

Scene: On the airplane to Delhi taxied at a Russian airport. A hunched-over old man approaches, and I get up from my aisle seat to help him with his bag. After he takes the seat next to mine, the man looks over and sees that I am reading Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass.

**O.M.** I used to be a poet once upon a time.

(He says these words both to himself and to me.)

**A.K.** Used to? Why aren't you a poet anymore?

**O.M.** Life gets in the way of things like poetry. It's a frivolous pursuit, and only a privileged few have time for things like poetry. It has always been like this.

**A.K.** You don't think poetry, or literature in general, plays an important role in society? That it can help change the world for the better? Change people for the better?

**O.M.** (Chuckles to himself) You sound so much like me when I was your age! Ah, yes. How I thought I could be like Tolstoy or Dostoevsky. A revolution through words and ideas, rather than with guns and bombs.

**A.K.** And you don't think that could happen?

**O.M.** No, I don't, dear boy.

**A.K.** Then what about this example: Thoreau's writings on civil disobedience and non-violence influenced Martin Luther King Jr.'s thoughts and actions during the civil rights movement. Same thing with Gandhi, too.

**O.M.** And how has that worked out for you American's? Is there not as much strife now as there was back in the 1960s? I get your point: some modest gains for so-called civil rights have been made, *maybe* in part thanks to literature, but isn't the same system that allowed these injustices to take place still in existence?

**A.K.** So what are you saying? Is it better to give up trying to change anything at all?

**O.M.** What I'm saying is try as you might, the world cannot change.

**A.K.** Do you *really* believe that?

**O.M.** Look, I'll give you my life as an example. I was about your age during the 1960s. Much like yourself, I was writing and traveling, trying to change the world and whatnot. I guess you could say I was a "hippie." Then, one day, you wake up and you have a wife, a child, and responsibility. And the real world, or at least the material world, sucks you in. You don't have time to try and change the world because you're trying to survive in it. Maybe you can choose to survive off scraps but you have to feed your child. Idealism doesn't feed an empty stomach. (He briefly pauses for a moment and sighs.) The world changes you, it's never the other way around.

**A.K.** Sir, I understand what you're saying. Idealism clashes with the harsh reality of the world and all that. But what if, instead of trying to change the world, you try and change the way people view the world? What if, instead of some grand external revolution where the people overthrow governments and institutions, there is a sort of inner revolution where people begin to question themselves and their reasons for living? And what if the world around them begins to change because they themselves are changing?

(The airplane begins to move. The old man looks out the window. A nearly imperceptible smile develops on his face.)

**O.M.** Well, if that's your goal, I hope you're a damn good writer. And I wish you and your generation luck—you're going to need it.