This year, we celebrate the 80th anniversary of the encounter between Gandhi and Lanza del Vasto.

Why are some encounters more important than others? Why are some encounters forgotten, while others are celebrated? Some just go unnoticed, while others on the contrary, become a source of deep transformation. The encounter between Lanza and Gandhi is part of the latter. Their encounter became a seed of life, of which, the Community of the Ark is one of the most beautiful trees.

To achieve this goal, Lanza had to change his vision of the world. What the author and philosopher learnt from the wise and pragmatic Gandhi is that thoughts go hand in hand with experiments. Any thought needs to be accompanied by consistent actions. Any thought needs to be confirmed by experiment. Gandhi neither wrote a dogma nor a theory, and as a matter of fact, he entitled his biography as “My experiments with truth”.

“Experimenting”: an action which is nourished and upheld by a coherent way of thinking, which can be “experimented”, tested, in an organized and concrete way. Experiment goes hand in hand with non-violence. It is not only a way of thinking, but also a way of living and of behaving.

To put things simply, we could say that Gandhian non-violence includes two inseparable aspects, just like the two sides of the same coin.

- “No” to violence, injustice, or anything else destroying human values.
- “Yes” to the creation of an alternative; a new personal and social proposal respecting human beings and restoring justice.

These two inseparable aspects can be found in Gandhi as well as in Lanza. The first has made it a reality through his non-violent actions, his writings and his periods of fasting; the second has created the Community of Ark.

Lanza’s encounter with Gandhi has broadened his vision of the world and has helped him to analyze the western world with a prophetic accuracy. It reconfirmed the intuition he already had that society itself was preparing its own destruction.

He devoted the 10 years following his trip to India to confirm and to sharpen his thoughts with a small group of people. Together, they launched the basis of a way of life aimed at reorienting society. They wanted to give an alternative to a society based on profit, possession and on the domination of a handful of people. The link with Gandhi has grown stronger in the course of time. It was Gandhi’s death which prompted Lanza finally to take a course of action. Indeed, when Gandhi died in 1948, Lanza felt the compelling need to take action and he founded the first Ark Community.
Since the very beginning, the Ark Community has always wanted to offer an alternative to the structural violence of our Capitalist Western society. What makes it different from any other similar group is the social transformation it advocates, which starts with each member’s inner transformation, both on a personal and a social level.

This is what surprised me most when I first discovered the Ark Communities in 1982. At that time I was 25, and I had been a fierce anti-Franco activist for 10 years. I used to put things in a dualist way, in which the world was divided between “the good ones and the bad ones”. Dictatorships, the capitalist system, corrupt politicians were the bad ones, and we, the freedom fighters, were the good ones. Yet, for some of us, if we struggled for freedom in the streets, we were real dictators at home.

I set foot in a community which offered me a life of humility and simplicity, of service and sharing, where working on oneself prevailed, and where what mattered was not what you possessed but who you were. “Being” was the ultimate goal of life in the Ark community.

The Ark has evolved a lot over the years. Today, there are only 4 community houses left. Most members of the Ark live outside the community, in private households, where they try to achieve their goals of non-violence. However, altogether we continue to form a community of several hundreds of people, living in 11 different countries and united by strong bonds and the shared desire to see the world evolve towards more love and justice.

For over sixty years, we have largely contributed to spread the need for non-violence in our society. We live in a world where violence keeps growing. Growing number of people are becoming aware that non-violence is the only way out of the impasse, and as a matter of fact, all around us, educators, mediators and training programs are working hard to spread this message of non-violence. Little by little it is becoming an obvious guideline for an ever increasing number of people, and having contributed to this movement is a real source of joy.

What is specific today, is our way of living non-violence, in a communal and spiritual dimension, reflecting the concerns of our times and generation. Over the years, we have learnt from our mistakes and today we bear a precious skill which enables us to live together in a benevolent and respectful way one with another.

We have understood for a long time that we can only move on together.

Here are the key points uniting us:

1. Inner dialogue and spirituality

The experiment of non-violence in the Ark implies self-reflection and the wish to set off on the path to a real personal conversion, in order to welcome the inner unity of each living being and of the Creation as a whole. It is rooted in the spirituality of the relationship and in the knowledge that we are all interconnected, sharing the same essence in creation. Any other person, as different as he may seem, is similar to me.

2. Non-violence

If the founding principles and the ideological orientation of the Ark has to be defined in one single word, it would be “non-violence”.

The members of the Ark are not born as non-violent: they choose to become non-violent. Non-violence leads to a path of life, whereas violence leads to a path of death. Non-violence is a choice of life as it involves your life as a whole. You can’t just choose non-violence in some restricted areas only; non-violence is expected on every level.

3. Serving, sharing and working

All over the world, and especially in our western society, we can see that human beings develop a spirit of possession, profit and domination, which encourages them to exploit their fellow man.
Of course, the members of the Ark do not pretend to have escaped these universal tendencies, however they deeply wish to distinguish themselves from these natural inclinations by developing a spirit of sharing and service.

4. A life rooted in simplicity
Living a simple life means focusing on *being* more than on *having*. It is a deliberate non-violent action against waste and appropriation.

Just like the members of the Ark are learning non-violence, they also learn to simplify their way of living. This voluntary simplification, both assumed and accepted is not sought for its own sake; it is an essential means on the path of well-being and freedom of mind. Once freed from worldly ideas, we are more dedicated to our commitments.

5. Consistency and responsibility
Consistency, or life unity, is a dynamic founding principle linking our thoughts, our words and our actions. In other words, it means adapting our actions to an enlightened awareness. Inner work rooted in being present to the present moment, and nurtured by meditation, prayer, self-reflection, silence and religious retreats, leads to a work that puts more emphasis on justice and solidarity. Spiritual life and social commitment are at the center of the Ark’s concerns, as one cannot go without the other.

6. Solidarity
The Ark Community is part of these movements serving men and women of their times. Its members choose to work for the common good of humanity in a world they don’t always share the values.

Violence originates in the loss of human values.

Developing the “being” and the conscience of Humankind is the shared and fundamental responsibility of all human beings. Living mindfully, whilst working on one’s own inner violence to avoid adding more violence to the world and to the future generations; making the choice of considering our fellows as equals on the road to fulfillment and not adversaries that we would have to overthrow or exclude; making the choice of confidence and not of fear; standing up against injustice, oppression, and whatever affects human dignity and freedom; believing that a change is possible and showing example.

In Gandhian spirit, our goal is “Be the change you want to see in the world”. The community spirit corresponds to a deep change of perspective. The community way of living is a revolutionary answer to a society where individuality kills the individuals, constraining them to loneliness and to the loss of meaning, to a society where we learn to fear one another instead of learning to cooperate and where profit has replaced the pursuit of the common good. Living in a community is almost a subversive answer, as it goes against the very basis of the prevailing economic and social liberalism of our times.

Developing the community spirit is also a way to combat fear, which is omnipresent in our society. Loneliness is proportional to fear. The more we feel lonely, the more we are afraid. And the more we are afraid, the more we become submitted and easily influenced. Creating communal ties, of solidarity and brotherhood is an act of liberation, making us stronger, more free and likely to take an active part in the world.

The specificity of our modern times lies in the absence of great spiritual leaders. We don’t have any Gandhi, Lanza, Martin Luther King or Nelson Mandela with us. We are left in a kind of disturbing emptiness. For millenniums, our Humanity has had great guides to nurture us morally and spiritually and to show us the way. Nowadays, these guides have disappeared, or are far less in the limelight. Some people believe that we live in a kind of lost generation, in a lost society.
Yet, the Spirit of the Living, the Divine Spirit, is still at work, and each era has what it needs to face its difficulties. Today we are confronted by a change of paradigm: for the sake of humanity, we need to go beyond the phase of learning; we need to create new social models. We urgently need to develop a collective knowledge, inherent to our Humanity as a whole. We need to trust in our ability to find an appropriate solution to the crisis situation we have reached and that we are experiencing today.

We need to put our trust in the wisdom we have stored up over the centuries, and finally set off for a real change. We need to develop our creativity and find collective solutions to a collective issue: the slow loss of humanity. Human Beings are losing their humanity.

Who we are, with our amazing creative abilities and our will to change…that’s for today, and for the benefit of all. It’s what the Greeks call “Kairos”, meaning, the “the right moment”.

The encounter of Lanza and Gandhi is also set in the Kairos. The right moment that took place 80 years ago was a seed which helped putting into motion today’s Kairos.

This is why it is good and necessary to celebrate this encounter and to remember it, not as a landmark moment in the past, but as a celebration of hope and a call to action for the present.

Margalida Reus is responsible for Communities of Ark in France