

WHAT'S WORTH A WAR?

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My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
So much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those who, age after age,
perversely, with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.

-Adrienne Rich

"PLAYING WAR" - *by Betsy Spethman (an Illinois high school student)*

I believe in oak tree safeties
broomstick guns
and naptime intermissions
We played war
with ack-ack sticks
in a backyard battlefield;
Mommies made tuna for lunch
and gave Mr. Bubble scrubbing baths.
Injuries healed
after "a thousand fifty"
and there was always a garage to hide in.
Real-life generals don't call time out, and
nobody waits while the enemy ties their shoes.
...Little kids die for keeps.
Nobody plays fair anymore.
They don't stop at dinnertime.

For CENTERING into silence

from "An Invocation for the New Year" by Mark Belletini (1990)

Can you imagine it?
Palestinians and Israelis settling down together in their common land, marrying each other,
reading each other's books, singing each other's songs, laughing?

Can you imagine it?
Iraqis visiting Jerusalem, Californians visiting friends in Baghdad? Cubans vacationing in San
Salvador, Americans vacationing in Cuba? Can you hear it? Tears and forgiveness set amidst the
clatter of Spanish and English...no more whistling ricochets, just the sound of fleshy shoulder
embracing fleshy shoulder, hands slapping backs, deep sobs?

Can you imagine it? Really can you see it? The President of South Africa, the President of the
United States, both the color of coffee, of chocolate, of Earl Grey tea, the memory of bloodshed
and burning crosses distant and far, the haunting of hateful ghosts exorcised at last by the rituals
of peace?

Can you imagine it? Not saying "I have no money to give you," because no one is asking? Can you imagine not having to worry about going here or there, or never having to slink past old women slung in doorways, covered with rags? Can you imagine healthcare and childcare and soulcare as if children and the spirit really mattered? Can you imagine...AIDS and cancer and MS cured because people thought healing was more important to spend money on than killing? Can you imagine people not having to shout because they are already heard, people not having to act crazy because the world isn't crazy anymore...?

Can you imagine that? . . .

Sermon: WHAT'S WORTH A WAR?

This is not a new question. Just-war theory has been evolving for millennia. It claims by now at least this: that moral restraints do not end when war looms; that wrong beliefs do not deprive people of their rights; and that right causes do not inherently justify wrong means. But a theory adequate to resolve the anguishing question of our moral responsibility when zealots are on a rampage has not yet been devised. Over the eons of our evolution we have barely gotten this far: understanding that war is a choice that people make.

People. People entangled in fear and longing and pain and rage. People not unlike ourselves. "Nothing human is foreign to me," wrote the Roman poet, Terence, 2000 years ago. It is an eternal truth and a wellspring of hope. It means we can grow understanding.

When social bonds are resilient, in a society that is healthy, room is created for diversity, and allowance is made for mistakes. New ideas can be born, old habits challenged, differences respected. There is freedom to think, to grow, to live honest and open lives.

But when social bonds are fragile, or one is under continuing threat, there is no safe space in which to bloom healthy selves. So I must hang in and seek to survive, somehow. - Perhaps by trusting no-one, and turning isolated and alien. - Or by submerging myself into a group and forsaking my self-identity.

These dynamics set the stage for every kind of war. There's no freedom to nurture hope or to foster imagination. Productive problem solving cannot happen because disagreement is not tolerated [no-one has learned to trust it], and objectivity is inoperative [it requires safe grounding]. It's because ethnic and religious groups provide the most potent identities that they so often become the major players in our wars.

Suppose we are free spirits, enjoying secure social bonds with each other, encouraged to be ever more fully and truly ourselves, nudged when we make mistakes, but not disowned for them. Imagine it. *A world in which we read each other's books, sing each other's songs. "A world in which people don't have to shout because they are already heard. ...A world in which we can see what **must be** as clearly as we see what **is**?" [Mark Belletini]...What would be worth a war?* Tears sting in asking this question, for there would be no war in such a world. There might be all manner of creative ferment, challenging encounter, daunting difficulty. But war would be absurd. What could be worth erasing another person or another people from existence?

Perhaps violence could be cleansing if it had half a chance of resolving a problem; but it doesn't. Violence merely batters it into another shape. Columnist Meg Greenfield stated it so well some two decades ago, in the wake of Britain's battle with the Falkland Islands and Israel's combat with Lebanon: *What seems indisputable as the firing dies down is that the violence represented failure, no matter which side prevails; that what you must do when it is over is what needed doing long before.*

I'm reminded of the luminous truth that you do not conquer me by killing me. Gandhi stated it with graphic power: "They may torture me, break my bones to atoms, and even kill me. They will then have my dead body, not my obedience. Ultimately therefore, it is I who am the victor...for they have failed."

Yes, they have failed. In the end, in the long cosmic view, violence cannot win. We may destroy each other with it, and obliterate humanity from existence. We will hardly have won. No-one will have won. Nor will the Life Force which gave hopeful birth to us have won. In the dying embers of a crushed civilization, the truth glows obvious: the end of all violence is destruction.

The irony is that people go to war trying to save something-or-other from destruction, be it lives, freedom, safety, home-[that essential human need to feel at home in the world]-which all too often devolves into defending the *status quo*: Maintaining our flow of gold, and gasoline. Securing our boundaries, our borders, "the stitches in our maps where we think we really split the planet into parts" [*a line from Joseph Pintauro*]. To whatever extent our land, our property, our standard of living, are merged in our minds with being at home in the world, we'll be sorely tempted to go to war to keep them.

It's not the things themselves that matter so much (though it's not beyond us to be greedy); it's our familiar way of life that's at stake. Peoples have long gone to war to preserve their way of life.

*See? We are all the same,
[laments poet Joseph Pintauro]
murdering each other like animals
over the waterhole
or over Papa's will or Mama's breast?
Don't show me your bombastic cities,
your buxom economies,
your fat cheeses and cream pies.
That's not enough for either side to die for.
Can't you see you are too slow evolving,
sibling apes?
Clumsy, you make war,
and you are the only brothers I've got
till the universe opens its arms. [from The Peace Box]*

"War simplifies the complex. It draws sides, us and them, good and evil. War has one set of responses to a myriad number of situations: violence." [Ellen Goodman] And what we must do

when it is over is what we might have done long before. And war keeps recurring because we haven't re-envisioned the parameters of what is, what is true, and what is truly worthy of living and dying for.

I would propose a principle: that no way of life is worth a war unless it is a way of Life, with a capital L. ...And this may be what is at risk now.

We have never known such an assault as September 11 before, nor have we known such an enemy, intent on our destruction and hiding from view. Lines from a W.H. Auden poem seemed to ring true: *Their cause, if they had one, is nothing to them now; they hate for hate's sake.* -Until the handwritten letter of guidance was found in the terrorists' luggage, instructing them to purify their hearts, and bless their bodies, their passports, their clothes and their knives. Their cause was everything to them. We might well have foreseen this if we did not understand too little of the awful weight of the world's unresolved history and our nation's enmeshment in it [keenly observed by San Francisco Chronicle writer Frank Viviano].

When one ideology is intent on destroying another, the classic battle plan is to destroy its temples. Are the Pentagon and the World Trade Center towers America's temples? Everyday evidence would suggest yes. I could outline a convincing case for that assumption, and do not doubt the terrorists believed it to be true. But Americans aren't responding like a people whose way of faith has been desecrated. Instead we are trembling like a people whose safety has been savaged and whose family has been ripped apart. The stories of generosity and caring and courage abound to heal our torn hearts.

There are those-all too many-eager to return the assaults, the barbarity, blow for blow, and compound the hatred. If those are voices you find yourself dwelling on, stop. You are feeding your despair and crippling your capacity to hope and to dream. Turn to the other voices, grappling deeply and thoughtfully with the why and the how and the what-yet-may-be - on the op-ed pages of newspapers, on public broadcasting programs, and such online sources as our UUA website. Nurture your capacity to imagine what a different kind of victory might look like, and a different way of war, and test and stretch your answers to what's worth fighting for.

It's a consequential question. It does matter what we think.

Moral philosophers have long wrestled with the dilemma of what justifies war and they have uplifted seven criteria: a just cause, right authority, right intention, overall proportionality of the good to be done over the evil, a reasonable hope of success, a situation of last resort, and the goal of restoring peace. In the light of these criteria, wars of aggression are always immoral, but modern just-war theories allow latitude for defensive wars, wars that combat grave threats to the international order, and wars on behalf of helpless third parties. [*To delve further into this field, check out Michael Walzer's 1977 classic, Just and Unjust Wars.*]

These thoughtful criteria appear clear, however, only at first glance. Wade in, and the water grows murky-for all the reasons human violence has never resolved a problem. Consequences we do not foresee will return to render their awful judgment on our choices. What happens *after* the

war ends matters mightily; and whether we are effective is every bit as vital as whether we're right.

Perhaps some of you recall Walter Van Tilburg Clark's classic short story, "The Ox-Bow Incident"-or the film with Henry Fonda as Davies, the lead character, in one of his most memorable early roles. He rides along with a posse chasing a fellow accused of murder. They catch up with him at the oxbow bend of a river, toss a noose into a tree and hang him there. Davies protests that the man might be innocent, as he claims; and this proves to be true once the posse returns to town. In the final scene he is sitting at a bar with a friend, pondering the awful events of the day, and the story ends with him owning his inability to dissuade the posse as a failure of conviction and courage, a very personal failure.

John G. MacKinnon was minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in Indianapolis when he pondered this story one Sunday in 1963, concluding that there is "not a little of Davies in most men of good will, myself included." Ineffective in our goodness, we hope against hope that something-God? we pray-will save goodness for us. His words have clung to me; let me quote him:

That God will save righteousness is a theological conclusion drawn from the theological premise that God is all-powerful, all-good and all-wise. The only thing wrong with this (apart from a faulty premise, or perhaps because of a faulty premise) is that things just don't work out this way. ...In the world of nature [where one either eats or is eaten], might makes right. We are not yet far enough from the world of nature to rely upon any other rule. Therefore we must make the right, as we see it, mighty. That means that [people] of good will must not only be good-they must be strong. They must be strong in the moral strength of their goodness; but they must also be strong in the tools that decide issues and create social orders... We have what measure of goodness we have in the world, because, from time to time as the need was critical, enough men [and women] who loved goodness have not relied upon God to achieve it, but have picked up the tools of the world-perhaps soiling their hands irreparably in the process-and rallied to the salvation of righteousness.

Ringling words! -though one of them troubles me: righteousness. It devolves into self-righteousness so easily and so often; blinding us to what is valid in dissenting views; leading us to shrink our opponents' stature rather than listen to them, truly hear them, and address their concerns. This is a nuclear-active habit, and too human.

Perhaps you know this? - The average adult contains about half a pound of potassium, and therefore a thousandth of an ounce of a lone-wolf isotope, potassium 40-which makes each of us, very slightly, *radioactive*. A pinch of our bodies is light-weight bomb stuff. -Likewise our behavior, even sometimes here with each other.

People walk through these doors and choose to join this church when they find here kindred spirits. Some may later leave when they encounter disagreement on issues of faith or of conscience. Our religious commitment to diversity is rare, and often difficult to live by. But in joining this congregation you covenant to affirm and promote the remarkable principles listed in the front of our hymnal. Take a look again at them. Whisper them to yourself ...

- *The inherent worth and dignity of every person;*
- *Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;*
- *Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;*
- *A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;*
- *The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;*
- *The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;*
- *Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*

Our Unitarian Universalist principles commit us to actively respect the truth of each other, and our neighbors, and our fellow humans far away, when we differ on deep and consequential issues, like the ethics of war and the nature of God. This is the pathway of peace, the only one I know.

I have no illusions that we will not for the foreseeable future continue to encounter wars we cannot envision how to morally avoid [*I've stuffed 4 negatives into that sentence-which reveals that I don't like it, but I'm at a loss to rephrase it*]: wars where someone or something treacherous must be contained. (And this, for me, at this point in time, is what remains worth a war.)

But Jesus, and the Buddha, and Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr.-and in this present day, Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama-have pointed the way we surely must travel. All we lack is the creative imagination and the courage.

-All we lack (!) is imagination and courage. Indeed, we are too slow evolving. I believe it inescapable that war is doomed-or will, in turn, doom us. I think our wars represent vast failures-failures of vision, and imagination, and commitment-before any weapon is fired. Every day, on any street, in every land under this sun we share, whether a little war begins or does not rests in the hands of someone like you and me. Lines from poet William Stafford illumine the dream of a saved and saving world. May we so live that you and I can echo his words:

This is the field where the battle did not happen,

Where the unknown soldier did not die.

Closing:

The little girl saw her first troop parade and asked, "*What are those?*"

"Soldiers."

"*What are soldiers?*"

"They are for war. They fight and each tries to kill as many of the other side as he can."

The girl held still and studied.

"*Do you know . . . I know something?*"

"Yes, what is it you know?"

*"Sometime they'll give a war and nobody will come."
-Carl Sandburg, from The People Yes*