

'Grandad's spirit guides me'

Mahatma Gandhi's grandson, peace activist, **Arun**, tells Kate Delamere how his grandfather in spirit continues to help him

You grew up in an ashram in South Africa with your parents and grandfather – a spiritual leader who led India to independence in the 1930s and 40s and inspired civil rights movements across the world. What memories do you have of him?

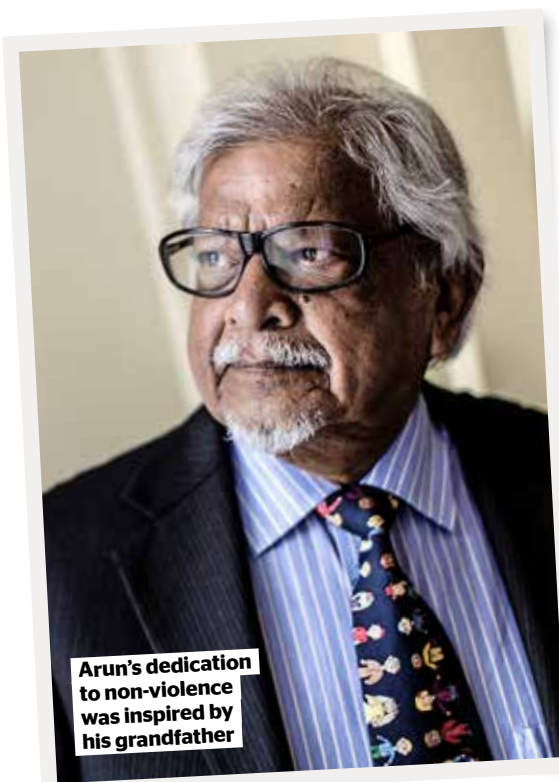
He was a gentle, calm loving man who treated everyone equally and I could talk to him about anything – even a headache, he'd find me a nature cure for – and he'd treat whatever I talked about like it was the most important thing in his life at that time.

A spiritual man, he had respect for all religions. We'd say Christian, Hindu, Islamic and Jewish prayers together every morning and evening, sitting in an open space. I'm a Hindu with Universalist views. He'd urge me to play with neighbours' kids to know what poverty was like.

Did Gandhi teach you any lessons that have stood you in good stead over your 84 years?

He'd teach me about life by converting some incident that happened in the day into a story with a moral behind it. One of the most important things he taught me was about anger. When I was a young boy I was playing soccer and one of my friends tripped me and I fell, bruising my knees. I was so angry I wanted to hit him but knew I shouldn't. I went to my grandfather weeping and told him what happened. He said anger's a wonderful emotion but can cause us grief if we abuse it.

'It's as useful as electricity if channelled for the good of humanity but can also be used destructively for violence. Don't act on it or you'll do things you regret,' he said. He encouraged me to keep an anger journal. 'Write incidents down with the intention of finding a solution, then



Arun's dedication to non-violence was inspired by his grandfather

'He inspired me to dedicate my life to spreading his philosophy'

commit yourself to the solution. Don't just pour out your anger into the journal because, when you read it, you'll remind yourself of the incident and get angry again.'

For years people have been asking me to write down my stories about Grandad and what he taught me. That incident all those years ago inspired me to write my book *The Gift of Anger*, published last year.

What other life lessons did he teach you?

Discipline. He was particular about regulating your life. He had me draw up a programme each day from the time I got up. For every hour I had to know what I was doing, including play and study time. From working in the ashram to cleaning up, everything I did was allotted a time.

He'd say that we waste a lot of time during the day and we don't have the luxury of time. Be careful how you use time, use it for goodness.

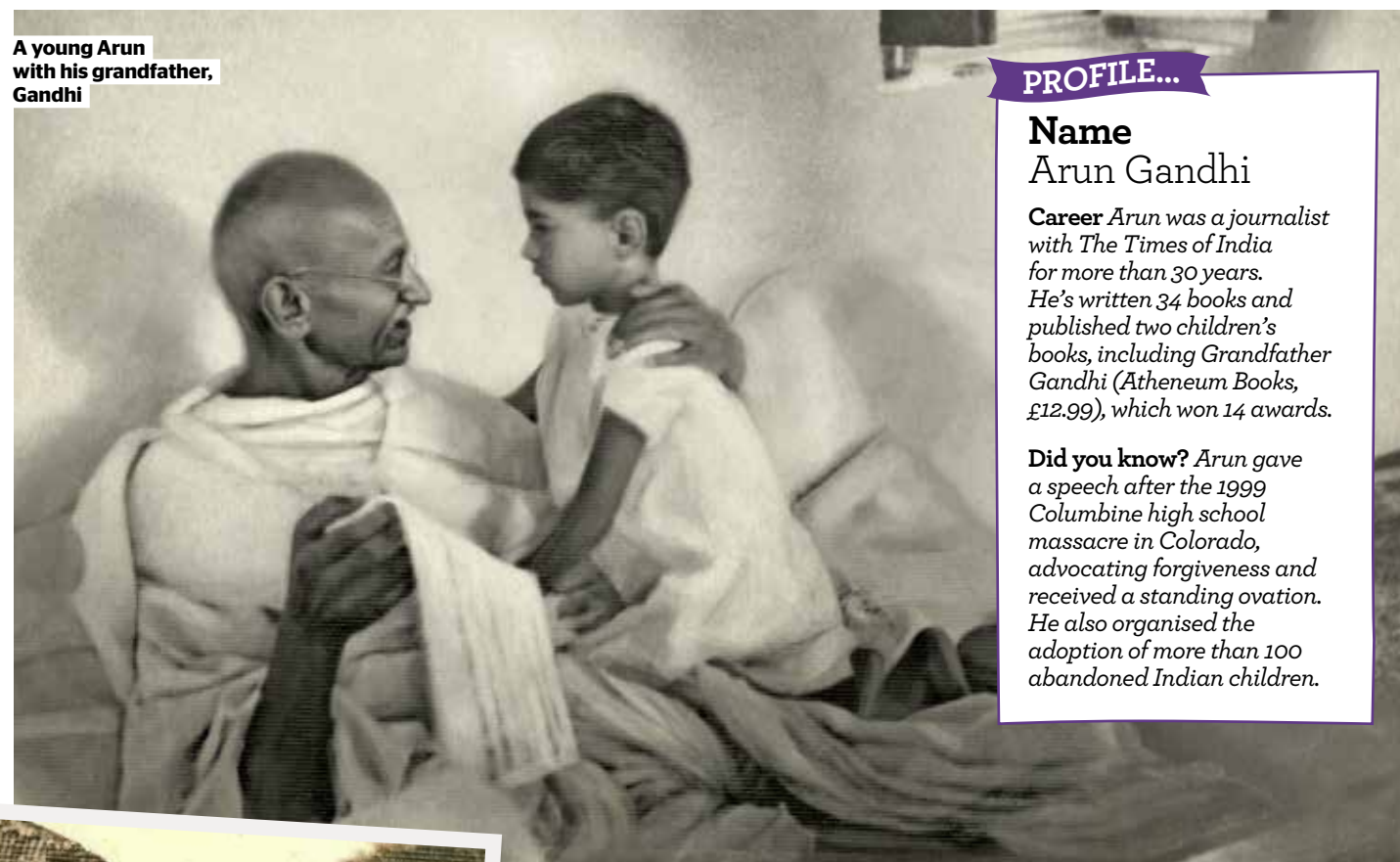
You were 13 when he was assassinated on 30 January, 1948, aged 78. What do you remember about that day?

I remember it distinctly. I was coming back from school, walking home through the sugar cane fields, when I saw an old gentleman from the ashram rushing towards me.

I was perplexed because he was the type of guy who never went anywhere and was content to stay inside. I wondered where he was off to, then he came up to me and told me that my mother wanted me. I could see pain and agony in his face. I ran home and saw my mother taking phone calls and weeping. She put down the phone and told me the news. I was shocked – I couldn't believe it.

After the funeral (in India), my father brought some of Grandfather's ashes back to South

A young Arun with his grandfather, Gandhi



PROFILE...

Name
Arun Gandhi

Career Arun was a journalist with *The Times of India* for more than 30 years. He's written 34 books and published two children's books, including *Grandfather Gandhi* (Atheneum Books, £12.99), which won 14 awards.

Did you know? Arun gave a speech after the 1999 Columbine high school massacre in Colorado, advocating forgiveness and received a standing ovation. He also organised the adoption of more than 100 abandoned Indian children.



They spent many happy days together

Africa. We had the ashes in the ashram for three days and held prayers every morning and evening. People came to place flowers and give respect. On the fourth day we took the ashes in a procession into the ocean and immersed them.

In the beginning, I thought people would forget about him and his philosophy of non-violence and found it weird people were interested in him years later. I'm so happy people still think about him and he inspired me to dedicate my life to spreading his philosophy of compassion and practicing non-violence. It's easy to spread hate and prejudice and difficult to spread love and build peace.

Lessons from my grandfather

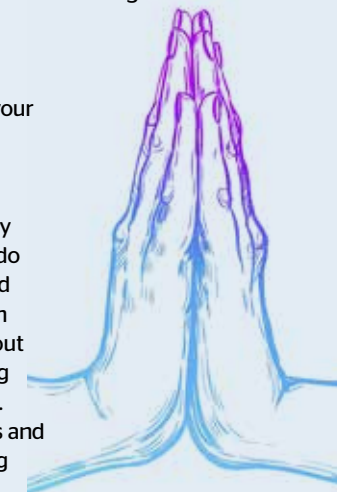
The lessons I learnt from Gandhi transformed my life and can help you find greater peace in yours, says Arun.

Train your mind to avoid lashing out in anger and reacting rashly. Strengthen your mind by sitting quietly in a room without any distractions and hold something like a flower or a photograph and concentrate on it for a minute or more. Close your eyes and see how long you can hold the image in your mind.

At first the image may fade quickly but if you do it regularly you can hold the image longer, which shows you're pushing out distractions and gaining control over your mind.

Then close your eyes and focus on your breathing

to empty your mind and keep your thoughts at bay. By practising these simple meditative exercises you'll be able to control your thoughts in a moment of anger.



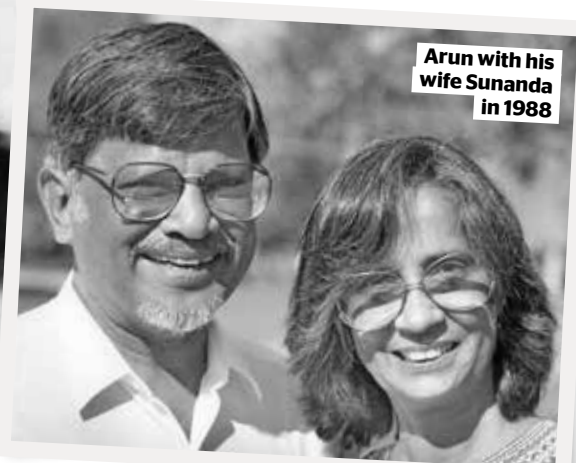
INSPIRED BY ANGER

Anger to people is like gas to the car – it can fuel you to get to a better place. For example, producing cloth was a cottage industry in India for centuries, then the big textile mills in Great Britain took cotton from India, processed it, and sold it back to Indians at higher prices. People were angry but instead of attacking the British industry for impoverishing people, Gandhi got his own spinning wheel and started spinning to encourage every family to channel their anger intelligently and to become self-sufficient.

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Gandhi after his release from a Bombay prison in 1931



Arun with his wife Sunanda in 1988

Was your grandfather's high profile ever a burden to you growing up?

As a teenager I'd get frustrated by the demands of people on us because of the Gandhi name. One day I told my mother: 'I don't know how to go through life with this legacy. It's already becoming such a burden.' My mother said: 'If you consider it a burden it'll get heavier and you'll be buried under it. If you consider it a legacy like a light illuminating the path ahead it will be easier for you to deal with.'

Since then I looked at his legacy as a light showing me the way and feel very blessed.

Do you ever feel Gandhi's spirit around you?

Yes, I've felt his spirit hover around me time and again since he died. His energy is so strong. Sometimes when I'm faced with difficult questions, the answer will suddenly pop in my head and it's his spirit that's helped me come to that realization. Recently I was doing a talk in the US, and I was asked a question about how to deal with North Korea non-violently. I was stumped for a fraction of a second then came up with an answer that made sense to the crowd, who gave me a standing ovation. The answer was so intricate I knew it was Gandhi giving me the right words to say. He also appears in my dreams. I have photos of him all around my home in New York – so many that my friends tell me it looks like a museum! His spirit is always there and his presence makes me feel comfortable and peaceful. I know he's around me, protecting, loving and guiding me.

Do you have any other spiritual guidance that you draw on in your daily life?

I believe in astrology (I'm an Aries) and read my horoscope every day. Some days my horoscope says something that

Gandhi's vision for a peaceful world

The civil rights leader inspired millions of people to find a peaceful way forward

Gandhi's vision inspired millions of men and women to fight for civil rights and freedoms across the world.

He started a movement known as 'non-violent civil disobedience', which saw him and his followers pushing for social change using peaceful methods that included boycotting, picketing and non-payment of taxes.

Gandhi used these radical methods to lead India's struggle for independence against the British Empire in the 1930s.

His philosophy caused social, political and religious waves across the globe.

His peaceful approach influenced Dr Martin Luther King Jr in the 1960s, who embraced Gandhi's policies in his struggle for the African-American community. The success of King's civil rights movement in America was evidence of Gandhi's powerful lasting legacy.

Nelson Mandela was also inspired by Gandhi, mentioning him many times in his autobiography. He drew on Gandhi's non-violent vision when setting up boycotts and demonstrations in the fight against apartheid.

Today, his sayings have become mantras in the mouths of the spiritual 'mindful' generation around the world

'where there is love, there is life', 'the best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others' and 'happiness is when what you think, what you say and what you do are in harmony'.

But one of Gandhi's biggest legacies was his inspirational commitment to a fight for truth and justice, and improving the plight of the poor. He believed each individual could create lasting change as part of society by taking that small first step.



'Where there is love, there is life'



Speaking about his grandfather at the 2015 World Peace Festival

More info

The Gift of Anger by Arun Gandhi, (Michael Joseph, £14.99), is out now.

then happens that day – it's truthful and weird. When I was working on *The Times* in India as a journalist I wasn't happy with the money and one day was on the verge of signing a new contract for a better job. That day my wife, Sunanda (who died in 2007), had gone to her grandmother's home who had an astrologer there and she gave him a photograph of me and he started telling my wife my future.

'He's going to go abroad and become famous. But he won't be changing his job,' he said.

My wife laughed and said: 'That's not right. He's signing a new contract today.'

But unbeknown to my wife, that day I realised the people offering me the job just wanted me to use my influence with prime ministers to do favours for them. I told them point blank that I wasn't going to do that and tore up the contract. When I told my wife, she was completely stunned – the astrologer was right.

Despite global violence and terrorism, you continue to spread Gandhi's message of peace around the world. What inspires you?

My grandfather campaigned all his life for non-violence and peace. He tried to convince the Indian Government to adopt it as an official

policy but they refused. Violence is growing everywhere around the world – it's mind-boggling. My grandfather believed poverty's the worst form of violence. Half of the world are living in misery and the other half in affluence that leads to violence and terrorism. To add to that mix, we have prejudice where we judge people by colour, race and religion.

Gandhi said 'be the change you want to see in the world'. When people realise they can change themselves to become better human beings then

change will come. Change can't be legislated from the top down, you can't pass a law to become a good person, you have to start from within. My responsibility is to ensure the poorer side of the world gets a better standard of living.

What makes you happiest?

To see somebody smile who was in difficulties. I do a lot of work in India with money I get from my books. I use it to support 1,000 children through poverty. When I go there and see the smiles on their faces, it makes up for everything.

What are your hopes for the future?

Gandhi taught me never to accept goals that are unattainable. Young people today set themselves high goals that they can't achieve. After a few years they burn out when they see they're not making headway.

I've learned to set goals that I can achieve and then when I do I raise the bar and go to the next level. I call myself a 'peace farmer'. Just like a farmer goes into the fields and plants seeds, I plant seeds in the minds of young people and one day hope that I'll get a good crop of peace makers. If you lose hope, you've lost the battle. ●

