

## THOUGHTS ON WAR AND VIOLENCE

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For this essay I am choosing to focus on the topic of war. The war in Iraq and the war on so-called “terrorism” have been so prevalent of late, and there have been such strong repercussions globally, that this is an area to which I have been drawn. Over the last 10 years I have also been engaged in facilitating large group processes internationally on issues of conflict, diversity and challenge. The topics of war and oppression have frequently emerged in the groups. Watching participants of opposing nations, that have been at war with each other, grapple with recrimination, loss, hate, pain and revenge and then at last come to a place where they can see themselves in the other, arriving at a moment of sharing, has been very uplifting for me. This work, plus the prevalence of violence and war throughout known history has inspired me to want to know more about the depths and meaning of this life and death experience. War must hold such a fascination for us that we teach our children about wars in school in great detail with such pride in the victors. What is the essential experience that we glimpse through the violence we encounter here?

Scapegoating, war, ethnic cleansing, genocide, terrorism, torture, conflict, bloodlust, revenge. The list is endless. There is so much suffering and horror in the world. “Why? What is this all for? What a senseless, ridiculous world!” I rage at God again and again. And yet...I am alternately horrified and fascinated by it all. I remember as a little girl my grandfather telling me stories of the Second World War and of the holocaust. He had escaped Germany years before, but all of his family died in the crematoria, their flesh fouling the air as they burned. “How inhuman...how could people do that to each other?”, I puzzled at the age of seven. I saw horror and conflict all around me on a daily basis growing up in South Africa. I witnessed millions of people being scapegoated, tortured, oppressed and disenfranchised. I saw people of the same race beating and murdering each other, turning their hatred and revenge on members of their own and other tribal groups of equal power. And then, there are the wars of the world recurring from the beginning of recorded history. We must be so proud of them that we teach our children about them in school in such great detail with such pride in the victors.

In light of these ruminations, I would like to explore in this paper whether there is meaning in war and violence and if so, what that meaning could be.

Last night I saw *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Moore, 2004) and came away thinking of corruption and power. So much bloodshed, so many wounded and dead due to the whim of a handful of people holding the power to initiate destruction in order to satisfy their greed. Jung (Stein, 1995) in talking of the beginning of the Second World War describes how the German people were suffering from an inadequacy, a low self-esteem, which left them susceptible to a man like Hitler who could offer them a new world in which they could celebrate their might and majesty. As Hedges (2002) describes, for those who embed themselves in Nationalism, life is transformed and through the collective glorification, preoccupation with the petty concerns of daily life are abandoned. Jung traces this transformation to the presence of Wotan's archetypal presence. The Germanic god Wotan is described as both the god of storm and lord of the dead, and as the master of secret knowledge and god of the poets (Ninck 1935). Wotan is not only a god of rage and frenzy, but intuitive and inspiring. Jung (1964) aligns Wotan with Hermes and his ability to work magic, and talks of how Christianity changed the archetypal Wotan into a devil. Jung (1965) describes Wotan as a nature spirit who "returned to life in the figure of Merlin of the Grail legend and who became, as the spiritus Mercurialis, the sought-after arcanum of the alchemists (p. 313).

The theme of war and its archetypes being not only terrible phenomena, but also enlivening ones, is also reflected in the writing of others. Hedges (2002) writes that "all great works of art find their full force in those moments when the conventions of the world are stripped away and our weaknesses, vulnerability and mortality are confronted" (p. 91). Violence and its expression may create the impulse for creativity itself. It may be that the expression of aggression and violence is a needed dynamic on a collective level in order for something else to grow. The violence of Ares can be seen as sacred, found in the altered states that take us over when we are seized by fury. Ares presents himself through action, rage and brutal power and we can assume that in the background of any violent or aggressive act lies the god Ares, the act being a sacrament to him (Hillman,

2004). Ares appears to be the most disliked of all the gods inspiring little real devotion or affection. This force, this god-like power represented in the archetypal image of Ares, so prevalent in human behavior in acts of violence and war, is deemed inhuman and relegated to the realms of our unconscious through our dislike of him. We can clearly see this in our everyday attitudes and interactions in which aggressive or violent expression is generally repressed. Ares though is also an ancient god of agriculture, and Hillman (2004) postulates that Mother Earth demands violence and bloodshed in order to promulgate the new from her chthonic depths. Could it possibly be that the essence of violence gives rise to reformulation and rebirth? That conflict generates evolution and growth of the self? This idea certainly may inflame those stalwart defenders of peace and harmony as the ideal.

In the Bhagavad-Gita we find the following passage (Mahesh Yogi, 1967). “The event of war is a natural phenomenon. It is a process of restoring the balance between the negative and positive forces of nature (p.108). War reminds us that we are more than the human body that lives or dies; the slayer or the slain (p.98).

He who understands him to be the slayer,  
and he who takes him to be the slain,  
both fail to perceive the truth. He  
neither slays nor is slain.

The commentary goes on to explain that war is a reminder of the real Self. It brings us to the realization that the Self in its inherent nature is beyond activity and is a witness to the relative field of life. In entering war and confronting our fear of death, we are brought to this understanding of the core of our existence through encountering the Self. In this context, could we then think of war as a guide to that which encompasses and is far beyond manifest reality, leading us to a meeting with who we truly are? If we follow the philosophical teachings of the Vedas, we may agree that war is one way through which we may contact the transcendent Self.

Another way of fostering consciousness of a sense of wholeness and of congruence between man and God has been found, according to Perera (1986), in the

rituals surrounding the separation of the collective from evil through confession and sacrifice (p.12). The scapegoat rite purified and renewed the community through ritual slaughter or sacrifice. The sacrificial offering was imbued with the evil lying within the people that was then released through sacrifice. In some cases the sacrificial offering itself was honored and revered by the tribe or community, and was in fact chosen for certain qualities that inspired this honor. In other cases however those chosen for sacrifice were seen to be alien, such as the physically deformed or retarded, members of minority groups, or those fallen out of favor. In this way, the unacceptable or evil aspects of humanity were vanquished and expelled from daily life. Through ritual, man and woman were once again re-united with God and a higher existence, in which they could live with purity and integrity, was re-established. This parallels the thinking found in the Vedas, in which the individual is made aware of the Self once again and integrated with it.

To my mind the Jungian idea of the shadow, made up of the repressed and unacceptable, mirrors the above ideas. Banished to the realm of the unconscious or projected onto others the shadow material is that which cannot be recognized or embraced within oneself. In the worst cases, it is these projections of the shadow material that create wars and terrorism as we banish our potential for evil and brutality onto those on the 'other side'. Hechmi Dhaoui (2002) reflects on the way radical Islam has projected its shadow onto the West which is seen as their persecutor, embodying modernity and a way of life of which Moslems are generally afraid, or to which they have difficulty adapting. From Dhaoui's point of view, the expressed violence and terrorism allows an avoidance of facing fear and breaking away from 'mother', which if faced, could lift a people out of its regression and inadequacy. From another perspective of shadow, Ulanov (2002) writes about unconscious identification with the powerful pictures that represent God subjectively, and the insistence that there is one truth, which is mine and should be everyone else's as well (p.198). Through this groups of people appoint themselves as avenging agents of god. This can be clearly seen so topically in both sides of the U.S./Terrorist clash where both sides feel they are so strongly in the right and representing the will of God. Two groups both claiming to be enacting God's will seek vengeance on the other. As Zoja (2002) so beautifully puts it, "Man has replaced God as

the supreme authority: from a psychological point of view, Man can feel as omnipotent as God” (p.18). Religion then becomes a weapon mirroring the destructive side of numinous experience, a strange kind of spiritual ecstasy, but nevertheless a way into the Self, even if it is destructive.

Hedges (2002) also reflects on a possible connection between spirituality and war and postulates that war may fill a spiritual void. In providing a shared sense of meaning or cause, arising from the communal struggle, a common purpose, or a calling leads to the self-sacrifice war demands of us (p.158). It is almost as if the surrender to a force greater than oneself constellates an experience so intense it is analogous to some kind of deep spiritual encounter. War provides us with the chance to step out of ordinary existence giving worth to our lives. It makes heroes of us, elevating us to heroic status and bringing a sense of fulfillment, replete in a new image of ourselves. Hillman (2004) maintains that war is one of the ways in which we attempt to transcend our mortality. This is beautifully illustrated in the tale of Achilles achieving immortality through becoming a legend and receiving acclaim as a hero through his participation on the battlefield. From Hedges’ viewpoint we feel immortal because war is greater than humanness, greater than ourselves. Hillman (2004) introduces the idea of war as a sublime experience, sublime being described as “an awesome and heart-stopping universal force... a kind of ultimate principle” (p.120). Not only is war horror, but within it is a spectacular beauty; according to Hillman, a deep meaningfulness not to be found anywhere else; “a certain point in life that is as close to the unlivable... the maximum of intensity and impossibility at the same time” (p. 123). Another dimension of experience is realized in which immanence and infinitude bring the chaos and horror of war into a realm of terrifying beauty, importance and immanent meaning.

As well as an agonizing ecstasy, Hedges describes war as a narcotic creating ‘adrenaline-driven rushes’ which could find their equivalent only in the experience of love. This brings me to a discussion of the relationship between war, love and death, so beautifully described archetypically by the ancient Greeks and modern-day writers such as Hillman (2004). When faced with violence and its horrors, love binds those sharing the

awful (awe-full) experience in a potent way. The ancient Greeks linked acts of violence with love and indeed it was Aphrodite, the goddess of love, who became the mistress of Ares, the god of war. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Aphrodite, the wife of the ironsmith Hephaistos, takes Ares as her lover and as the two lie together Hephaistos casts a net of chain over them imprisoning them, and in those moments the two are inseparable. The attraction that brought them together is the inevitable striving for wholeness and balance, each compensating the other in areas where there is a gap. Their union, representing the complementary forces of love and war, brings these together, a *hieros gamos*, a sacred union, the final *coniunctio*, the marriage of the opposites. And indeed, there are many stories of how love bonds are formed by those fighting together in war facing possible death and torment. These bonds sometimes last a lifetime.

After the Columbine high school shootings, members of the community reported experiencing a bonding and connection with others never known before, and an experience of closeness among people that appeared to be sustained over time. I have certainly found this to be true. When the Red Lake shooting occurred, members of Columbine High School visited Red Lake School to share their experiences and be a support for the community there. Over the years in which I have been part of a facilitation team working internationally with groups in conflict, it has been my experience that after hours of expression of blame, revenge, anger and hatred directed at others, an alchemical shift happens as new feelings such as sadness, grief, longing and recognition appear. Out of this intense struggle with the pain and recrimination of past wrong-doings, wars and terror, a beautiful love and sense of connection forms between parties present (Rose, 2000). In one such process, a group of people from the various countries making up the Balkans came together to focus on their difficulties. This occurred about a month after the end of the war in the Balkans and people were alternately struggling with still raw feelings or still in shock. Participants represented Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia, Bulgaria and Greece. Many hours were spent venting their fury, talking about past atrocities and hurts, people sharing both their personal and cultural histories, blaming the others and often breaking down in pain. At last there was a wondrous moment, when all recognized the experiences of the others and that they shared

these in common. In that moment, the fury and vengefulness transformed and the group moved closer together, taking the hands of others and crying together. A sense of love permeated their blossoming connection. A new bond was formed out of the horror of what they and their people had been through.

Before concluding this paper, I would like to mention other wars that those in more privileged positions tend to marginalize or forget. For example, there is war in our cities on a daily basis; between gangs, between the police and people of color; between the rich and poor; in our schools. These are the kinds of war that do not get much attention as those in comfortable mainstream or privileged positions would rather not address them. These do not impinge on our protected and familiar lifestyles and yet many people are in torment over them. Where is Aphrodite here? I struggle to find her in these situations. Having shown that war does have meaning in the various ways described above, I find that I cannot accept only this. I notice a depression and despair within me at the thought of fully embracing this notion. Surely, humanity can reach the Self, love, creativity, and connection without perpetuating war and terror. In blandly accepting my premise that war does bring all of these experiences as well as the horror, and is therefore necessary and here to stay, I lose my enthusiasm for life. In light of this, meaninglessness takes over. The part of me that is a social activist and cannot rest with this conclusion, says that there must be something greater for which to strive. There must be some way to circumvent war and terror and still support creativity and individuation. I could name a few possibilities, such as meditation, dialogue, working on oneself, owning one's shadow, more dialogue and so on.... and yet.... and yet.... why do these not take hold and fire up humanity with a different vision? Perhaps it is true that war is an inherent part of life for humanity and will go on eternally playing its part in our development.

T.S. Eliot may express this more succinctly.

The dove descending breaks the air  
 With flame of incandescent terror  
 Of which the tongues declare  
 The one discharge from sin and error,  
 The only hope, or else despair

Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre-  
To be redeemed from fire by fire.  
Who then devised the torment? Love.  
Love is the unfamiliar Name  
Behind the hands that wove  
The intolerable shirt of flame  
Which human power cannot remove,  
We only live, only suspire  
Consumed by either fire or fire.

I notice how many questions I have posed in this paper, without being able to supply any concrete answers or resolutions. As wars appear to be inevitable and ongoing through the ages, so do these questions. Although many of us today are working at promoting dialogue and various other means of conflict facilitation, I believe we also need to provide ways of accessing and developing spiritual warriorship, power, love, connection and creativity until these are integrated into our conscious realities in such a way that we would not need to fall back on war as a pathway to these deep experiences. Having said that I feel more hopeful and I can once again grasp the incentive to carry on with my work in this world, namely to cultivate the growth of qualities mentioned and bring these closer to awareness. In conclusion, I am well aware that I have barely touched the tip of the iceberg in my exploration of this topic. I have taken a look at only one question, namely “what is the meaning of war and terrorism?”. Other aspects of this subject, of which there are many, have not been addressed. I look forward to more exploration in the future.



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