving rise to violence, hate and prejudice.

Although we have learned to see nonviolence as "a pursuit of peace" or resolving conflicts amicably, Gandhi saw it as a way of life. Unless we live it in thought, word and deed we cannot practice it effectively. What we see today as glorious examples of success achieved through nonviolence Gandhi would say are neither glorious nor successes. What we achieve most of the time is to talk down people from a position of violence while not always addressing the problem. One widespread example of the inadequate resolution of a conflict is the crime situation that plagues every society on earth. The widespread assumption is that the world is made of good people and bad people and if we can control the bad people we will have goodness all around us. Nothing could be more ridiculous. What makes people do bad things in society are the problems that they are not able to resolve. For example a homeless person is hungry and has no means to buy food. He walks past a store and sees fruit displayed in boxes outside and sees an opportunity to steal some. He may get away once but at some stage he is likely to get caught. When he is arrested he is punished with imprisonment, but society will do nothing to address the issue of homelessness and hunger. All we do is dehumanize people as criminals and deserving of what they get. If living in peace is the ultimate goal of any society then it is the responsibility of every individual to build it brick by brick by becoming morally and ethically aware of one's responsibility towards the society in which we live.

We have ignored the core of Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence -- the concepts of Swaraj (freedom); Trusteeship; constructive Action and, above all, Sarvodaya. Let me explain each of these briefly. Although we have interpreted Swaraj to mean freedom as in independence from political oppression, to Gandhi Swaraj meant "individual freedom". As long as we remain enslaved by material and physical attachments we can never be free. How many times do we turn a blind eye to injustice simply because we are too afraid to lose our jobs or suffer financial loss? It is that chain of thought that forces us to live in bondage.

Trusteeship is the Gandhian belief that no one "owns" the talent he or she possesses or acquires. We are trustees of the talent and should therefore be willing to use it to help less fortunate members of society as much as we are willing to use the talent for ourselves. It means we give up our greed and selfishness that a material society encourages, and be more respectful and compassionate towards those who have nothing. It means giving, sharing not out of pity but out of compassion. There is a significant difference between the two, the same as giving a man a fish and teaching him how to fish. It is simple and effortless to just give someone some money or food and walk away. This only increases dependence. Giving out of compassion takes more effort

and resources but it helps a person become a worthy, contributing citizen and, what is more, it helps rebuild the person's self-respect and self-confidence - the two valued assets that are crushed by poverty and/or oppression. This is also constructive action.

Which brings us to the concept of Sarvodaya (welfare of all). Materialism has led to greed and selfishness and getting rich at any cost, which, in turn, has led to the creation of a Culture of Violence that is now so deeply rooted and pervasive that it dominates all aspects of human life from sports and entertainment to relationships, education, and religion. Our only moral guiding principle in a Culture of Violence is the good of a majority of the people, which has resulted in 51% of the people of the world enjoying all the benefits and more and 49% languishing in poverty and starvation and ignorance. And we are happy with this situation. Gandhi said true happiness, peace and freedom will come only when we work for the good of all people. In fact the following paragraph from his writings is significant:

"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 person whom you may have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to her. Will she gain anything by it? Will it restore her to a control over her own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to Swaraj for the hungry and spiritually starving millions?"

"Then you will find your doubts and yourself melting away." (Paraphrased)

The essence of Gandhi's philosophy of life and teaching was responsible behavior, responsible actions, responsible relationships and responsible citizenry. My parents - Manilal and Sushila - and my grandfather taught me well and I have been attempting to live up to their expectations.

A long time ago my mother said to me: "You have tremendous responsibility on your shoulders which will not be very easy to carry. Just remember this simple advice: You may not be able to enhance the glory of your grandfather's name, and that is fine. But please don't do anything to bring dishonor to his name."

On another occasion she also told me: "Don't see this Legacy as a burden because it will just become oppressively heavier as the years go by. Instead see this Legacy as a light that is illuminating the path ahead and keeping you on the right course."

My father, Manilal, the second of four sons that my grandparents had, was also wise and compassionate. They practiced at home what they preached outside. Both my parents were convinced that the first seeds of violence are planted in the minds of children when they are punished for misbehavior. The message the children get is when someone misbehaves or does something bad they must be punished and, of course, in modern jurisprudence punishment is always violent whether at home with children or in the courts of law. The cycle of violence begins in childhood at home.

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It is scientifically proven that children learn from what they see at home rather than what they hear from their parents. Gandhi's constant refrain was: "Live what you want others to learn." This is as true of children at home as it is for adults outside. In other words what we need is responsible parenting and responsible living.

Responsibility covers all aspects of human life. One might say that every step we take has to be thoughtful and responsible or we can end in a total mess. Responsibility transcends the self and flows into societal behavior. Is there a role that all of us need to play in order for the better functioning of society and, if yes, what is the extent of our responsibility? Coming from the Gandhian perspective our responsibility to society is equal to our responsibility for self-preservation.

When I was growing up in Phoenix Ashram near Durban in South Africa I was taught to respect all life - human and animal - and nature. My sisters Sita and Ela and I were never allowed to indulge in classification of human beings especially the concept of master-servant relationship that still persists in human society. Everyone was simply human whatever their race, religion or economic standing, and they had to be addressed with respect. They also taught us our responsibility towards others and they displayed this through their own actions. My parents believed in living simply, so that others could simply live. In Phoenix we were surrounded by very poor African families who barely sustained themselves on the pittance they were paid as farm laborers. We had cows that gave us more milk than we needed and our farm produced more vegetables than we could consume. My mother ran a little shop where she sold the excess milk (some of it was converted to yogurt because the African natives loved yogurt), vegetables and old clothes that she picked up from friends in the city. The prices for these items were ridiculously low. Pennies for a pint of milk or a pound of vegetables, and a shilling or two (less than a dollar) for a coat or trousers or dress. One day I asked my mother why she charged such ridiculously low prices, why not just give it away free? "Just because they are poor," she said, "We should not disrespect them by giving handouts. Even the poor have pride and when they pay for what they need they feel proud and respected." In a materialistic world we are taught just the opposite. Individual success is measured in terms of income and possessions which leads to greed and selfishness. Consequently, those who are marginalized are considered incapable and unmotivated. In a subtle way society relegates them to the status of working class people.

In significant ways we have reduced poverty to modern day slavery. The exploitation of the poor in all parts of the world is widespread and inhuman. They are made to work with no benefits, at the lowest possible wage for the longest number of hours.

In the United States, for instance, our farms and much of the service industry would not function without "illegal" Mexican workers. The operative word is illegal because the employers do not wish to pay benefits nor be governed by the labor laws that a legal immigrant would be entitled to. So, employers seek out the illegal immigrants, pay them as little as they can get away with and offer them no benefits whatsoever.

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It is this loving, compassionate, respectful upbringing that instilled in us the importance of a value-based life. Most importantly, what I learned from my parents and grandparents is that life is not about living for the Self but that our existence should enrich the community and thereby the world. In keeping with this philosophy I have attempted to mold my life according to the respect and responsibilities instilled in me since childhood.

For the first 23 years of my life I lived with my parents in the Phoenix Ashram in South Africa helping my parents with the administration of the Ashram community and in their defiance of the policies of apartheid. In 1956 my father died and I carried his ashes to India for immersion in the River Ganges. While I was consulting with my uncles and aunts about my future course I met a young Indian lady, fell in love and later we decided to marry. Since South Africa under the oppressive apartheid regime did not allow non-white citizens the privilege of marrying abroad and bringing home their spouses I was destined to live in India.

I saw a great deal more poverty and oppression in India, especially in the city of Mumbai and the legacy of responsibilities nudged me towards constructive action. I knew I could never have eliminated poverty and oppression even with a team of dedicated and committed workers but I also knew, in good conscience, that neither my parents nor my grandparents would want me to turn my back and pretend it did not exist.

I remembered the story of the starfish. One morning a man went to the beach just before dawn for a walk. In the dim light he could see someone near the shoreline picking something and releasing it into the water. Intrigued, he went closer to find the man was picking up stranded starfish and putting them back in the water one at a time. There were thousands of starfish all along the shore so the walker said: "Why are you wasting your time? Look at all the starfish all along the shore. You are not going to be able to save all of them, so what difference is it going to make?" The Good Samaritan continued picking up the fish and releasing them. He turned to the walker and releasing a starfish into the water, he said: "It makes a big difference to this guy." The moral of the story is because you cannot solve the whole problem not doing anything should not be an option. I got a few friends together and we discussed our responsibility to do something to help as many people as we could using the "trusteeship and constructive action" aspects of my grandfather's philosophy of nonviolence.

After months of speaking to groups of homeless destitutes we were able to assemble almost 800 people who were willing to participate in our cooperative experiment. They were all so desperate to improve their economic standing that they agreed to whatever we suggested. Since we wanted to simultaneously help rebuild their self-respect and self-confidence we suggested that we register them as a cooperative entity. What helped this process was the fact that poverty had compelled them to find their own entertainment outlets that did not cost any money. Some local person would take the initiative to form a hymn singing chorus, or, if they were more talented, a stage group. They would then have competitions between different localities. They performed out in the open and mostly the poor people

assembled for some moments of joy in their otherwise dreary life. This kind of internal leadership helped us reach out to them.

We could have sought a grant from a foundation or donations from some rich industrialists for the economic program we had in mind, but that was rejected by us because we did not want the poor to feel that they could ask for anything they needed and we would find ways of providing them. Since they were the problem we wanted them to be a part of the solution. So, we convinced them that as a cooperative they should collectively decide to save some money every day to build a corpus fund.

It must be remembered that these people were so poor that many of them lived from meal to meal. It was therefore all the more laudable that they decided they would put aside a half rupee (about 5 cents in 1967-68) each and every day. They worked harder, longer hours, scrimped and saved and shocked us with a collection of Rs.110,000 (approximately \$10,000) at the time. A Kranti Weavers' Cooperative Society was formed, with ten reconditioned power looms to weave cloth. These machines were installed in a modest tin shed in a village south of Mumbai. The group selected 50 people who would go back to the village and run this cloth making unit so that it could become profitable.

These were ignorant unlettered people who had no idea how to run a business but they were intelligent and willing learners. We had to spend time with them and teach them about money management, production, marketing etc. As they became confident we handed over charge to them. Over the years they kept expanding and by 1976 they had three units working and many who had contributed to the initial fund were able to move back to the village and live a decent life with their families. In 1978 through the small savings habit that we instilled in them they were able to open the Kranti Weavers' Cooperative Bank in Mumbai which now has seven branch offices and total assets worth around \$1,000,000. Through the bank they are helping other poor people get micro-loans to start their own enterprises.

Over the years hundreds of thousands have benefitted economically and now live a decent life. Their children have gone to schools and colleges and become professionals. They opened their own schools to teach successive generations and in tangible ways their lives have changed forever. What we are grateful for is that they have not yet succumbed to greed.

While we were engaged in this economic revolution we also came across many newborn babies who were abandoned on the streets. We realized these babies were born to unwed mothers and this is something that society frowns upon so the pregnancy is hidden; mostly through malnourishment the baby does not grow much; at the last moment the girl and her parents would go somewhere to quietly deliver the baby and leave it in the streets for someone to find. Over a period of a dozen years we found and rescued 129 babies and found homes for them - some in countries like Sweden and France - and others in India.

While they are all well settled, there are some poignant stories that are heart-wrenching. In the late 1990s many who were given to loving families in Sweden wrote to me with a request to organize a reunion. My late

wife Sunanda and I were their only link to their motherland, and since we had given them in adoption they were eager to meet us. We went to Sweden in 1999 and spent a weekend with some 30 of the adopted children, teenagers by then, with their adoptive parents. We had several discussions to share their lives with us and it seemed they were all very happy except in one respect. They were all very eager to find their biological parent and wanted our help. They explained that ever since they started going to school they heard all the children talking about which parent they looked like and whose eyes and hair they had inherited. These adopted children did not resemble either of their adoptive parents. They were also eager to know the medical histories they had inherited from their biological parents.

I considered myself responsible for the lives of these children because I was the one who had to decide where and to whom the baby would be given. I am grateful that I have not yet come across any who blame me for destroying their life. I asked the group why were they so eager to find their biological parent. I explained that in the Indian culture it is rare that a mother would give her true identity when abandoning a baby. All the babies that we gave in adoptions were found on the streets without any documentation of their birth or parents. In a country of 1.2 billion it would be difficult to find their parent. I concluded my explanation with an apology: "I thought I was doing the right thing by giving you to Swedish families who appeared very loving and caring," I said. "However, if you now feel that I made a mistake and that you would be happier living in the orphanage in India then please forgive me." For several moments there was pin-drop silence in the room and then they all got up in unison and proclaimed: "You have resolved our problem. We resemble you so we are just going to consider you to be our parents." That was one of the rare moments when I sobbed tears of gratitude and relief. Now sometimes to befuddle people when asked how many children I have I proudly say 131. Then I explain that I have 129 adopted and 2 biological children.

Finding Indian families to adopt was much more challenging. They feel if they are going to adopt then they have the right to shop around for a baby. They would come to us with specifications for the kind of baby they wanted and we generally rejected such applications. Once we had a request from an Indian Airlines pilot. He and his wife had no children. While the pilot was quite happy living a childless existence his wife was not. When she realized babies could be adopted she pleaded and persuaded her husband to adopt. He finally gave in and said he would adopt only a boy with fair complexion. Because he was a friend I said I will see what can be done but the chances were slim. Boys were not often abandoned and for some reason, when abandoned, the mortality rate among boys was higher than girls.

A few weeks after this discussion I went one lunch hour to visit a baby that was hospitalized because she was severely malnourished. While I sat by the bed playing with the little girl a nurse came to me and asked: "What do you do with these abandoned babies?" "Find loving homes for them and give them in adoption," I explained. "We have a baby girl who was abandoned in this hospital and for the past six months we nurses have been pooling our

money to take care of her. Can you find a home for her?" "Yes," I said. "But, we would have to go through a legal process. Can I see the baby?" I asked.

We went upstairs to a special room and the moment the nurse opened the door I saw this beautiful six month old chubby baby girl standing up in her crib with a wide smile on her face. She just clung to me and wanted to play. That evening when I got home I told my wife about this baby and said: "I have a feeling we should persuade our pilot friend to see her." My wife reminded me that he wanted only a boy. Nevertheless, I called him and asked him to come with me the next morning just to see the baby. It took me an hour to convince him that he did not have to take the baby but just as a friend come and see her. He finally broke down and said he and his wife would swing by the next morning and pick me and my wife and we would go to the hospital together.

What I suspected happened. The moment we walked into the room the baby giggled with laughter and wanted to be picked up. The pilot and his wife melted like butter in a sizzling pan. They wanted to take her right away. I said they couldn't because the legal procedure would take at least a week. The pilot and his wife went wild. They shopped for baby clothes and toys to fill a couple of suitcases and every day until the legal procedures were completed they went to the hospital and spent the whole day with the baby. I wondered what would happen if the judge ruled against giving the baby to them. For their sake I prayed that all would end well. They did get the baby and she became the princess of the household.

Another Indian couple that approached us were eager for a baby. They did not mind taking a girl. We were told that the wife was informed by doctors that she would never get pregnant. We found a baby girl for the couple and they were overjoyed. Some months later we were informed that the wife had miraculously become pregnant and that she would be delivering a boy. The couple, understandably, were in ecstasy. My wife and I, of course, were very concerned when we heard this knowing that in Indian society a girl was relegated to second place and an adopted girl would fall even lower. One day we visited the couple and suggested that since they were expecting a biological son they may want to consider giving the adopted girl back so that we could find another home for her. Of course, they would have none of that. "She is our princess and has brought good luck to our home, we will not part with her. If you wish we will abort the baby boy but please do not take our princess from us," they wept.

It was a very poignant moment that deeply touched our hearts. The reason I share these stories is because I feel life gives us opportunities to realize our responsibilities and we can either shirk them or shoulder them. Turning away from poverty or from abandoned babies is normal and society is not going to castigate anyone who does. What is one's understanding of responsibility and to what extent one wishes to shoulder them is ultimately one's own choice. One can show you or one can teach you about responsibility but ultimately it is like the proverbial horse that is taken to the pond but he won't drink if he does not want to.

