

“A Heart at War, A Heart of Peace”

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I am not a pacifist, never have been. Maybe it is because I am a younger sister to an older and bigger brother. Maybe it is because I am loud and aggressive and boisterous; that I am willing to demand what I want and not take no for an answer. But I don't think that's all there is to it. You see, I have what my husband, David, calls a huge 'justice button'. I get angry and enraged when I see, hear of or know of even the most minor of injustices: a racially biased advertisement on TV, an assumption that the word 'God' means the same thing to all people, or the idea that people who are poor are so because they don't want work for anything better.

I do believe there are things worth fighting for, worth losing lives over. “War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things.” Writes John Stuart Mill, “The decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks that nothing is worth war is much worse. The person who has nothing for which he [or she] is willing to fight, nothing which is more important than his [or her] own personal safety, is a miserable creature and has no chance of being free unless made and kept so by the exertions of better men [and women] than [themselves].”

In the three years of conflict within Darfur 450,000 people have died, 3 million are going hungry and 2.5 million have been displaced due to the fighting. In Iraq, it is estimated that close to 35, 000 Iraqis (both civilians and insurgents) and over 2500 American soldiers have died. And in the Middle East we cannot begin to know how many have lost their lives and their homes in the decades long conflict. “Look at the 1990's,”

Chris Hedges says, “2 million dead in Afghanistan, 1.5 million dead in the Sudan; Some 800,000 butchered in ninety days in Rwanda; a half million dead in Angola; a quarter million dead in Bosnia; 200,000 dead in Guatemala; 150,000 dead in Liberia; a quarter of a million dead in Burundi; 75,000 dead in Algeria.” The list continues, but you get the idea.

If we were to look at global history we might believe humanity to be a violent and cruel species. Since the time of recorded history there has yet to be a decade in which some tribal, regional, national or international militarized battle has not occurred. Are we a war-like people? History tells us, yes. James Hillman writes in his book *A Terrible Love of War*, “We think in warlike terms, feel ourselves at war with ourselves, and unknowingly believe predation, territorial defense, conquest, and the interminable battle of opposing forces are the ground rules of existence...war is the primary human condition.” Hillman continues to argue that war is a normal part of our human existence because “it is with us every day and never seems to go away.” This does not mean however, that the “pathologies of behavior, the enormities of devastation, the unbearable pain suffered in bodies and souls is eliminated. Nor does the idea that war is normal justify it.”

Hillman states that humanity must come to an understanding of war on a deep and psychological level. He says that we must explore the root of war not in its germination of event and planning, but in how we adjust to the idea that the killing of others is not only possible, but permissible and the right thing to do. History has most often recorded only the machinations and utilitarianisms of the ‘great’ conflicts and so has allowed for

war to become distant from the true brutality and ugliness. We have focused mainly on the how and when, by whom and to whom of battle, and let the poets and artists do the work of exposing war's soul. Hillman argues that war has become so normalized in our culture that it has entered our dialogues on social ills and civil concerns. We have "trade wars, gender wars, wars against cancer, crime, drugs, and poverty." None of which have anything to do with the "actualities of war." This ability to declare war on ideas and issues rather than people at first glance seems appropriate. We wish to eradicate social evils and ills so that our society can be better for having done so. We want to bring great force to the abolition of wrongdoing and cruelty; we want the power to alter the lives of others for the better. We want to fight poverty and illness as if they are the greatest of foes and to win a war that won't hurt anyone, but on the contrary will help hundreds if not millions.

"War is not its own end," writes Lois McMaster Bujold, "except in some catastrophic slide into absolute damnation. It's peace that's wanted. Some better peace than the one you started with." That is the hope of course. We go to war with the ideals that from the battle of right and wrong, right will win out.

"The armies of both sides were mobilized and ready." So begins a Hindu tale of war. "Horses snorted and neighed, elephants trumpeted, conch shells resounded in the air, war drums rolled. The Great War between good and evil was about to begin.

Krishna, sitting alongside Arjuna in his glorious chariot drawn by white horses, drew an arrow from his quiver, strung it on his mighty bow, and was about to let it fly as a signal that the war had begun, when Chidia, a little bird, flew into his line of vision and

perched herself on the yoke of the horses. Looking as aggressive and intimidating as she could, her feathers fluffed up in anger, she looked at Krishna and Arjuna, and said:

"I will *not* let this war proceed."

The young soldiers standing by, eager, ready, and chafing at the bit for battle, laughed in disbelief and derision. Krishna and Arjuna, momentarily distracted from the tremendous task ahead of them, looked at each other and smiled.

"Oh?" said Arjuna. "Are you, like me, afraid of bloodshed, little bird? Then let me tell you what wisdom I have just learned from Lord Krishna here."

"*You* are the great Lord of the Universe?" said Chidia, turning to Krishna. "Then you are just the person I wanted to see. My nest is over there on the ground. My five fledglings hatched a few days ago. I cannot have elephants and horses, chariots and crazed men trampling the fields. You must stop this war immediately."

The soldiers guffawed and came over to shoo away the stupid little bird, but Krishna held up his hand and stopped them. Chidia continued,

"What kind of a lord are you? Encouraging grown and conscious men to kill each other? Destroying the nests of helpless little birds like me? Annihilating seeds even as they sprout in the earth? Allowing blood to splatter on blossoms, and letting this horrible tumult overpower bird song?"

Krishna was thoughtful and silent. Arjuna compassionately continued his dialogue with the bird. It was important to him that the wisdom he had just acquired from Krishna be communicated even to the little creatures of the earth.

"I too was distraught and despairing at the thought of killing my father's and mother's and wife's brothers. 'O day of darkness,' I cried. 'What evil spirit moved our minds to kill our own people for the sake of an earthly kingdom?'"

"Exactly," said Chidia. "War is a terrible thing. Let no wisdom from Krishna or anyone else allay that despair."

"Nothing can," Arjuna said, sadly.

"Good," she said, turning to Krishna. "So let's stop this madness right now and let the soldiers of both sides return to their peaceful, comfortable nests, delight in children, eat bread from the grains in their fields, adorn themselves with spring flowers, and make sweet music."

"But neither should we be deterred from a righteous act out of fear or cowardice," Arjuna countered. "This is a necessary and important war, and it cannot be put off. Good must fight evil whenever it rears its ugly head."

"I know nothing of righteous acts or good and evil. I know only that my fledglings have just hatched and that we were very happy till this chaos began. Krishna, say something. Do you hear me? Are you deaf? Please, please take your important and righteous war somewhere else, for I won't let you make it here."

"Little bird, everything that is born must die," Arjuna said. "But the spirit is beyond destruction. You, I, your fledglings, my children and brothers and relatives and enemies have all been for all time. Never was there a time when we weren't, and never will there be a time when we won't be. In the scale of the universe, blood and blossoms,

singing and dying, are one. So face what must be, and cease from sorrow.” In anger and resignation the small bird returned to her nest.

The war began. But not before Krishna took up his bow again, strung an arrow, and took aim. With a loud twang he let the feathered arrow fly towards the enemy camp. It seemed to the surprised soldiers that he had faltered and missed the mark, for instead of hitting the enemy's general, or even the elephant on which he sat, the arrow merely severed the huge and heavy brass bell around the elephant's neck. It fell to the ground with a mighty clang.

And a terrible war it was, sad to see. Eighteen long days the battle raged. When it was all over, corpses littered the field, and the earth was soaked with blood. The nests in the trees were knocked to the ground with lances and spears. The nests on the ground were trampled underfoot by soldiers, horses, and elephants, and crushed by the wheels of chariots. Krishna, with Arjuna by his side, alighted from his chariot and walked slowly to the place where the little bird had said her nest was. He bent his knees and with both hands, lifted the brass bell where it lay on the grass. Beneath it Arjuna saw something stirring, and then with a whirring, whirling sound of wings, five fledglings and their parents flew, singing, into the blue beyond.”

There are righteous wars that must be fought. Wars of morality, of justice, of equality and most of us would agree that though war must be a last resort, it is a worthy option and in rare instances the only option remaining. Would we rather sit back and allow millions to die at the hands of their governments or factions within their governments or factions outside their governments? And is it not the same with the evil

of society's wrongs? Would we feel sanctified if we sat and did nothing in the face of social ills and wrongdoings whether in a foreign land or our own? You see, it is part of our faith, most people's faith – regardless which religion it may be – to work for the betterment of society and community. So when here in the United States we are faced with 36 million people going hungry each year and 3 million of them being children what else can we do but declare war on hunger and use what force we have to obliterate it.

But war against an idea, a social ill, confuses and blurs the truth and the reality of battle. It becomes all too easy to see the enemy, the real human enemy as an abstract idea, rather than a human being; a concept instead of a person. This is the argument that Hillman makes, we must, if we are to engage in war see it for what it really is...the battle of human soul against human soul for often intangible objectives.

This is not to say that social ills are not worth our time or effort or our force and power to rectify them, but they are not wars, not really. Though lives hang in the balance and are most certainly at stake, a fight to save a life is very different than a battle that ensures we take a life in order to be victors.

War is human against human. Though our faith only confuses the ability to decide what right action is when war might be called for. When we, as Unitarian Universalists, stand and declare that *every* human life has worth and dignity, it means not only the ones who look like us or who think like us or who live like us or even believe like us, but *every* life. And we also assert a goal of 'world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.'

What do we then do when such injustices as Darfur are before us? Do we believe that diplomatic negotiations will work? How long are we will to wait as millions are dying to see if we are correct? What is it we are willing to do, what will be the proverbial line in the sand that calls us to action? And what action are we willing to take? Are the lives of the innocent African people worth the same as the lives of the innocent Iraqis? Are we willing to kill to bring an end to the genocide, as we were to end the reign of Saddam Hussein? These are questions war demands that we answer. Whose lives are worth the deaths of our own? Whose lives are worth saving? How do we choose who has more worth?

I have no clear answer. What I hope is that we come to these decisions, not out of desire to put power over another, but because we see no other choice but to engage in the brutal and horrific act of killing another being to bring about something other than war. “War may sometimes be a necessary evil.” Says Jimmy Carter, “But no matter how necessary, it is always an evil, never a good. We will not learn how to live together in peace by killing each other's children.”

Many would argue that peace is the solution to war, but Hillman says no, that peace by its definition is simply freedom from war, absence of war, not the end of war. Peace is just the negation of war. It is something beyond war and beyond peace I look to and look for. And as yet, I have caught no sight of what that might be, but I am willing to hope and to wait and in the meantime to not let my own warlike self get the better of me.

“There is no practical solution to war because war is not a problem for the practical mind,” concludes Hillman, “which is more suited to the conduct of war than to

its obviation or conclusion. War belongs to our souls as an archetypal truth of the cosmos. It is a human accomplishment and an inhuman horror...To this terrible truth we must awaken, and in awakening give all our passionate intensity to subverting war's enactment, encouraged by the courage of culture, even in dark ages, to withstand war and yet sing. We may understand it better, delay it longer, and work to wean war from its support in hypocritical religion. But war itself shall remain until the gods themselves go away."