A Pacifist Responds to the War

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Rounding Second...
Mark Brittain

my son stumbled on his way to third base
trying to extend a stand-up double.
Rooster tails of native clay and immigrant top soil
sprayed the opponent shortstop
as planted right foot launched him
off of second and into an arm wheeling,
tip-toeing slave to his own inertia
and his ten-year old bravura.

Flailing body overtook ambition
in a collapsing bow to the goggle-eyed
third-base coach whose arms
were still mutely raised, fingers extended,
frozen in coach-sign-speak for Stop.
Knowledgeable fathers and step-dads
screamed conflicting commands from the stands
and he levitated.
He rose to a sprinter's crouch
and sprang, arms pumping at the bag
and the unfortunate boy playing third base,
who was a soccer player with his hopeful father's
too large fielder's glove
and sudden questions about the decision
to try baseball.

And he fled.
The ball, thrown perfectly
from deep in the wet, marshy turf
of a spring baseball outfield, bulleted
into my son's back as he dropped
into cleat-footed contact with the unguarded base
and effortlessly popped up to see
the ball spinning lazily away, unintended.
And he ran for home.

Apacifist Responds to the War

I became a pacifist when I was three years old and marched into a
group of my uncles huddled with my Dad around the back end of our '41 Nash,
my Dad's foot carefully balanced on the rear fender. They were talking
feverishly—until I entered the group when the conversation stopped cold. I am
certain they were talking about their war experiences. And I am equally sure
they knew what they were saying was not fit for the consumption of three year
olds. My Mother told me later how her brothers had changed in the war. I
watched them my whole life: dark, withdrawn, drinking too much, mean. (Of
course, not all soldiers are affected in this way; but we must find a way to stop
feeding our young to the monsters of war!) During the Viet Nam War, my
Father exploded one day at the TV when somebody referred to World War II as
the "last good war." "No such thing!" he told me. People who fight wars know
better. I believe them.

Finally, the issue of war comes down to our ability to imagine
alternatives. All of us find it too easy to see people we perceive as different as
"The Other." To update Stephen Spender in The God That Failed, we find it as
convenient to kill "them" as to erase a botched sentence with a click of our
mouse. "Do not kill kin," the early Greek code of justice announced. In The
Orestesia, Aeschylus forces us to ask again, "Who is our kin?" Athena expands
the notion to include anybody in our society: "my curse on civil war." In the
Global Village, all wars are civil wars, wars among neighbors. A Pacific
Northwest Indian legend helps us understand.

One day five brothers, traveling
West across the ocean, meet some strangers, who kill four of the young men.
The fifth flees—and eventually returns to the land of the strangers, avenging the
death of his brothers by kidnapping the daughter of their Chief. She becomes
his wife, and while pregnant with their child, she escapes back to her people.
She finds a way to break the cycle of revenge by establishing the following
principle with their son. She tells him: "The man you see from the other side of
the ocean may be your father. Be kind to strangers."

I once had a poster that said, "War is not healthy for children and other
living beings." That's the dainty view. That irascible World War I pacifist
Randolph Bourne put some teeth into it. "War is the health of the state." War
is good for business; it builds the egos of nation-states. On a deeper level,
Bourne is saying that we go to war because we fear complexity. There is
something about us that loves to wave flags, to send packages to "our boys," to
stand united in a common cause.

Our language betrays our innocence: initially we were on a "crusade";
now we are fighting against the "axis of evil," comfortably evoking that last
"good war"—and simplistic notions of our own innocence. Even "war on
terrorism" is problematic: Who are the terrorists? Osama bin-Laden? The
Palestinians? The Israelis? Us? We must examine our conscience; as the
Christian doctrine of sin says, we are all sinners. In the last 20 years, we have bombed Libya, Grenada, Panama, Somalia, Haiti, Iraq, Yugoslavia, Sudan, and now Afghanistan. Most victims were poor, dark skinned, and/or “heretics.” Too often, we prop up right wing governments and fund their death squads (in isolation. We fear the absence of meaning. We can understand what the Italian novelist Ignazio Silone meant when he wrote that in the “sacred history of people of earth, it is always Good Friday.”

We fight wars because we fear that the Resurrection may be an illusion. We believe that there isn’t enough to go around: not enough resources (so we commit to fortify ourselves, like the man in the story who built such barricades around his house that he was captured inside? People ask me all the time why I am a pacifist. My answer is Luther’s answer: “Here I stand; I can do no other.” Beyond that, there are alternatives to violence. Living together in community is the archetypal human story. We find the power of imagination. I reject war because I am a democrat. I reject war because I believe in the big picture,” we are in this world together with the mission to “spread the wealth,” i.e., to work against racism and economic and political exploitation. The U. S. can in fact be a moral leader, especially if we see ourselves ecologically as part of a community of nations, working with our neighbors to create a more just world. I reject war because I have HOPE that this can happen. And as Vaclav Havel reminds us, hope is not the same thing as optimism that things will turn out well. Hope is rather the certainty that certain principles are worth working for, regardless of how they turn out. Peace is one of them.

Once a person sees the possibility of peace and justice, the only issue becomes how to translate the vision into reality. We have choices in the current crisis. We could invoke the power of the global village (convene the U. N. Security Council). We could empower an international police force to capture those responsible for the raid on the World Trade Center (since the attack was essentially a crime against humanity). We could remove U. S. forces from Saudi Arabia, which Muslims see as “sacred ground” (and which would remove one of the major reasons “why they hate us”). We could employ currently available environmental-friendly energy sources that will wean us from our addiction to oil and other fossil fuels. Perhaps most of all, we can promote options to war and violence: Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Vaclav Havel and many others have shown us ways to create better human communities. As one practical alternative, we could fund national peace colleges, putting our best minds to work finding strategies to resolve conflicts. Our goal is to work for justice, the most enduring path to peace and security. We can pray, hope and imagine. But we must also work. In the words of the old Civil Rights anthem, “I ain’t gonna study war no more.”