Essay: "Reacting to 'Reacting'"

**by Amanda Houle**

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Gandhi was dead. The shot, fired hundreds of miles away and four decades prior to my birth, hit without warning and shattered my dreams of a unified India. Without Gandhi, Hindus and Muslims would destroy one another. Gandhi was gone, and I was devastated.

In a last-ditch effort for peace, I would take his place. I would speak to India on the radio. I leapt on top of a chair, seizing an imaginary microphone. Below me, I could hear the Muslim League growing louder and more strident: "We knew Hindu radicals would dominate this allegedly united India," shouted Sarah. "That's why we Muslims must break away and form Pakistan." I tried to organize my thoughts but was distracted by Sarah's defamation of Gandhi. "Gandhi's death is proof that Muslims and Hindus cannot co-exist in the same state. Violence is necessary and inevitable."

I searched for Gandhi's voice within me. Trembling atop the chair, I delivered a call for unity and forgiveness. Weaving my own words in with those that I could recall from Gandhi's texts, I cried out for a peace that would honor his life's work: "Either we will defer to the unholy weapon of armed strength or we will assert our historic greatness as a nation empowered by the sacred force of non-violence, for no power of earth can stop the onward march of a peaceful, unified, determined, and godly people."

In hopes of finding encouragement, I looked down to my right. Much to my disappointment, I found my teammate Jennifer, head in hands, muttering: "It won't work. Indians can't get along." In that instant, I felt a cold, clammy hand touch my own. I looked to my left and found what I am sure was a reflection of my own panic-stricken face. Anna, another teammate, nervously climbed onto a chair beside me.

Her voice, louder than my own, rang out: "We cannot forsake Gandhi's dream. We can transcend the hate and divisions and live in peace as one people." In an instant, another member of my team climbed on a chair and added her voice to the chorus: "We must put aside our weapons of violence and greet our antagonists with spiritual non-violence. Violence begets more violence."

Their words made me proud--and thankful that we had spent the previous evening sitting on my dorm room floor eating popcorn and reviewing Gandhi's writings. The mood in the room began to shift. The faces of the Muslim League softened; Sarah fell silent. Now, at last, we might have the peaceful negotiations that would honor Gandhi's legacy. We would make a better history than had transpired a half century ago. We would get it right and make a more peaceful world!

But suddenly, I felt a hand tap my shoulder. It was the Game Master. Time had run out; the game was finished. And before I knew it, India was partitioned. Sarah and the extremists had won. It was time to head to calculus. But instead I raced to the ladies room, went into a stall, locked the door, and wept.

I will never forget the month I spent in Gandhi's India. For a while I became Gandhi, and India became my own country. Nor will I forget the month in 403 B.C., when my vote in support of the Socratic model of government single-handedly brought about the fall of a radical Athenian democracy; or my time in Puritan New England where, during the trial of Anne Hutchinson, I was challenged to use my own sacred text--the Bible--to defend positions at odds with my own fundamental political and religious beliefs; or my trip to Ming-era China, where I sat in the company of Confucian scholars and debated the utility of tradition in governing a nation.

These historical journeys, paved with late-night strategy sessions, repeatedly delivered me to a place where my academic and personal passions became one. In my memory, the voices of my classmates, together with those of Socrates, Rousseau, and Calvin, echo in an unending debate over the meanings of truth, justice, citizenship, and how to survive your first two years of college.

Many of the texts rest as close to my heart as the personal secrets disclosed by my teammates and newfound friends, the lessons within them as applicable to my life as the wisdom of my mentors. When forming political opinions or choosing a presidential candidate, my thoughts are complicated by the positions of my parents, the musings of CNN's talking heads, the opinions of my classmates, and the questions raised by scholars from centuries past. This intensely personal connection to the texts is a product of my necessary investment in them. My work in the "Reacting" course demanded an unqualified commitment to understanding and defending various historical positions.

But why did I cry? It was simultaneously a cry of passion, aggression, desire, joy, exhaustion, and empowerment. To say that my tears were simply provoked by my attachment to a frail, soft-spoken man working on the coasts of India in the last century would be too simple. To be sure, some of those tears were shed for him--but some were caused by frustration with team members who had not been brave enough to mount the chairs; some by fear that I had let those who were brave down; some in remorse that the ideals of nonviolence had failed; and some in pure embarrassment at the fact that I had just stood up on a chair, red-faced and breathless, in front of my ex-boyfriend's new shiny-haired girlfriend.

"Reacting" was completely unique in my college experience. In playing those games, the words of Gandhi, Socrates, and other historical figures became mine, transcending the academic distance I had grown accustomed to and tapping into a very personal, intimate realm. Their thoughts, their histories, their biographies are real and alive in my mind.

I suppose the best way to explain those tears is to point to the only other time that "Reacting" made me cry. After I finished the course, I vacationed in Greece. After dragging my family through Athens in the sweltering heat, attempting to use a map that I couldn't decipher and a language unintelligible to me, I finally landed at my intended destination: the ancient agora. I searched until I found the small marble plaque marking the spot where Socrates is thought to have held discussions with his pupils. Staring at the worn stone, I found tears streaming down my face.

When my mother pressed me for an explanation, all I could say was that, standing in the dust and ruins, some part of me was surprised not to find him there. In my mind, the agora exists as a bustling and exciting place where Socrates can still be heard in the early morning, speaking on matters of justice and leadership.

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