

## Be the Change Interview by Trena Cormack

I was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi. I was an 18-year-old monk when I read his autobiography in which he said that some people leave the world thinking that the world is a form of bondage where you cannot practice spirituality, non-violence or truth. They retire from the world and think that they have liberated themselves. Then the people who are left behind in the world think that spirituality is only for saints, that they cannot practice it, they can do what they like. This kind of split and dualism has to be healed; the best way is to be the change in the world – to practice spirituality, truth and non-violence in everyday life.

So I left the monastic order, joined the Gandhian movement and lived in an ashram. There, my greatest learning was to transform every activity, to see it not as a chore, but as a spiritual practice. For example, gardening: you can garden to produce vegetables to feed yourself; or you can garden as a spiritual practice, to serve the earth, to serve people and you get food as a by-product. Or cooking – as a spiritual practice, you are cooking to serve your family, guests and friends, and through them, God. You transform, through your higher motivation. What you do is not as important as how and why you do it. Sweeping the floor, doing the dishes, cleaning the toilets, whatever it is, everything can be transformed into a spiritual practice if you do it with the right motivation; the motivation of service.

### Walk for Peace

At age 25 I was sitting in a restaurant and, while waiting for coffee, I picked up a newspaper. My eyes were drawn to a piece of news which said Bertrand Russell had been arrested and sentenced to imprisonment because he had committed civil disobedience to demand that the British Government ban the bomb immediately. That was an example, for me, of being the change. Here was a man of 90, a Nobel laureate. He could be comfortable in his house, making speeches and writing articles about peace, but he did not do that. He went to Whitehall, sat in the street, and said, 'I'm not going to move from here until the British Government bans the bomb.'

That became an inspiration. My friend and I said, 'Let's do something, let's be like Bertrand Russell.' So we decided then and there that we'd walk to Moscow, Paris, London and Washington DC, the four nuclear capitals of that time. And walk, not go by train or car or plane, because if you go like that, then it's like lecturing, it's not being the change. When you witness with your body, step by step, day by day, you are walking and touching the earth, meeting the people, being peace, not demonstrating *for* peace but demonstrating peace; then your action and your thoughts become one.

So we started from Gandhi's grave in New Delhi and we walked to Moscow, to Paris, and to London. Of course we crossed the Channel by boat and then we

crossed the Atlantic by boat from Southampton to New York and walked to Washington DC and to the grave of John F Kennedy. We walked from the grave of Gandhi to the grave of Kennedy for peace, for 8,000 miles, without a penny in our pockets. The reason that we took no money was because our guru, Vinoba, who was also a Gandhian, said, 'I bless you for your journey but I want to give you advice: go without any money in your pockets.' I said, 'Any money? You mean nothing? Sometimes we might need a cup of tea. Sometimes we might need to make a telephone call.' He said no to any money because the root of war is fear and the route to peace is trust. If you have no money you have to trust yourself, you have to trust people, you have to trust God, and you have to trust the universe. So we accepted Vinoba's advice and decided to take no money.

You find the meaning of life in a relationship and whatever I do offers me an opportunity for a relationship. For example, going without money around the world, walking for peace, that gave me a chance to relate to the earth and to the people. If I'd gone by aeroplane or by car and if I'd stayed in a hotel, I'd just have met politicians or media people. Not on a basis of relationship, but just on an intellectual level. But when you have no money and you are walking, you arrive in a village and you have to look for somebody who can offer you hospitality, who can offer you a bed for the night and food for the evening. At that time human contact is primary and your ideas, your convictions and your mission becomes secondary. Sometimes I did not get any food or shelter. I said to myself, 'This is my opportunity to fast, to sleep under the stars.' But 98 per cent of the time I did receive hospitality, and that way you are able to relate to people at the heart level. They are strangers, and yet you trust them and they trust you. They are giving you their utmost – their home, their bed, their food, celebration, friendship, friendly hands. So it's through relationship that I find the meaning of my life. When I serve others, when I relate to others, I find joy, a sense of happiness. When I'm kind to others I'm happy.

### Peace Tea

It took two and a half years. We were walking through stormy weathers, deserts, mountains, snow, rain, and one day I was feeling in very low spirits. I was wondering whether we were achieving anything. Was it worth doing? In despondence I gave our flyer, which we carried in different languages, to two women outside a tea factory by the Black Sea in Georgia. They read it and said, 'Wait, wait! Have you really walked from India? All the way? Come and tell us your story. Would you like to have a cup of tea?' Any time is tea-time when you have no money! So we went into this tea factory.

One of the two women went out of the room, while we were drinking tea, and she came back with four packets of tea. She said, 'These are not for you.' 'For whom are they?' I asked. She said, 'I want you to deliver one packet of tea to our capital, Moscow; the second packet to Paris, to the president of France; the third packet to London, to the prime minister of England; and the fourth packet to

Washington DC to the president of the United States of America. And please give them a message from me.' So I said, 'What's your message?' She said, 'My message to them is, If ever you get a mad thought of pressing the nuclear button, please stop for a moment and have a fresh cup of tea from these packets. That will remind you that a woman from Georgia has sent you these packets, and these weapons you are going to use are not only going to destroy your enemies, Russian, American, or some other enemy, but they will destroy everybody. Nuclear weapons are no weapons. They will destroy men, women, children, peasants, workers, factories, farms, forests, rivers, lakes, mountains, oceans — everything will be destroyed or contaminated. So think again, and don't push the button.'

That was so inspiring. My low spirit was lifted. I said, 'Now we have to be the messenger of this woman. We have to carry these packets of peace tea and deliver them to Moscow, to Paris, to London and to Washington.' And so that's what we did in these capitals. However, President de Gaulle would not accept them. He would not see us. We were refused any meeting and so we went to demonstrate. We said, 'We want to see President de Gaulle.' We were arrested and put in jail. In a way we were happy, because Bertrand Russell had inspired us by going to jail, so we were following in his footsteps. After three days we were released and then we carried on. This way, we did four capitals and then we ended our journey at the grave of Kennedy. It was a journey from the grave of Gandhi to the grave of Kennedy, to make the point that if you trust in the gun; if you trust in violence then this is what happens: the gun does not kill only the bad guys, the gun can also kill the good people, like Gandhi and Kennedy. So you have to remove your faith from the gun and you have to eliminate the existence of the gun from your society if you want a peaceful society. From the grave of Gandhi to the grave of Kennedy was 8,000 miles and it took two and a half years.

And if that journey did nothing else, it transformed me. After two and a half years, I was a very different person. I realised that peace is not only the absence of war, the absence of nuclear weapons — peace is in your heart. And unless you make peace with yourself, you cannot make peace in the world. Quite often we are at war against ourselves. We think, 'I'm not good enough, I can't do this, I can't do that, I'm too weak, I'm too powerless.' We harbour an inferiority complex in our hearts. We underrate our own capacity. Walking around the world for 8,000 miles, for two and a half years, without money, gave me a kind of self-confidence and self-trust and it was a way of making peace with myself. I realised that every human being is given all the capacity, all the facilities and all the skills that one needs to survive, to live, and to solve any problems that we face.

People are afraid of hardship, of difficulty, that 'If I live my ideal it will not be comfortable, it will not be easy.' They are insecure in their heart. Being the change requires courage, and we are not taught to be courageous, we are not taught 'Have no fear,' we are taught to be careful, be cautious, be aware that something may go wrong. From childhood, our parents, our teachers, our media,

our politicians, our whole society injects fear into our hearts, and so we are afraid to practice what we believe in, because of fear.

The antidote to fear is courage and trust. I say to myself that I was born without any security, without any money, without any job, without any education, without any anything, but something happened and I'm here. So how am I here? The process of the universe is helping me to be self-realised, to fulfil my potential, to meet my destiny. The universe is there co-operating, the universe is there supporting, and that gives me trust. If I trust the universe my fear disappears; if I love the universe my fear disappears. My life is driven by this trust in the process of the universe, and trust as well as love of the earth, love of people, love of nature, love of communities, love of living and love of life. That's when you are able to trust.

### Gandhi's inspiration

Gandhi inspired me because not only did he say, 'Be the change you want to see in the world', he actually lived it. Once there was a very famous politician in India called Dr Lohiya. He was very educated — a very good orator, thinker and writer. He always wondered why Gandhi had so much power and influence and such a hold on people's minds. What was so special about him? One day he went to Gandhi and asked, 'What are the secrets of your power? Why is it that when you call thousands of people follow? You are not a great orator, you are not that handsome, you have no teeth and you're just wearing an ordinary loin cloth.' And Gandhi said, 'I don't know why people follow me. The only thing I can say to you is that I have never asked anyone to do anything which I have not done myself.'

Once, some people asked of Gandhi, 'Please send us a message for our conference.' Gandhi said, 'I have no message. My life is my message.' He said, 'I have nothing new to teach. All the philosophy I'm talking about, non-violence, truth, love, compassion, freedom and self-reliance, all these virtues and all these philosophies are as old as the hills. They were taught by the Buddha, by Krishna, by Mohammed, by Jesus Christ; they were taught by hundreds and hundreds of teachers — nothing new. What is new is we practise it, we live it and we experiment with truth every day.' Gandhi experimented with truth in his life; that's why he called his autobiography *My Experiments with Truth*.

### Resurgence

In 1973, I was here in England giving a few lectures about non-violence. I was going to go back to India, but I met EF Schumacher. He said, 'Why do you want to go back to India? Why don't you edit *Resurgence*?' I said, 'I want to go and work with the Gandhian movement.' He said, 'Satish, there are many Gandhians in India. We need one in England. Stay here.' He persuaded me to stay in England, and I became editor of *Resurgence*. The vision of the magazine is not to dwell in

the negative and the blame game — ‘The government is bad, industry is bad, business is bad, corporations are bad and globalisation is bad.’

Yes, we do say that they are all causing problems but our main concern is solution-based. What can we do? How can we create new, positive, constructive, visionary projects, through art, through craft, through imagination, through organic farming, through renewable energy, through new philosophy, new science? Our approach is more constructive, positive, visionary and creative, rather than doom and gloom and disaster and blame. Yes, there is a place for resistance, but resistance should emerge out of practice and constructive action. Non-violence is a way of life first and only then is it a way of resistance. I have been editing *Resurgence* for 35 years, so I am one of the longest-surviving editors of any magazine in England, and I enjoy it. It’s another way of relationship. You relate to your authors, photographers, illustrators, printers, staff, so it’s a kind of family, a relationship. It’s a way to serve, and it’s a kind of spiritual activity.

### **Gandhian education**

Twenty-five years ago, I established the Small School, very much based on Gandhian principles. I was also taken by the ideas of EF Shumacher, who wrote *Small is Beautiful*. I live in Devon and I like to live in a rural community, in a village where people know and care for each other. But when my own children came to the age where they would need to attend a secondary school they had to go to the town. If I wanted to live in the town and send my children to the town, I would have lived in the town. So I said, ‘I want to have a school in the village.’ When children go to the town school they take a bus, and that bus takes them from village to village collecting children, which takes one hour in the morning, one hour in the evening — a commuter’s life from age eleven. Then once they go to the school, what do they learn there? All this bookish education, intellectual and academic knowledge! I wanted to make it a Gandhian school where you can learn by doing, learn by being, learn by making. So I said, ‘Let us start a school in the village.’

We started with nine children. How is the school different? I said, ‘The first thing is that the kitchen will also be the classroom and every day children will learn to cook.’ What’s the good of learning all about science and technology and maths, about Newton, Galileo and Shakespeare and all the great academic knowledge if you don’t know how to cook and to live? The kitchen became the classroom. The Small School is still running after 25 years; the children prepare and serve meals to their teachers, parents and fellow students. We started a garden so children learn about biology and ecology by putting their hands in the soil. Printed books are fine, but nature is the greatest book. We also take the children to the sea, the valleys and the forest. They learn *from* nature as much as they learn about nature. Learning about nature encourages a kind of dualism — object and subject. When you are learning from nature, you learn ecological humility. Nature becomes your mentor. That is the special quality of the Small School.

Schumacher College is a similar project, for adults. At the time we were discussing the format of the college, I said it should be the same as the Small School. So every day students, who come from all over the world, practice what they are studying. They learn to live an ecological lifestyle. There's no good sitting in the classroom talking about how to save the world when somebody else is cleaning your toilet, making your bed, sweeping your floor, cooking your meals and doing your dishes. Every day the students do all of those things and then they come to the classroom and learn about ideas and theories and so on. Practice leads and theory follows. And as with the Small School, students also go out in nature. They experience the untamed sea and the wildness of Dartmoor; they go on a field trip every week. Education is not just about academic and intellectual learning but is also about embodied, practical, experiential learning.

## Optimism

I know pessimism is very fashionable. Hundreds of books, newspaper and magazine articles are full of it and people are driven by doom and gloom and disaster. Therefore it is easy to become a pessimist. But pessimism is disempowering. I want to be an optimist because that is empowering. When you are an optimist, you can do something about a bad situation. If we are poisoning the soil, we can transform this through organic farming and local and fresh food. If we are destroying our rivers and oceans, we can redesign our economic system so that we don't. I am an optimist and I believe it is cool to be an optimist.

As the industrial system is designed by humans, it can be changed by humans. This is what gives me hope. The problems we face today are not created by God, they have been man-made over the last 200 years. What's 200 years in the history of evolution, billions of years of history? If something designed by humans has gone wrong, we can redesign it. So we bring a new consciousness and new ideas through *Resurgence*, through Schumacher College and through the Small School. If we can bring new a consciousness and a love of the earth into the equation then we can bring a new design. We can create new systems with our imagination and our creativity, with human ingenuity and spirit. I have faith and trust that the human spirit will rise to the occasion and stand up for Gaia and not be subsumed by this pessimistic scenario.

The most valuable lesson I have learned is to live in the present moment, in the here and now, and do what you feel is the right action at this moment, without worrying about the outcome. We are quite often too concerned and uptight and we get obsessed with the result; and so we lose our focus on our right action at this moment. If you sew the right seeds, the right fruit will appear, so sew the right seeds. If you do the right action, the result will be good; you don't have to worry about the result. Whether the results are there or not, they are not in your hands. The results are in the hands of God. If you are living well in this moment, the here and now, then the future will take care of itself. But if you are too worried about the future and not living in the moment then you might act in panic

and in fear of the future. Every action we take has to be right action in the here and now.

So the greatest lesson I've learned is to live every moment as fully, as creatively, as imaginatively, as lovingly, as compassionately and as generously as possible — because every moment is the real building block of life. You cannot just think of the destination. This is why I called my book *No Destination*, no reaching anywhere. Life is a journey; every step is a journey. If you take every step rightly, you will not fall down and you will reach wherever you are reaching. But there is nowhere to reach. You are already there; we are living our life now. The fullest moment, the most pregnant moment is this moment, and if we live this moment well and fully, everything else will be fine. We have to be the change we wish to see in the world now! Not tomorrow, not in the future but now!

[www.resurgence.org](http://www.resurgence.org)  
[www.schumachercollege.org.uk](http://www.schumachercollege.org.uk)

*Spiritual Compass*, Green Books, 2008  
*The Buddha and the Terrorist*, Green Books, 2005  
*You Are, Therefore I Am*, Green Books, 2002  
*No Destination*, Green Books, 2000