

The Right to a World Without War
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I believe that you have the right to live in a world without war.

Not a world without violence, or without bad actors, or without disputes between countries or peoples, or a world without harsh feelings. I expect that we will never be able to escape such difficulties.

But I do believe that it is possible for you – or your children – to live in a world without the kind of violence that is right now being organized, bankrolled, glorified, and carried out by your “peace-loving” government – in other words, by you.

Your right is to live in a world where the trillions of dollars that finance the organization and control of war is invested, instead, in learning and teaching peace. Your right is to live in a world where human intelligence is put to work solving problems between people in ways that are worthy of human beings.

At the anti war rally last Friday here in Ann Arbor I saw a little girl carrying a sign that said, “War is Stupid.” I couldn’t agree more.

But war is more than stupid. Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist who is an expert on combat trauma and advises the top brass of the United States Military, said at a talk here last month that “war is ritualized torture carried out by slaves.”

Let’s look at that for a minute. Ritualized torture. Many combat veterans have described this fact of war for us in graphic detail. The head of your best friend hanging in a tree. An explosion in someone’s gut that doesn’t kill him right away, but leaves him writhing on the ground, trying to scoop up his intestines and shove them back into his body. A “shock and awe” campaign that turns tall buildings into raging infernos and their occupants into human fireworks, reminding us of the World Trade Center disaster. The organized, systematic rape of civilians – including grandmothers and little girls; the prostitution camps, the filming of rape scenes for pornographic entertainment, something that was even indulged in by NATO peacekeeping troops in Bosnia. This is war as ritualized torture.

And these heinous acts, these acts of war, are carried out by slaves, who of course, are young people like you. Dr. Shay points out that in ancient times, warriors could decide to leave the battlefield when they saw that their own personal defeat was imminent. Not today. Once you enlist, or are drafted, you become the slave of the state. You are punished, even sentenced to death, for desertion or refusal to fight. Your mind becomes the province of your training sergeant, who teaches you to overcome your natural horror

of killing other human beings and instead, to see their murder and torture as glorious and patriotic.

You learn to give up the critical thinking and the intelligent questioning of motives and reasons that you learned here at the university, or in your high school, or around your family dinner table. You become an obedient slave who believes you do not know enough about politics to make an intelligent assessment of the reasons that war might be necessary. A recruiting company commander recently told high school students who asked him why the US was invading Iraq, "It's not important whether we support this. Our job is to obey. If you're a normal person you don't want to go to war. You don't want to go into another country and kill someone. But if that's what you are told to do, then you have to stand by your duty."

Even civilians back home are urged to stop public debate in wartime, to obediently support the enslavement of young people -- sometimes their own children -- and to take pride in the torture and murder they are forced to inflict on other human beings. Major General Smedley Butler, of the United States Marine Corps said, "War is just a racket. A racket is best described, I believe, as something that is not what it seems to the majority of people. Only a small inside group knows what it is about. It is conducted for the benefit of the very few at the expense of the masses."

If we always spoke of war in these terms, would it be so easy to carry out – even as a so-called "last resort"?

I am a pacifist. My pacifism is rooted in my Quaker faith. Quakers have been pacifists since the 1600s, when Quakerism was founded. In a declaration to King Charles the Second, in 1661, Quakers said "We utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons for any end or under any pretense whatsoever. This is our testimony to the whole world."

It's true that not all Quakers are pacifists. Many fought in World War Two, after becoming convinced that this was a good war, necessary to preserve peace and freedom, and to free others from oppression. But many other Quakers became conscientious objectors, opposed to all wars as a matter of principle. I joined their ranks after 9-11.

This is how I came to that realization in my life. On September 10, 2001, I had just returned from Cambodia where I had talked to survivors of a terrible period in their history, when, in a misguided social experiment, the ruling government had sent most of the population into slave labor in the countryside, declared money invalid, blew up the central bank, burned books, executed anyone who knew anything – teachers, doctors, traditional dancers and musicians – and turned the local high school into a torture chamber where they starved, mutilated, and executed seventeen thousand of their own people including many young children.

Who were these monsters that inflicted such suffering on ordinary Cambodians? They were not an external enemy, nor were they some different ethnic or religious group. They

were Cambodians who had turned against their neighbors, their teachers, their colleagues, even their own families. This is what haunts Cambodians today, that they did all this to themselves, that they became so brutalized by an idea, and committed such atrocities, out of fear, or revenge, or cold-blooded self righteousness. Looking around as I walked through the streets of Phnom Penh and the other villages and towns I visited, I realized that many of the people I saw had been young adults during those terrible years, and had either been very, very lucky, or had participated in some way in this evil system.

But strangely enough, I did not see a nation of people degraded by evil. In fact, I found Cambodians to be some of the most gentle, hospitable, and delightfully sunny people I have ever met. As a nation of Buddhists (which they have been for thousands of years), they revere all forms of life and deplore inflicting pain on others. To get angry in public – over a cab fare or some other petty complaint – is considered childish and embarrassing. Even raising one’s voice is culturally inappropriate. This is not something that arose recently, after the experience of such opposite sentiments. These values have been present throughout Cambodian history.

I was also struck by the connectedness people seemed to feel in traffic jams. Trucks, cars, and especially motor scooters were all over the road, going any direction, the roads deeply potholed, the potential for accidents extreme, yet everyone seemed to watch out for each other, passing within centimeters without incident, without fear, without a hint of road rage. Were these the same people who gave rise to the demented fanatics of the Khmer Rouge regime only a generation ago, I wondered? Or was the concept of “demented fanatic” somehow wrong?

My conclusion was that it’s terribly simplistic to say, as our President has said, that there are the bad people and the good people, the evil countries and the good countries, and that if we annihilate the evil ones we – the good people -- will be safe, and evil will be defeated forever.

I thought about this again when I saw a TV program on David Berkowitz, a.k.a. “Son of Sam,” the serial killer who terrorized New York City in the 1970s, and who as a member of a satanic cult, used to walk up to young people sitting in parked cars and shoot them in the face. What amazed me about the hour long interview that Larry King did with David Berkowitz, was that this “demented fanatic,” this “evil, satanic killer” has become a volunteer mental health counselor for fellow inmates; a stable, intelligent, warm, open person, a contributing member of society who is liked and trusted by even the guards at the high security prison as well as his fellow inmates. Although he is eligible for parole, he has chosen not to pursue it, as he believes he does not deserve freedom. He would rather live out his life helping others from his prison cell.

So here’s a very bad guy, the worst one could imagine, one who had been in trouble his whole life, from the time he was a small child, and who committed terrifying crimes, but yet has turned his life from hatred to love. So what does that say about the potential of any human being? What does that say about a dictator who tortures his political opponents, like Saddam Hussein, or for that matter, what does it say about dictators we

have tolerated or even supported, like Chile's Augusto Pinochet, or Uganda's Idi Amin or North Korea's Kim Jong Il? What does it say about the September 11th hijackers, or for that matter, the US soldiers who laughed and applauded at the wasting of Iraqi soldiers who were fleeing for their lives at the end of the Gulf War, or the American pilots who dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima?

I believe that people who commit unspeakable crimes – either ones they dream up themselves or ones they perpetrate under the protection and encouragement of the state -- are not “inhuman.” They are not monsters. They are victims of an idea – whether that idea is a militant political philosophy or a twisted interpretation of a religious or spiritual creed. And most importantly, they happen to live in a time and place where conditions are right for that destructive idea to take hold and feed upon itself, blooming and mushrooming until it explodes in violence. And as that violence begets an ever more violent response, the idea grows even stronger, and those who hold that idea, who are in a sense the victims of that idea, believe more and more firmly that they must carry out these crimes and that their society, their values, their dignity, their way of life, all depend on it.

How does war become justified in our own country? First, we create the fiction that our enemy won't listen to reason. Government officials describe “those people” as evil and irredeemable. Newspapers begin to carry cartoons that represent the leaders of that country as stupid and infantile, and human interest stories show their ways as barbaric, in contrast to our ways, which are kind and humane. The crimes of “those people” are detailed in historical docudramas on public television, while our own human rights violations, our own encouragement and financing of other criminals, other dictators, other massacres, all remain unspoken. Finally there seems to be no choice but to annihilate “those people” quickly and cleanly, in a “humane and just” war.

The idea of war that is waged for noble purposes and played by certain rules is a product of the twentieth century. Because war cannot be avoided, the thinking goes, it at least can become more controlled and safer for civilians when it is regulated by international agreements and fought with sophisticated weapons. But instead, throughout the last hundred years, war has become, as Howard Zinn says, “more uncontrolled, more deadly, using more horrible means and killing more noncombatants than ever before in the history of mankind.”

From the use of poisoned gas in WWI (which Winston Churchill upheld as a reasonable weapon to use against “uncivilized tribes” – that is, the Iraqi Kurds in their struggle for independence) to the firebombing of German cities in WWII, to the atomic blasts at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to the chemical weapons used on food crops and whole villages full of civilians in Vietnam, to the depleted uranium in the Gulf War which caused thousands of cases of “Gulf War Syndrome” that is, respiratory illnesses, blood infections, cancer, and birth defects in children of US soldiers who returned home, seemingly safe and sound – through all that century of rules, and conventions, and technological improvements, warfare has become more and more of an abomination.

Why is it so hard for human beings to resolve our differences peacefully, and to protect ourselves from exploitation and oppression without “becoming the evil we deplore”? I think it’s because we haven’t devoted much in the way of personnel and resources to it, in part because we’re not convinced that it’s possible, and also because of the sheer difficulty of understanding how humans think and interact, and how we might be persuaded to act differently. For all our efforts in psychology and sociology and political science and economics and philosophy we haven’t made much headway in understanding the complexity of human behavior, compared to the progress we’ve made in our study of the physical and natural worlds, or the invention of marvelous new technologies.

Why do humans chronically engage in warfare? We don’t really know. Is it instinctual, or hormonal, or gender-specific? What role do media play in whipping up or calming down aggressive behavior? Or does aggression play only a *minor* part in warfare? Can war be predicted to act like an epidemic, sweeping through social systems as battlefield losses and humiliations feed further acts of vengeance? If so, how can we disrupt the chains of transmission? Is it possible to have a war to end all wars, like Americans thought in World War One? What about a war to end all terrorism? Can you really defeat a tactic or a strategy? What effect does nonviolence have on an aggressive or fearful or overconfident enemy? Why would men and women hate their own government but dislike even more the prospect of being liberated from it by a powerful country whose beliefs and values and history and experience with colonial domination are so different from their own? How do we convince ourselves to lay down our arms, and study war no more?

All these questions, and thousands more, need our serious attention. When we say “war is not the answer” we need to be able to suggest alternatives – alternatives that are saner than mutually assured destruction, more culturally savvy than most diplomacy, subtler than empire, more democratic than the United Nations Security Council, and certainly, more spiritually rich than apathy or defeatism.

We need to believe, first of all, that a world without war is possible. And we do have indications that oppression and injustice can be confronted peacefully. Although the 20th century was the bloodiest in all of history, it also saw the birth of nonviolent direct action that allowed ordinary people on every continent to overcome rulers who had every conceivable advantage in the use of violent force against them.

In India, Gandhi led a civil disobedience campaign against the British, defying oppressive laws, holding general strikes and economic boycotts, filling the jails, and eventually achieving independence.

In Chile, people overcame their fear and submission to Augusto Pinochet, a dictator who vied with Saddam Hussein in his cruelty, and nonviolently displaced him.

In Denmark, ordinary people resisted the Nazi occupation by refusing to aid the war effort.

In Germany, individuals working quietly saved thousands of Jewish children from death in concentration camps.

In the United States, Martin Luther King inspired people to challenge and overcome an evil system that denied African Americans their rights as citizens and as human beings.

In Poland, long years of organizing, labor strikes, negotiations, and nonviolent underground resistance defeated Communist repression.

In Argentina, mothers of the disappeared staged protests and marches until the legitimacy of the country's military junta was undermined, leading eventually to its downfall.

And a student movement, with help from democratic groups abroad, toppled Europe's last remaining dictator, Slobodan Milosevic.

These nonviolent movements and others – in South Africa, Czechoslovakia, the Philippines, Palestine, and El Salvador– added to the world's store of knowledge about strategy, about tactics, about goals and possibilities for nonviolent resistance and social change. But these are just the beginning.

Just think what we could learn if we put the same resources that we now use for war into studying peaceful means of resolving conflict: peace colleges instead of war colleges; peace training instead of helicopter gunship training; peace medals instead of war medals; peace scholarships instead of ROTC scholarships. What if you automatically registered for peace training when you turned eighteen? What if courses in conflict resolution and healthy relationships were mandatory in everyone's high school education? What if peace studies were funded by deep pocket donors on college campuses? What if weapons of war and police control became so obsolete the only place you would see them would be as relics, in a museum?

2600 years ago, Lao Tse, a Chinese sage, wrote:

Weapons are the tools of fear
a decent man will avoid them
except in the direst necessity
and, if compelled, will use them
only with the utmost restraint.

Peace is his highest value
If the peace has been shattered
how can he be content?

His enemies are not demons
but human beings like himself
He doesn't wish them personal harm

Nor does he rejoice in victory

How could he rejoice in victory
and delight in the slaughter of men?

Thank you.