

Gandhi's Legacy: Laying It on the Line for Peace

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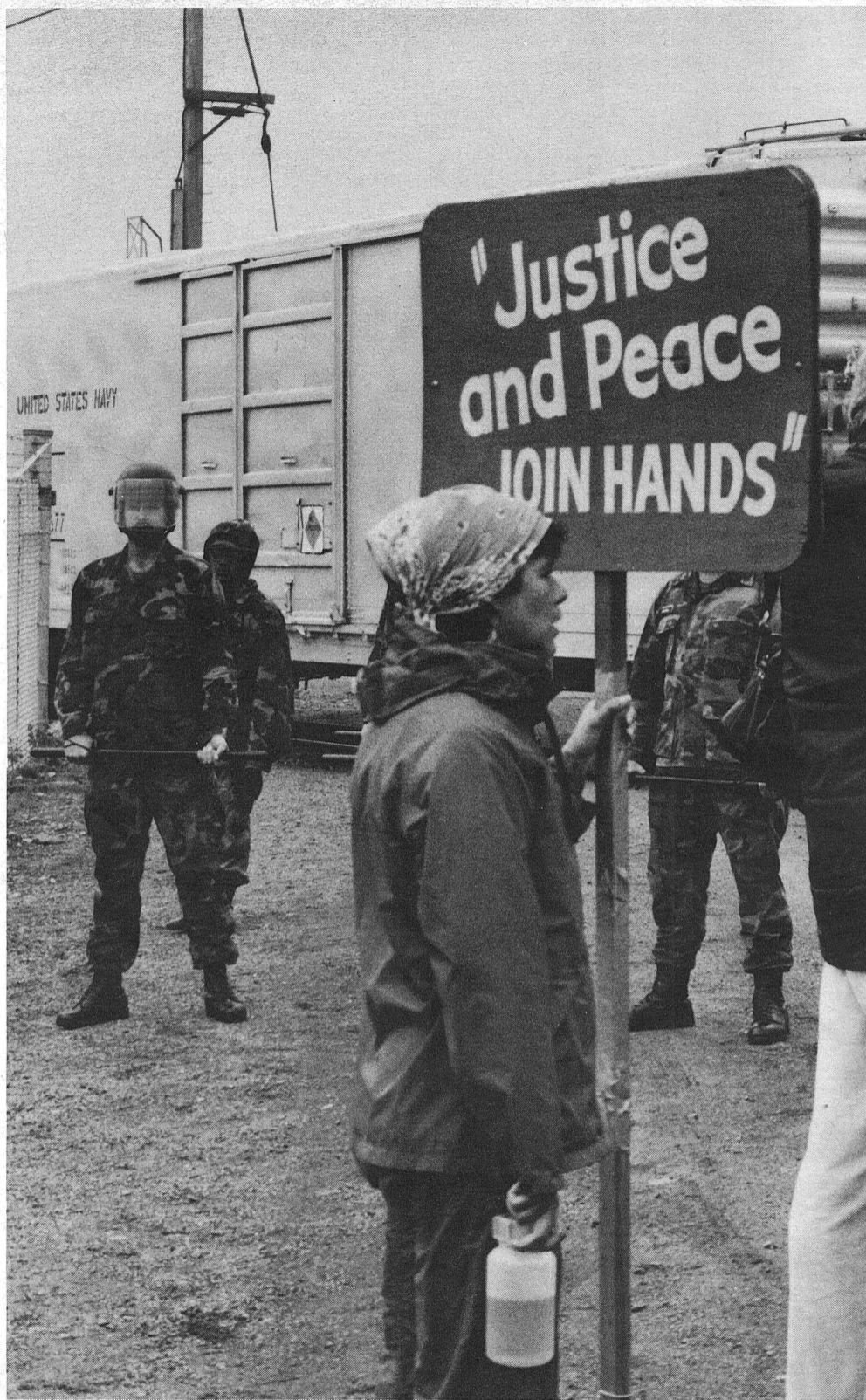
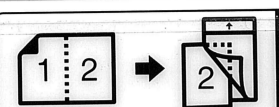
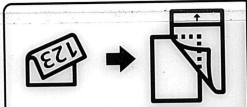
## Voices of our Ancestors

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# GANDHI'S CHILDREN

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*In the spirit of satyagraha,  
protesters at the Concord Naval Weapons  
Station in California are waging a  
non-violent struggle against U.S. involvement  
in Central America.*

*But are they really succeeding in  
“converting their enemies into friends,”  
as the great Mahatma taught?*

**BY BILL THOMSON**



As I walked from my home last year on the morning of December 9, I noticed the *USA Today* headline — “Reagan: ‘We Made History.’” President Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had just signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. The signing was celebrated with a lavish state dinner at the White House, and the next day Reagan and Gorbachev chatted about peace and human rights beside a crackling fire in the Oval Office.

While the two world leaders were making history, a few dozen protesters 3,000 miles away in California stood in a cold rain on some desolate railroad tracks protesting United States military intervention in Central America. They were recording their own history on the ninth of December — it was the 100th straight day they had kept a round-the-

erect tents that stood more than three feet high. So the group strung plastic tarps three feet above the ground and huddled beneath them during the heavy rains.

In the previous six months, many demonstrators were dragged off the tracks, arrested, and jailed. Two had their arms broken as they were pulled away by police. People threw rocks and bottles and yelled threats at them from passing cars. In the spirit of peaceful Gandhian resistance, each protester vowed to act non-violently at all times, no matter what was said or done to them.

When President Reagan said, “We made history,” he gave no credit to groups like the one in California. But some feel that the framework for disarmament was constructed by demonstrators like those at Concord long before

they have committed themselves to the struggle in some painfully real ways.

#### Whose Truth Is True?

On December 1 last year, an overcast day in Concord, I went to meet the protesters. When I arrived, at 8:30 in the morning, two dozen of them were holding hands in a circle across the railroad tracks that led out of the Concord Naval Weapons Station.

The Weapons Station has been operating since 1942 as a West Coast ammunition terminal for the Department of Defense. It's the principal port for the transshipment of explosive ordnances for U.S. operating forces in the Pacific, the Far East, and the Indian Ocean. Protesters maintain that some shipments include arms and explosives destined for Central America, a place they believe



clock vigil at the Concord Naval Weapons Station. The day they started, September 1, Vietnam veteran Brian Willson was run over by a military train believed to be carrying weapons and explosives bound for Central America, an activity Willson and others had been protesting at the weapons depot since June 10.

When Willson planted himself on the tracks on September 1 at the start of what was to be a 40-day fast, he as much as told the U.S. government, “If you want to send those weapons down there, you’ll have to deal with me first.” Miraculously, Willson survived, but he lost both legs below the knees and wound up with a gaping inch-and-a-half hole in his forehead. Since then protesters have dug in for the long haul, and they plan to stay put until their government stops supporting war in Central America.

It's no day at the beach out there at the tracks. Northern California in early December was battered by a series of fierce Pacific storms that slammed into the coast one after another. The protesters at first had sought refuge under tents and inside an old school bus given to them by entertainer Wavy Gravy. However, local authorities, citing them for minor infractions, made them move the bus down the road far from the protest site and told them they couldn't

any historic summit meeting between the two world leaders. For years, protesters, with their lives on the line, have beseeched the superpowers to stop building nuclear weapons, while Reagan has promoted their escalation.

Non-violent protest movements, especially in their early years, are practically assured of meeting with ridicule and violence. It happened in the fight for civil rights in the '60s, in demonstrations against the Vietnam War in the '60s and '70s, and in protests against nuclear weapons and energy in the '70s and '80s. There is drudgery and pain in the business of non-violently trying to budge government policy.

More than that, there is anguish over Mahatma Gandhi's stringent principles of *ahimsa* — non-violent action and thought. Were he here today, the great Indian leader would undoubtedly urge those at Concord to have compassion for the “adversary” — from the industrialist who manufactures the explosives to the operator of the train that ran over Willson. If the protester cannot “see himself in all and all in himself,” as it says in the *Bhagavad Gita*, then the goals of real peace will slip away. But this doesn't come easy; even the saintly Gandhi struggled with this lofty ideal. So it should come as no surprise that protesters at Concord are struggling with it, too. But unlike almost all the rest of us,

their government has no business being.

The Concord protest is rooted in two major chapters of 20th-century history — the formulation of the Nuremberg Principles and the practice of non-violent disobedience by Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others. The disobedience at Concord is called Nuremberg Actions, after the Nuremberg Principles that were drafted in 1950 at the request of the United Nations. The principles state that punishable crimes include “crimes against peace,” including the “waging of a war of aggression or a war in violation of international treaties.” They also state that “complicity in the commission of a crime against peace . . . is a crime under international law.”

Willson, who has practiced law, and others in Nuremberg Actions maintain that it's their legal duty to avoid such complicity. They believe that the trains carry the instruments of a war in Central America that violates the Nuremberg Principles. Since their tax dollars pay for these weapons, they are co-violators of the principles. By standing in front of the trains, they believe they are obeying the law, not violating it.

The Nuremberg Principles are the legal basis for the Nuremberg Actions protest; Gandhi's teachings are the moral basis. Gandhi wrote, “Non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as is cooperation with good.” He specifically



advocated non-violent non-cooperation, coupled, he wrote, with "cheerful submission to the highest penalty that can be inflicted." This, he said, is a citizen's highest duty.

Every participant in Nuremberg Actions is asked to commit to a "covenant of non-violence," which states, "We will use no violence, physical or verbal, toward any person." It also asks protesters to refrain from making insulting remarks, to harbor no hate, and to submit to expressions of violence without returning the violence. A few weeks earlier a demonstrator who shouted "baby killers" at the soldiers was asked to stop or leave the site. During the morning of December 1, passengers inside four of the cars that passed the demonstrators screamed intimidating or insulting remarks, like one who yelled angrily, "Go

fict and overcoming injustice was called *satyagraha*, a Sanskrit word meaning "holding to the truth" or "the force generated by adhering to the truth." In "How Satyagraha Works," Timothy Flinders' appendix to Eknath Easwaran's *Gandhi The Man*, Flinders wrote, "Traditionally, conflict . . . is 'resolved' only by the acknowledged dominance of one antagonist over the other. . . . Rather than trying to conquer the opponent or annihilate his claims, satyagraha tries to resolve the sources of conflict." Quoting Gandhi, Flinders wrote that satyagraha "seeks to liquidate antagonisms but not the antagonists."

The most effective methods for satyagraha aren't clear cut. "Holding to the truth" assumes that everyone can agree on what "the truth" is. Whose truth? The Hindu's truth? Or the Muslim's?

oppression of Indians.

Gandhi's inconsistencies, however disconcerting, demonstrate the importance he placed on compromise. Always he sought ways of joining with his opponent. This required patient dialogue and, as one who knew Gandhi said, "vigorous forgiveness."

I was curious to know how forgiving and patient was the dialogue between protesters at Concord and employees at the weapons station. So I called the base and spoke with Dan Tikalsky, a 62-year-old public affairs officer who has dealt with peace demonstrations there since the Vietnam War. Tikalsky says he talks with today's protesters. They meet with him, for example, to discuss any plans for special demonstrations. (On the day Willson got out of the hospital and visited the tracks, 10,000 people showed

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home! We're tired of looking at you." None of the demonstrators reacted, visibly anyway.

Trains in early December were departing the Weapons Station about twice a week. December 1 was quiet; no trains passed. When I arrived, the demonstrators who stood on the tracks holding hands were participating in a customary morning peace circle, an opportunity for silent prayer and announcements. Someone introduced a Buddhist monk who had arrived that morning to begin a seven-day fast for peace. Several in the circle welcomed him and thanked him for joining the demonstration. Throughout the morning, the gentle-faced monk sat by the tracks with eyes closed, chanting and softly thumping a small hand drum. A soothing calm spread over the area. Across the road a teenage soldier, whose fresh young face clashed with the military greens he wore and the gun strapped to his side, stood guard behind a steel fence. It was hard to be sure, but the soldier appeared drawn to the monk's hypnotic chanting and insistent drumbeat.

Protesters say it's not their intent to alienate soldiers or the police. They want to win them over, to touch their hearts. However, their relations with the other side raise sticky questions about the tactics of protest.

Gandhi's strategy for resolving con-

The Contra truth or the Sandinista truth? Protesters give accounts of Contra atrocities in Nicaragua, and anti-Sandinista rebels describe the mistreatment of 9,000 political prisoners held in Nicaraguan jails. Because "the truth" depends so much on one's perspective, Gandhi tried not so much to win an opponent over to his truth as to find things in common they could agree on. "No one," he said, "has a right to coerce others to act according to his own view of truth."

Gandhi learned the power of compromise, sometimes to the disappointment of his followers. In order to meet opponents halfway, he appeared at times to contradict everything he stood for, as when he recruited and led an ambulance corps to help the British in World War I. In 1918 Gandhi said India was regarded as "a cowardly people," and "if we want to become free of that reproach, we should learn the use of arms." He told his critics that "partnership in the empire is our definite goal. We should suffer to the utmost of our ability . . . to defend the empire."

Gandhi biographer Louis Fischer wrote that Gandhi agonized over the eternal dilemma of the citizen who abhors violence: What does one do when one's country is invaded? Because he valued India's freedom, Gandhi chose to defend the empire despite Britain's

up.) Tikalsky's comments, however, suggest that the satyagraha of Nuremberg Actions has not yet "liquidated the antagonisms" between the two sides.

Tikalsky says he has a different personal perspective than the protesters. He believes that moving arms out of the weapons station is important to national security. Like Willson, Tikalsky served in Vietnam. "Between 1964 and 1973 I spent 2,000 days and nights in Vietnam," he said. "My daughter lived in El Salvador; my son-in-law has a green card in El Salvador; his father was assassinated by a left-wing group; and I'm married to a Vietnamese woman. We'd been trying for years to get my wife's parents here. Coincidentally, on the day Brian Willson was hit by the train, her mother died. She never saw her mother again because of what they [the protesters] do. So, yes, you can say I have a different perspective."

We talked for about 30 minutes two different times. Tikalsky seemed at least willing to have a dialogue with protesters. "Although I have a different perspective, I don't dislike them."

However, he doesn't think anyone on the base now sides with them. After Willson was hit, opposition to the protest increased, both from base personnel and from people in the community.

Why, I wondered, would sentiments turn against the protest after Willson



was hit? None of the protesters, including Willson, ever expected the train to run over him. But social movements like Nuremberg Actions expect to capitalize on such events by drawing greater media attention to the movement and creating public awareness.

"The protesters don't realize that their actions endanger more than just themselves," Tikalsky explained: "If a truck carrying explosives has to swerve because someone jumps in front of it, it might cause a serious accident." Community anger also has increased, he said, because people in Clyde (the tiny town right next to the weapons station that's playing "host" to the protest) are watching the demonstrations grow and attract issues beyond Central America.

Tikalsky read me some letters to the editor of a local newspaper. Most, he

fold. According to social movement educator Bill Moyer, most successful movements have a similar growth cycle. Moyer, whose impressive activist work history spans three decades and includes his involvement in practically every major movement during that time, is now teaching activists around the world how to conduct social movements.

"We have models for just about everything, from baking a cake to having a relationship. But we don't have any models for conducting a social movement," he says.

Moyer wrote "Movement Action Plan," or MAP, which describes the seven stages that social movements generally go through to achieve success. The first is "normal times," when certain "cherished human values" are violated, usually without the public's awareness. In the

— is more complex. If satyagraha is working, the satyagrahi (one who practices satyagraha) transforms his or her opponent and alters the nature of the relationship in the course of the struggle. Gandhi said, "It is the acid test of non-violence that . . . there is no rancor left behind and, in the end, the enemies are converted into friends." That was his experience in South Africa with General Smuts (the leader of the oppressive Transvaal government), who went from being his bitterest opponent to being his warmest friend.

Gandhi accomplished this, wrote Timothy Flinders, with the satyagrahi's "weapons": sympathy, patience, trust, and a willingness to suffer. Gandhi said, "Things of fundamental importance . . . are not secured by reason alone but have to be purchased with . . . suffering."



CHUCK GOODMACHER

said, have been critical of the protest. One letter sharply criticized the \$12.7 million overpass the Navy considered building to circumvent the protesters and demanded to know why taxpayers should pay for these illegal acts. Another blasted Willson for being a hero to Fidel Castro and the Soviet Union.

#### Suffering as a Tool — Is it Enough?

Do these reactions mean satyagraha is failing? This is not the place for debate on the politics of Central America. But if we can assume for a moment that Central America, as Willson says, looks suspiciously like another Vietnam and that the public, if all the facts were known, would insist on no involvement whatsoever, then is the satyagraha of Nuremberg Actions effectively ending such involvement in a way that promotes good will instead of bad blood?

These are actually two questions. The first — Is it working at all? — brings to mind the years that passed while "radical" opposition to U.S. involvement in Vietnam was at first ignored, then called a nuisance, then a problem, and finally a revolution, until at last the public joined in the call for troop withdrawal. But this took nearly a decade to happen.

The protest against U.S. involvement in Central America might be somewhere near the "problem" stage, if we look at the history of how social movements un-

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next two stages attempts are begun and continued, sometimes for years, to push for change through courts and legislatures and with small demonstrations. In stage four the movement explodes into public consciousness, usually with a "trigger event," some "shocking incident that dramatically reveals a critical social problem to the general public in a new and vivid way."

(Nuremberg Actions comprises just one segment of a broad social movement protesting U.S. intervention in Central America. Two trigger events in this movement occurred in 1987 — the Contragate scandal in which administration officials illegally diverted funds to the Contras, and the train running over Willson.)

Even though protesters often think a trigger event will quickly sway public opinion, it usually doesn't. Thus, a time of letdown (stage five) follows. However, the trigger event spurs widespread grassroots activity, which calls the injustice to the attention of enough people (stage six) to force a change in policy (stage seven).

The movement to end U.S. involvement in Central America hasn't achieved success yet, but it appears headed there, according to Moyer's model.

The next part of the question — whether this is being achieved without leaving behind a trail of bitter feelings

When I met the coordinators of Nuremberg Actions on December 1, both of them, David Yulie and David Hartsough, had a broken arm in a sling, the result of being dragged off the tracks by police during an earlier blockade of the trains.

Hartsough is a 47-year-old activist who has worked for peace and justice his whole adult life. "The spirit that's developed in this campaign is incredible," he said. "We don't see them [police and Marines] as our enemy. We have compassion for them. Fifty to 70 Marines are out there every day. We see glimpses of their returning the compassion to us. The other day we were singing 'Where Have All the Flowers Gone?' and I saw in one Marine's eyes, 'I'm with you, brother.' We're concerned that they'll end up in the graveyard, too. In the Salt Marches that Gandhi led, line after line got beaten down. That kind of thing is beginning to happen here. Arms have been twisted and broken, people have been pulled by their necks, and we're taking it, lovingly and courageously. They think that the greater the pain they inflict on us, the less enthusiasm we'll have to go on. But the opposite is true."

I asked some protesters if stage five — the letdown — had set in. No one thought it had or that it necessarily would. Noting that as of mid-November



Willson had received over 10,000 letters, Hartsough said, "People around the country are saying they're going to stop paying taxes, hold vigils, write letters every day. The word is being carried. . . . There is a moral crisis developing around this space."

The willingness to sacrifice or suffer may not be effective unless it is accompanied by disciplined efforts to make real peace with the opponent. If that fails, then even a protest movement victory can carry the seeds of more acrimony. Gandhi himself often fasted and prayed for days to find the strength and understanding to achieve reconciliation with his opponents.

One of the protesters I talked with on December 1 made the point, as had Martin Luther King, Jr., that using non-violence solely as a tactic to defeat the

all, he replied, "I would note that the times have changed in a way that makes it both necessary and possible to find that link. In the early years of this century, when some of the great non-violent movements were launched by Mahatma Gandhi, the situation was interestingly different. For instance, there was no sense that the Earth as a whole was being imperiled. There wasn't a sense of all humanity's being threatened, as there is today. So a protest movement today can easily tune into the thought that we are in this boat together and we can sink. That awareness builds bridges."

But there is another awareness that Ramu described, an awareness that enables us to have the "widest view" of the world. He addressed this in one of his lectures on Sri Ramana Maharshi's *Who Am I?*

scious knowledge we have, and we're not really putting it to work. We're not using all our weapons in this business of making peace."

Back at the tracks in Concord on the morning of December 1, I listened to a half dozen protesters who sat on the cold steel rails and talked, as they do daily, about Nuremberg Actions and whether it was fulfilling its non-violent mission. As they spoke, I felt their deeper struggle to become non-violent in their hearts.

"I think non-violence is obvious, in a way," said one woman. "I certainly don't want to hurt anyone. But to reconcile with the military-industrial complex — I have a hard time with that. When people yell at me, I can see their fear and anger, and I can feel compassion for them. But the institutions, I struggle to

Gandhi wrote, "Non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as is cooperation with good." He specifically advocated non-violent non-cooperation, coupled with "cheerful submission to the highest penalty that can be inflicted."

opponent is itself a form of violence. If, in your heart, you're less interested in reconciling with your adversaries than in conquering them, you'll have lost the opportunity to achieve the understanding necessary for lasting harmony. It is one thing to make a commitment to be physically non-violent, altogether another to love your enemies so thoroughly that they're forced to love you back.

But even on this point, Gandhi compromised at times. He taught that loving the enemy is the ultimate goal, but that it is still better to act for justice and peace with some enmity in the heart than to harbor violence in the heart and not act at all.

While writing this article, I happened to meet an Indian man who discussed this dilemma with me. He was Ramchandra Gandhi, a grandson of Mahatma Gandhi. Ramu, as he is called, arrived in San Francisco from New Delhi last autumn to teach Eastern philosophy for a year at the California Institute of Integral Studies.

During one of our talks, I asked Ramu how effective he thought the modern non-violent protests are. "Certainly, they can be effective," he said, "so long as there is care taken not to separate oneself from those against whom the protest is registered. We need to find that thing between us that we have in common."

What, I asked, is "that thing?" First of

Answering this question — Who am I? — according to those who have seriously tried to do so, is a lifetime job. Those who take it on soon discover that what most of us imagine ourselves to be — our bodies, our thoughts, our feelings — trigger division and strife if that's the sum total of who we think we are.

"If I am this body," says Ramu Gandhi, "I certainly cannot be another body. If I am this mind, I cannot be another mind. And if I am these thoughts or feelings, I cannot be other thoughts or other feelings. Identification of ourselves in these ways precludes our looking at others as we see ourselves. It precludes the possibility of love. It is the ultimate caste system of the universe.

"In our own experience of self-consciousness, of quietness, of silence, we know that we are the center of the universe, each one of us. But we also know that others know that they are the center of the universe, too. So we must be one, because there cannot be more than one center! People know this but they forget.

"Hand in hand with this principle of non-duality [the oneness of all life] goes the practice of vigorous forgiveness. Ramana Maharshi once said, 'If my teeth were to bite my tongue, would I knock my teeth out?'

"Every human being has this knowledge in his heart, this knowledge of overcoming hatred. It is the most pre-

feel compassion for them. Do I need to break them down into individuals?"

"The motive is important," reminded a second woman. "It must be pure."

Then a young man, who seemed less confident than the others that non-violence would always succeed, said, "If you're so committed to non-violence that you fail, then you're guilty of negligent complicity. I'm more committed to non-violence when I'm sure that it serves the purpose."

"But that's the power of non-violence," responded the second woman abruptly. "Its virtue is its strength. Its example is powerful. You have to be able to see that effect."

The talk continued in this vein for a long time while the melodic chanting of the Buddhist monk and a few others streamed on and on through the gray wintry morning. And as I listened, I realized that satyagraha is more than standing in the rain, more than going to jail, more even than losing your legs. It's the effort to reach that place inside us where we are all one — the place where Mahatma Gandhi tried to lead us, and where Ramu Gandhi says that love abides. The protest at Concord is a courageous search for that place. Like Gandhi himself, it is not perfect. But it represents a compelling plea for others to join in the search and find their own tracks, whatever the price. □