



An Interview With Arun Gandhi

By **AMY PINCUS MERWIN**

Arun Gandhi was born in 1934 in Durban, South Africa, the fifth grandson of India's late spiritual leader Mohandas Karamchand "Mahatma" Gandhi. Arun has been a journalist for The Times of India, written four books and hundreds of articles. With his wife and colleague, Sunanda, Arun published the Suburban Echo in Bombay from 1985-1987. Arun envisioned and edited **World Without Violence: Can Gandhi's Dream Become Reality?**, a collection of essays and poetry from noted international scientists, artists, political and social leaders on the ideals of nonviolence, published in October 1994 in celebration of the 125th anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's birth. Arun's most recent literary project is **Testament to Truth**.

Q: How did you become aware of the personal pains of racism in your childhood?

Arun Gandhi: I grew up in South Africa. My dad was the second of four sons of Mohandas K. (Mahatma) Gandhi, and was the only son who devoted his life to nonviolence. He offered to live in South Africa and continue with the work that Grandfather had started there. My two sisters and I were born there.

Apartheid in the '30s and '40s was really very oppressive and deeply rooted. I suffered a lot of prejudice. I was beaten up at the age of 10 by some white youths because they thought I was too black, and a few months later by some black youths because they thought I was too white. The beatings and humiliations caused me to be very angry, and I wanted revenge — an-eye-for-an-eye justice. That is when my parents decided to take me to India and give me the opportunity to live with Grandfather and hopefully learn something from him.

When I went to India and lived with Grandfather, one of the first things he taught me was that anger is like electricity — it's just as useful and beneficial, but only if we use it intel-

ligently and respectfully; it can also be just as deadly and destructive if we abuse it. He taught me that, although we can't do away with or eliminate anger from our lives, we can learn how to use that energy positively. One of the things he suggested was that I should write an anger journal with the intention and commitment to find a solution to the problem, not with the intention of keeping it alive. I did that for several years, and it helped me very much in learning how to deal with my feelings of anger.

One of the reasons why I have devoted my life to spreading the word of non-violence is to try to bring about a change in the attitudes of people by helping them move away from prejudice and hate and toward learning how to build better relationships.

Q: At the M.K. Gandhi Institute that you have established, what are your goals regarding the elimination of racism in the broadest sense of economic, political and cultural equity for all?

Arun Gandhi: We basically see two things wrong with human beings. One is that they don't know how to deal with their anger in a positive manner, they usually deal with it in very negative ways. The results are that they destroy themselves and everything around them, and still the problems remain. We are focusing on teaching people how to deal with their anger in positive ways.

The next thing we find is that we as humans don't know how to build relationships between ourselves, so we create all kinds of labels. We label people as black, white, yellow or brown, or by gender or religious affiliation or sexual orientation or whatever — we have so many labels...so we are teaching people how to build and maintain relationships.

These are goals that we have set for ourselves. We are appealing and reaching out to people everywhere, trying to teach them those two things — how to use nonviolence in their personal lives rather than nonvio-

lence in public life. A lot of the problems we face are results of personal problems, and if we are able to solve personal problems then public problems will take care of themselves.

Q: What are the elements of non-violence?

Arun Gandhi: People have the misconception that nonviolence is a political strategy that is only meant

for huge political conflict resolution, and that one is nonviolent as long as one doesn't use physical force. But truly, nonviolence begins with the self. We must be the change we wish to see. If we want to have a nonviolent relationship with people, we have to be nonviolent ourselves. That means we have to understand what we mean by nonviolence.

It is not enough to not use physical force, we must also not use passive force. There is a difference between physical violence and passive violence. Physical violence is when we use physical force against another. Passive violence is when we express hate, prejudice, anger, and economic, social, cultural, political and religious suppression and op-

pression. That insidious passive violence is so oppressive it generates anger in the victims. Then the victims, not knowing how to deal with that anger, respond with physical violence.

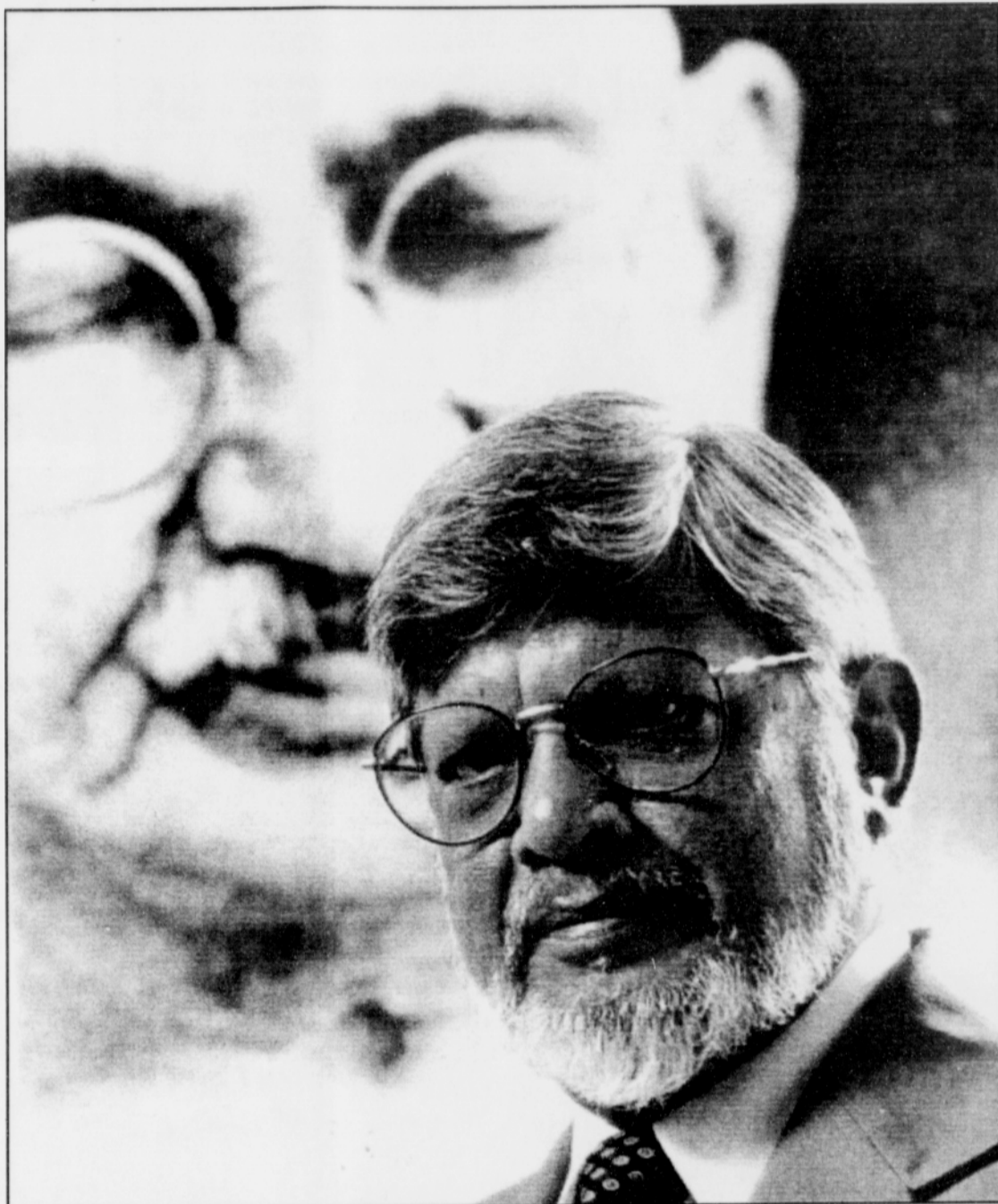
If we want to create a situation where people live in peace and harmony at home or in their neighborhoods or in the cities or wherever, first we must address the passive violence we practice, and then move on from there to the physical violence, because passive violence is what fuels the fires of physical violence — to put out the fire by turning off its fuel supply.

Q: In many families, two members are working just for survival, and they have no time, energy or money to put toward social change or political action.

Arun Gandhi: One of our problems today is that we get so caught up in materialism and living "the good life" that we are spending all of our energies trying to earn more money so that we can have better lives, either for ourselves or our children. The result of that is we forget our own morality. Grandfather used to say beat materialism and morality have an endless relationship — when one increases, the other decreases. We have to decide what we want in life and to what extent we are willing to go for it. If we seek materialism all of our lives, then we are going to dispense with morality and will suffer the consequences of that.

Q: If people can set their limits on their materialistic needs, how can they achieve an inner peace?

Arun Gandhi: When they decide to achieve that — and each individual family has to come to that decision honestly and with complete faith in what they are doing — then they would be able to give better time and more attention to their children and would be able to bring them up better. That would mean we would be able to have better relationships with people. Today a lot of our relationships are breaking down because nobody has time for each other, not even for our children. Then when our children rebel, we get angry with them. One thing leads to another, it goes on and on, and we don't know how to stop it.



Arun Gandhi is the founder of the M.K. Gandhi Institute.

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