



# War and Humankind

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In the last few years, as we in the West have moved in and out of war, I have wondered what it is that draws humankind continuously to this position of war. What does our learning as humanists, our self-awareness teach us that could keep us from this place? When I look into myself I see the possibility that war arises from aversion and greed. I think of the wars against the native Americans and the native Australians. I guess there was the greed of wanting the land for ourselves, and the aversion to this different way of life, to these people who looked and behaved differently.

There is much aversion created towards the enemy, s/he is convenient for the projection of our shadow. Was the First World War created by greed, the desire to overtake the other? When I travelled in America I was very struck by the aversion to the other on the media. It was very much the enemy begins at our border, and very little sense of all in the world being the same people. Each wave of immigrants arriving in America and in Britain has been met with hostility. Does the immigrant play out his hostility to the next wave? Only now, with immigration restricted, we feel it more towards the enemy without rather than, as in racism, the enemy within.

The remedy to war is in the opening of our hearts, a sense of interconnection not only with the ones we like and

admire, the ones onto whom we project our good qualities, but also the ones onto whom we project our bad qualities, with the men who make war as well as the victims of it.

In the West we deny death's existence. Dying is failure. Do we in waging war somehow feel we take control of death? Do we feel its master? Can we send it forth or hold it back? We try to master death medically. We try to master it by being frozen after death, hopefully to be reborn when the medical solution has been found. Do we also try to master it through our own violence? Is that mastery a part of the serial killer's preoccupation? Bataille, quoted in Christopher Bollas' *Cracking Up*, argues that the sacrificial killing of a human being gives witness to the act of transcendence over death itself. An acceptance of death, of its proximity to each of us, a knowing of it rather than a hiding of it, would reduce the need to test it, play with it, deal it out in waging war.

War gives us a sense of righteousness about killing. I am reluctant to kill, but would kill an animal if I felt the alternative to killing an animal was starving. Maybe I would kill in the protection of my child or myself. We create a myth around war scapegoat the other people, and go to war to protect our country, our women and children from the fate of being ruled and maybe raped and murdered by the enemy.

Capitalism fuels war. If something is destroyed something new has to be made to replace it. That something new means profits for the capitalist. The threat of war, the creation of an enemy, means it is necessary to be well updated with plenty of arms. This again means profit for the capitalist. Capitalism also has a vested interest in our not making friends with death. I often think that a visitor from outer space would find it impossible to believe that we are aware we cannot take our worldly wealth and goods with us when we die. How can we reconcile our preoccupation with acquisition with our impending death? If we knew we would die, we might spend our lives in other than the constant working and buying of goods. Where would capitalism be then?

One of the things I most appreciated when Princess Diana died was the group response of people opening their hearts. We so often have the group response of closing the heart and projecting the other so that we can condemn them. So I guess another factor in the making of war is group influence, how quickly we are swayed by our neighbour and the media finding it hard to stand outside, maybe to stand alone. I felt it very difficult to stand outside the groundswell of feeling at Diana's death. I still cannot see her photograph without being touched. Is this what happens with war? Was this what happened at the time of the Falklands War when the fairly friendly Argentineans became 'the Argies' overnight? War is a place for individuals and groups to put their anger and aggression. I am certainly guilty of

'kicking the cat', displacing my bad feelings onto somebody or something that is not the source of them. Is war the doing of this on a more global scale?

Here the answer is the reduction of frustration, by reducing poverty, sharing with our neighbour here, as well as with the countries abroad. It is also in the growth of self-awareness, being able to stand back and see our reaction for what it is. I am reminded of a recent Star Trek episode, where an alien aboard the ship constantly influenced the mind of the travellers so that they were drawn into hostility on, and on, and on, with the possibility of its continuing into eternity. What saved them was the ability of one or more to step back and see what they were doing, to bring an awareness to the situation. Similarly on earth we do that, one hostility breeds another. The First World War breeds the Second World War. The history of Muslim-Christian hostility in the past breeds the current hostility.

... it is not so much knowing that 'There for the grace of God go I', as knowing that in interconnection, 'There go I in the other.'

Religion and war??? Ah, there's another question. I guess Buddhism has generally avoided having war waged on its behalf by its emphasis on each individual's finding the truth for themselves. Other religions claim to have the truth and defend it. In the implicit knowledge that it is the truth, (because how can it be, how can we

know the truth in all its enormity), we defend it vehemently when it is threatened, even being prepared to go to war in its defence.

I am very concerned by the attitude to the Arabic Muslim world. I fear this because of the number of elements that fuel this hostility. They oil, probably the most precious commodity for the west, after food. This fuels our greed. They look different. Their culture is different. This fuels our aversion and the projection of our shadow material. Their religion is different. I suspect with a bit of imagination, they could have had a hand in the killing of Christ. This fuels our aversion. They have pride, they do not back down easily, this challenges 'Western supremacy', fuels our fear, which they do little to allay.

It is the 'I belongedness' of race, nationality and religion that brings us to war, if we can let go of this attachment to the 'I', see for ourselves what we are beyond that, recognise our connectedness with the other, then we might know peace. It is also irrelevant for me to speak of we and us, that is putting the need for change out there, whereas the only place it can start is here in my heart. It is finding a safety in the larger, in greater access to the spiritual, in knowing there is something beyond. Stephen Levine talks about awareness, the need to lose the attachment to the 'I' and the 'me', and to enter into something beyond; to focus on the light rather than what it illuminates; to focus on the light rather than the shadows it throws.

There is a need for an open heart, the opening of my heart to all, not only the Kosovan refugees, the hungry Rwandan children, but also the aggressors who assist in the creation

of the situation in which people die and suffer. Opening my heart not only to those I see as demonised rulers abroad, but to the rulers of my own country, who also suffer and struggle.

Albert Einstein was quoted as saying that a human being is a part of a whole, called by us "universe," a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling, as something separate from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

Here we learn about the need to let go of our separateness, our sense of duality, and know that we are one. Do we really want to go on and on fighting and destroying the other in this small world, where what I throw in the sea today may affect the life of another on the other side of the world? A world where the reverberations of the bombing of one country may shudder on and on for generations? I guess it is not so much knowing that 'There for the grace of God go I', as knowing that in interconnection, 'There go I in the other.'

### Further reading

Christopher Bollas, *Cracking Up*, Routledge, 1995.

Stephen Levine, *Who Dies*, Gateway Books, 1997.

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