

# Nonviolence & Us

by Arun Gandhi

Modern society is plagued by violence - at home, at work, in the streets, in schools. In fact anywhere there is, unfortunately, the distinct likelihood of violence breaking out. So much violence is an indication of our deteriorating human relationships, as well as the stress under which we live and work.

Many of us enjoy living in the "fast lane" because that, we are told, is the road to success. So we allow our minds to street us at phenomenal speed, oblivious of the danger of crashing. When we live on the edge day after day we become like taut rubber bands - either we break or we bounce back. And in either case, the consequence is that we damage or destroy human relationships. What we must learn now is how to rebuild those relationships and lessen the stress so we can create an atmosphere of harmony around us.

We need a qualitative change in our behavior, a concerned attempt to slow down and put people and profit on the same pedestal so we can ultimately reduce violence.

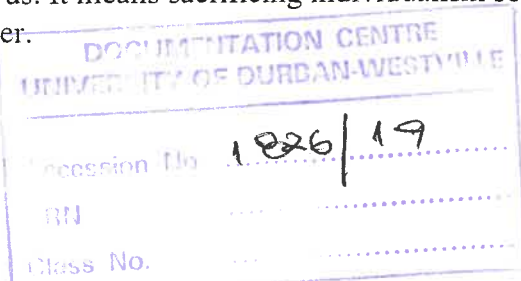
*In a pell mell world of profits and the pursuit of success, we must not forget to care about one another.*

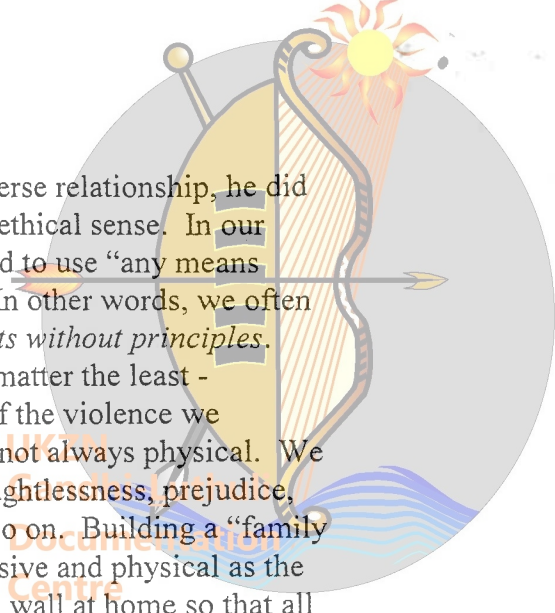
Note that I emphasize the *reduction* of violence. The creation of utopian state of absolute harmony is presently beyond human capacity. The philosophy of nonviolence, as practiced by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, is based on the assumption "we are not governed by logic and, therefore, some violence may be necessary in our lives. However, if we are progressing towards civilization we should be able to reduce violence to the bare minimum."

In the world so obsessed with materialism, one must wonder what "civilization" really means. Are we civilized because we possess all the riches of the world? Are we civilized because we have the best of book education? Are we civilized because we have progressed scientifically and have the capacity to send people to the moon? In our concept of civilization, human relations, it seems, do not fit the equation.

American society is, reputedly, built on *rugged individualism*, which was fine when pioneers came to conquer the land. But once settled, a society cannot thrive on such individualism. A nation is as cohesive as its society and the society is as cohesive as the family. If every member of a family thought only about himself or herself, the "family" would be more like a collection of people grappling for material survival under the same roof. There would be no love, no cooperation. When understanding wears thin, relationships begin to fray, and before we know it the fabric we call "family" disintegrates. The effect of this domestic disaster is reflected today in our workplace and in society.

Strong relationships can be built only if we shift the focus from the *self* to the *several* and begin thinking about others around us. It means sacrificing individualism so that we can give and get strength from each other.





When Gandhi said materialism and morality have an inverse relationship, he did not mean morality only in sexual sense. He meant it also in the ethical sense. In our pursuit of material goods and capital gains, we are often prepared to use “any means possible,” throwing principles, ethics, and morality overboard. In other words, we often unhesitatingly indulge in *commerce without morality* and *profits without principles*.

In our headlong pursuit of the ideal life, people seem to matter the least - sometimes even our own people. This sets the stage for much of the violence we experience in our daily lives. Violence, we must understand, is not always physical. We practice a great deal of *passive violence*: greed, selfishness, thoughtlessness, prejudice, bigotry, exploitation, suppression, oppression, hate, anger, and so on. Building a “family tree” of violence, such as the one shown in the **Figure**, with passive and physical as the two offspring, is a revealing exercise. This chart should adorn a wall at home so that all family members could participate in researching each act of passive violence committed. This is an effective way of recognizing our weaknesses and searching for ways to turn them into strengths.

Passive violence causes anger and anger leads to physical violence. The lack of physical violence in our homes or neighborhoods should not necessarily be construed as peace and harmony. The underlying passive violence simmers like a cauldron waiting to erupt into physical violence - which erupts because we are not taught how to deal with the anger generated by the passive violence. We are repeatedly told, “Get it out of your system,” but we are seldom, if ever, shown how to do this effectively.

Using the analogy of electricity, Gandhi, my grandfather, taught me about anger when I was 13 years old. He said that anger can be as deadly as electricity if we abuse it, or just as useful if treated with respect and intelligence. He suggested that I keep an “anger journal” into which I should pour my anger without inhibition, then read it periodically to find ways of improving. A life that is not periodically examined, after all, is a life not worth living. Gandhi said that the cardinal principles of my life should be: *Do not do to others what you do not want others to do to you*. This helped me find ways to deal with my anger positively. The journal also provided me with a written record of my emotions so that weeks, months, or even years later I could study the changes that did or did not take place in me. It taught me how to become selfless and think about others while thinking about myself.

Violence, anywhere, in any form, is reprehensible - especially at home and in the workplace, because this means we are committing violence against people we are expected to love, honor, and respect. If we do not hesitate to violate the people closest to us, why would we hesitate to harm those we don’t know? Salvation lies in changing the self before we attempt to change the society. To quote my grandfather: “We must be the change we wish to see.”

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This article appeared as one of two articles on the grimmest of workplace phenomena: **homicide** in *Business Horizons*/ March-April 1995. The full extent of this problem appears subject to some debate, but no one who reads the newspapers or listen to CNN

Headlines News escapes the conclusion that violence is spilling over from the streets onto the job. Thus, it seems quite appropriate - doubly so, in view of a forthcoming issue featuring an article from A.T. Kearney's research sizing up India as the "New Asian Tiger" - that we examine the following reflection by Mr. Arun Gandhi, grandson of the Mahatma, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.



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*(Please see Family Tree of Violence on back)*

*Figure: Family Tree of Violence*

