

Waging Peace

If we practice an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, soon the whole world will be blind and toothless.
Mahatma Gandhi

Ever since September 11, 2001, the question of how to respond to a heinous act has been a central theme of American and world politics. George W. Bush has chosen a course of retaliation that has polarized the US and the world. By dividing the world into good and evil, for us and against us, the possibility of compassion and forgiveness is eliminated. To maintain this attitude, I am forced into an arrogant illusion of my own infallibility and must hide and deny my own shortcomings. The principles of democracy and Christianity have been hijacked to justify the killing of thousands more innocent victims since 9/11. In the name of righteousness and with a highly combustible mix of politics and religious fundamentalism, atrocities are being committed. Regarding prisoners as evil or sub-human, soldiers felt justified in committing and seemingly enjoying acts of torture. We turn away from this horror and try to pretend that it has nothing to do with us. But it does.

Otherwise inexplicable results from quantum physics experiments have led to the theory that the energy in the universe is intertwined in ways we never imagined, that the wings of a butterfly beating on one continent can later cause a storm on another continent. I invite you to entertain the notion that we are the butterfly wings that set powers in motion. I believe that how we treat ourselves and each other in everyday life has an influence on the relative state of war or peace, in ourselves and in the world. Lashing out when we are threatened or attacked seems to be an instinctive and genetically-programmed reaction that we share with animals. It is the default reaction, but it is not the only possible reaction. One of the main tenets of Christianity is to transcend this vengeful tendency and turn the other cheek. But how many of us actually do this? Jesus Christ preached love and forgiveness, yet many who profess a personal relationship to Him practice vengeance and retribution.

How many of us react to even the slightest injustice — someone cutting in front of us, for example — with a surge of inner and outer venom? A tightening of the jaw, a dirty look, an inner judgment on the lack of manners here (thus holding an entire culture responsible for one individual's behavior), a snide remark. How often do we actually calmly and directly confront the offending behavior by saying "Excuse me, I was here first?" How much of the anger that we feel is actually due to our own lack of courage to do that? How often do we just smile and let it go? We have many options for how to respond to a transgression and which option we choose has direct consequences for our own well-being. How do you respond to an offense by someone you care about, where the stakes are higher than at the cheese counter? Do you put your energy into trying to compassionately understand the other and move forward or get stuck in blame and recrimination? Choosing a path of compassion and forgiveness is admittedly difficult when we are surrounded by a paradigm of retribution: sinners go to hell, criminals get the death penalty, companies get sued, under-performing employees get fired. In our daily lives we are repeatedly confronted with the choice between waging war and waging peace. How do you choose?

When, in the article *Love Yourself* I exonerated all parents of malicious intent by saying that “no parent deliberately hurts his or her child,” I received a strong response questioning my right to do so. We seem to want to hold on to the status of victimhood that we gain when we are wronged. But who suffers from that? By focusing on the offender’s wrongness, we can turn our attention away from our hurt and need and vulnerability. But it is often only by allowing ourselves to feel the anger, pain and sadness that we can move on. I think this is part of what is going on in the US. Interestingly, the strongest supporters of retaliation are the people who were the furthest away — literally and figuratively — from the September 11 attacks. These people have not really faced the hurt of the vulnerability of America and America’s connectedness to the rest of the world. Their denial feeds their aggression. Consider the reflection below, sent to me by a college friend from New Jersey before the election:

I will just add that I believe as a nation, we Americans are in a state of denial akin to children who know that there is something terribly wrong at home (Daddy is drinking and hitting Mommy, Mommy is covering for him, both are lying about this), and who are hiding in the closet, afraid to tell anyone what we know to be true for fear no one will help or take care of us if we do. I also believe that if Americans could be encouraged (by our own politicians? by people abroad? by you?) to come out of the closet and begin our very real grieving for what could have been and for what we have become, so that true healing can start, and we can turn this whole thing around — and that if we did come out of the closet, afraid and weeping, the whole world would clasp us to their collective breast and heave a sigh of the most profound relief....

What would happen if America actually admitted its fallibility and asked for help? What would happen if you admitted yours? What would happen if America looked at its own faults and ask the world for forgiveness, opting to heal terror rather than wage war on it? What would happen if you did that? What feelings are released in you when you contemplate these possibilities?