

Gandhi Memorial Lecture
E.H. Simmons
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I am deeply honored to have been asked to present the Gandhi Memorial Lecture today.

I grew up in a college town in the Midwestern United States in the 1960's and 1970's. While today my husband and I can Facebook with relatives in Hyderabad, back then Ohio felt very distant from India – not only geographically, but also in terms of communication and culture. Yet, because my parents were university faculty, I was very aware of the Civil Rights Movement unfolding in the US at the time. In particular, I learned how the work of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. had been impacted by that of Mahatma Gandhi, who led the way toward peace, nonviolence, and self-determination.

Today, I'd like to share a few thoughts about how peace is represented in the context of higher education, both because I work at UC San Diego and because today's event is honoring students who will soon begin their own college and university experiences.

My focus will be on the following quote from Mahatma Gandhi: *"Peace will not come out of a clash of arms, but out of justice lived and done by unarmed nations..."*

In my field of physics, we often focus on the related concept of equilibrium. An object is in physical equilibrium (sitting still or moving along at constant velocity) if it is not acted upon by any forces or if the forces on it balance, cancel one another out. Similarly, in chemistry, a substance is in chemical equilibrium if it either is not interacting chemically with its surroundings or if the amount of the substance lost to the environment by evaporation or chemical reactions is balanced by the amount restored by condensation or inverse chemical reactions.

Equilibrium can manifest in several ways: A dust grain floating through empty space or a batch of chemically inert Helium atoms are in a static equilibrium. A ball poised atop a knife-edge is in an unstable equilibrium – the slightest breeze will send it toppling. A stone trapped between two strong opposing forces is in equilibrium, though the whole system is in tension. Or there can be a more delicate, dynamic equilibrium in which light forces or taps from different sides cancel out.

University leaders strive to create equilibrium on their campuses. This is best done in the dynamic mode. For instance, rather than prohibiting the discussion of certain topics in order to avoid conflict, a university leader should work to ensure the free exchange of ideas and open discussion of concerns so that conflicts can be recognized and resolved. Moreover, the leader should remember that their authority is most naturally used to guide processes, assure clear communication, and support those on campus who are traditionally marginalized. Rules may be helpful to provide consistency... but one should remember that rules are written by fallible humans and may, therefore, not cover all circumstances appropriately. Rather than following

rules blindly, one should adopt a holistic, humanistic view and try to identify overarching principles that apply to the situation at hand.

In fact, this very ability that Mahatma Gandhi showed to look beyond the particular circumstances of his own life or community and identify the commonalities of a state, a nation, or humanity was one of the most unusual and inspiring things about his work. As a university leader, I try to keep in mind the principle he articulated about the nature of authority: *“Power based on love is a thousand times more effective and permanent than [power] derived from fear of punishment.”* Finding what I have in common with my colleagues and relating to them as fellow human beings is crucial; though we may well disagree about some specific issues, we share the desire to educate students and promote the development of knowledge.

Now, I would like to speak directly to the students we are honoring today. As you begin your time at college or university, do seek out equilibrium in your life. But avoid the pathological kinds.

Don't be like Helium atoms, finding equilibrium through non-interaction. Don't isolate yourself within narrow bands of ideas, interests, people, or spaces. This would miss out on the main point of a university experience: to grow mentally and personally by encountering new individuals and ideas. Rather, relish the chance to become acquainted with people from places you have never visited. Take courses in disciplines you had never heard of in high school. Grapple with ideas that are foreign to you and initially difficult to comprehend. Some of these will, amazingly, become part of your own approach to the world. Others, you will disagree with – and you may even find yourself writing an course essay demonstrating exactly where those ideas fall short.

All of these skills will be important in your life beyond university, as you find yourself working with diverse groups of people with a myriad of ideas and approaches. Even if you become an artist, exercising your creativity alone in a studio, you will still have to interact with the vendors you buy materials from or the patrons who purchase your art. More likely, you will work in industry, or academia, or an office, as part of teams. Either way, gaining related experience in college will be tremendously helpful.

At the other extreme, avoid the crushing kind of equilibrium. Don't close your mind and hold too tightly to the ideas you arrived at college with, or seek to rigidly impose those ideas on others. The latter is not merely wrong, but is futile: people may acquiesce in your presence but will likely not adhere to those ideas in your absence. You would also lose the chance to practice gently persuading others to listen to your ideas – and to practice learning from theirs as well. For, as Mahatma Gandhi reminds us *“Nobody in this world possesses absolute truth.”* If you let others' perspectives in, yours will likely change for the better over time.

So, lower your defenses and listen to your professors and classmates. Actively invite others into the conversation, especially those whose voices are usually disregarded; make a space for their concerns to be heard and addressed. In doing so, you will be promoting that peace which

is the "*justice lived and done by unarmed nations*". And you will be honoring Mahatma Gandhi, in whose name you are being honored today.