

'Conference kindness' and a triple whammy

Narinder Kapur

AS A FOLLOWER of Gandhi, I was always fascinated by the subtitle of his autobiography, this being *Experiments with Truth*. Gandhi noted, 'Far be it for me to claim any degree of perfection for these experiments. I claim for them nothing more than does a scientist who, though he conducts his experiments with the utmost accuracy, forethought and minuteness, never claims any finality about his conclusions, but keeps an open mind regarding them' (Gandhi, 1927, p.15). I have also been interested in how his ideas can be applied to medicine and to science (Kapur, 2010, 2013a,b).

It was around Christmas 2012. I was preparing for a major lecture tour of India, where I would be giving workshops in neuropsychology and behavioural neurology along with other colleagues from Britain and from India. I thought of the triad of Gandhian principles – Truth, Love and Self-Sacrifice. What about carrying out an experiment in 'Love', or what may in this context be better termed 'Compassion'? Could I use this lecture tour to carry out such an 'experiment in Compassion'?

For many years I had been both troubled and preoccupied by the fact that there is often so much surplus and waste in the world in the midst of so much want and need. As a Rotarian, I had become familiar with foodbanks in the West, and around that time I was exploring whether foodbanks could be set up and supported in India (one such foodbank exists in Delhi – see www.awbfoodbank.org). As I looked at the books I was reading to prepare for my lecture tour, I thought – what about 'surplus' in the case of books? I had an extensive library of books in my field, neuropsychology, and I knew there were some earlier editions of a book that were very good but which I no longer needed. I also had duplicate copies of a few books, etc. They were just taking up valuable space. How about getting these books together, along with similar ones that my colleagues may have, and shipping them to India... during the conference, could we not sell them off at a bargain price and give the proceeds to a local Indian charity? I consulted the workshop organisers in India, and they were enthusiastic about the idea. How to go about putting the idea into practice?

I gathered together my own surplus books, around 20–30 in all. I arranged for members of my academic and professional societies to be circulated about any surplus ones they might have. One colleague kindly sent over two crates of books. I ended up with around 60 books. How could I get these to India? There were simply too many to carry in my suitcases. I sent three boxes of around 10 books each by post. The remaining 30 books were divided amongst the two other UK professors who were going to India and myself. (I did contact the charity Bookaid, but they indicated that they mainly dealt with books for Africa.)

The first workshop was a six-day affair in Calcutta. We displayed around 30 books on a table outside the conference hall. Along with a few Indian colleagues, we quickly priced the books – most were between 100 and 1000 Rupees (approximately £1–12). We stuck a large label on each book, and asked delegates to put their names on a

book they fancied buying. On the last day of the workshop, those books that were selected by a single delegate were sold to that person. Those books that attracted several buyers were then raffled, with one of my UK colleagues picking the lucky name 'out of a hat'.

In Bangalore, the location of the second workshop, we adopted a slightly different strategy. Instead of having the books on display for several days, we simply had them on display over a lunch break and sold them on a first-come, first-serve basis. We sold most of the books in the lunch break. At the start of the after-lunch conference session, we simply auctioned off the with eight remaining books, starting at 100 Rupees. We sold them all in no time!

In Calcutta, we raised around 20,000 Rupees and I topped this with a personal donation of another 20,000 Rupees, making 40,000 Rupees in all (around £500). We donated this to the Acid Survivors Foundation of India, which has its headquarters in Calcutta (www.asfi.in). A doctor from the foundation accepted the money, and gave a short presentation of the work they do to help acid survivors, usually attractive young women who are terribly disfigured as a result of having acid thrown in their faces. In Bangalore, we raised around 16,000 Rupees, which I topped up with a further 9,000, and we thus donated 25,000 Rupees (around £312) to a dementia centre which is doing pioneering work, offering residential, day care and community-based care.

It was a simple idea that worked! We achieved a 'triple whammy' – my colleagues and I got rid of books we no longer needed, professionals in India got books they valued and at a bargain price, and a local charity benefited from the book sales. We embodied all three of Gandhi's principles in one go – we promoted Truth via the books, we promoted Love (giving books away cheaply, donating proceeds to charity), and it was a form of Self-Sacrifice in donating books that belonged to us.

Conferences are an ideal setting where such 'experiments in compassion' can take place. Senior delegates will often have spare books, and junior delegates (especially in developing countries) may well need them and are happy to pay a knock-down price. The concept need not be limited to books – it could apply to medical equipment, computer hardware/software, tests, etc. I urge readers to suggest this experiment to the organisers of the next conference they or their friends attend. It is 'conference kindness' with a 'triple whammy'. There are few other triple whammies that give such satisfaction all round!

References

- Gandhi M. (1927, 1982). *An autobiography. Or the story of my experiments with truth*. London: Penguin Books.
- Kapur, N. (2010). Bringing Gandhi to science and medicine. In R. Mashelkar (Ed.), *Timeless inspirator: Reliving Gandhi*. New Delhi: Gandhi National Memorial Society, pp. 228-237.
- Kapur, N. (2013a). Why NHS leaders should heed Gandhi's message. *Health Service Journal*, April 19.
- Kapur, N. (2013b). The NHS could learn much from Gandhi's teaching. *BMJ*, 346, f2411.

The author

Professor Narinder Kapur, University College London n.kapur@ucl.ac.uk. A similar version of this article appeared as a BMJ blog, April 24, 2013.