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‘Dear Friend’: The Practice of Nonviolence in Gandhi’s Letters to Hitler

Kelly Rae Kraemer

ABSTRACT

At the onset of World War II, Mohandas Gandhi wrote two separate letters to Adolf Hitler. Though neither letter ever reached the Führer, both are readily accessible, via Internet, to 21st Century readers, for whom the content of the letters may prove both alarming and instructive. Why did Gandhi address the chief Nazi as his ‘Dear Friend’? Why did he write with such profound respect and humility when addressing a man accused of ‘monstrous’ acts? Did he really believe his appeals would persuade Hitler to end the war?

This article will examine Gandhi’s letters to Hitler as notable examples of the Mahatma’s everyday practice of peace. His sympathetic approach to the Führer, models a deep practice of nonviolent values which, while quite shocking to those of us working in today’s ‘woke’ environment, can, if we approach it with open minds, provide an opportunity to explore the strategic value of Gandhi’s principled methods. Understanding the nonviolent strategy we find deeply embedded in these short letters can offer us useful guidance on how to talk to people we disagree with, how to restore community relationships in our increasingly fractured and polarised societies, and how to establish today’s truths as we understand them in a world where the existence of truth is increasingly debated. If we approach our opponents as ‘dear friends’, we can restore and rebuild nonviolence as the foundation of our own peace praxis.

KEYWORDS

Nonviolence, polarisation, communication, Gandhi, Hitler

INTRODUCTION

‘Libtard!’ ‘Birther!’ ‘Snowflake!’ ‘Deplorable!’ ‘Social Justice Warrior!’ ‘MAGAt!’ ‘Feminazi!’ ‘Wingnut!’ Those of us living, studying, and organising in the United States today are well aware of the degraded levels to which our civic discourse has sunk. Fake news, political positions, so polarised, that facts matter less than the identity of the person proclaiming them, and name calling in place of reasoned

debate are now the hallmarks of everyday political speech. We've even reached the point where sucker-punching the leader of a hate group, as happened to white supremacist Richard Spencer, while a television reporter interviewed him on camera, brings not just cheers from those experiencing vicarious satisfaction, but applause for what many seem to view as a meaningful political action. Crafters marketing their wares on Etsy are even making money selling merchandise emblazoned with slogans like 'Punch More Nazis' to those who don't distinguish emotional satisfaction from victory. The dehumanising of our political discourse carves ever more permanent lines between left and right, liberal and conservative, Democrat and Republican.

Left/right divisions have also begun to surface on college campuses in new ways, with each side decrying the other's efforts to suppress 'free speech'. While some students boldly take their stands, as college students will do, many—maybe even most—claim more reluctance than ever to speak their minds. They worry, not only that others might disagree and attack them verbally, but also that others might attack them physically on campus, or bitterly, virally, and without restraint, through social media. After Donald Trump took the oath of office as President of the United States, the polarisation, name-calling, and cyberbullying escalated, and they continue unabated, now that Joe Biden is President. Many frustrated young people, especially those of an activist bent, are turning to peace and conflict studies for guidance about how to talk to 'those people'.

But it's not just young people asking these questions. A good and thoughtful friend of mine, now retired after a long career in higher education and feeling frustrated by unproductive conversations with 'the other side' in our gerrymandered conservative Congressional district, asked me one day: 'What would Gandhi do in a situation like this? How did Gandhi talk to people whose ideas he found morally reprehensible? If he were alive today, how would Gandhi talk to Trump?' I thought I had a ready answer: 'Probably the same way he tried to talk to Hitler.' But I also realised that, although I had read each of Gandhi's two letters to Hitler more than once, at that moment, I was not prepared to explain Gandhi's approach in any detailed, coherent, meaningful fashion. I did, however, believe that the answer to this question could prove instructive for those of us struggling to communicate across deep political, cultural, and social divides.

So I decided to go back and take a closer look at the two letters Mohandas Gandhi wrote to Adolf Hitler, hoping a careful reading might shed some light on the Mahatma's approach to conversations with someone whose politics he abhorred. In order to systematically investigate Gandhi's approach, I turned to the methods of discourse analysis, examining his texts as linguistic exercises in power, that is, attempts to use words to influence the reactions and response

of his audience. James Paul Gee, Emeritus Professor of Linguistics at Arizona State University, explains that all language is political, in the sense that it is an attempt to communicate one's own perspective in an effort to influence others:

When we speak or write we always take a particular perspective on what the "world" is like. This involves us in taking perspectives on what is "normal" and not; what is "acceptable" and not; what is "right" and not; what is "real" and not; what is the "way things are" and not; what is the "way things ought to be" and not; what is "possible" and not; what "people like us" or "people like them" do and don't do; and so on and so forth, again through a nearly endless list... Politics is part and parcel of using language.¹

Gandhi's letters to Hitler are very much political, in this sense. They focus on what was normal and not normal in the world; how things were (World War II) and how things should have been (nonviolent transformation of conflict); and what Hitler was doing (waging war), versus what Gandhi thought he should have been doing (pursuing peaceful solutions). Gee adds that 'far from exonerating us from looking at the empirical details of language and social action and allowing us simply to pontificate, an interest in politics, demands that we engage in the empirical details of language and interaction.'²

As a qualitative, interpretive method for examining the use of language 'in its interactional context, asking how narrative is shaped by, and helps to shape, the particular interactions in which it arises',³ discourse analysis can give structure to our reading of Gandhi's letters, while allowing us to engage deeply with his texts. My methodology, in brief, involves exploring the social and historical context in which Gandhi wrote the two letters, identifying themes that appear in the letters, and analysing these themes as artefacts of the social and historical contexts in which they arose. Using discourse analysis in this way, I have found that both letters are carefully structured around three typical Gandhian themes:

- (1) respect for the humanity of the other;
- (2) pursuit of the truth, at all times and under all circumstances; and
- (3) nonviolence, or taking action while refusing to do harm.

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For Gandhi, nonviolence moved beyond merely refraining from physical violence to encompass ‘the practice of active love towards one’s oppressors and enemies in the pursuit of justice, truth, and peace.’⁴

Before examining the contents of the letters, I’ll share some background information to provide historical context. I’ll briefly describe each of the letters, then, I’ll explore each of the three themes as they appear in each of the letters, and discuss their place in Gandhi’s nonviolent philosophy and methods. Finally, while acknowledging we live in very different times and cultures from Gandhi, I’ll explore some lessons we might learn from his approach to difficult conversations and then, try to apply those lessons to the uncomfortable dialogues in which many of us find ourselves engaged today. First, some background.

BACKGROUND

Gandhi wrote two letters to Adolf Hitler, both in English. He sent the first letter from his Sevagram Ashram near Wardha, in the Indian state of Maharashtra, on 23 July 1939, fewer than six weeks before Germany’s invasion of Poland led Great Britain to declare World War II.⁵ After the war began, unaware that the British government had prevented his letter from reaching Hitler, he published it in his weekly journal, *Harijan*.⁶ He sent the second letter from the same location seventeen months later, on Christmas Eve (24 December 1940).⁷ In the first letter,

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Gandhi appealed to Hitler to prevent the impending war; in the second, with war already raging, he urged him to consider possibilities for peace.

Images of the original first letter, far more widely known than the second, and just two paragraphs long, are readily available on the Internet.⁸ I have not found any original images of the second letter (which is by comparison, far more wordy, as it ran for six lengthy paragraphs) but the text of this letter is widely reprinted in news stories online. The versions of the letters I used for this paper appear online in Volumes 76 and 79 of *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, published in 1999, by the Government of India. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to the first letter as ‘Letter 200’ and the second as

As at Wardha
C.P.
India.
23.7.'39.

Dear friend,

Friends have been urging me to write to you for the sake of humanity. But I have resisted their request, because of the feeling that any letter from me would be an impertinence. Something tells me that I must not calculate and that I must make my appeal for whatever it may be worth.

It is quite clear that you are today the one person in the world who can prevent a war which may reduce humanity to the savage state. Must you pay that price for an object however worthy it may appear to you to be? Will you listen to the appeal of one who has seliberately shunned the method of war not without considerable success? Any way I anticipate your forgiveness, if I have erred in writing to you.

Herr Hitler
Berlin
Germany.

I remain,
Your sincere friend
M.K. Gandhi

Letter 200

'Letter 520', as they are numbered in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*.

According to the annotations in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, the British government suppressed both the letters, ensuring that neither one reached Hitler.⁹ Other sources confirm this. We don't know how Hitler would have responded to Gandhi had he received the letters. We do know, however, that Hitler knew about Gandhi and his campaigns in India, since he had, at one time (unknown to Gandhi himself), advised the British that they could solve their problems on the subcontinent quite easily, by simply shooting Gandhi.¹⁰ If that didn't work, they could kill additional Indian leaders, and continue killing independence activists until the rest lost hope and gave up.¹¹

So it's unlikely that Hitler, had he received and chosen to reply to either letter, would have been receptive to Gandhi's overtures. But it's also possible that the unexpected greeting from the Mahatma—'Dear Friend'—might have, at least, given Hitler pause, or maybe even intrigued him enough to get him to read the rest. And although we cannot know exactly what Gandhi was thinking or expecting

As at Wardha,
December 24, 1940

DEAR FRIEND,

That I address you as a friend is no formality. I own no foes. My business in life has been for the past 33 years to enlist the friendship of the whole of humanity by befriending mankind, irrespective of race, colour or creed.

I hope you will have the time and desire to know how a good portion of humanity who have view living under the influence of that doctrine of universal friendship view your action. We have no doubt about your bravery or devotion to your fatherland, nor do we believe that you are the monster described by your opponents. But your own writings and pronouncements and those of your friends and admirers leave no room for doubt that many of your acts are monstrous and unbecoming of human dignity, especially in the estimation of men like me who believe in universal friendliness. Such are your humiliation of Czechoslovakia, the rape of Poland and the swallowing of Denmark. I am aware that your view of life regards such spoliations as virtuous acts. But we have been taught from childhood to regard them as acts degrading humanity. Hence we cannot possibly wish success to your arms.

But ours is a unique position. We resist British Imperialism no less than Nazism. If there is a difference, it is in degree. One-fifth of the human race has been brought under the British heel by means that will not bear scrutiny. Our resistance to it does not mean harm to the British people. We seek to convert them, not to defeat them on the battle-field. Ours is an unarmed revolt against the British rule. But whether we convert them or not, we are determined to make their rule impossible by non-violent non-co-operation. It is a method in its nature indefensible. It is based on the knowledge that no spoliator can compass his end without a certain degree of co-operation, willing or compulsory, of the victim. Our rulers may have our land and bodies but not our souls. They can have the former only by complete destruction of every Indian—man, woman and child. That all may not rise to that degree of heroism and that a fair amount of frightfulness can bend the back of revolt is true but the argument would be beside the point. For, if a fair number of men and women be found in India who would be prepared without any ill will against the spoliators to lay down their lives rather than bend the knee to them, they would have shown the way to freedom from the tyranny of violence. I ask you to believe me when I say that you will find an unexpected number of such men and women in India. They have been having that training for the past 20 years.

to achieve when he wrote to Hitler, we can nonetheless learn a great deal from the texts themselves about how he shaped his approach. We can examine how he constructed his letters, how he framed his arguments, the language he used, and how each of these factors fit into his overall philosophy and practice of nonviolence. This in turn can help us identify his underlying strategy in trying to communicate with Hitler, the Führer, whose actions he openly described as 'monstrous' in the second letter. Understanding Gandhi's strategy, we may then look for opportunities to apply it to our own polarised conflicts today.

THE LETTERS

In her 1958 classic analysis of Gandhian strategy, *Conquest of Violence*, political scientist Joan Bondurant, who spied for the Office of Special Services (OSS) during World War II, identified three stages in Gandhi's strategy for 'winning over an opponent': persuasion through reason, persuasion through suffering, and nonviolent coercion.¹² The letters to Hitler clearly fall into the first of these stages: persuasion through reason. As we'll see, Gandhi (responding to pleas from people around the world) attempts, in his letters, to convince Hitler that his goals cannot be achieved through the war he is waging. This effort at persuasion begins with an approach that is quintessentially Gandhian: a demonstration of respect for one's opponent. To the shock of most contemporary audiences, Gandhi begins both letters with the salutation, 'Dear Friend'. He signs off at the end of Letter 200 using the words 'I am, your sincere friend', followed by his signature: M K Gandhi. He closes Letter 520 with a slight alteration of that phrase, perhaps referring back to his first letter: 'I remain, your friend, M K Gandhi'. The entire contents of both letters are thus framed in declarations of friendship, raising the question: Why would any thinking person outside Germany, let alone the 'Great Soul' recognised today as the 'Apostle of Nonviolence', address Adolf Hitler as his friend in 1939?

Part of the answer to this question may be found in the 9-point Code of Discipline Gandhi

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9-point Code of Discipline
 Gandhi drew up for participants in his famous Salt Satyagraha of 1930, which included three principles used to guide actions when confronting opponents. *Satyagrahis* were to ‘(1) Harbour no anger but suffer the anger of the opponent. (2) Refuse to return the assaults of the opponent... (3) Refrain from insults and swearing... [and] (4) Protect opponents from insult or attack, even at the risk of life.’

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In fact, Gandhi often began his correspondence with world leaders by using the ‘Dear Friend’ salutation; Hitler was, by no means, singled out for special treatment, in this regard. For example, Rajmohan Gandhi, in the lengthy biography he wrote about his grandfather, refers to a document he calls Gandhi’s ‘Dear Friend Letter to

Roosevelt’.¹⁴ The Mahatma’s famous letter to the British Viceroy, Lord Irwin, announcing the impending civil disobedience against the salt laws, also began with ‘Dear Friend’.¹⁵ In telegrams, he referred to South Africa’s Prime Minister, General Jan Smuts, as ‘friend’.¹⁶ Hindologist Konraad Elst reports that Gandhi consistently approached his chief Muslim opponent in India, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, ‘in a spirit of friendship’ that lasted throughout their relationship.¹⁷ The assumption of friendship can clearly be seen as a standard Gandhian strategy for entering into dialogue with a political opponent, one that had the power to, at least, momentarily disarm anyone anticipating a less cordial greeting, as well as anyone expecting a more formal approach. In this light, any other approach to Hitler would seem un-Gandhian.

In each of his letters to Hitler, Gandhi goes on to build considerably on the friendship theme immediately after the salutation. In the first paragraph of Letter 200, he approaches Hitler, a world leader with whom he had no prior connection, with extreme humility, claiming to be writing at the behest of others,

despite his feeling that this could be viewed as 'an impertinence', because, 'something tells me... that I must make my appeal for whatever it may be worth'.¹⁸ In Letter 520, he discusses friendship more directly, first explaining his belief that everyone is his friend, and then, going on to flatter his new associate in the spirit of this doctrine, calling him courageous and proclaiming he is not a monster, though some of his acts are monstrous.¹⁹ Gandhi also finishes off the body text of each letter with a display of respectful friendship: in the first, with a return to humility, 'I anticipate your forgiveness, if I have erred in writing to you'²⁰ and in the second, with a courteous request that his 'friend' would consider the many appeals of humanity for peace in Europe.²¹

Fr John Dear, in an essay on Gandhi's life and work, reports that, since Gandhi believed 'God is everyone... then he would have to love everyone, even his enemy'.²² Indeed, in Letter 520, Gandhi states quite clearly: 'I own no foes'.²³ And Bondurant wrote that his nonviolent politics required practitioners not to 'harbour an uncharitable thought even in connection with one who may consider himself to be your enemy...'²⁴ because, ultimately, 'the pursuit of Truth or God was, for Gandhi... the search for realising the truth of human unity'.²⁵ Communication with an opponent, therefore, begins with respect, comprising the extension of friendship, humility, and acknowledging the humanity of the other person, even if that person is a brutal dictator.

This brings us to the next theme in the two Hitler letters: Truth. Gandhi often compared truth to God, and he made it the foundation of his nonviolent politics when he adopted the term *satyagraha*, or 'truth-force', as the name for his method of nonviolent action. Bondurant opines, 'Holding to the truth means holding to what the *satyagrahi* believes to be the truth until he is dissuaded from that position or any part of it. Meanwhile his effort is steadfastly to persuade his opponent'.²⁶ Importantly, while the *satyagrahi* must cling tightly to the truth with his whole soul in the struggle to reach agreement with an opponent, this does not require becoming 'embattled', even with an opponent who holds completely contradictory views.²⁷ Gandhi was willing to work with his opponents for very long periods of time before resorting to the more confrontational levels of

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struggle built into his strategy (persuasion through self-suffering and nonviolent coercion).

We can see this practice of holding to the truth, in both of Gandhi's letters to Hitler. In Letter 200, having identified Hitler as the person who had sole power to prevent the war that loomed in Europe, Gandhi simply questions the need to pay the awful price, war will extract.²⁸ In Letter 520, written at the height of Hitler's early success in the war, the Mahatma directly challenges Hitler's evil actions, labelling them 'monstrous' and criticising them in direct and negative language, referring to Germany's 'humiliation of Czechoslovakia, the rape of Poland and the swallowing of Denmark' as 'spoliations' and 'acts degrading humanity'.²⁹ He places his criticism in a wider context—Indians are

opposing the British, Hitler's enemy, as well as the Germans—while remaining firm in his negative judgement. He clings to the truth of nonviolence throughout this letter, offering Herr Hitler, a lengthy description of the dynamics of the Indian Independence struggle. For Gandhi, 'the quest for truth takes place in community',³⁰ and he works hard in his writing to challenge Hitler's evil acts, while addressing him continuously as a member of the world community.

Gandhi believed that every human being, including Adolf Hitler, had the capacity to distinguish truth from falsehood. And there is a fundamental truth in Gandhi's world, knowledge of which, can only benefit his friend Hitler. As he writes in Letter 520, 'no spoliator can compass his end without a certain degree of co-operation, willing or compulsory, of the victim. Our rulers may have our land and bodies but not our souls.'³¹ Non-cooperation with evil comprises the foundational tool in the Gandhian nonviolent arsenal, and he wants to convince Hitler of the truth that this tool can defeat the mightiest army. Indeed, military force bears no guarantee of victory, as inevitably, 'some other power will certainly improve upon your method and beat you with your own weapon'.³² A stronger army can always defeat a weaker army, but a nonviolent force cannot be defeated, because, it is all "do or die" without killing or hurting. It can be used practically without money, and obviously, without the aid of science of destruction which you have brought to such perfection. Non-cooperation with evil can continue as long as there are people willing to engage in it. Gandhi describes for Hitler as to how the Indian people have been training in this form of struggle for 20 years and have had much success against the British.

With regard to this third theme of nonviolence, violence is excluded from Gandhi's approach to politics, because people are 'not capable of knowing the absolute truth and therefore, not competent to punish'.³³ Since everyone is capable of identifying the truth, anyone may have a piece or pieces of it; killing a person may, therefore, destroy access to whatever knowledge of the truth they may have. So Gandhi replaces violence with *ahimsa*, or 'action based on the refusal to do harm',³⁴ which can advance the struggle without destroying pieces of the truth. This action is rooted in love, even for those who do evil, but love does not mean tolerance for wrong actions, which must always be resisted. And he instructs the resister to 'pit one's whole soul against the will of the tyrant'.³⁵ John Dear quotes Gandhi as saying, 'non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as cooperation with good' in the famous speech from his

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Great Trial of 1922.³⁶

So of course, when writing to Adolf Hitler, Gandhi must refuse to condone Hitler's actions and attempt to use the full force of his soul to dissuade the Führer from continuing on his established path of violence and destruction. In Letter 200, Gandhi does this by suggesting to Hitler that there are alternatives to the war he is threatening, and by identifying himself as 'one who has deliberately shunned the method of war, not without considerable success'.³⁷ In Letter 520, he goes into much greater detail, laying out considerable evidence for the success of nonviolent action in a few short paragraphs aimed at convincing

the Führer that nonviolent action offers more effective means of achieving one's political goals than violence. Gandhi writes:

Our resistance...does not mean harm to the British people. We seek to convert them, not to defeat them on the battle-field. Ours is an unarmed revolt against the British rule. But whether we convert them or not, we are determined to make their rule impossible by nonviolent non-cooperation...Our rulers may have our land but not our souls...if a fair number of men and women be found in India who would be prepared without any ill will against the spoliators, to lay down their lives rather than bend the knee to them, they would have shown the way to freedom from the tyranny of violence...We have attained a very fair measure of success through nonviolence...a force which, if organized, can without doubt, match itself against a combination of all the most violent forces in the world.³⁸

Gandhi goes on to describe his appeals to the British to accept this method of nonviolent action. He then returns to his humble approach by telling Hitler: 'I have not the courage to make you the appeal I made to every Briton.'³⁹ Instead, he concludes Letter 520 with an appeal for peace, asking Hitler: 'Is it too much to ask you to make an effort for peace during a time which may mean nothing to you personally, but, which must mean much to the millions of Europeans whose dumb cry for peace I hear, for my ears are attended to hearing the dumb millions?' He adds a final note, respectfully asking Hitler, to share his message with 'Signor Mussolini, whom I had the privilege of meeting... during my visit to England...'⁴⁰ and finishes the letter with a reminder of his friendship.

A GANDHIAN APPROACH TO 21ST CENTURY POLITICAL DIVIDES

What can we learn from these attempts by the father of mass nonviolent action to communicate with the father of the Holocaust? Since they never reached their destination, we don't know how Hitler would have responded to Gandhi's letters, so we can't say whether the Mahatma's outreach could have succeeded. Nonetheless, understanding the strategy, we find clearly and deeply embedded in these short letters, can offer us useful guidance on how to talk to people we disagree with, how to begin to restore community relationships in our increasingly fractured and polarised societies, and how to establish today's truths, as we understand them, in a world where the existence of truth is increasingly debated.

The preceding discourse analysis highlights three clear principles from the 'Dear Friend' letters, for the first stage of Gandhian practice, persuasion through reason:

1. *Respect*: Approach your opponent as a friend, humbly respecting their humanity.
2. *Truth*: Speak the truth as you understand it, and cling to it, while acknowledging that everybody has pieces of the truth.
3. *Nonviolence*: Take action while refusing to cause harm.

Following these principles can serve as a first step in bridging our current divides, leading us in a very different direction from typical political discourse in the 2020s.

Let’s take as a representative example of this discourse, the column, ‘An Open Letter to White Evangelicals’, written in 2018 by Christian pastor and liberal author, John Pavlovitz, whose analysis I often admire.⁴¹ How does Pavlovitz reach out to his opponents in this text? He begins with a straightforward salutation, ‘Dear White Evangelicals...’.⁴² At first glance this may appear to be a neutral greeting, as he is simply describing the group with which he wishes to communicate. However, he includes the descriptor ‘White’, identifying by race, a group that generally does not care to be so identified. If they are, in fact, his intended audience, this could be perceived as an aggressive move and might make them less receptive to his message.

After the initial greeting, Pavlovitz continues:

I need to tell you something: People have had it with you. They’re done. They want nothing to do with you any longer, and here’s why: They see your hypocrisy, your inconsistency, your incredibly selective mercy, and your thinly veiled supremacy...⁴³

Here Pavlovitz takes a popular contemporary approach to political communication, calling out others for their bad behaviour. As with the race-based salutation, these accusations of ‘hypocrisy’, ‘inconsistency’, ‘selective mercy’, and ‘thinly veiled supremacy’ are unlikely to win Pavlovitz a receptive audience among those he is openly attacking. What self-

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professed Christian would be willing to enter into dialogue with someone who publicly accused them of having ‘jettisoned Jesus as [they] dispensed damnation on him’?⁴⁴

Pavlovitz maintains this tone throughout the 10-paragraph letter, attacking white evangelicals for demonising President Obama, and refusing to welcome him as a Christian brother, while giving a free pass to his immoral, unchristian, philandering white successor. He claims that ‘... pigmentation and party are [their] sole religion’, and denounces them for having lost their souls. He concludes: ‘I had to, at least, try and reach you. It’s what Jesus would do. Maybe you need to read what he said again—if he still matters to you.’⁴⁵ The clear message is: I am a better Christian than you, so you should listen to me.

There’s nothing particularly remarkable about this kind of reaching-out-by-calling-out to the other side in today’s world, but the success of this kind of communication depends heavily on knowing one’s audience. In fact, though his salutation appears to call for the attention of white evangelicals, Pavlovitz’s intended readers for this jeremiad are actually his white liberal Christian followers who can happily read this ‘letter’ and experience feelings of satisfaction and catharsis at seeing their opponents castigated for unchristian attitudes and actions. In the face of what one regards as immoral and unconscionable political actions, reading a text that inflates one’s self-righteous and holier-than-thou sense of moral superiority can be a gratifying experience and may serve as an important release valve, letting off steam accumulated in hostile political encounters. It can also fuel the fires of political polarisation, fanning the flames of mutual hostility and pushing partisan opponents further and further away from one another.

Political polarisation, exemplified by two decades of discourse, dividing the United States into ‘red states’ and ‘blue states’, is a subject of great interest today among scholars of peace and justice who recognise how increasing polarisation negatively impacts decision-making, conflict resolution, and peacemaking in many countries today.⁴⁶ Estaban and Ray (1994), drawing on Marx, identify polarisation as a phenomenon in which diverse forces divide a society into two or more distant and hostile camps.⁴⁷ Estaban and Schneider (2008) note that ‘One of the main and increasingly accepted conjectures in the social sciences is the hypothesis that increasing polarization increases the risk of conflict, including armed violence.’⁴⁸ Is this the goal of Pavlovitz’s letter?

What if Pavlovitz genuinely wants to reach out in good faith to white evangelicals? The article is, after all, framed as an ‘open letter’ to them. Perhaps, we can learn something about persuasion through reason, by rewriting Pavlovitz’s letter, Gandhi-style. Let’s start by applying Principle 1, ‘*Respect*: Approach your opponent as a friend, humbly respecting their humanity’, to the salutation. Instead of ‘Dear White Evangelicals’, we could substitute ‘Dear Fellow Christians’ or

'Dear Christian Friends'. Words like 'fellow' and 'friends' express a shared sense of humanity, while describing the opponents as 'Christians' creates a shared identity with the author and many of his liberal readers.

Moving on to Principle 2, '*Truth*: Speak the truth as you understand it, and cling to it, while acknowledging that everybody has pieces of the truth', we could use this principle as a guide to revise the letter's opening line. Here, Pavlovitz does appear to be speaking the truth as he knows it: his followers are upset by the political rhetoric and choices of the evangelicals. But telling white evangelicals that people (in general) want nothing to do with them anymore because of their hypocrisy, lack of mercy, etc denies the possibility that they might possess any pieces of the truth. A Gandhi-style rewrite might go something like this:

I greet you, as fellow Christians, because we share a common faith, that I believe to be larger than our differences. As your Christian friend, I have something important to share with you. I think you should know that many of your co-religionists are concerned by some of your recent political choices. We don't understand your unsubstantiated claims that former President Obama is a Muslim, nor can we make sense of your unwavering support for President Trump, a self-confessed adulterer.

Principle 3, '*Nonviolence*: Take action while refusing to cause harm', could be applied to Pavlovitz's conclusion:

You believe in the teachings of Jesus, just as we do. I therefore, humbly request that you take another look at the book of Matthew, chapter 7, in which Jesus shares his Golden Rule, telling us that we should treat others the way we want them to treat us. I hope that, as fellow Christians, we may use his words to guide our interactions with one another.

He could end his letter with a respectful, friendly closing, such as 'Your Christian friend, John'.

I am obviously not John Pavlovitz and cannot actually speak for him, but offer these possible edits to illustrate the potential gap-bridging power of the rhetorical strategy Gandhi used in his two letters to his 'dear friend' Adolf Hitler. Gandhi openly proclaimed that Hitler had committed monstrous acts, but approached him with extreme humility nonetheless, taking care with every word to address Hitler as a fellow human rather than a monster. There's nothing easy about this approach; it requires the user to let go of ego and focus on relationship-building.

If political opponents today are willing to take this leap, applying Gandhi's principles to contemporary, political communications could be done from any

political position. For example, a photograph of conservative television personality, Tomi Lahren, whose political commentary I rarely understand, appears in one of my favourite memes, the text of which reads: 'Dear Liberal Snowflakes. Nothing is free. Crying doesn't solve problems. Screaming doesn't make you right.' Let's suppose she truly wants to connect with her liberal opponents whom she clearly wishes to insult in the original meme. What would her meme

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say, if it were rewritten according to our Gandhian principles? Granted that the meme format lends itself more naturally to invective than to compassion, and to brief phrases rather than thoughtful texts, I nonetheless find this attempt at reconstruction a worthwhile exercise in empathy. Here's what I imagine:

Dear Liberal Friends,

We each have to make our own way in the world. We need practical, action-oriented solutions to our problems. We should speak civilly to one another.

I believe, this respectfully restates what I understand to be her truths, in a way that causes no harm. As a meme, it would not be terribly funny, but it would also not encourage self-righteous, holier-than-thou laughter from its originally intended audience. It might, however, invite its targets, her opponents, into a conversation. The exercise of rewriting Lahren's meme did, at a minimum, help me to develop a sense of some of the aspects of liberal discourse that may have upset her.

Importantly, for our purposes here, if we can bring ourselves in 2022, to approach our opponents as 'dear friends', we can restore and rebuild nonviolence as the foundation of our own peace praxis. In a political world dominated by social media, where out-group animosity baits 'clicks' and drives reactions, we have the option to choose our words respectfully. In an 'attention economy', where technology companies attempt to keep our eyes on the screen and our minds full of quick takes and (often deliberate) misinformation,⁴⁹ we can also use Gandhi's principles to manage both our social media posts and our news consumption

habits, analysing each message to see if it is respectful, truthful, and nonviolent.

Imagine a world in which we referred to one another not as 'snowflake', 'libtard', or 'MAGAt', but as 'friend'; in which we tuned out political commentary about 'Crooked Hillary' or 'Blabbermouth Don', and listened to reports about 'Secretary Clinton' and 'President Trump'; where television news anchors spoke, not of 'Kung Flu', but SARS-CoV-2 or COVID-19. Imagine a world in which

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televised talking heads explained to viewers, not that 'the number of people who voted in Wisconsin was larger than the number of registered voters', but more clearly and accurately that 'More people voted in Wisconsin in 2020 than were registered to vote in 2018'. Imagine a world in which a student refuses to call a classmate 'a racist', but fearlessly informs them that 'what you said, dear friend, is coming across to me as insulting to people of my race'.

It certainly won't be easy to apply these principles in actual dialogue with people whose views we loathe. Gandhi's writing to Hitler, in such a context, was rooted in a life lived with the effort to apply these principles in every minute to every thought and action. Most of us are not living such a life today, but in reading these letters to Hitler, I'm struck by the calm and control Gandhi is able to maintain while challenging the man's 'monstrous acts'. I doubt even Gandhi could have persuaded the Führer, in two letters, to end the Holocaust, stop the war, and make friends with the French and British. But I believe his approach enabled him to speak directly, from the heart, to Hitler, powerfully, and with far less agony than most of us put ourselves through, when we argue with our political opponents today.

I'm particularly taken with the idea of approaching those whose views we loathe, the hated (and hateful) other, from a position of friendship. This is the step by which Gandhi recognises the humanity of his opponents, allowing him to speak to them calmly, sincerely, and with hope, while simultaneously expressing firm disagreement with, condemnation of, and challenge to the wrongs they are committing. With this move, Gandhi deftly employed what the late Barbara Deming, so eloquently identified as, 'the two hands of nonviolence':

The more the real issues are dramatized and the struggle raised above the personal, the more control those in nonviolent rebellion begin to gain over their adversary. For they are able at one and the same time, to disrupt everything for him, making it impossible for him to operate within the

system as usual, and to temper his response to this, making it impossible for him simply to strike back without thought and with all his strength. They have, as it were two hands upon him—the one calming him, making him ask questions, as the other makes him move.⁵⁰

By disarming Hitler with the first words of his letters, ‘Dear Friend’, and condemning his actions on the basis of friendship rather than personal hatred, Gandhi used the two hands of nonviolence to nonviolently ‘punch a Nazi’. Hitler never read the letters, but we can and we should learn from them. Imagine the world we could build.

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