Rediscovery of the Gandhian legacy from the Ark Community

Guillem Legland Reus

I was born and raised in two different Ark communities (in Bonnecombe from my birth till 3 years old, and in Saint Antoine till 22). However, as a child from the Ark, I truly experienced community life during my FEVE training course from 2011 to 2013. (Formation et Experimentation au Vivre Ensemble – Living together training course).

Today, I earn a living in Mexico. Two years ago, I started collaborating with the UAEM (Universidad Autonomodel Estado de Morelos, the Autonomous University of Morelos State) discussing topics such as Gandhian non-violence, positive transformation of conflicts and civil disobedience, in the department led by Javier Sicilia. In focusing on the texts of the most famous non-violent leaders and authors (Gandhi, Luther King, Thoreau, Tolstoy), I suddenly realized that I had integrated a large scale of non-violent concepts without even knowing it. It jumped out at me that these concepts are inherent to the Ark community way of living, and as all the children from the Ark, I integrated them as being perfectly normal. Green awareness, being spiritually open-minded, refusing to answer evil with evil; I’ve been taught all this on a daily basis in the Ark community. This legacy has forged my vision of the world and has made the adult I am today. This legacy contributes to help me understand the world and to analyze it. At the UAEM I realized that these concepts are over 150 years old and that the Ark community is rich of a priceless legacy.

At the beginning of the XXth century, Gandhi started theorizing what has come to be known as “Non-violence”, and God knows how reductive a term it is, and how it can lead to all kinds of misinterpretations. The English translation of the Sanskrit word *ahimsa* is partly responsible for the erroneous interpretation of the Mahatma’s concept. Today I would like to address the three Gandhian concepts of Non-Violence: *Swaraj* (or *Hind Swaraj*), *Swadeshi* and *Satyagraha*.

I didn’t know two Christian people had inspired Gandhi: Henry David Thoreau, from the Western World, and Leo Tolstoy, from the Eastern World. Both of them lived during the 19th century.

Thoreau theorized civil disobedience. To stick to their values, and principles of life, people have no choice but to disobey and stop collaborating with a government which overrides their values. Hence, in 1846, Thoreau refused to pay his taxes to show his disagreement with a government which was going at war and which was participating in the slave trade. It is thus from an American prison that he wrote his first manifesto, entitled “Civil disobedience”.

At the end of his life, Lev Tolstoy, the great Russian author of “War and Peace”, wrote a short book on his Christian faith. In this book, entitled “The kingdom of God is within you”, he questions the Christian Orthodox interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount. He demonstrates that Christians have the duty to denounce and disallow war and violence, as
both run counter to the commands of Jesus-Christ. Church and violence are contradictory. For the Russian author, the main teaching of Christ is that we shouldn’t answer evil with evil. Literally, when hit on the face, Christ orders to offer the other cheek. Tolstoy wrote “A Christian, according to the teaching of God himself, can act only peaceably toward all men, and therefore there can be no authority able to force the Christian to act in opposition to the teaching of God.”

Gandhi decided to apply these theories to the Indian situation at the beginning of the XXth century.

All over the country, Gandhi organized powerful demonstrations in which he put into practice Thoreau’s civil disobedience in a very creative and tactful way. Thoreau inspired Gandhi in his personal and spiritual practice of non-violence on a daily basis. Gandhi found the answer to Tolstoy’s question of not answering evil with evil in his Hindu and Jainistic roots; the Sanskrit word he found for this concept being “ahimsa”. However, Gandhi pushed the analysis way further. He realized that a few thousands of British people controlled and submitted a whole nation composed of three hundred and eighty million Indians. This oppression being the result of the fragmentation and the division of the country, but also of an economic superiority. At this point he started theorizing the Swaraj, a word meaning “self-government”, and Swadeshi meaning “self-sufficiency”.

In the 1930s, in his hopes for his country, Gandhi dreamed of a society made of thousands of ashrams, which would all be economically independent, food self-sufficient and have their own system of government. Each ashram would cooperate with their neighbors, while remaining independent and autonomous, and thus emancipating themselves from the economic and politic domination of the British. Swadeshi follows the same ideal of economic independence with the goal of a complete sovereignty in all aspects of life. The intended purpose of this community life on a large scale was the independence of India in all areas. Gandhi wanted to introduce Satyagraha in all aspects of Indians’ lives, including politics, economics and ecology, with Swaraj and Swadeshi, in order to limit violence as much as possible.

Today, when we talk about Gandhian non-violence, we mustn’t forget to mention this community vision, including economics, politics and ecology, as it is an integral part of his theory, on the same level as civil disobedience and the fight against personal violence.

During my studies, I realized that History had censored Gandhi, though he is the personality of the XXth century. Most part of his message concerning non-violence has been censored and boycotted. It’s very hard today to find any information about Gandhi’s Swaraj and Swadeshi…as if at the time, his visions and theories had been too disturbing, too revolutionary and too dangerous. When it comes to Gandhi, people only debate over non-violent struggle and civil disobedience. The community aspect is never tackled, though this issue was at the very center of his theories, and the best way to experience non-violence in all aspects of life.

Nowadays, these theories are seen as valid alternatives to the major problems of our times, in India and all over the world. From reading Gandhi, I realized that Shantidas had understood everything about Gandhian non-violence. I realized Lanza had understood everything about the three Gandhian concepts. His great achievement has been to adapt them to the western world and to Christianize them. To put a long story short, Lanza managed to adapt them to 1940-1950 Europe. The Ark communities are the faithful heirs (though westernized) of the Gandhian philosophy.

We can find the Swaraj philosophy in the Arch community, in their political independence, in their decision making process (unanimity, consensus or sociocracy). The division of power in the Ark communities is also a good example of the practice of Swaraj, as well as their
implication in all kinds of social struggles (against arms, GMO or nuclear power for instance).

*Swadeshi* can be seen in the communities’ desire to produce their own food, to buy locally, to be vegetarian, to choose a simple way of life and to participate in deceleration and transition movements. Sharing, as well as the simplification of technology, are also part of the *Swadeshi* philosophy. Within the community, *Satyagraha* can be found in the work on oneself and in the process of self-transformation. The positive transformation of conflicts and the reconciliation committees follow the same pattern, as well as the spiritual and religious deepening, ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue. Experimenting non-violence in every aspect of life, as done in the Ark communities, is part of what Gandhi called *Poorna Swaraj*, or “complete independence”.

Today we can say that both Gandhi and Lanza have been pioneers, far ahead of their time. Gandhian ashrams and Ark communities have been, and still remain, a revolutionary way of living, a real alternative to the major social issues of our modern times, such as living together in a multi-cultural society (as it is the case in France for instance), the ecological footprint, the economic and job crisis, the struggle for a new society, and so on and so forth.

The Ark community has a valuable background, and is rich of an important legacy. I personally think the Ark has a bright future ahead, as, according to me, the community way of living is a model for the future. We can see this all over Europe with the revival of collective structures and small communities. As a child from the Ark, I feel both grateful and privileged to have been raised and educated in this culture of non-violence. Today I know there is an answer for the future, and that living together is the answer; I know there is hope, and this fills me with strength and confidence, for me, as well as for my family and children.

Guillem and his wife, Mariana, are postulants of the Ark community, and they live in Mexico since June 2014.