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## Ethics for Today's World

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It takes guts, in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, to be a professor of ethics, so I salute Eric Dent<sup>1</sup>. Even giving a single lecture on the subject demands a degree of brashness, so I think I too must have a pretty thick skin.

What makes this a little easier is the memory of Jim and Ellie Newton, in whose honor I speak. Perhaps there are people listening who knew Jim and Ellie better and more continuously than I did. But I too knew and loved them, having first met them in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when I was in my twenties and the Newtons were in their fifties, and again, three or four decades later, in the 1980s and 1990s. These later meetings took place here in Fort Myers, the earlier ones on Mackinac Island, Michigan, and in New York.

Even if he had not written his best-seller *Uncommon Friends*, the first word to pop up in my mind at the thought of Jim would have been “friendship.” Whenever I met Jim, he looked glad. He wasn't just acknowledging my presence, he seemed happy about it! This was true, I think, with everyone he met.

Whether or not I conclude at the end of my lecture that friendship is the heart of ethics, friendship was clearly the first, middle and last name of Jim Newton's soul. Which probably is also why I feel that Jim isn't gone, he has just gone to another place, and is in fact listening to me right now. “Hi, Jim! I'm sure you're doing great!” And he replies: “Sure, two hundred percent!”

This current of friendship that flowed from him is of course why so many, and not just Edison, and Ford, and Lindbergh, and Harvey Firestone, and Alexis Carrel, bonded with Jim.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Dent holds the Uncommon Friends Endowed Chair in Ethics at Florida Gulf Coast University, Fort Myers, Florida.

As for Ellie, I will never believe that she could possibly reach the age of 104! Not possible. Can't be true. The Ellie I knew was forever young, forever beautiful, forever smiling, forever, it seemed to me, dancing, forever dancing forward on her toes with a deep conviction, a strong conviction, that change was possible. Change in the way people treated one another, in the way nations treated one another.

Dear Jim, dear Ellie, I honor you.

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All of us know that professional ethics isn't always a simple or straightforward question, whether for doctors, nurses, lawyers, teachers, policemen, accountants, psychologists, politicians, journalists, or for those in any other career or vocation. And it's not a question I will go into. I will only say that in my work during the last quarter century as a professor at the University of Illinois – i.e. as a state university employee --, I've been required, almost every half-semester, to complete an online training course on ethics. This requirement has taught me two things: firstly, patience, and, secondly, awe at the depth of what a university, at different levels, has to wrestle with.

In this lecture I will share my understanding of ethics in relations between human beings, and in relations between groups of human beings. Let me start by saying that my take on this question has been influenced by encounters in my life, including my encounter with my grandfather and his ideas, and my encounter with an idea that was a huge influence on the lives of Jim and Ellie Newton, the idea put across by Moral Re-Armament, or MRA, known earlier, before World War II, as the Oxford Group, and now known, for the last two decades or more, as Initiatives of Change.

I must acknowledge that today Initiatives of Change is not known as widely in the world and in the U.S as MRA was in the forties, fifties, sixties and seventies.

Jim and Ellie Newton would have told you that MRA was a major influence in their lives. In fact, Jim and Ellie were seen by many as being among the leaders of MRA, even if they did not see themselves that way. Let me add for myself, with pride and gratefulness, that I continue to be associated with MRA, i.e. with Initiatives of Change, and had the privilege of serving as president of Initiatives of Change International in 2009 and 2010.

My father, Devadas Gandhi, who died in 1957, the youngest of Gandhi's four sons – Gandhi had no daughters --, was for over two decades the editor of the *Hindustan*

*Times*, a newspaper published from India's capital, New Delhi. The *Hindustan Times* was and still is one of India's great newspapers.

Earlier, when my father was 31 years old, he had met Frank Buchman, the founder of MRA, in London in 1931. My father's father, the Mahatma, was in London for talks about India's independence, and my father was serving him as a secretary. Buchman, the Pennsylvania-born American, was also in London at that time.

Two decades later, in 1952-53, and again in 1955, when Buchman was in New Delhi along with many of his associates, my father welcomed Buchman and helped in finding beds in the city for his large team. One result of my father's friendship with Buchman and his team was that in 1956, when I went to Edinburgh, Scotland, to train with the newspaper, *The Scotsman*, I stayed for nine months as a paying guest in the home of a leading Edinburgh doctor who was actively associated with MRA.

That stay in Edinburgh with Dr. Patrick Petrie and his wife and sons, and my association with them and their MRA friends, brought a turn to my life. Thereafter, in the months and years that followed, I met hundreds of individuals, many of them American, who had accepted a very simple, almost childlike, idea, which was this. If they wished to change the world, they should start with themselves. In Edinburgh, in the fall of 1956, I too embraced the idea. I was exactly 21.

That fall I couldn't stop looking at a little book that MRA had produced. Bearing the title *Where Do We Go from Here?* it contained a number of cartoon-like sketches. Two center pages opened to reveal four magnificent pillars reaching the skies. These pillars were called Absolute Honesty, Absolute Purity, Absolute Unselfishness, and Absolute Love. "Wow!" I thought. Can we have a society, a nation, a world, inspired by such pillars? A crazy dream? Or a fantastic dream!

Also spelled out in that little book was this tip for getting out of a logjam in negotiations: "Look for what's right, not who is right." I read other books too, with titles like *Life Changers*, *Soul Surgery*, and *For Sinners Only*.

I heard as well about listening to the inner voice, or the voice of conscience, or the still small voice, or the voice of God. Phrases like these were interchangeably used. My grandfather Gandhi also used those phrases. As did others, in the 1950s and in times prior. Many still do.

From my MRA friends, I heard this claim: “When man listens, God speaks. When man obeys, God acts. When men change, nations change.”

I believed those ringing, rhythmic lines. Today, when I am not 21 but 86, I still believe them. If I were to repeat those words now, I would probably add, after “God acts,” the words, “often slowly” or “imperceptibly.” And I would add those words also after “nations change”. And perhaps I would say that when a *person* listens in silence, useful, helpful or even inspired thoughts could come. I would say that, instead of saying categorically, “God speaks.”

Over the last many decades, I have seen with my eyes, and in place after place, relationships between individuals and groups being restored, or becoming stronger, as people sincerely try to listen to the inner voice, and as they recall the pillars of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love, and think of what is right, not who is right.

One of Frank Buchman’s key findings, perhaps fresh and even radical for his time, was that if you wished to help others, sharing works better than advising. In or very close to 1960, when I was 24, I spent three or four days with him and a few of his close associates in Tucson, AZ. This was not long before Buchman’s death, which occurred in Germany in August of 1961, when he was 83. About eight or ten young students from the Middle East – either Iranians or Iraqis, I am afraid I’ve forgotten which – had come into the house in Tucson for a conversation with some of us.

I ran into Buchman after spending half an hour or so with these men from the Middle East. He asked me how it was going. “Fine,” I said, “we’re having a great time.” “Did you tell them how you changed?” “No, Frank.” “Go back and tell them.” Which I did -- and connected better with the students.

After all these decades, here, for whatever it’s worth, is my take on the MRA approach. *Sharing* works. Quiet times work. Friendship works. Absolute moral standards are fantastic stars for life, scary stars, maybe, but also inspiring and illuminating.

At the same time, I’ve learned that there is no formula, no short cut, no magic bullet for change. It seems that people change when the moment is ripe, and only God knows when that is.

In interactions or relationships with others, the most I can control (with some effort) is what I say or don’t say, what I do or don’t to. I should seek to make my

responses or initiatives sound, healthy, constructive, wise -- no easy task – and leave results in God’s hands.

In line with Frank Buchman’s awareness, and Jim Newton’s awareness, of the usefulness of stories, let me relate a couple stories from my life that relate to ethics in relationships between groups of people. Both stories are from long ago.

First some background. I was eight when, in 1944, my grandmother died while she and my grandfather, then in their mid-seventies, were prisoners of the British. I was 12 when in 1947 India won its independence, and 12-and-a-half when in New Delhi, the city where I was going to school, my grandfather was killed by a group of Hindus who objected to the friendship that Gandhi, a Hindu, was offering to India’s Muslims.

Many of you know that the India that became free in 1947 was also divided into two, a Hindu-majority ‘India’ and a Muslim-majority ‘Pakistan’. Killings marked the partition, and many Indians and Pakistanis stepping into the future thought of one another as enemies. Although I had been moved by my grandfather’s efforts for Hindu-Muslim reconciliation and friendship, I too, as a youngster, had absorbed some of New Delhi’s street-level prejudice.

I was 16 years old in September of 1951 -- four years after India and Pakistan had emerged as free nations -- when a young journalist working on the newspaper my father was editing came up to our apartment, which was located right above the newspaper’s offices, and knocked on the door. He had with him with a piece of paper, hot off the teleprinter, which he wanted to show my father. I looked at the piece of paper as I let him in. It read, ‘Liaqat Ali Khan, Prime Minister of Pakistan, has been shot. MTF.’ Knowing that MTF meant “More To Follow,” I said to the journalist, ‘I hope what follows is news that he is dead.’

Expecting a smile at my clever remark, I was surprised when the journalist gave me a frown. I was embarrassed. Rightly so. Later I recognized that more than stupid prejudice, a desire to be macho had prompted my comment. I was a boy trying to be a man.

Five years later, when I was 21 and in London, England, I was invited to a lunch meeting where a man from South Africa spoke brilliantly. He was what some would call a Black South African, though in his country a man like him would be known for his name and his profession, not for his skin-color. In 1956 in South Africa, people like him were often described as “natives.” I had seen and heard

him earlier in a film, where he was a most impressive presence. However, while watching that film, I had told myself that he was surely speaking to a script written by others, perhaps a European or an American.

When I heard his brilliant short speech at that London lunch, I said to myself, ‘My God, what a man,’ and I was horrified at the ignorance and the bias behind my earlier assumption.

I didn’t know the world. In my arrogance I thought I knew. In reality, I didn’t even know myself properly.

In the sixty-five plus years since that lunch in London, having been to dozens of countries and met and listened to God knows how many people, having studied the histories and conflicts of some parts of the world, and even written about some of them, I have learned this. “We human beings have opinions about one another, we don’t have knowledge.” We’re judges pronouncing verdicts without evidence. We don’t read, we don’t listen, but we think we know.

I’ve learned that the first step to knowledge, leading to riches we can acquire from all who are around us, is to remind myself that I don’t know.

One result of recognizing my ignorance, arrogance and biases was that I studied, researched and found out more, and shared with others what I was learning. To my great good fortune, some of my books seem to have added a little to clarity and may even have assisted a little bit in the difficult process of understanding and reconciliation among divided communities.

After I decided that history writing would be a serious part of my life, one of my first projects was a study of the lives of eight influential Muslim leaders (including the man shot in 1951) who had helped shape the Pakistan and the India that had grown along with me. Thanks to my luck, this 1985 book, which in its US version is called *Eight Lives: A Study of the Hindu-Muslim Encounter*, whereas the Indian version bears the title *Understanding the Muslim Mind*, this book not only remains in print in different languages in India and Pakistan; Hindus and Muslims have both liked it, and the book seems to have removed some cobwebs from some minds.

Published more recently, in 2012, my study called *Punjab, 1707-1947: A History from Aurangzeb to Mountbatten*, was also intended to serve the ethics of much-needed reconciliation. This book probes the deep historical roots of the great

carnage that took place in 1947 in the vast region called Punjab, one half of which went to Pakistan, while the other half remained with India.

In the summer of 1947, at least half a million, possibly even more, were massacred across Punjab. Popular wisdom in India holds that almost all who were killed in that summer of madness were non-Muslims -- Hindus or Sikhs. Popular wisdom in Pakistan is certain that mostly Muslims were killed. The Rashomon syndrome has been at work. Studies like the one I was able to carry out have brought out a less one-sided picture.

Among other things, such studies show that in 1947 in Punjab there was almost complete parity in violence and cruelty, and parity also in the brave way in which on both sides large numbers of the vulnerable were protected and sent to safety. I feel thankful and lucky when I find Muslims in Pakistan, and Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims in India, referencing my Punjab book.

Professor Dent is now probably asking whether it is ethical for a lecturer to promote his own books. So I will only mention one other book of mine, which was written in the hope that the peoples of three countries, the U.S., India, and Great Britain, would get to know one another better. *A Tale Two Revolts: the American Civil War and India 1857*, published in 2009, examines two momentous and violent events that took place at almost the same time, around 160 years ago, on opposite sides of our world.

Among other things I wanted to find out what the people of 19<sup>th</sup>-century, British-ruled India thought of slavery in the U.S., and what 19<sup>th</sup> century Americans, including Abraham Lincoln, thought of India's efforts for freedom from British rule.

A brilliant Englishman, Peter Howard, rugby star, famed journalist, playwright, wonderful speaker, implemented a drastic new ethics in his own life after meeting MRA. After Frank Buchman's death, Peter Howard was acknowledged as MRA's leader. He was only 57 when he died in 1965. His plays, books, and talks influenced many people.

Peter, a great friend of Jim and Ellie's, once made a very simple, very obvious, and yet easily overlooked point. He was speaking to a group of Kenyans in East Africa, where, as in several other places, the British had taken charge for several decades and were not instantaneously loved. Said Peter Howard, "I was born white," adding, "I couldn't help it." The Kenyans laughed. The ice was broken.

Not knowing what we are doing, we *label* people for where they were born, for whom they were born to, for the race or religion of their parents. Often, we foolishly imagine that the label we give them sums up their qualities. But I think we can accept that everyone has the right to exist, whoever they are and whoever their ancestors were. Irrespective of what their forebears might have done or not done.

Everyone has the right to exist. Everyone has the right also to be respected, and to receive protection from the state and its officers. I think that should be widely acceptable.

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I said earlier that Gandhi too spoke of the inner voice. “The only tyrant I am willing to obey,” he would say, “is the still small voice.” Gandhi nursed audacious goals that people at the time thought were crazy goals. A hundred years ago, when the British Empire seemed permanent, he sought India’s liberation. When Indian society believed in high-and-low, and was treating one of its precious sections as, believe it or not, “untouchable,” he fought to end that cruel practice. And he fought for Hindu-Muslim unity and partnership.

And he told India: “We will fight for freedom from British rule but not hate the British people.” This stand was not an easy one to hold on to, as this story will tell you.

Some of you may be aware that the worst single incident in the annals of British rule over India was the Amritsar massacre of April 13, 1919, also known as the Jallianwala massacre. That day over 10,000 people, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, most of them unaware of a ban on meetings freshly imposed by British officers, all of them completely unarmed, had gathered in the city of Amritsar on an open ground called Jallianwala, which was enclosed on three sides by five-foot-high walls.

The ban had been imposed following violence three days previously, April 10, when Indian demonstrators in Amritsar had killed five Englishmen. The meeting of April 13 had barely started when a British brigadier and fifty Indian soldiers with rifles appeared and took possession of the entrance to the ground, which was also the sole exit. Without calling for dispersal, Brigadier Dyer ordered fire. For ten minutes, the soldiers carried out the order. Almost every bullet got a victim.



Official estimates said that 379 were killed and over 1,000 injured. Unofficial figures were higher.

That was on April 13. In December that year, 1919, the Indian National Congress, which was the chief vehicle for India's freedom movement, held its annual session in that same city, Amritsar, and discussed a resolution that condemned the massacre and also deplored the violence, three days previously, at Indian hands. An eye-witness record of the discussion by the INC was left by a delegate called K.M. Munshi, lawyer and author from Bombay, who would later hold senior positions in independent India. Wrote Munshi:

The hearts of most of us revolted at the latter part of the resolution. "This must have been Mrs. Besant's work," many thought. She was after all British. (*Annie Besant, an Irishwoman, was a prominent leader of the INC.*) One Punjab leader gave expression to the feeling rather crudely: no one born of an Indian mother, said he, could have drafted this resolution. [Others] too [were] indignant and the latter part of the resolution was lost by an overwhelming majority.

The next day (*continues Munshi's first-hand account*) the President wanted the committee to reconsider the resolution as Gandhiji, he said, was very keen on it. There were vehement protests. Ultimately Gandhiji moved that the resolution be reconsidered. He spoke sitting. Out of respect the house sat quiet but with ill-concealed impatience.

Referring to the remark that no son born of an Indian mother could have drafted the resolution, Gandhiji stated that he had considered deeply and long whether as an Indian he could have drafted the resolution, for indeed he had drafted it. But after long searching of the heart, he had come to the conclusion that only a person born of an Indian mother could have drafted it.

And then he spoke as if his whole life depended upon the question... When he stopped, we were at his feet... The resolution was reconsidered and accepted in its original form.<sup>1</sup>

With interventions like this, Gandhi was giving a new meaning to Indian honor. He was enabling the independence movement to capture the moral high ground and put the Empire on the defensive.<sup>2</sup>

About three decades later, right before the transfer of power was agreed upon, and India's Partition too was accepted by all sides, Gandhi spent the first quarter of

1947, three months, working for peace between Hindus and Muslims in East Bengal. East Bengal was still part of undivided India. After August 1947, it became part of Pakistan. In 1971, it would become part of Bangladesh, which split off from Pakistan.

In a portion of East Bengal called Noakhali, which had a Muslim majority and a frightened Hindu minority, Gandhi, 77 at this point, and a handful of his co-workers walked from village to village, staying overnight in humble homes of Hindus and Muslims in 47 different villages. The goal was to encourage friendship, trust, reconciliation, courage. Evidently moved by Gandhi's effort, a Muslim resident of East Bengal, a man named S. Haq, wrote Gandhi a letter saying he'd had a dream where he saw Gandhi the Hindu preaching Islam. Gandhi sent him this reply:

I am a simple man, no reader of visions. My motto is: "Fear God, and no other, and love thy neighbor as thyself." (87: 18)

Gandhi was not spelling out any new ethic. He was only living out – with courage – an old ethic.

A few weeks after this, in April 1947, Gandhi returned to Delhi. I saw him again several times. I was there, as an 11-year-old, in Delhi's Purana Qila, the Old Fort, sitting not far from the podium from where Gandhi spoke to hundreds of leaders from across Asia. They had gathered for a conference convened by Nehru, who four months later would become the Prime Minister of free India.

Here's what Gandhi told Asia's leaders in April 1947. The scene is from my memory, the words are from archives:

All the Asian representatives have come together. Is it in order to wage a war against Europe, against America or against non-Asiatics? I say most emphatically 'No'. This is not India's mission (87: 182-83).

The first of [Asia's] wise men – *Gandhi continued* -- was Zoroaster. He belonged to the East. He was followed by the Buddha who belonged to the East—India. Who followed the Buddha? Jesus, who came from the East. Before Jesus was Moses who belonged to Palestine though he was born in Egypt. After Jesus came Mohammed... I do not know of a single person in the world to match these men of Asia...

[T]he message of Asia – *continued Gandhi* -- is not to be learnt through Western spectacles or by imitating the atom bomb. If you want to give a message to the West, it must be the message of love and the message of truth. I want you to go away with the thought that Asia has to conquer the West through love and truth.

In this age of democracy – *said Gandhi* -- in this age of awakening of the poorest of the poor, you can redeliver this message with the greatest emphasis. You will complete the conquest of the West not through vengeance because you have been exploited, but with real understanding... This conquest will be loved by the West itself (87: 192-93).

That was said 75 years ago. Countries today are far more diverse than they were, many of them. “East” and “West” no longer connote the contrasts of that period. However, the idea of love for a common humanity has not lost its relevance. Nine months after he made those remarks, Gandhi was killed by a fellow-Indian and a fellow-Hindu -- because he asked for love and friendship and opposed vengeance. But that only highlighted the relevance of what he had said.

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In my study over the decades of earlier periods and of more than one country, I’ve found, as I said before, that we human beings are inclined all the time to label people. I guess that that is inescapable and at times useful too. We want to know, for instance, the demographics of a city, a state, a country, a neighborhood. The race or religion of its inhabitants. And then we think of “our” people and “their” people. I don’t know how useful *that* is.

About India, for example, we hear that India has 80 percent Hindus, 14 or 15 percent Muslims, 2 ½ percent Christians, and 2 percent Sikhs, or that the U.S. has 61 percent whites, 18 percent Latinos, 13 percent Blacks, 6 percent Asians. And so on.

But the U.S. also contains, as does India, one hundred percent of neighbors. All of us, in every land and across the globe, are neighbors and have neighbors.

I think Jim and Ellie Newton would have agreed that *that* is a statement about ethics. But if today we think of neighbors, we also know, soberly and horrifyingly, from the east of Europe, what human beings driven by the opposite of friendship are capable of doing to neighbors.

Thank you, Eric, for giving me the chance to do this, and thanks everyone for coming to listen, and listening. (end)

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<sup>1</sup> K.M. Munshi, *Pilgrimage to Freedom* (Bombay: Bhavan, 1967), pp. 16-7.

<sup>2</sup> Munshi, *Pilgrimage to Freedom*, pp. 16-7.