

Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Symbols of Nonviolence

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Grade Level/ Subject Areas: Art/Graphic Design, High School, Grades 9-12

Duration of Lesson: 3-5 class periods/days

Oregon Art Content Standards:

AR.HS.CP.01 Select and combine essential elements and organizational principles to achieve a desired effect when creating, presenting and/or performing works of art for a variety of purposes.

AR.HS.CP.02 Explain the choices made in the creative process when combining ideas, techniques, and problem solving to produce one's work, and identify the impact that different choices might have made.

AR.HS.CP.03 Create, present and/or perform a work of art by controlling essential elements and organizational principles and describe how well the work expresses an intended idea, mood or feeling.

Lesson Abstract:

Students will learn the importance of symbolism through graphic design and will understand how Gandhi and Chavez used symbols to enhance their nonviolent grassroots campaigns. Students create a logo for their own nonviolent campaign for any social issue they choose.

Guiding Questions:

What is symbolism and how did symbolism enhance or add to the success of Gandhi and Chavez's nonviolent campaigns?

What might have been the outcome if the choices in the designs would have been made differently?

How can symbolism be interpreted in many different ways?

Content Essay:

Mahatma Gandhi and Cesar Chavez are well known icons of nonviolence. Their names and images are known throughout the world. In India images and statues of Gandhi are common and in the United States almost every major city has a street or boulevard named after Cesar Chavez. This is most likely not the way that either of these grassroots leaders would have wanted to be remembered. Gandhi and Chavez shared similar viewpoints in opposing hierarchy and neither one intended to ever be elevated over others. Both Gandhi and Chavez had a good understanding of the importance of

symbols, and they may have been surprised, or even disappointed, that they themselves had become symbols to such a significant degree. These two men never placed themselves above their followers, believing in leadership from the bottom up, not from the top down. Both of these men cared about the people and the communities in which they lived and both used symbolism to make their communities stronger while leading successful nonviolent social movements.

Gandhi used many symbols but perhaps his most important symbol was the charkha, or spinning wheel. In India, traditionally the charkha was used only by women to spin cotton or silk. Under Gandhi's direction and leadership the charkha would become so much more. While India was under British colonial rule the cotton that was grown in India was harvested by the Indian men and then shipped to England to be woven and spun into cloth. The British would then sell the cloth back to the Indian people at prices they could not afford. Gandhi believed that the Indian people had become self-imposed indentured laborers for the British and that the only way for the Indian people to free themselves of the British control was to be self-sufficient.

Gandhi thought the charkha was the key to accomplishing his goal. Gandhi believed that the men of India should stop harvesting the cotton for the British and that the Indian people should boycott British cloth. He encouraged both Indian men and women to start spinning and weaving their own cloth with the use of the charkha in the hopes that it would eventually free the Indian people from the control of the British. The charkha and the hand-spun and hand-woven cloth it produced, called khaddar or khadi, quickly became symbols of Gandhi's nationwide movement.

In going around the country, Gandhi preached swadeshi and called upon his followers to take up the daily spinning of khadi; the charkha became the symbol of the national movement. Gandhi wanted to introduce charkha in every household and by 1921 there were about two million charkhas operating in private homes. For Gandhi, charkha was a means of economic regeneration, autonomy, and self-reliance. (Sethia 134)

The powerful symbol of the charkha that Gandhi had given to India soon became the symbol that represented the nation. In 1931 a new flag was officially recognized to represent the nation of India. The charkha was now centered on a tri-colored field of orange, white and green on khadi. This new flag was known as Gandhi's Swaraj flag.



"History Of The Indian Flag, Indian Flag History, Indian Flag Icon." *India Heritage - India - Its History, Culture, Art, Tourism, Cuisine, Religions*. Web. 08 Aug. 2011.
<http://www.indiaheritage.org/history/history_indian_flag.htm>.

Even though Gandhi's Swaraj flag was replaced with India's current flag in 1947, his symbolism is still present. The tri-colored field remained and the same, although the charkha wheel was simplified. The wheel on its own is still reminiscent of Gandhi's original symbol but it is stylized, making it representative of the past, present and future of India. The flag, by law, is made of khadi, leaving another symbolic legacy to India's culture that has always been immersed in symbolism.



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Mythology and symbolism have always played and still do play important roles in Indian life. Many Indians see their own culture as basically non-materialist and reliant more on spiritual than physical values. Indians also like to distinguish their own approach, which gives preference to feelings, (Smith 5) emotions, and inexplicable inner convictions, from the Western approach, which is predominantly analytical, intellectual, and logical. The Indian approach often expresses itself as seeing a symbol in everything. Symbols and meanings are so important that realism seems to be deliberately discarded. (Balaram 68)

I found it interesting that Balaram mentions that the “Western approach” is “predominantly analytical, intellectual, and logical.” Unfortunately, as Balaram mentions, the difference is that the western world is much more based on materialism. It seems that our western culture is so materialistic that our materialism sometimes clouds our judgments. This materialistic cloud was very much one of the concerns that Gandhi had with the modern world.

Sometimes this clouded judgment results in interpretations that are completely opposite from the original intention, resulting in entirely chaotic, ignorant, and unreasonable uses of sacred symbolism. Several examples in the last 20 years have taken Cesar Chavez's United Farm Worker's logo, the primary symbol of his nonviolent movement, and even his own name and using them in ways that completely go against everything that he embodied.

In 1995 a news story from KSBW News in California focused on a rise in gang members getting the logo of the United Farm Workers tattooed on their bodies after killing someone for the gang. In fact due to the increase in gang members physically labeling themselves with this icon, the UFW logo is still on police image banks listed as a possible gang related image. It's hard to imagine that a symbol that represented nonviolence could be used as a “gold star” for killing someone.

Dr. Jose-Antonio Orosco, from Oregon State University gives another example of a possible miss-use or interpretation of Chavez's symbolism in his book, *Cesar Chavez*

and the Common Sense of Nonviolence. Orosco focuses on this discussion in the first several pages of his book when he discusses the advertisements during the 2006 World Cup.

In one particular example, a street sign reading 'Main Street' fades and quickly reemerges as "Cesar Chavez Ave.," suggesting that Latinos are literally altering civic landscapes with symbols, images, and colors that reflect a new sense of culture and history. (1)

Chavez most likely would have agreed and perhaps even been pleased that the Latino culture was altering the civic landscape, but how would he have felt about big corporations using his name to make money, when he had spent most of his life fighting them?

In 2011 the U.S. Navy got themselves into the middle of a huge debate when they announced that they would be naming a cargo ship after Chavez. Many people questioned how using Chavez's name to label a Navy ship would honor his legacy of nonviolence. It makes one wonder about Western culture and how it allows some people to interpret these symbols in a completely different way than they were intended or to take individual grassroots leaders and place them on a pedestal. Could it be that we just have a need to label things or do we have a different view on what it takes to be great. Is America in constant need of another "hero" or another "chosen one" or do we just like to jump on the band wagon of other people's achievements? "It is as if mainstream America requires an icon, a leading figure that acts as a placeholder to embody the needs, interests, and complexities of an entire ethnic group". (Orosco 2)

Do we really believe that one must be chosen to be great rather than just being born with that greatness instilled in them from birth? Chavez, like Gandhi, was not born a leader, he was a regular person. Cesar Chavez was born in Arizona and spent most of his early years working with his family in the fields. In his later years he got involved with the Community Services Organization where he learned to work organizing at the grassroots level. Chavez then focused his attention on working to organize the farm workers in California, fighting large corporate growers, ultimately forcing them to make working conditions in the fields better for the workers. After Chavez began to organize the workers it was clear that they would soon need their own symbol. Chavez with the help of his brother Richard and a graphic designer, worked to bring life to a logo for the United Farm Workers. The iconic UFW logo was created in 1969. The symbolism of Chavez and his movement was similar to the symbolism of Gandhi's movement, in that it was entirely focused on unifying people and building communities. The UFW logo was based on an Aztec pyramid, represented the cultural connection between Mexico and the Aztecs. It was also noticed that the pyramid upside down resembled the wings of an eagle, an icon in American symbolism. By joining the two symbols they were able to illustrate the coming together of two cultures for a common good.



"The Farmworker's Logo." *J Paul Leonard Library Home Page*. Web. 08 Aug. 2011.
<<http://www.library.sfsu.edu/exhibits/cultivating/intropages/farmworkerslogo.html>>.

I believe that the upside down pyramid not only represents the Aztec cultural Connection, but separately illustrates Chavez's view on hierarchy. By placing the pyramid upside down, he was able to flip the hierarchy placing the workers on the top and the growers on the bottom. This was very much in line with Gandhi's view of hierarchy. In an interview in 1946 about his political vision and oceanic circles. Gandhi states, "Independence must begin at the bottom", later going on to say "Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom." (Parel 181-182)

It is important for us not to forget the original intent of symbolism that both Gandhi and Chavez used in their nonviolent social movements. It is important that we honor these icons by recognizing that their symbolism was about unifying communities and people and not about separating them.

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Teaching Activities/ Materials Needed:

Historical Context (Day 1)

- Present students with basic background information on Gandhi and Chavez.
- Use sources in Bibliography.

Digital Story (Day 1)

- Present Digital Story "Symbols of Nonviolence or show examples of Gandhi and Chavez's symbols. (You may want to introduce more symbols as well.)

Class Discussion (Day 1)

- Discuss the importance of symbols and their meanings. Allow students to create a hypothesis about the design decisions that were made in the creation of the symbols and have them consider how different choices may have altered the intended outcome.

Brain Storming (Day 2)

- Have students brainstorm ideas for their own nonviolent campaign.
- Students can choose any social issue.
- Have students to start to come up with possible imagery.

Sketches (Day 3)

- Students take concepts from brainstorming session and begin to sketch ideas.

Design Logo/Symbol (Day 4-5)

- Students take their sketches to completion.
- Final logo in Black and White in ink.

Possible class presentations of work and/or Class Critique (Day 5)

Some of the most common symbols are the heart symbol, the dove symbol, the raven symbol, the tree symbol and the owl symbol. Find out what they mean. The colors used in a banner can symbolize all sorts of concepts, which is why most countries have designed their own flag with the meanings of colors in mind. For example, red can represent blood loss, valor and revolution, while white usually stands for nonviolence and harmony. People have been using nonviolent action for thousands of years. Let's start by talking about one of my favorite videos. It involves Jamila Raqib. For a living she promotes nonviolent resistance to people living under tyranny, and she shares with us the importance of nonviolent action in today's society. She explains Nonviolent Paths to Social Change. Why Nonviolence Works. 4 The Power of Nonviolent Action Stephen Zunes, Professor of Politics, University of San Francisco Armed insurgencies impose great human costs. Nonviolent "people power" movements succeed by calling attention to official repression and winning support from the undecided.