

‘A true revolution of values will lay hand on the world order and say of war, “This way of settling differences is not just.” This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation’s homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice, and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.’
(MLKing, Jr., Beyond Vietnam April 4, 1967)

It was Dr. King’s Beyond Vietnam speech that began to work on my conscience. By the turn of the next calendar year I would formally dis-enroll from the Regular Naval Reserve Officer Program at Yale because I could no longer square participation in the war with my conscience. The universal condemnation of this speech only confirmed my recognition that my decision would not be a popular one.

My parents were divided, my father strongly against it and my mother in favor of my action. The priest who was rector of my home parish was against it, feeling that such patriotism in a time of war was in no way contrary to my commitment to Christ. He certainly was in the tradition of the Episcopal Church whose clergy seemed more than any other denomination to populate the ranks of the chaplains corps in the US military.

Dr. King’s impassioned speech was a provocation to my own convictions. At that moment I was hardly a pacifist or the conscientious objector I would become, forced, in a way, by this decision to voluntarily dis-enroll, into an application for a discharge from the Navy precisely on religiously argued grounds of conscientious objection. There was no other way out in 1968.

It was a different time, after all. The draft held sway over our educational policy, sorting poor, mostly African American young men into the war effort but privileging those of us with the resources for it into college or into other means of deferment. The news media was beginning to discover an anti-war reaction as its graphic coverage of the war itself grew in intensity. With only three national TV news outlets the whole populace was affected by the same horrific pictures and questions raised about the war’s progress and its detractors.

Never, however, were the basic assumptions for taking up arms so far away ever effectively questioned, at least until King’s speech. Why else was the reaction so strong? And in exactly a year King was dead by an assassin’s bullet. Some have made the point that his death was directly related to this stand he took. Others have suggested that from our perspective, his non-violent stand was naive, some seeming to claim that evil is more evil today than it was in his day. The subject has become taboo. Is that why no one is raising questions about the wisdom of our current wars?

And I suppose the question I want to pose is the one Luke's Jesus asks the daughters of Jerusalem as he is being led to his crucifixion, from a vantage point overlooking the city: "For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?" There are certain things about Jesus' execution that are common to all other acts of violence, and there are some things that are alarmingly different about violence as we know it today.

Jesus' death in John's gospel is a premeditated intention of the high priest and the rulers of the temple. After the raising of Lazarus we are told, "from that day on they planned to put him to death." They even provide a reasonable justification: Jesus is a security risk; thus his execution, in the terms of the so-called 'Bush' doctrine is a "pre-emptive, defensive" attack. "If we let him go on like this," the rulers argue, the Romans will come and destroy our holy place and our nation." It's a logic as familiar as the domino theory: "it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." Likewise war always has a logical pretext, a compelling narrative in terms of which it becomes obvious what must happen, what is inevitable. And anyone who attempts to speak out is silenced.

Throughout Jesus knows what is about to happen, what—according to the logic of the world—must happen to him. But his is a different logic, this king who is not "from the world" (otherwise he and his followers would fight) has a different narrative. He says, "I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." According to this logic of Jesus the way to ensure the loss of the "holy place" and the "nation" is to act to save them, just as the rulers do in having Jesus killed.

For Jesus, our penchant for self-preservation through violence is misguided. Some seem to have discovered this in our current situation. They are making the point that the more we send violence and destruction into the Middle East, in the form of unmanned drones, high altitude bombs, or in the form of frightened young soldiers at dangerous check points who end up killing unarmed non-combatants, the more hatred and retributive violence we will end up reaping. The more we seem to act to save our lives the more we lose them.

It used to be that such "good" violence could put down "bad" violence, insurrections, stop riots, and calm crises. A show of force, a shot across the bow, a targeted assassination, could be counted on to bring a pause, a lull in hostilities, a longed for peace. In our country, for instance, heinous assassinations have seemed over time to have salutary affects, but despite such appearances they simply hid the causes of the crises beneath the sacralization of the memory of the departed leader, channeling the impetus for change into law and policy that rarely fulfills it's promise. Similarly, war has become costly to question due to the "patriotism," which is now the sacred memory of those who have recently fallen in them. Wars used to be followed by eras of prosperity, but even these have gotten briefer and briefer and less prosperous.

Exposed as empty by the cross and resurrection of Jesus, violence seems to have lost its power to solve human problems even as it has become more and more destructive and impersonal. Today the case is easier to make than ever before that violence is counterproductive, that it backfires and only leads to more violence directed back at its initiators whether immediately or delayed a generation. It is less and less obvious that violence can ensure our

safety and security. Indeed the reverse argument is more and more compelling. It is as if the scripture passage John's Gospel quotes when Jesus is taken down from the cross has exposed war itself as evil: "They will look on the one whom they have pierced." Every victim of every war ever fought is contained by and in the figure hanging from the cross whom we look upon today. Seeing the affects of war more immediately than ever before, we are likely to wonder about its morality, even though our enemy has been so thoroughly demonized.

More disturbing in a global economic and social context, there is more clearly a connection between the destructive impact of warfare on nature and human welfare. We simply do not count the cost of our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. They are considered off-budget externalities that some later generation will have to pay for, in a degraded environment. We can no longer assume that nature is inexhaustible and endlessly resilient. Modern warfare is likely not only to come back to us in the retribution of those whose lives we destroy either wittingly or unwittingly, but also in the natural catastrophes to which our continued externalization of wars costs will inevitably lead.

War not only no longer works. It is now clearly more destructive than any benefits we derive from it. It is a net loss. The only gains it offers are short term and to those who profit from it. Why can't we stop it? Where are the voices for its end? Why must every American president at least give lip service to how tough he is, to how evil our enemy is, whoever it might be at the time, so as not to be called soft on terror or security? Why must we be driven by fear of the other?

When I applied for a discharge from the Navy during Vietnam as a conscientious objector, it seemed bold and controversial. Today it is only reasonable and patriotic to object to war, to personally resist this war and all others as inevitably more costly than they are worth. After years of seeking to live in the logic of Jesus, beginning in that CO application on religious grounds, I have come to agree with Paul Jones, Episcopal Bishop of Utah during the "War to End All Wars," who said war is "unchristian," since how can you love your enemy as Jesus taught if you're bound to kill him. For his stand was removed from his diocese by the House of Bishops. Not just on religious grounds but on any grounds, I believe war is indefensible. And I believe that especially now "when the wood is dry" Christians must reject the old logic of the world and stand against all war in any form and for any purpose.