

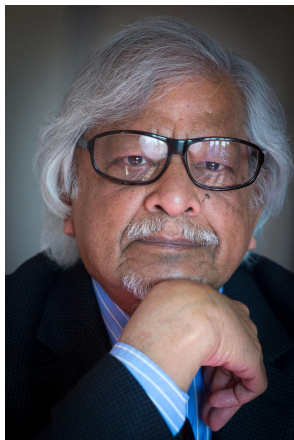
ROBERT PRICE: 'Never submit to cowardice,' another Gandhi urges

BY ROBERT PRICE rprice@bakersfield.com Sep 30, 2019

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Bakersfield College history professor Oliver Rosales, left, interviews Arun Gandhi about the legacy of his grandfather, Mahatma Gandhi, and his own mission promoting the virtues of nonviolence.



Arun Gandhi
Thierry Orban / Bestimage

Young Arun had been targeted and targeted again. White teens were beating him because his skin was too dark. Black teens were assaulting him because his skin was too light. Finally, Arun decided the only solution was physical superiority: He would pump iron until his muscles bulged. Then he would show them.

His parents had a better idea. They would bring him 4,500 miles to his Bapuji. To his grandfather.

And so it was that Arun Gandhi, just 12, came from the turmoil of South African apartheid, past the turmoil of India's colonial rebellion and ultimate partition from Pakistan, into the care of a placid man so transformative that seven decades after his death his name — his last name alone — still inspires reverence: Gandhi.



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Mahatma Gandhi died a martyr in 1948, felled by an assassin's bullet. It seemed therefore poignant — perhaps only to me — that he spoke to an auditorium full of students at a Delano high school named for Robert F. Kennedy, felled by an assassin's bullet 20 years later. In any case, these RFK students, all of them enrolled in Bakersfield College's Early College program, seemed to hearken to the words of BC President Sonya Christian, who advised them to clear the noise from their minds and listen.

But this Gandhi, speaking in Kern County for the second time in three days, had more to offer than a recitation of his grandfather's substantial legacy of nonviolence and compassion. This Gandhi — at 85, seven years older than his grandfather at his passing — spoke of the power of peace but also of action.



Gandhi's grandson spreads message of nonviolence in Bakersfield

■ WATCH: Gandhi's grandson speaks at Robert F. Kennedy High School

"Better to do it violently than to sit back and do nothing," Arun Gandhi said. "Cowardice is the worst thing that can happen to human beings. Never submit to cowardice."

Those words underscored the theme of his 2017 book, "The Gift of Anger": That fury was like electricity, capable of destruction or construction. Untethered anger is harmful but focused, directed anger can be a tool for justice.

This was a soft-spoken call to action.

One young man in the audience wanted to know when Arun Gandhi found his calling as his grandfather's messenger of nonviolent activism. "When did you fathom," he asked, "that you would bestow upon people your grandfather's methods of being a pacifist?"

It was a journey, Gandhi said, that came with no single jolt of clarity. He might have pointed to his coverage of various injustices during a 30-year career as a feisty, fearless journalist writing for the Times of India. He might have pointed to his founding in Memphis, Tenn., of the M. K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence at Christian Brothers University.

Both would miss the mark. It was surely his two years with his grandfather, "from a naive child of 12 to a wiser young man of 14," as he writes in "The Gift of Anger."

"In that time I learned from him lessons that forever changed the direction of my life."

He returned to South Africa just weeks before his grandfather was killed.

A young woman in the audience asked Gandhi about the seeming contradiction of humility, an ideal celebrated by both Arun Gandhi and his grandfather, and ego, the essential component of confidence and self-esteem.

"How does someone find enlightenment and become open minded if you take ego into play?," she asked. "I feel like it's a paradox."

Gandhi responded much as he had during the car ride to Delano earlier that morning.

"The answer is in creating community, having relationships that mean something to the greater purpose," he said. "We think we are individuals and we can do what we want, but that is a myth. We are guided by the communities we choose."

Surely he left the auditorium having steered RFK students toward communities with purpose.

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