

Merging with Rachel Corrie - A Dedication to Non-violence

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Global Research Editor's Note

Matthias Chang, a distinguished Malaysian barrister, former private secretary to the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia. Acting on behalf of the Perdana Global Peace Organization, Matthias Chang was one of the key architects of the Gaza Freedom Flotilla. An unbending commitment to the causes of peace, justice and non violence combined with unusual organizational capabilities is the driving force behind Matthias Chang.

Michel Chossudovsky, Editor of Global Research, 16 June 2010

Sailing on MV Rachel Corrie has changed my life and my perspective on many issues that I hold dear. I am humbled by the experience and have learned so much from everyone on board the ship.

MV Rachel Corrie was previously known and registered as MV Linda, a 43-year old cargo vessel abandoned by her owners. Her crew was left in a lurch when the owners failed to pay their wages for over a year. The crew took her to the port of Dundalk in Ireland for refuge.

Rejected and in disrepair, she was dying of neglect. She had much to offer but no one cared.

On the 22nd January 2010, I received a letter from the solicitors for the Free Gaza Movement that she has been identified as a potential cargo ship to bring aid to Gaza and preparations were made to purchase her.



I was elated, as it was only six months ago that like-minded activists from the Free Gaza Movement and the Perdana Global Peace Organisation, headed by the fourth prime minister of Malaysia, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad gathered in Cyprus to explore the suggestion that a flotilla of cargo ships and passenger boats would be more effective in breaking the horrendous blockade imposed by Israel on Gaza than despatching a single boat as had been the previous missions organised by the Free Gaza Movement. Within three weeks, we were able to raise, with the assistance of the wife of the prime minister of Malaysia, the sum of RM1.5 million and a month later another sum of RM90,000 to purchase aid for the Palestinians. The monies were sufficient to buy a cargo ship and two passenger boats. The flotilla became a reality. The rest as they say is history.

MV Linda was auctioned for €70,000 and immediately was nurtured back to health by the remarkable Irish activist couple, Derek and Jenny Graham. For six weeks, sleeping in dilapidated conditions, they lovingly cared for her and imbued her with the spirit of Rachel Corrie. It was therefore apt and proper that she was renamed MV Rachel Corrie.

Rachel Corrie, an American, was a member of the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) and in March, 2003 was crushed to death in Gaza by an Israel Defence Forces (IDF) bulldozer when acting as a human shield to prevent the demolition of a Palestinian home. She was only 23 when she gave her life in selfless devotion to the cause of the Palestinians

in their struggle against injustice and oppression.

Her courage and depth of compassion for the downtrodden and oppressed is revealed in an interview with the Middle East Broadcasting network. She said,

“I feel like I’m witnessing the systematic destruction of a people’s ability to survive... Sometimes I sit down to dinner with people and I realize there is a massive military machine surrounding us, trying to kill people I’m having dinner with.”

Rachel Corrie personifies the very best of America even though the image has been sullied by the war criminals in their barbaric invasion of Iraq and the slaughter of the millions of innocent men, women and children. In memorials held in Gaza after her death, Palestinian children and adults honoured her by carrying a mock coffin draped with the American flag.

She believed in non-violence. She said so in her letters to her mother. She was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. but died a violent death at the hands of an oppressive regime.

In February, 2007 Malaysians honoured her in their special way when they queued to pay their respects at the Perdana War Crimes exhibition held at the Putra World Trade Centre in which her violent death was depicted. In death, Rachel Corrie continues to inspire the young and the old. There are many in the corridors of power who wish that she be forgotten. There were even attempts to demonise her.

But today, her spirit is reincarnated in the ship that bears her name - MV Rachel Corrie - flying the Irish and Malaysian flags, having a Scottish captain, a Cuban chief engineer and six Filipino crew members. She set sail for Gaza with five Irish and six Malaysian peace activists to continue her struggle to free the Palestinians from oppression and bring a message of hope and peace.

There is not much one can do while sailing in a cargo ship in the Mediterranean Sea en route to Gaza. You can sunbath only so much in the sizzling open deck, a temporary respite before facing the wrath of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF). Others took to reading and contemplation.

My good friend, Denis [1] brought along a book, Gandhi, Naked Ambition by Jad Adams, essentially an occidental perspective of the great leader, focusing mainly on the private life of Gandhi. Jad Adams pride himself as a historian but his biography of Gandhi was pure muckraking.

The Bhagavad Gita teaches us that everything happens for a reason and as such I took the presence of Jad Adams’s biography as a pointer that I should contemplate on Gandhi’s teaching as he had inspired Rachel Corrie and the reason why I am sailing on the ship named after her towards Gaza.

Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. were advocates of non-violence, yet both fell to an assassin’s bullet.

There is a common thread running through the lives of these three advocates of non-violence. They had died as they had lived - as private citizens, fearless individuals without

power or position, great wealth or possessions. But they all had courage, integrity and humility, and an abundance spirit to serve humanity.

It has often been said that Gandhiji had no need of possessions. He was contented to have just his simple clothes – loincloth and the angavastra, his shoes, a pair of spectacles and his personal copy of the Bhagavad Gita. He did not consider his opponents as enemies, but people with a different point of view. I recalled the story when Gandhiji was jailed in South Africa by General Smuts. While in prison, he made a pair of leather sandals as a gift to the general who received it with great pride as it was from an adversary. Much later, the general met up with Gandhi and returned the sandals to Gandhiji, saying,

“I have been using these sandals during many summers, though I have to admit that I don’t feel worthy of wearing the shoes of such a great man.”

It is with humility that one conquers the hearts and minds of one’s opponents not the force of arms or violence.

Was there a need for Jad Adams to demonise Gandhiji under the pretext of historical revisionism? Gandhiji never considered himself a saint or that he was a great man. He did not seek high office or political power. He lived his life in accordance with the teachings embodied in the Bhagavad Gita.

Gandhiji tells us,

“I had done it through serving my religion, since I felt God could only be reached through service. And service was for me to serve India, because I had the talent for it, and it came to me without taking the initiative. I travelled to South Africa to flee from an untenable situation and to earn my living. But instead, it became a search for God and a striving for self realisation.

“What I wanted to achieve, what I have striven for and sought after, these thirty years is self-realisation, to see God face to face, to achieve moksha (liberation). I live and act for this goal. Everything I do, through what I say and write, and all my efforts in politics, is aimed at this same goal.”

Such are the noble ideals of Gandhiji. Such lofty benchmarks, but how are we to emulate such good deeds?

My questions were answered by the gentle whispers from a very special person whom I am now privileged to be considered a friend by her.

Mairead McGuire, the Nobel Peace Laureate, literally touched my life when I was awfully sick on board the Rachel Corrie. I was suffering intense pain on the entire left side of my head, a recurrence from my hunger strike in the Kajang prison, when I boarded Rachel Corrie in Malta. I was not yet fit to travel and was advised that the pain would re-occur, but I was determined to be on board the Rachel Corrie. I wanted to merge in her spirit, to be renewed and rejuvenated after the gruelling 10-days hunger strike.

I slept for twenty four hours at a stretch. One morning, I felt the gentle touch of healing and woke up to find Mairead beside me offering words of encouragement and medications. I thanked her for her concerns and assured her that all I needed was rest as advised by my doctors. In the evening, she returned and enquired about my health again and offered her

special wrist band designed to alleviate sea-sickness. It was a generous gesture, as she was prone to sea-sickness and the special wrist band prevents sea-sickness. I could not accept her offer even if I was sea-sick, but I was not and I told her that I was suffering from a severe pain on the entire left side of my head, a consequence of my hunger strike in April. She invited me to meditate with her. There and then, I knew that a spiritual lifeline was extended to me.

I recalled once again what was stated in the Bhagavad Gita – everything happens for a reason, everything that has happened, is for the best, everything that is happening is for the best and everything that will happen is also for the best.

Call it coincidence or whatever, but I am blessed that in my journey in search for peace, I encountered three kindred souls all dedicated to non-violence and my life has been richer by the experience.

On the second day, I was fit as a fiddle and resumed my “duties” as a part-time chef for the crew and passengers. It was great fun.

But the moments that I shared with Mairead were special. She too is an advocate of non-violence and like Rachel Corrie and Gandhiji, has deep compassion for everyone especially the oppressed and the downtrodden. Her strength and courage lies in her unyielding faith in God and her dedication to serve humanity.

There were moments that I worried for her, dreading the thought whether she, like Gandhiji, Martin Luther King Jr., and Rachel Corrie would fall victim to a violent death. Such fears were misplaced for whenever I met up with her for a quiet chat she would exude her remarkable confidence and assured me that non-violence would not beget violence.

Her presence and her calming influence once again reminded me how relevant are the teachings embodied in the Bhagavad Gita:

Ahimsa – the practice of non-violence in thought, word and deed;

Kalyana – virtuous conduct, which enables us to pray with a pure heart for the welfare of the world and the wellbeing of all people;

Kriya – doing good to all. As compassion and mercy grows in our hearts, we learn to serve others;

Satyam – truthfulness which is essential for a life of Bhakti; and

Dana – charity. This is born out of the generosity of a large heart. [2]

The journey on Rachel Corrie was short, a bare seven days, but the memories that I cherish will last a lifetime.

I was able to experience in a living way, the richness of those who took and are taking the path of non-violence, their strength and conviction that humility and compassion would ultimately triumph over violence and oppression. Truth and justice will prevail so long as we have faith and hope.

This is my story of Rachel Corrie and long may her spirit continue to inspire us to do good

deeds.

Notes

[1] Mr. Denis Halliday was the former Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations and a member of the International Advisory Panel of the Perdana Global Peace Organisation.

[2] Extracted from The Seven Commandments of the Bhagavad Gita, JP Vaswani, edited by Prabha Sampath and Krishna Kumari, JAICO Publishing House.

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