

Remarks to commemorate the Second International Day of Nonviolence UN Headquarters, New York, 2 October 2008

by Dr. Arnold Matlin

Your Excellency, Mr. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, Minister of Foreign Affairs of South Africa
Your Excellency, Mr. Pranab Mukherjee, External Affairs Minister of India, Excellencies, Mr. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Friends all,

I want to thank each of you for being here this morning to participate, in person, in this short but significant ceremony. Today we celebrate the Second International Day of Nonviolent Struggle.

It is a most important day, the principal purpose of which is to invite us all to reflect on the method of struggle used by one of the greatest human beings in all of history, Mahatma Gandhi, to obtain the liberation of India.

You may be asking yourselves why am I adding the word struggle and why am I spelling nonviolent as one word, instead of two, or with a hyphen. I am doing it for the sake of clarity, for the same reason that led Gandhi to look for a better name than "passive resistance" to describe his method of struggle, which was by no means passive, and to explain, at the same time, the source of its power.

Gandhi correctly believed that the name "passive resistance" gave rise to confusion and also thought that it was shameful to allow his great struggle to be known only by an English name. That was why he decided to sponsor a contest through his magazine, *Indian Opinion*, and offer a small prize to whomever came up with a better name to describe his struggle. It was his own nephew, Maganlal, who suggested the name "*sadagraha*" which means firmness or relentlessness in a good cause. That word was the origin of the name that Gandhi himself would come up with in order to best describe his struggle: *SATYAGRAHA*.

There is nothing passive or timid about this "love force" or "truth force" which would be the translation of *Satyagraha* into English. On the contrary, *satyagraha* is a bold, brave, assertive and risk-taking method of struggle. Gandhi knew that what they were doing was not at all passive. As Terrence Rynne puts it in his excellent book entitled *Gandhi and Jesus: The Saving Power of Nonviolence*: "They were actively pitting their lives against injustice. It was a strategy for the strong. They were filled with love and compassion for their adversaries—not with the anger and hate expressed in many "passive resistance" campaigns. They were returning good for the evil done to them and were aiming to convert and not humble their adversaries. They were not employing brute force but were using soul force.

Gandhi sensed that what they were doing was in many ways a new principle of action. The term "passive resistance" did not adequately convey this new principle". I know that in these kinds of brief commemorations we don't pass resolutions. Nonetheless, I would like to suggest that today, in honor of Mahatma Gandhi, we resolve to adopt the word *SATYAGRAHA* in all of our languages and thus begin a gradual and profound process of reflection into its meaning. If we do so, we will have entered into the process of liberating humankind from its dependence on violence as a means to resolve differences.

Gandhi showed us the way to turn from the edge of self-destruction toward a just, disarmed and sustainable global community, if we would only choose, personally and collectively, step-by-step experiments in the infinite power of truth. Truth is, in the final analysis, a synonym of love.

As another sign of hope in the nuclear age, Martin Luther King, Jr. followed Gandhi with further experiments in the truth of non-violent revolution. King's application of Gandhi's methods to the struggle in the United States for civil rights, economic justice and an end to the Vietnam War revealed the power of a growing nonviolent movement to begin to transform the course of even the most powerful nation in history. Echoing Gandhi, King proclaimed to that nation and the world that we must choose nonviolence or nonexistence. While trying to build a movement of massive civil disobedience against poverty and war, and precisely because of that, he was gunned down in Memphis, Tennessee, 40 years ago last Spring.

Gandhi's and King's successors in the twenty-first century have carried out further experiments in the power of nonviolent truth to achieve justice and peace in every corner of the world—including, in the last two months, Gaza.

The Free Gaza Movement has succeeded in breaking the siege of Gaza by nonviolent direct action. After sailing from Cypress, 44 activists from 17 countries landed their two small wooden boats at Gaza Port on August 23, 2008, where a beleaguered people welcomed them. This nonviolent initiative allowed Palestinians to enter and leave their own country freely for the first time in over 60 years. As Richard Falk, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in the occupied Palestinian Territories noted, it is now a question of whether the courage and commitment of the Free Gaza Movement "can awaken the conscience of humanity to an unfolding tragedy".

From the groundbreaking work of Gandhi and King to the ongoing example of the Free Gaza Movement, we can discern the transforming power of nonviolence at a crossroads in our history.

Having developed the means of our own extinction by war, we are called by Truth, at the very center of our being, to turn to a nonviolent way of transformation into a just and peaceful future. In one of my several declarations during the General Debate of world leaders in the General Assembly that has just ended, I said something like "We either love one another or die".

Today—my dear brothers and sisters—I say what amounts to the same thing: nonviolence or nonexistence. May *SATYAGRAHA* occupy the central place it deserves in our lives! Thank you.