

## Gandhi Foundation Annual Lecture 2023

### Paul Blazely – Becoming Gandhi

Dear Friends, thanks for doing me the honour of asking me to speak to you today. Whenever I'm asked to do something like this, something I've not done before, I always feel a stab of fear and my shadow-self tells me that I'm not qualified to do it. Whether its to be the trustee of a peace charity or play Gandhi or speak to a group of eminent people such as yourselves. But I also have a practice of trying to say yes, whenever the Universe presents me with an opportunity or challenge so here I am.

I have just finished playing Gandhi in the National Theatre's production of Anupama Chandrasekhar's wonderful play The Father and the Assassin. The play begins with Nathuram Godse (Gandhi's assassin) suggesting that if we hear his version of events, we will end up building temples in his honour. (Something that is actually happening in present day India.) In one way the play is an examination of what might turn someone into a premeditated murderer. But I also like to think of it as an anti polarisation, anti Cancel-culture play. It asks us to put aside our prejudices and to genuinely stand in this young mans shoes. In the way that Gandhi always asked us to. Then it suggests we make our own minds up.

I've been asked to talk a little about what brought me to the place of playing Gandhi, how I prepared, how I used the practice of spinning to deepen my performance and what I learned from this process.

A little bit about me. My parents are both from Chennai and moved to England in the early 60's. I was born in 1968 in South London and grew up in a very humble, unartsey family setting. There were no books in my house, but alot of delicious Indian food and a family that spoke of this magical place that I had never visited. The India of the 50s and 60s that they described seemed to be colourful, vibrant and alive in a way that the dull England of the 70s was not. Actually I think my parents and Aunties and Uncles were just mourning their youth and bemoaning middle age, but that passed me by as a child. I was a timid boy who was not sporty and suffered from a malaise that many second generation immigrants felt. I felt that I didn't quite belong and was not welcome in the only country that I had ever called home. And that this difference was very easily spotted because of the colour of my skin. I also felt an unsettling fear of lots of things. The dark, death, bullies at school, the disapproval of authority figures.

One of the seminal experiences of my childhood was of our family going to the Odeon in Croydon to see the Richard Attenborough film, Gandhi. I was 14. It was unusual for a number of reasons. Firstly I was taken with my Mum AND Dad. My Dad never went to see films. Secondly we were at the cinema on a weekday evening and there were only adults in the audience. Thirdly there was alot of other Indian people in the audience, beautiful saris and turbans etc. Finally the subject matter indelibly marked me. Ben Kingsley's beautiful performance captured a small frail man who wielded a power that was not violence, but that could ultimately overcome it. To

a child brought up on Star Wars and Tom and Jerry this was absolutely revolutionary. I felt changed but had no idea what to do with the information I'd received. I was still scared of the boys at school, I didn't know that Gandhi's teaching and methods could be learned and applied to my own life.

I sought sanctuary in drama. Here was a relatively safe world where I felt I was seen for the first time without being at risk from that visibility. I soon realised that people also seemed to like what I was doing. I could make people laugh or move them. It was addictive. Being from an immigrant family I had no conception that one could make a living from this kind of activity. My Dad was very keen for me to go into computing. And so was I really. But at sixth form my rebellious streak finally started to match some bravery in me and I decided to go to drama school. From there an acting career developed. I've had some very lean times but I've also been lucky enough to work at the very highest levels with some of the most talented people in the world. My wife (who is a script writer) and I have also managed to pay the bills and bring up two children.

But I was always missing something. My parents are Christian and my Dad loved to sing in the choir so I was often at church as a kid. I loved the idea of Jesus but couldn't make sense of the fact that, according to the Church, my non-Christian friends would not be allowed into heaven. I just didn't buy it, so left it at the age of 18. After a few years of hedonism and acting-as-religion ( I wouldn't recommend it) I rediscovered the spiritual world. I had always been drawn to environmentalism and finally found a

Review of a book called "Your life is your Message" in Satish Kumar's Resurgence magazine. It was a book by the mediation teacher Eknath Easwaran about Gandhi's life and message. I was hooked. I began to meditate straight away and started my journey to learn more about Gandhi, his life and his philosophy. Easwaran had also written what is to me the most important book I've read about Gandhi. Its called '**Gandhi the man**' and is an examination of how Gandhi transformed himself from a timid child and average lawyer, into the man who overcame an Empire without firing a shot. His spiritual journey rather than his political one.

Western Culture likes to keep Gandhi in the box of politician, brilliant strategist etc. it absolutely does not like to consider the spiritual source from which his strength and inspiration came. But to me all the greatest leaders of the last Century are people who are essentially powered by spirit. Desmond Tutu, Martin Luther King, the Dalai Lama, etc. I met one of Easwaran's students. A professor called Michael Nagler who taught a course on Gandhian nonviolence at Berkeley University and now runs the Metta Center for Nonviolence. I took his lecture course remotely and so began to learn an awful lot more about Gandhian philosophy, particularly the two branches of Constructive and Obstructive program. I also started to voice some of Easwaran's books as audio books (Easwaran had left instructions that his books should only be voiced by a long term meditator). I voiced the book Gandhi the Man and his meditation book, 'Passage Meditation'. But I also voiced his biography of one of Gandhi's great followers Abdhul Gaffar Khan or Badshah Khan who led the Pathans and set up the first

ever nonviolent army- the Kudhai Kidmatgars. And I also voiced Easwaran's translations and guide to The Bhagavad Gita, The Upanishads and the Dhammapada of the Buddha. I started to understand the Vedanta, the philosophical underpinning of Gandhi's world view.

I wanted to *practice* Nonviolence. So I took a course on Nonviolent Communication or NVC developed by Marshall Rosenberg. It was completely transformative. For the first time I started to feel that I might be able to personally meet the challenge of conflict and even violence in my own life, without resorting to violence myself. My wife and i started to attend a Quaker Meeting where I was eventually asked to sit on a committee that allocated resources to grassroots peacebuilding initiatives led by local people in countries in East Africa. Through my NVC I was also asked to be a board member of a small peace building charity called OpenEdge Transforming Conflict.

I never thought I would *play* Gandhi. I was then too young and am still too tall. But time passes and when the director of The Father and the Assassin, Indhu Rubasingam, asked me to play him at the National Theatre last year, I realised that maybe I had spent decades preparing for the role without ever knowing it. It was a daunting prospect but I knew that I had to do it. Still, I warned the director that if she cast me I would be a constant thorn in her side. Gandhi was bigger than us or any play, so we had to be sure that every single word he spoke was in keeping with our best understanding of Gandhi and his philosophy. I was lucky that Anupama is a very generous

playwright. She was open to collaboration during rehearsals and I was constantly approaching their desk with a copy of Gandhi the Man in my hands, in order to suggest a change or a cut or a more spiritual version of the same words. Indhu was more interested in the political side of him so we had many lively discussions, but in the end we managed to meet in the middle. One exchange that summed up our discussions was the day that Indhu suggested that the scene in which we are preparing for the Salt March was too long. She suggested we cut the line “our Cause is just, our means are strong and God is with us” as they didn’t really add anything to the plot. I countered that they were the most important lines in the whole play and that she could cut anything else but that! The rest of the cast grew accustomed to having to sit around while we thrashed it out.

So how did I prepare before rehearsals began? I knew that an impersonation was not going to be enough or satisfying for the audience. I needed to portray something of the essence of Gandhi as a human being, not an icon. What is a saint anyway? The West is uncomfortable with them. they either want to pull them down or keep them safely on the shelf as a myth. Or there is the devotee’s view that a saint is perfect and cannot be portrayed in any other way. But if someone is perfect then how can we hope to empathise with them or more importantly emulate them in any way? A favourite technique of cancel culture is also to smear a figure from history so that we no longer have to consider their views or teachings. (I’m afraid that the modern Left is probably more guilty of this than people on the Right these days). But if this is the case then we have to

discard most of the knowledge of history. For instance Einstein was in an abusive relationship with his first wife, does this mean we have to discard his theories of Relativity?

One of the interesting things about Gandhi is that I discovered that you can mention him to literally ANYONE and they know who he is. They might know nothing else about his life and message but they can see a picture in their minds of the little man in the loin cloth who talked about peace. Is that because his image is so memorable and easy to copy? Or is it because of something deep in his message and the revolutionary nature of his life and achievements? Maybe a bit of both. So how to find a human being behind that image?

I started by avoiding any portrayals of him or commentaries on him. I wanted to return to the source. I read My Experiments with Truth and read and reread Hind Swaraj. I couldn't believe how prescient and modern Hind Swaraj felt. I found in it a man who I believe was literally a hundred years ahead of his time but who's source document and inspiration was the ancient Bhagavad Gita. His story of the world seemed diametrically opposed to the modern Western one.

The philosopher Charles Eisenstein talks of the fact that we are occupying a space between stories as a culture. The still dominant story of the West that has spread through the ruling classes of the world, but is now hollowed out and teetering, is the Story of Separation. It is the story of Empires and our attempt to dominate nature and each other through history. In this materialist view you and I are forever separate and what is

good for you may not be good for me and vice versa. In this world view it is inevitable that i should try to maximise my good at your expense. It is a world where the only kind of force is physical and the more of it you have, the more powerful you are.

Eisenstein then identifies a New and Ancient Story that is springing up all over the world. It is, as Thich Nhat Hann calls it the Story of Interbeing. You and I and all beings are essentially one. Different expressions of the same underlying consciousness. What harms you must eventually harm me and what is good for you must eventually be good for me. In this world view there are other powers in the Universe than plain physical force. This is the world view of Ahimsa, that Gandhi brought back into the modern world. Nonviolence. In English it sounds like a negative of something. But in Sanskrit the word has a wholly positive implication, more like the English words Flawless or Priceless The Upanishads say that Ahimsa is the highest Dharma of the Universe. Gandhi discovered this and set about applying it to the modern world. It is a worldview where as BR Nanda said, “you can lose every battle but still win the war” . **For Gandhi, there was no distinction between the moral choice and the most effective or practical choice.**

So here was his philosophy, but what was he like physically. Who did that make him as an embodied individual?

I found the wonderful documentary Mahatma, Produced by The Gandhi National Memorial Fund in cooperation with the



Films Division of the Government of India in the year I was born 1968.

Its five hours long but absolutely absorbing. It contains virtually all the footage we have of Gandhi. Of course most of the footage is silent but what you see is someone who is always laughing. Always reaching out physically to friends and opponents alike. And someone who seems to be able to make those around him laugh whether it was Nehru or Jinnah or the Viceroy. I discovered a direct quote of his that says "If I did not have a sense of humour I would have killed myself long ago". This image of the laughing sage very strongly brought to mind my images of the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu. I found a wonderful documentary about them called Joy. The South African Govt would not grant the Dalai lama a visa to visit his old friend, so Desmond Tutu went to spend some time with the Dalai Lama in India. I think it was the last time they were together in their physical bodies. The documentary shows two people who never stop laughing but who can in the next breath be talking about deep spiritual truths and how they apply to the modern world. How much more fun they seem than the clever Western materialists who dominate our modern culture. Would you rather be stuck on a desert island with Desmond Tutu or Richard Dawkins? There's a beautiful moment when the Dalai Lama is asked what Tutu means to him. He quietly says that when he is on his deathbed he will think of Tutu. Tutu is clearly overcome and just holds his hand. The next minute they are laughing together again.

So their voices and physicality and especially their laughter were what I wanted to bring to an embodiment of Gandhi.

Of course on stage we have less of the real world to work with than on film. We are not in the heat of India in a real village. But one of the main physical things we do have is costume. When you move from the rehearsal room to the dress rehearsal onstage, to step into costume can have a visceral effect on you. We were lucky enough that the designer Rajha Shakiry had insisted that we use Khadi for our costumes. Khadi is the traditional handspun cloth that Gandhi championed. She teamed up with Khadi London who supplied us with all the Khadi we needed. Suddenly I was on stage wearing a short dhoti and shawl made from beautiful Khadi. The effect was dramatic. I realised that Gandhi gained a great deal of power from wearing very little. When he visited Buckingham palace in his shawl and Dhoti, Churchill was enraged. When he was asked about it, Gandhi said "The king was wearing enough clothes for both of us." Humour without any malice behind it. It was the same as when Gandhi stood in front of a crowd of Pathans in the Border region all with Rifles slung over their shoulders. He asked them "What are you afraid of that you have to carry guns? I fear nothing" They all threw their guns to the ground.

Even onstage to wear so little seemed to be a challenge to my own sense of self and definitely had an effect on the actors around me. The genius of Gandhi was that he would enact his principles physically. By deciding to only wear two items of clothing, to insist that everyone spend time creating their own

cloth, to be vegetarian. Whatever the action, it spoke greater volumes than any preaching could. And coupled with his words it could move mountains. Anupama's grandmother saw him speak at a park as a little girl. And to this day she only owns four saris.

And so this brings us to spinning. It was a surprise to me when I was told that a Khadi expert was being brought in to teach me spinning. I didn't realise I was doing it in the play and also didn't know that our antique spinning wheel prop even worked. When Asha Buch arrived I immediately felt that effect of someone who has been living their principles for decades. She quietly and calmly taught me to spin. Those of you who spin know that it takes less than half an hour to learn, but probably years to master. She showed me how simple the machine was to maintain and how even a child could do it. And yet the technology is beautiful, elegant and clever. Gandhi took an ancient, village grown, technology that anyone could do, and realised that with it he could challenge the terrible injustice of the British Empire, where Indians produced the cotton but then had to sell it to British traders to pay their taxes and then pay again to buy back the cloth once it had been made into clothes in British Industrial Mills. His Obstructive program was to make the British Empire less and less profitable. His Constructive program was to have everyone from the Prime Minister to the sweeper spinning their own cloth. It encompasses localisation, decentralisation, and common people owning the means of production of essentials and thus freeing them from unjust power structures.

More than this it reconnected people to the soil, to a sense of place. For centuries Western Culture has been moving in the direction of devaluing the soil, the land, people who work with their hands. The most highly valued members of our society are those who work with the pen or the laptop. The class that found Lockdown so pleasant because they could sit in their nice gardens tapping away on their laptops and getting their food and other necessities delivered to them by the working classes for whom lockdown was a luxury they could not afford.

The person who actually grows food or carves wood or spins cloth has become a looked-down-upon addendum to 'real' society. And yet Gandhi argued that if you are dependent on someone else for your food or clothing or shelter, then you are actually the lower class person. I'm not a very handy person. I have grown food for myself and I like to have my hands in the soil but I have never really made anything myself. I soon realised the power of spinning. I knew it intellectually, I had done my online courses in constructive program after all. But to sit with a handful of cotton fibres and watch them become thread in front of your eyes with just the help of a simple Charka, was a lesson that you cannot learn on a laptop. The same as planting a tiny tomato seed in the spring and having handfuls of tomatoes in September.

I also realised that spinning was tricky and addictive. I needed to practice if I was to do it on stage so I started spinning every day in rehearsals whenever I wasn't needed. The company would laugh at Gandhi spinning in the corner, but they all

came one by one over the weeks to marvel at this thread appearing out of nowhere.

We have become so dislocated from the land, from a sense of belonging, from a sense of empowerment. We are so impoverished by this. It also marks the insanity of our culture. we grow apples in Kent and then ship them to China to be polished, then ship them back again. (this is literally true) we are destroying our habitats our fellow species and our own happiness. It doesn't make sense. But of course it does make sense because every skill that we lose, is more money in the pockets of big business people who, like the Empire before them, deskill us so that they can sell us back the things we used to be able to make for ourselves. Now even our childcare and entertainment are sold back to us to give us more time to work for money to pay back the debts that we have all accrued in order to keep the system growing.

Spinning cloth was Gandhi's symbolic and actual rejection of this system.

So I was spinning, I was wearing Khadi I was visualising the laughter and body language of Tutu and the Dalai Llama. We had settled on the right words. It was very important, for instance that we had a definition of Ahimsa that was not just 'not being physically violent'. Peace is not just a state of permanent cease fire. We settled on the term "a complete lack of ill will" for if you bear no other person or creature ill will. If their welfare is genuinely important to you, then all else will follow.

Finally I would ask Gandhi to join me every evening. I firmly believe in the Greek concept of the Muses. We as artists are not making these things as Western materialism would have you believe. We are not just regurgitating ideas from our past experiences like a clever AI. I believe that all art is a channelling of creative powers that lie outside ourselves. The singer, the sculptor, the actor, the writer. On stage I am a channel for Anupama who is a channel for Gandhi who is a channel for Krishna. To the extent that we can lose ourselves we can then let in those creative powers that can then flow through us. So every night in the wings I would invite Bapu to walk with me and keep me grounded. Sometimes I would see my own shadow on the floor with my bald head and the walking stick in my hand and physically feel him there with me.

I try to do that with any character fictional or real. To invite them in. To meet them. In this case it was a blessing and a privilege to walk some distance with him.

From audience feedback I can report that some of them felt that presence too. The play certainly brought Gandhi to the attention of a lot of people, particularly young people who really knew nothing of him. And I know from my own 14 year-old self, that once he's in your head, all sorts of wonderful things can happen.

So what can we learn from Gandhi and apply to today? What have I learnt from this process?

Gandhi envisaged an India organised around Village Democracy, not a system where the great and the good decide what's best for the little people - a trait of both capitalism and socialism. Gandhi trusted the people. Is this unrealistic? Nehru, Patel and Jinnah certainly thought so and took India and Pakistan in the opposite direction. And I do believe that had Gandhi lived he would have possibly ended up back in prison. His great lieutenant Badshah Khan spent more time in prison under the Pakistan Government than he did under the British. To be fair he did live till he was 98 and never stopped attempting beautiful mischief.

So his idea of Village Democracy may seem unrealistic, But Barcelona in the 30s made a go of it. And today the Kurds have taken advantage of the chaos of the Syrian civil war and have formed a small state called Rojava, where village democracy is the organisational heart. Interestingly both these experiments have naturally placed women at the centre of decision making. David Graeber and David Wengrow have shown us in their excellent new book, *The Dawn of Everything*, that contrary to popular belief, humans have constantly experimented with incredibly exotic (to our eyes) ways of organising ourselves. There is nothing inevitable about our current, top - down system.

Tyson Yunkaporta tells us in his book *Sandtalk*, of the completely different world view of the Aboriginal people of Australia. A world view where people belong to the land and act accordingly. Again the opposite of what we do. What Gandhi did is show us that even in our complex modern world, these ideas can be reintroduced. Just because something hasn't

existed, doesn't mean that it cannot be dreamt into being. This is the beauty of the human species. We can imagine something and work together to make it happen.

Now I'm not expecting our so-called leaders to lock the doors of the Houses of Parliament, declare the nation-state a failed experiment and hand power back to the people any time soon. (although anything is POSSIBLE). We need to oppose their excesses with Obstructive Program.

But lets also talk about Constructive Program. One of Gandhi's gigantic contributions was to realise that if we only oppose, we have nothing to put in the corrupt system's place. Think of the Arab Spring.

Khadi was the cornerstone of his constructive program. Could we introduce spinning into every household in Britain or even in Middle Class India? Its possible. But at the heart of the philosophy of Khadi is a return. A return to the land, a return to localism and non-hierarchical organisation. A return to a sense of belonging to place. I believe that farming might be a major part of the Constructive Program that we need. We have become disconnected from our food and clothes to a degree that Gandhi could not have imagined. Look at the work of modern Ghandians like Vandana Shiva and Satish Kumar.

We all need to start to grow food.

Its something that everyone, young and old, can do. It is symbolic but it also can be eaten. Home grown food tastes great



and empowers. Whether you have a garden with chickens or a pot of basil on the windowsill of your flat.

I volunteer on a Regenerative farm in Sussex. Lovebrook Farm. A lot of people come just for their mental health. Why does it make you feel so good? It's something that Western culture completely discounts.

*Regenerative* farming also sequesters mindboggling amounts of carbon in the soil, it holds water in the land, it employs people in creative land work rather than the back-breaking menial labour of agribusiness. And of course regenerative agriculture means the growing and local production of the clothes that we wear. Khadi London's skills will come to the fore after all.

Our culture has trapped us in the notion that to save the world we have to GIVE UP something, we have to stop being such greedy mean evil people. We need to wear hair shirts and live in poverty without all our pretty toys. Isn't that what Gandhi had to do?

The message of Gandhi is that all our pretty toys, our cars and phones and TVs, are masking a deep hunger *that they can never satisfy*. The things that we have lost are the things that materialism can never meet. We've lost connection to the rest of Nature, the more-than-human world, and this isn't just spiritual. Studies have shown that our gut microbiome is a shadow of a hunter-gatherer in the Amazon for instance. Chronic illness has increased exponentially since the 50s. How many people do you know are on some kind of anti-depressant?

The root of the Sanskrit word Maya is ‘that which can be measured’. Western culture only values what can be measured. In fact it doesn’t believe that anything else even *exists*. But what do humans really value? Companionship, joy, music, laughter, love. All unmeasurable, all priceless.

Our new Constructive Program needs to show people that they don’t need to give up anything. It’s a win-win scenario. The drug addict doesn’t lose anything when he gives up the drugs that are killing him. Instead he gains real community and meaning.

In the modern world, People are having to go to greater and greater lengths to have any sense of adventure or meaning. Freeclimbing perilous mountain slopes, rowing solo across the Atlantic, developing Virtual Reality that will make you feel like “you are actually there”. Could we find that meaning and sense of adventure, in our own homes and communities? Remember the joy of Gandhi. when asked why he never took a vacation he said “I am always on vacation.”

We look at the world this week and we may be tempted to say that Gandhi failed. The violence, the suffering, the terrible polarisation. But of course these stories are only part of the human experience. The part that the media loves to show us to keep us helpless and afraid.

To quote Gandhi:

“History (and the news), is a record of an *interruption* of the course of nature. Soul-force, being natural, is not noted in history.”

All the millions of people this very moment, loving their families, overcoming difficult conflicts peacefully, caring for a dying loved one with no external reward or even recognition. The daily acts of heroism without which we would have gone extinct millennia ago.

To quote Gandhi again:

“As a Satyagrahi I hold to the faith that all activity pursued with a pure heart is bound to bear fruit, whether or not such fruit is visible to us.”

And of course the fruit is all around us even if we can't see it immediately. There are the large figures who were inspired by him. Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela etc. But there are also the smaller, less easily seen figures. The students of the Nonviolent revolution of Serbia that brought down Milosovic, the People Powered protests of Indonesia that translate Satyagraha as “Offering Dignity”. One of the best definitions I have seen. The protests of Occupy Wall Street or XR, in fact pretty much every activist organisation these days has Nonviolence as a central tenet. That was unthinkable before Gandhi. And what about the countless tiny Constructive Program movements all around the world who may have been inspired by him or one of his followers?

His work has spread in a million different directions like a wave of tiny ants. There are too many of us for the authorities to stamp on, no matter how much they extend the powers of

control. And as an army of ants can bring down an elephant. Our nonviolent army is unstoppable. I think Gandhi would say that we have already won. The powers that be just don't know it yet. And maybe we don't quite believe it yet too. And of course there will be only winners in this revolution. The Corporate CEO and the secret policeman will have the joy of turning in their toxic riches and weapons, to discover the community and belonging that *we* already know is possible.

So as we look around us let us use our knowledge of Gandhi. Local action. Community empowerment and education, producing at least some of the things we need ourselves.

We can't all work on the scale of Gandhi. The real question that we need to ask ourselves is: What is *mine* to do?

For instance, I sometimes think that I should give up acting to work on my friend's farm full time, or to retrain to work full time for OpenEdge as a peace worker. And maybe one or both of those things are in store for me. But at the moment I seem to also be called to be a story teller. And a father and child to my elderly parents. And to play Gandhi will very possibly be the highlight of my storytelling career.

As the Gita says: Do the work that is before you, leave the results to God.

I will leave you with one last quote from the Mahatma:

“The cause is great, the remedy is equally great; let us prove worthy of them both.”

Thank you