

## Just War

Make no mistake, evil does exist in the world.  
- Barack Obama

I was at the diner the other night having dinner with my husband, Paul, and we were seated right up against another table where a couple was entertaining a group of young girls—I think there were six of them and they may have been nine years old or ten. The kids were excited and all talking at once, and they were making such a racket Paul and I couldn't hear ourselves. So finally I went over and asked if they could keep it down.

Things got quieter for about two minutes and then their conversation heated up again, and the high-pitched girlish voices began once again to drown us out. This time my husband went over, and he was diplomatic and kind. Could they please just be a little more quiet?

The woman at the other table took offense. "Look, we're having a birthday party here," she said. "Just leave us alone." Paul returned to his seat, and we could hear her still

fuming and then suddenly she said, “This is outrageous!” and jumped up and went off to speak to the manager.

In a few minutes, our waiter came and moved us to the other end of the restaurant, where we could not hear the birthday celebration, and that was the end of that.

Apparently good fences do make good neighbors, even where there are no cows. Is conflict just built in to human nature? Are we hardwired to become enraged when someone threatens our boundaries? “Make no mistake, President Obama said in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, “evil does exist in the world.”

I have questions about war. Is it inevitable? Are we humans just doomed to become entangled in conflicts that cannot be resolved by diplomacy and common sense? Will there always be a war going on somewhere? Maybe war is like an earthquake: violent, unpredictable, bound to pop up somewhere, tragic, out of our control. Maybe trying to solve problems with violence is just our human nature.

Marge Piercy’s poem is called “Choices.” Do we really have choices? If our country were not waging two wars that

cost trillions of dollars, we could pay for health care for every person in the United States. But is that really a choice? The Big Fool says to press on, and we do. “Waist deep/chest deep/neck deep in the Big Muddy” (Pete Seeger).

The President said in his speech that the war in Afghanistan is a just war because the United States is acting in self-defense, responding to the 9/11 attacks on American soil in which three thousand of our citizens were killed. He explained, “The concept of a ‘just war’ [suggests] that war is justified only when it meets certain preconditions: if it is waged as a last resort or in self-defense; if the force used is proportional; and if, whenever possible, civilians are spared from violence” (Obama, Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech).

According to Just War Theory, “only duly constituted public authorities may wage war” (Wikipedia, Just War). Nations, not individuals, wage war. Suppose the 9/11 attack had been described as a crime, not as an act of war. Sixteen Saudi nationals representing no nation or government stole planes and crashed them into buildings and killed people.

Suppose these terrible deeds had been framed as crimes committed by civilians: hijacking, murder. Suppose they had been prosecuted in an international court of law as crimes against humanity, not as acts of war. Is the war in Afghanistan a “proportional response” to 9/11.

Nine hundred and forty-one American service members have died in Afghanistan since the United States entered the war, including Matthew N. Ingham, 25, whose death was announced last week. Staff Sergeant Ingham served in the Third Marine Division and was from Altoona, PA. Last year 2,412 Afghan civilians were killed, two-thirds of them by the Taliban and other insurgents (*New York Times*, January 14, 2010, A6).

One truth about war is that people are always getting killed and maimed and dislocated and terrorized in these conflicts. Many people suffer: combatants, civilians, men, women and children. In modern warfare, more innocent bystanders die than military personnel.

Obama acknowledges these facts about war in his speech, “I am responsible for the deployment of thousands

of young Americans to battle in a distant land. Some will kill. Some will be killed...In today's wars, many more civilians are killed than soldiers; the seeds of future conflicts are sown, economies are wrecked, civil societies are torn asunder, refugees amassed, and children scarred."

Another truth about war: people remember and grieve and grind their teeth and seek revenge for generations afterwards. The last time we had a war on American soil was our Civil War, and we are still divided North and South by the memory of brothers killing brothers six generations and a hundred and fifty years ago.

In the speech, Obama moves on: "We must begin by acknowledging the hard truth that we will not eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes. There will be times when nations...will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified...To say that force is sometimes necessary is not a call to cynicism—it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason."

Sounds like the President thinks he has no choice.

At the beginning of the speech he says, "...we are not mere prisoners of fate. Our actions matter, and can bend history in the direction of justice." And at the end of the speech, he returns to this hopeful rhetoric: "We can acknowledge that oppression will always be with us, and still strive for justice. We can admit the intractability of depravation, and still strive for dignity. We can understand that there will be war, and still strive for peace. We can do that—for that is the story of human progress; that is the hope of all the world; and at this moment of challenge, that must be our work here on Earth."

The image of history bending toward justice was a favorite of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Obama has used it before. Speaking on the fortieth anniversary of King's assassination in 2008, then Senator Barack Obama, "Dr. King once said that the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice. It bends towards justice, but here is the thing: it does not bend on its own. It bends because each of us in our own ways put our hand on that arc and we bend it in the direction of justice...."

Dr. King did not originate the image. It was created by a Unitarian, the nineteenth-century minister and political activist Theodore Parker. In an 1853 sermon called "Justice and the Conscience," Parker wrote, "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice."

So what can we do to bend our history in the direction of justice? Shall we accept the inevitability of war?

This full-page ad from last December 27 in the *Sunday New York Times* offers an alternative approach ("WAR IS OVER!" 29). The original WAR IS OVER campaign was launched by John Lennon and Yoko Ono in 1969 to advocate for peace during the US war with Viet Nam. They rented billboards in New York, Los Angeles, Toronto, Rome, Athens, Amsterdam, Berlin, Paris, London, Tokyo, and Hong Kong and posted the same message on all of them: "WAR IS

OVER! (If You Want It) Happy Christmas from John and Yoko.”

So what can we do to resist war as a solution? I think we must reject it. For me, Just War Theory is just fancy rhetoric covering up harsh reality. The president’s speech is beautiful and eloquent, well-reasoned, and clear. But in the end he is arguing that this war, the one we’re in right now, is necessary and right.

And I must respectfully disagree.

There is no justice in war. Evil does, indeed, exist in the world, and one of our greatest evils is war. Dr. King said it well: “Darkness cannot cast our darkness. Only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that.”

There is no way to peace. Peace is the way.

Copyright 2010  
By the Rev. Dawn Sangrey  
For the Fourth Unitarian Society  
Mohegan Lake, New York  
January 17, 2010