

October 22, 2006

“Can There Be a World without Violence?”

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This morning I'm going to be posing a question: Can there be a world without violence? I think that the answer to that is no. I don't think that human beings, given who we are, can ever live in a world that is completely free of violence. Violence has had a reason in our evolution and it's part of who we are. But, I would say this: while I don't think we can have a world completely free of violence, we can have a world virtually free of violence, and we can have a world free of full-scale war. That's not as contradictory as it sounds. I believe that to end war we are going to have to understand violence. We are going to have to study and refine methods of non-violent social change. We are going to have to, most importantly, transform our individual minds and souls, transform our own inner violence and separation. I think that the international community at times will need to use force as a last resort.

If you look at the green piece of paper in your order of service, you will see a study action resolution on peacemaking that was passed at this year's General Assembly in St. Louis. Here's how this process works: this is the issue that the delegates to that General Assembly have voted on for a four year discussion at the congregational level. The wording of that resolution will be worked on for four years and all the different aspects of the problem of violence and peace will be studied and then the final resolution will be voted on in the year 2010. This is an important discussion. At a time when the world is convulsed in violence, as a faith community I think it is hard to imagine a more important conversation than the conversation about how we as a faith community and we as a human civilization will address the problems of violence and war. Human beings are not going to be around much longer if we don't renounce war and decrease violence.

Unfortunately, I do believe that because of who we are as human beings, the use of force is sometimes the lesser evil. Sam Harris, in his book *The End of Faith*, writes about the problems of total pacifism. If you have a village of pacifists and one sociopathic killer, you have thousands of deaths that could have been prevented. Stopping an evil doer is different from destroying somebody. The use of force to stop evil, the use of force to stop human rights violations is different from trying to destroy the enemy. There is a crucial distinction here. Right now there is an immoral and preventable genocide going on in Africa, in Darfur. The world is doing nothing. It is like mounted brigades of sociopaths are killing innocent people every day. Nothing is happening to stop it. I'm afraid that the only way that the carnage in Darfur will be stopped is for the world community to show more guns, bigger guns, or both to the government of Sudan. That in itself could prevent further violence if it were clear that they will be stopped by the world community.

I think that we can get to the point where the use of force to stop the killing of innocent lives will be rare. How do we stop war? I think we need to understand human nature. Our human tendency to aggression is too close to the surface for us to be comfortable

with actually, but in our evolution as a species it had a purpose. In every culture, because of the way that we have evolved, men are many times more violent than women. But, what studies have been done up to now, and some of them are very good, point to the fact that culture and nurture can do an amazing amount to cut down on violence. We haven't yet scratched the surface about what we can do to cut down on violence within our society and in our world civilization. Here's a fact: Norwegian men are many times more violent than Norwegian women at about the same ratio as it is within any other country, BUT Norwegian men are much, much less violent than American women. I'll say that again. Norwegian men are much, much less violent than American women. That's worth studying. One culture nurtures violence and the other channels, sublimates, and suppresses violence rather effectively. Why? I think we need to ask these questions. How can we reduce violence as a human species? Now I told a friend of mine this statistic and he said, "Well, it's because those Viking ancestors of the Norwegians spent thousands of years sacking and pillaging and they finally got it out of their system." When are we going to get it out of our system? When is that whole frontier violent mentality going to be worked out of our system?

Chris Hedges graduated from Harvard Divinity School, but he did not go into the ministry. Instead, he became a war correspondent for the New York Times and for fifteen years he covered wars all over the world, in Central America, in the Middle East, and in Bosnia. Nobody speaks more eloquently about the way that war distorts and corrupts individuals and society than Chris Hedges. He saw it with his own eyes. The first thing to go, he says, when a society goes to war, is truth. Truth and nationalistic war cannot live side-by-side. He's written a book and the title of that book says a lot. The title is *War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*. In that book Hedges writes this: "I learned early on that war forms its own culture. The rush of battle is a potent and often lethal addiction. For war is a drug, one I ingested for many years. It is peddled by myth-makers, historians, war correspondents, filmmakers, novelists, and the state, all of whom endow it with qualities it often does possess, excitement, exoticism, power, chances to rise above our small stations in life in a bizarre and fantastic universe that has a grotesque and dark beauty. It dominates culture, distorts memory, corrupts language, and infects everything around it, even humor, which becomes preoccupied with the grim perversities of smut and death. Fundamental questions about the meaning or meaninglessness of our place on the planet are laid bare when we watch those around us sink to the lowest depths. War exposes the capacity for evil that lurks just below the surface within all of us. So it takes little in war time turn ordinary men into killers. Most give themselves willingly to the seduction of unlimited power to destroy and all feel the peer pressure. Few, once in battle, can find the strength to resist."

Hedges says that war gives ordinary people the chance to do what all human beings want to do. He's not talking about killing and destroying here, he's talking about something that is potentially much nobler and more beautiful about who we are as human beings. It seems that we were built to long to give our lives up for a meaning greater than our individual existence, that most of us live in a world that is too small for us. We are encouraged to be too selfish and too self-centered. Part of us longs to

sacrifice for something greater and for millennium human beings have found an outlet, a terrible and destructive outlet, for those deep spiritual yearnings through war.

I'm going to quote Hedges again: "And yet, there is a part of me that remains nostalgic for war's simplicity and high. The enduring attraction of war is this: even with its destruction and carnage it gives us what we all long for in life. It gives us purpose, meaning, a reason for living. Only when we are in the midst of conflict, does the shallowness and vapidness of our lives otherwise become apparent. Trivia dominates our conversations and increasingly our news and war is an enticing elixir. It gives us resolve, a cause. It allows us to be noble and those that have the least meaning in their lives, the impoverished refugees in Gaza, the disenfranchised North African immigrants in France, even the lost legions of youth that live in the splendid indolence and safety of the industrialized world are all susceptible to war's appeal." I think this is a powerful insight and the positive thing is that there are much nobler and much less destructive ways for us to give our lives away to a greater cause. Our society and our faith community need to help us to do that. Unfortunately, I think we are going in the opposite direction.

We are encouraged toward evermore greed and self-centeredness and violence. Our faith community is called upon to be a countervailing force and asking us to give our lives to others for justice, tolerance, and love. The only solution to violence and war is a spiritual one. Our culture for millennium has emphasized the negative aspects of human nature, but the fact is that there are very many positive aspects of human nature. Human beings are capable of self-sacrifice for the greater good, of transforming greed into generosity, hatred into love, and when enough people on this planet have reached that point of enlightenment when they as individuals know that the person across the table from them and the person across the planet from them is them, has the same heartbeat, the same yearning, the same suffering, the same love, and the same fate as they do, when enough people understand that not only in their mind but in the deepest fibers of our beings, then war on this planet will cease. In the meantime, there are spiritual strategies of non-violence resistance to injustice and evil. As Unitarian Universalists, we can be proud of the fact that some of the very pioneers of non-violence and non-violent philosophy were Universalists and Unitarians beginning with Aidan Baloo, Henry David Thoreau and his essay on civil disobedience, and the lineage goes from Tolstoy to Gandhi to King.

People argue that non-violent strategies are ineffective. That's simply not true. The fact is that they have seldom been tried, but in areas where they have been tried they have been remarkably effective. It is not just the fight for Indian independence. Non-violent civil disobedience saved most of the Jews of Bulgaria from the Holocaust in World War II. It ended legalized segregation in the American south. The Norwegian teachers' strike under the Nazi occupation mitigated the harm of the Holocaust in that country. It ended Apartheid in South Africa. It was a huge and underreported part of the break up of the Soviet empire. Those ideas are constantly being refined. It's a good thing for us to study these as a faith community. It's a good thing for us to understand the ways that non-violence, which is a philosophy grounded in the understanding that

the other person is us and need to be treated with love and respect and that includes our opponents. Maybe for you, your challenge of non-violence is not to impugn the character of your political opponents. Maybe that's where you can begin. It's understanding that our opponents are human and appealing to the higher parts of their nature, of fighting violence with love. There are so many aspects of this. It's a way of life.

I'm glad that this resolution has come before us. As I said, there is hardly anything more urgent right now. In a world that is convulsing in violence, then to go from studying war to studying peace and as individuals and communities to transform our hearts and souls and claim our birthright of our higher humanity.

May it be so.