

The Gandhi Foundation Summer Gathering 2012

This year our annual weeklong ashram type experience took place at the Abbey (Saturday 28th July – Saturday 4th August) a beautiful and unique Grade 1 medieval listed building with an inner courtyard. It is tucked away in the small village of Sutton Courtenay, 10 miles south of Oxford. The Abbey's architectural heritage dates back to the 13th century and has a peaceful environment with a meditative atmosphere, perfect for us. The Abbey is surrounded by four acres of beautiful grounds that include mature trees, a woodland path, a labyrinth and places to sit. Sutton Courtenay itself is a sleepy and charming traditional English village with spectacular river walks that we were all able to enjoy. The Abbey is run by a small resident lay community of four and it was very rewarding for us to be able to share the meals we had prepared with them and their volunteers.

Most of us were accommodated in the Guest House, a small modern building in the grounds in either single or double rooms. Some of us were resident in the Abbey and some of us camped. Most of our activities took place in the Great Hall, a unique and flexible space with a timber vaulted ceiling, wooden floor and wall panelling with exquisite and intriguing carvings, an enormous fireplace and french windows opening onto the garden. In one corner sat a grand piano and occasionally throughout the week when passing through we were lucky enough to hear it being played. There was also a country style kitchen with a large table and chairs, excellent for food preparation (and playing board games!) and an ample sized dining room where we could all eat together on one long table.

Without access to either TV or computers and with the nearest shop some walk away we were Olympic free for the week but no one felt deprived, being together and taking part in our own shared activities was enough. There was no competition here, only cooperation and mutual appreciation. Twenty of us shared in an inspirational week which included serious exploration of the issues of non-violence both for ourselves and our global family, reflection, sharing, living as one community and having fun. As a group and as individuals we were able to bond in a special way as both the setting and the rhythm of the week were conducive to personal growth and authentic sharing.

Participants

Twenty people took part, aged 7 to 75+ including pensioners, single people and families with young children and teenagers. There was a mix of ages within all activities and small groups with each person sharing what they could and appreciated for their contribution. It felt a bit like a large extended family where respect, tolerance and friendship were experienced by us all whatever our age, sex, ethnicity or background – an ideal Gandhian society perhaps?

Rhythm of the day

The week and each day followed a rhythm which has been tried and tested over the years and found to work very well. However there was flexibility and sometimes other activities were added in depending on the wishes and needs of us all.

7.00am yoga

8.00am breakfast

9.00am morning meditation and sharing. To begin we sat in a circle. A short meditation was followed by words of thanks, sharing of information, problems shared and resolved and hopes for the day.

9.30am presentation and sharing about themes of non-violence.

11.00am shramdana. Four teams rotated daily in their tasks lasting for about half an hour including preparing lunch, cleaning the Abbey building, preparing supper and cleaning the guest house. An important part of the week was preparing food for each other. Our cook for the week – Lizz, who wowed us with her creative and delicious vegetarian food – had a team to help her prepare soups, salads, crumbles, cakes, cookies and tarts. Most mornings there was freshly made bread straight from the oven.

1.00pm lunch

3.00pm creative activity consisting of art/craft, crochet, gardening, badminton, baking, Bananagrams, a word game played by up to six people which proved to be very popular during the week, reading or walks by the river. Fortunately there was lots of room at the Abbey both inside and out for our activities. Activities were done either individually or in groups, everyone was welcome to participate but nothing was compulsory. Some of us spent the afternoon sleeping or relaxing.

6.30pm supper

8.00pm evening entertainment – a different activity each evening

9.00pm evening meditation

The Theme – The Power of Non-violence

This year our theme for the week was the Power of Non-Violence. Each day was slightly different as described below. Many of the morning presentations were in depth and raised many fascinating and contentious issues for us all to grapple with. I scribbled like mad making notes of each session for my own interest but my brief summaries below cannot begin to do justice to the depth of research, preparation and discussion. I aim to give just a flavour of the experience. I have also included our evening activities in order to give an idea of our daily experience.

Sunday

In the morning Graham gave a short summary of Gandhi's life. After lunch some of us participated in creative listening. For evening entertainment we played games with a beach ball coaxing it around the outside of the Gandhi Foundation parachute. We all had a lot of fun.

Monday

We looked at the ideas and people who had influenced Gandhi. Gandhi's ideas evolved over time and later he was very good at putting them into practice. The Bhagavad Gita, the Bible, John Ruskin, Tolstoy, Henry David Thoreau were discussed. We then looked more closely at the lives of Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela who were themselves influenced by Gandhi. In small groups we studied a handout detailing the life of Nelson Mandela and attempted to find similarities and differences. The comparison was very interesting and generated much discussion.

In the evening Hester led a group of us in circle dancing.

Tuesday

Graham gave a brief presentation on the different Arab states and the recent Arab spring, illustrating that the methods used in their revolutions against oppressive regimes had not all been nonviolent. We discussed the ideas of the eccentric American academic Gene Sharp, the principles outlined in his book *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, and how these ideas have been put into practice. We watched on DVD a recent documentary about him titled 'How to start a Revolution' and learnt about the 198 nonviolent ways in which he suggests an oppressed group of people can bring about significant change. These methods included nonviolent action, economic and political non-cooperation and nonviolent intervention. One of the key issues is strategic planning. Unplanned struggles have rarely been successful. Having never heard about Gene Sharp before many of us found it both gripping and illuminating.

That evening Denise ran a creative writing group for all ages. Linnet, age 9, in particular enthralled us with her creative and perceptive ideas. Many of us chose the theme 'polite and rude' which caused some giggles.

Wednesday

Trevor gave a presentation based on a report called *War Prevention Works* by the Oxford Research Group formed in 1982. One of the things they study is how people can resolve conflict by nonviolent means. Out of 50 case studies detailed in the report Trevor selected six of them – Nigeria, Assam in India, Romania, El Salvador, Liberia and Guatemala. During our discussion time several of us expressed surprise that there were so many instances of successful resolution of conflict by nonviolent means.

At 2.00pm, some of us met Nona to discuss the article in *The Gandhi Way*, Spring 2009 about Te Whiti o Rongomai, 'A forerunner of Gandhi' by Helena Nielson. He was a Maori leader who practiced nonviolent resistance against the British Empire two generations before Gandhi. With reference to episodes in New Zealand we discussed how Te Whiti reacted to oppression and predicted how Gandhi might have reacted in the same situation.

At 3.00pm some of us joined in parachute games in the garden, a lot of fun was enjoyed by all. This was followed by our usual choice of creative activity and extended Bananagrams. In the evening there was another session of circle dancing with Hester followed by a bonfire. It was an action packed and great day. "Days don't get much better than this", I heard someone say. I agreed.

Thursday

The theme for the morning discussion was 'The Violent Alternative.' In pairs we created two lists, one list for the good things about war, and a second for the bad things. Back together in the large group there was a lively discussion. We then discussed the definition of a just war and the six conditions which must be satisfied for a war to be considered just.

After lunch we gathered on the lawn for our annual group photo.

In the evening we joined together in the hall for our annual party of homemade entertainment. This is real old-fashioned light-hearted fun, a do-it-yourself variety show hosted by our MC, Natasha who had been gathering ideas from us all week and planning an order of events. As is the tradition of the Gandhi Summer School and Gathering individually or in groups we perform for our friends. Sometimes audience participation is requested but not compulsory. We had the usual mix of games, jokes, poems, music, drama and stories. It was a particularly lively party by our standards and everyone had a lot of fun.

Friday

Lizz gave a presentation about living in harmony with the planet. We discussed the different ways people view planet earth and our relationship with it. Research has shown that social change movements are very long haul and each one of us has an impact by the way we view and use energy, food, transport and waste. Land use, soil erosion, population and climate change are all critical for humanity's future on planet earth. The issues are broad and include economics, politics, culture, community, legal and social infrastructure. Research has shown that behaviour change is not easy. It takes three weeks of conscious effort to change behaviour and three months for the desired change to become established. Changes in policy can also lead, surprisingly, to changes in behaviour.

In the afternoon a small group of us painted a super large picture of the Abbey. After supper we all came together in The Hearth – an Abbey sitting room – and watched the film *Gandhi* as if in a cinema. Chai was served in the interval –thanks Lizz!!!

Saturday

After packing to leave and the general clear up Lizz led a 'wash up' session. We discussed what we found 'new', 'inspiring', 'challenging' and 'interesting' and what we would like to follow up next year. Next year's theme will be about limits to growth and using resources more sustainably.

Conclusion

I haven't been able to mention everyone by name but it would be wrong to get the impression that only a few people did most of the organisation and preparation. Everyone contributed, some in ways too small to mention, but critical none the less to the success of the whole experience. I met old and made new friends. Over the years I have found the week provides the perfect balance of thoughtful and relevant discussion about the pressing issues in today's world, reflection, relaxation, sharing and fun. My heartfelt thanks go out to everyone who participated in making this yet another very special and important week which is so difficult to replicate in the outside world. I feel nurtured yet again and ready to try to make small changes in my life. These changes feel like a very small effort but like a mosaic where changing the colour of just one square changes the whole, if everyone does this maybe we can change the future for the better for all living beings on our fragile planet.

We welcome new people; if you would like to take part and attend next year's Summer School and Gathering please contact me at tplewis1@gmail.com

Trudy Lewis

Please see The Gandhi Foundation Flickr site for photos of the Summer Gathering 2012:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/gandhifoundation/sets/72157631960697122/>

An article about the event also appears in the October issue of Yoga and Health magazine:

<http://www.yogaandhealthmag.co.uk/>