

SPINNING WHEEL BIRTHDAY:

An Alternative View of the World

BY MICHAEL NAGLER

October 2nd, 2006 marked the 137th anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's birth, and this seems an appropriate time to imagine what our world would look like today if we had followed his challenging experiments.

For one thing, globalism as we know it – the centralization of worldwide marketing forces coupled with the imposition of a dominant, materialist culture – would not be happening. In its place would be the playing out of a principle called *svadeshi* or 'local orientation.' In this key Gandhian idea, one always begins with the resources (and problems) nearest at hand. When that core is secure (and only then) one's circle of influence expands into wider circles naturally. When we avoid the temptation to solve other people's problems before we've solved our own (think democracy in Iraq) and start close to home, our influence can propagate throughout the world – the way Gandhi's success with India's liberation struggle spread, among other places, to the civil rights movement in the U.S.

Svadeshi, in its economic mode, led to the rebirth of cottage industry, versions of which are today putting organic food on our tables and clothes on the backs of some of us here in the developed world. Behind it lay Gandhi's distrust of mass communication and the transport of less-than-necessary goods vast distances for purposes of profit. In the culture mode, Gandhi took *svadeshi* to the extreme of discouraging the use of English in place of India's many regional languages (one of the few areas in which he may have been mistaken, in my view).



Svadeshi is not provincialism. Narrowness of outlook and distrust of foreigners was a thing of the past, not of Gandhi's envisioned future. His fascinating concept of "heart unity" took care of that. It stated that you did not have to be like another person to want them to be happy — you did not have to deny or suppress differences to avoid conflict.

Svadeshi rests on the belief that we are not condemned by any external condition or circumstance to a life of competition. As he famously put it in economic terms, "There is enough in the world for everyone's need; there is not enough for everyone's greed." Heart unity states that there is no need for all of us to practice one religion or even hold precisely the same values if we want to live in a mutually enriching peace.

Indeed, the more natural diversity the better – provided that we cherish each other's ultimate well-being at this heart level. So it was not that your sympathy would be confined to that small circle you regard as your own, be it a family, nation, or a religious group. Rather, by serving them first, your benefit to and your knowledge and lively understanding of others would naturally expand. The balance of *svadeshi* and heart unity would mean that while the world would grow closer in many ways, exploitation would not be one of them.

Examined in this light, our search for order through uniformity and centralization – not to mention through violence – is exactly wrong. To ensure a vibrant future on this shrinking planet, we need the kind of unity-in-diversity articulated by Gandhi's great follower, Martin Luther King, Jr.: "I can't be what I ought to be until you are what



Mahatma Gandhi Foundation
India.
www.mahatmagandhi.org.in

In 1931, Gandhi visited British mill workers in Lancashire to demonstrate his concern for the quality of their lives, even as his campaign for homespun cotton in India weakened Britain's control of the clothing business. Gandhi was "received with sympathy and affection by the Lancashire cotton workers," even though they were facing unemployment.

you ought to be; and you can't be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be."

And then, the violence. Undoubtedly the sharpest contrast to the world we have now would be the security we could be enjoying if things had developed according to the Mahatma's model. It is rarely remembered that he not only opposed violence in every form, including terrorism, but that he worked out to a greater or lesser degree practical alternatives that could take its place. For example, Vinoba Bhave, widely regarded as Gandhi's foremost spiritual successor in India, walked the length and breadth of the country taking dona-

tions of land for redistribution to poor families. He also brought about the peaceful surrender of a brigand community that was terrorizing a whole district of his native Maharashtra, offering them fair treatment under the law if they renounced their weapons and their predatory lifestyle. (They took him up on it.)

One alternative that the incredibly active Mahatma himself had little time to develop has, in fact, been picked up and carried forward by activists today. This is his bold vision of a shanti sena, or 'peace army' that would head off communal conflicts through the presence of trusted nonviolent volunteers in every community – which worked very well when it was tried after the Mahatma's passing – and that had the potential to grow into a force that could defend people and even nations from aggression without provoking aggression in its turn. This dream has now inspired many forms of volunteer international conflict abatement that we call Third Party Nonviolent Intervention (TPNI). An ambitious attempt

to globalize this kind of people-based rather than nation-based, and nonviolence-based rather than threat-based way of dealing with conflict is being tested in Sri Lanka as I write (see nonviolentpeaceforce.org).

Gandhi himself wanted this anniversary to be named after the spinning wheel rather than himself. It seems an appropriate symbol for the creative potential of his far-reaching experiments that still cry out to us for development.

Prof. Michael N. Nagler is the author of [The Search for a Nonviolent Future](#) and founder of UC Berkeley's Peace and Conflict Studies program.

Letter to the Editors • Spring 2007

Dear Editor,

Our group, Save the Oaks at the Stadium (SOS!), is working to convince the University of California, Berkeley to spare a healthy grove of old oak trees beside California Memorial Stadium. UC wants to cut the trees down to build an athletic training facility. The oak woodland is an irreplaceable natural resource and is appreciated by thousands of members of the campus and the community every year. Unfortunately, the trees are completely powerless to defend themselves against chainsaws. They cannot talk, cannot move, and cannot even cry out for mercy. How does one act to protect living things like this from people who have other priorities?

We have adopted the principles of peaceful protest and nonviolent social change as a guide for our efforts. We believe this has helped us gain public support faster than would otherwise have been the case, which is crucial because there is very little time left before UC Berkeley plans to cut the trees down—most likely sometime in December or early January when the majority of students are away from campus.

Our commitment to nonviolence has encouraged several important developments. First, our willingness to look at the conflict from the perspective of the other side has led us to seek and find viable alternatives to cutting the trees. Indeed, we have located several sites that would be quite suitable for the new gym that would not require the destruction of the oak grove. Second, the sincerity of our beliefs has allowed us to approach people from many different social groups, and we are pleased that we have received support from many students, athletes, faculty members, football fans, and alumni. Third, we have pursued creative methods to get public attention: puppets, costumes, rallies, ritual offerings, street theater, funny signs (like "Official Member—Berkeley Tree Sitter's Club"), and so on.

So far, we have attained the support of the Berkeley City Council, the Sierra Club, Julia Butterfly Hill, and local luminaries like Wavy Gravy (who gave us the slogan "Don't croak the oaks") and award-winning satirist Stoney Burke. Please check our website to find out what you can do to help save the oaks:

www.saveoaks.com or email us at info@saveoaks.com.

Our event hotline is 510-841-3493.

Doug Buckwald

Write a letter to PEACEPOWER!
letters@calpeacepower.org