

The Ripple Effect of Ahimsa

Gandhi's beliefs in action

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“Service is not possible unless it is rooted in love and ahimsa. The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.” This was a tenet of Mahatma Gandhi, one of the greatest leaders in history. Gandhi believed that by living a life focused beyond your own personal needs you are able to better serve humanity and make the world a better place.

He was not alone in these beliefs. Many great leaders throughout history have touted the importance of serving others. Confucius said: “He who wishes to secure the good of others, has already secured his own”. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was greatly inspired by Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence and belief in the importance and satisfaction of serving. He felt that if the world were to change it would take the efforts of many: “ Everybody can be great because anybody can serve”.

Never has this philosophy been more relevant than today. With the weakening of the global economy, the need for help is greater than ever. There are many people without jobs, children who are hungry, and people without medical services or the basic things needed to get by in life. In order for the world to be in better balance these needs have to be met. It is our duty as a society to help others. As individuals we can each do this in our own way, and hope that our actions ripple out and encourage others to do the same.

Serving others can start at the smallest level. An action as simple as donating your outgrown clothes or unused toys demonstrates an act of compassion. That action becomes even more powerful when people work together. At St. Michael’s, we often hold food drives and fundraisers, and collect donations benefiting local charities. Gandhi believed that as you serve others, not only do you serve yourself, but you come

to learn more about yourself and how your deeds can change a life. When asked by a friend if his objective to serve was purely humanitarian, Gandhi replied: "I am here to serve no one else but myself, to find my own self-realization through the service of these village folk". He realized that helping others doesn't always start altruistically. I experienced this personally. Our school requires us to put in 20 hours of community service during the summer after seventh grade. I chose to perform my service at the Community Farm in Jamestown. At first, I wasn't enamored with the idea of digging in the dirt, planting seeds or weeding the long beds. But as I spent time there, I realized how much I was helping others through my efforts. I began to look forward to the days I was working there alongside people from my community, and I continued working at the farm long after my community service hours had been met. It was very rewarding to see that by working together we were able to grow 16,000 pounds of vegetables, which fed hundreds of people. What started out as something I resisted became something that gave me great internal satisfaction. I learned that through my little efforts I could help make others' lives easier.

The idea of serving can work on a grander scale as well. Gandhi encouraged people to "recall the face of the poorest and weakest man whom you have seen and ask yourself if the next step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him". We must understand the real needs of others and put our efforts into things that really help them. A friend of our family went to Ghana on a small project to help children learn to read. Her mother was so moved by her daughter's stories that she put together a plan to build the area's first library. She secured book donations and free freight on book shipments to make this happen. More family members got involved. One of them has started an

organization in Ghana to help women make and sell their own jewelry, so that they can achieve financial independence. The grandfather, a professor at Providence College, learned of the sanitation crisis in Ghana and developed an inexpensive stand-alone toilet stall that uses very little water and can be purchased by individuals or shared by a village. The project won a grant from the Gates Foundation, which will enable him to produce more toilets for Ghana. This one family has improved the lives of many through their efforts.

A good deed can ripple out in many ways; not only through its effect on those being served, but by encouraging others to serve. I believe that if people were to live by Gandhi's ideals the world would be a better place.