In 1962, Satish Kumar decided to walk for peace. Not only did his journey cover 8,000 miles and take in four heads of state, it was also an enriching personal experience.
«I was 25 years old and living in India when I decided to walk to Moscow,

London, Paris and Washington to protest against nuclear weapons. I was sitting in a café with a friend, EP Menon, when I read about Bertrand Russell being arrested in Trafalgar Square. ‘Look! Here is a man of 90 going to jail for peace in the world, what are we doing here – drinking coffee? Let’s do something!’ So we came up with the idea of walking to the four nuclear capitals of the world.

Advised by the leader of a Gandhian organisation, we chose to travel without any money. He told us, ‘Wars begin with fear, and peace begins with trust, so if you want to make peace in the world you have to trust the world.’ It was 1962. We set off from Mahatma Gandhi’s grave with nothing but a sleeping bag, a change of clothing and some pamphlets in a variety of languages promoting peace.

My friends thought I was crazy, especially because our first stop was Pakistan, India’s sworn enemy. But no sooner had we crossed the border than we were met by a stranger who had read about us and travelled from Lahore to the border, just to find us. As I said to my friend, if we come here as Indians, we meet Pakistanis, if we come here as Hindus, we meet Muslims, but if we come here as human beings, we meet human beings. And that first day gave me the strength to face the world with a very positive attitude. Struggle is part of life, and difficulties simply make you stronger.

Wherever we went, we would meet the media to tell our story. Some were interested in peace and some were interested in our human story, but we always got good publicity and because of that, good hospitality, too. People fed us, gave us shelter, wanted to help us.

In the early part of our trip we were walking by the Black Sea in Georgia when we passed a tea factory and came upon two young ladies sitting in the sun on their lunch break. They read one of our pamphlets and then offered us a cup of tea. As we sat and drank it, one of them had a brainwave. ‘I am going to give you four packets of tea,’ she said. ‘Please deliver one packet to each of the leaders in Moscow, Paris, London and Washington. And give them a message from me: If you ever get a mad thought of pressing the nuclear button, stop for a moment and have a fresh cup of tea. And while you drink it, think about what your nuclear bombs will not only kill your enemies, but they will kill all men, women, children, farmers, workers, trees, rivers, animals, plants, everything will be destroyed. So don’t use them.’

So off we went to Moscow. While Nikita Khrushchev did not receive us directly – he was in the middle of the Cuban Missile Crisis at the time – he sent us a nice letter saying, ‘It is wonderful that you are doing this, and I appoint my leader of the Supreme Soviet to meet you in the Kremlin, and receive the “peace tea”.’ He told us, ‘Russia has been proposing peace for a long, long time. It is to America that you must go.’

When we arrived in France we wrote to Charles de Gaulle about our peace tea but we received no answer. So we went to the Elysée Palace and demonstrated. But this got us arrested. We didn’t mind, as we were following in the footsteps of Bertrand Russell. But after three days, the Indian ambassador got us released and we ended up giving our peace tea to the Paris chief of police.

We did not see Harold Wilson either, but at least he wrote to us and asked us to speak to Lord Attlee when we were in London. He promised to deliver the tea to Number 10, so we felt acknowledged at this stage of our trip.

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We met Bertrand Russell while we were in Britain, and he insisted upon paying our fares to sail on the Queen Mary to New York (we couldn't walk to America, obviously). From there we walked to Washington DC, but by that time the president, John F Kennedy, had been assassinated, and so his successor, President Johnson, suggested we meet his disarmament adviser officer. We gave him the peace tea – and we got the same sort of answer the Russians had given us: 'We are for peace, it is the Russians who are to blame.'

My belief is that you show by example, so we didn't give up, we continued on to the grave of Kennedy. We had walked from the grave of Gandhi to the grave of Kennedy to make the point that if you trust in the gun, it not only kills a bad person, but also a Gandhi, or a Kennedy. All the problems in the world are human problems, and there are always problems. We need to start trying to solve them through negotiation and not through nuclear bombs or warfare. That was our message throughout.

So now, 50 years later, the Cold War is over but we have still not found a way to settle our disagreements. Dissidents in places such as Syria or Palestine would be more powerful, for peace, I was making peace with nature, and when I was making peace with nature, I was making peace with myself.

We don't talk any more about the nuclear clock (which symbolically showed how far the world was from nuclear destruction) but people are still very worried about their future. We need some kind of counterbalancing of that fear. There are thousands of people without homes, and thousands of homes without people, so our management is wrong. Britain is the seventh largest economy in the world, so why do we have to worry? We have so much talent, so many skills: use them. Always worry, worry, worry, and no trust. Fear and no trust.

I am an environmentalist and I work for the environment, not because of a fear of global warming or climate change, but because of my love for nature, love for trees and forests and flowers and animals and birds. I want to celebrate nature.

«When I was walking for peace, I was making peace with nature, and so I was making peace with myself»

their authority would be greater, if they used non-violent means. The great example is Aung San Suu Kyi – she has wonderfully shown that resilience can have positive results. Now she is getting more democracy in Burma. She has suffered, but she never advocated arms.

Our trip took two and a half years, covering 8,000 miles – a slow, slow process. But look at wars, how long they take, how many years Western powers have been in Afghanistan, and still no solution. How many years Palestine and Israel have been at loggerheads – and still no solution. So the idea that violence will take you there quickly is wrong.

And I must admit that, for me, the peace walk was also a wonderful personal experience. I had been a Jain monk in my teens and I believe that for personal healing and development we need to be out in nature, at one with the elements, feeling the air, the rain, the sunshine, seeing the birds, the trees you are passing, the soil on which you are walking. This is psychologically very strengthening. During those years I made a shield around myself by renouncing anger, renouncing ego, renouncing pride, and that shield protects me. It made me stronger and more resilient. So when I was walking

Why would I want to pollute it and destroy our environment? So if we are driven by a more positive and more resilient view of the world, we can try to trust the world and trust the process of the universe. We will see that the sun shines for our wellbeing, and that the rain comes free of charge for our wellbeing, and the soil produces food for our wellbeing, a mother gives birth to a baby for our wellbeing, and a husband and wife take care of each other for our wellbeing. We need to celebrate that rather than just complaining about negativity.

As Mahatma Gandhi said, there is enough in the world for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed. So if we are free of greed, nature is abundant, nature is generous. If you plant one apple seed in the ground, how many apples do you get from it? Thousands upon thousands. And each apple has another seed. That is nature's cycle.

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