

Stop the Hate

Annual Interfaith Service

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How do we stop the hate? Tonight we ask this question together -- profound and necessary for the health of our planet and all its inhabitants. This important question has a simple answer. Jesus taught it. Buddha taught it. Moses and Mohammed taught it. And Lao Tzu, Socrates, Plato, Gandhi, Mother Theresa, Dr. King. All the world's spiritual and philosophical traditions have taught it. How do we stop the hate? There is only one antidote for its poison, only one medicine for its illness: Love.

If the answer is so simple, then why have we human beings not yet learned to stop hating and start loving? Perhaps the problem lies in how and why we endlessly resort to violence and vengeance when we ourselves have been hurt. Why do we rarely follow the instructions of our wisdom masters to "turn the other cheek" or "love our enemy as ourselves?"

As a trauma expert, in the days immediately following 9/11 I was invited to be a guest on a call-in radio show to help our community deal with 9/11's impact. One caller demanded immediate military reprisal. I invited him to be aware of the grief, rage and fear that galloped through him and impelling him toward violence. But he shouted over the airwaves, "Damn you liberals and your feelings. I don't want to feel anything. I just want us to do something." "What? To whom?" I asked. "We don't even know who did this." "It doesn't matter," he shouted, "just hurt somebody. Just scare them into leaving us alone."

At about the same time, I conducted a psychotherapy session with a navy veteran. He stormed into our post-9/11 meeting and screamed, "I know I shouldn't say this, but I don't care. They took out two of our buildings. Let's take out two of their countries!"

I heard this cry with much fear. What if enough Americans felt this way? What if our leaders did? I prayed this veteran's outburst was not a prediction. Sadly, it was.

This cycle of violence seems as simple and basic as instinct. You hurt me so I'll hurt you. You threaten me so I'll threaten you. There is not enough food or water for both our peoples or tribes, so I will fight you to the death for possession of these resources. You think of me as less than human so I will render you less. You claim to follow God's commands. I follow the real God's commands. You arm yourself and challenge me. You force me into a kill-or-be-killed conundrum. There seems no survival or escape but for me to kill you.

Whenever we are threatened, frightened or attacked, we are reduced to basic survival instincts. Spinoza said that every creature seeks to persist in its own being. This is especially true about survival. The survival instinct says that, at all costs, my kind and I must survive, even if we must take your life to do so. Scientists teach that a "fight or flight" mechanism is built into all creatures and that when threatened we respond from these two choices.

Over this past Thanksgiving holiday, my college-age children wanted to relax together with a family movie. They chose LORD OF THE RINGS and cheered as hobbits, dwarves, elves and men slaughtered orcs. Were we honest and the violence real, we would be viewing slaughter as gruesome and massive as on the fields of World War I. So why do these imaginary killings thrill?

Moviegoers and readers enjoy the virtual slaughter primarily because the victims are orcs. What, in Tolkein's fantasy world, is an orc? It is a bestial creature -- made of primal forces, ugly, ignorant, instinctual, reeking, blindly obeying orders to destroy, not thinking for itself. It fits Homer's description of the war god Ares, "delighting in slaughter." Orcs represent these qualities in all of us that are lowest, most savage, primitive, unrefined, irrational and lacking empathy or compassion.

But we need one more element to render orc killing delightful. It takes an act of the human imagination. What happens when we substitute terms like *kraut*, *nip*, *gook*, *dink*, *slant*, *hadji*, *towelhead*, *ali baba* for orc? I do not use these words to be disrespectful. They are, in fact, some of the dehumanizing terms Americans have used on enemy combatants from WWII, the Vietnam War, Desert Storm, and the present Iraq War. As soon as we dehumanize the other, as soon as we say that we are better, or more refined, or wiser, or have the truer form of government or society, or know God's will, or have God on our side, then we render other human beings in our imaginations and hearts into something less than human, into orcs. Then we can cheer as we slaughter them. The philosopher Sartre was correct in saying the war is first an act of the imagination. First use our collective imagination to turn a foreigner into a version of an orc, then we believe we can hate and kill with justification and without remorse and

that we thereby rid the universe of evil.

How do we not turn other human beings into orcs? How do we accept real-world pain and threat and competition and strife without responding with hatred and violence, without justifying our response as divinely sanctioned? Is it possible for societies, let alone individuals, to achieve this? Can the higher functions of compassion and forgiveness contribute to survival?

Just three weeks ago I returned from leading a group of American veterans and civilians on an annual reconciliation and healing pilgrimage back to Viet Nam. It was my sixth journey.

There are signs all over Viet Nam, north and south, of its war damage and losses from the Japanese, French and American wars there. In Viet Nam, I have visited both national and family, official and home-grown cemeteries and memorial altars. One cemetery deep in the jungles near the old Ho Chi Minh Trail has over 100,000 graves – almost twice the number of dead in this one isolated cemetery as Americans lost in the entire war.

I prayed with a surviving grandfather in his tiny hut before the altar to his three sons killed by our side. I prayed over empty graves called Windy Tombs that the Vietnamese built for the souls of their quarter million MIAs. I visited My Lai, the site of the infamous atrocity. I cried beside the water ditch where marauding GIs, driven berserk by that war, massacred innocent villagers.

I have learned very much from the Vietnamese people, who had far greater losses than we did – 2 1/2 million dead, 4 million wounded, untold numbers of disabled, ravaged infrastructure and ecology. But, to our surprise, they have far less Post-traumatic Stress Disorder than we do. Living for millennia in Buddhism, Confucianism, and ancestor worship, they have spiritual tools that enable them to resist the descent into the madness and disorder that usually comes from war and its aftermath.

I apologized to that grandfather who lost all his sons in our war. But this lone surviving male in his lineage answered, “Thank you, but do not grieve. I am content that my sons served their country, fulfilled their karma, and met their destiny.”

I take my groups to visit the altar built in memory of Thich Quang Duc, the Buddhist monk who burned himself to death in protest in 1963. The first time I stood at his altar, I heard these words, as if from the monk himself, “When I burn; let me sit.” Quang Duc’s great spiritual achievement, and lesson to us all, is that we willingly take unbearable pain upon ourselves without hating or striking out against anyone.

And finally, here is a story from My Lai, a hamlet as full of loss for the Vietnamese as Ground Zero, Manhattan is for us. I met a 75 year old woman there, the lone survivor of her entire family. Her parents, husband, children were all killed in the massacre. She said that it would have been far easier to die that day than survive to carry this pain her entire life.

“I grieve with you, *Ba* - Grandmother,” I said. “Then how do you feel about us Americans visiting you here?”

“You must come,” she said. “Everyone must know the story.”

“I understand, *Ba*” I said. “That is why I am here. But what about our veterans? How do you feel about them returning? They might have killed your people. They might have even been here on that day.”

“No,” she answered. “You must understand this. Often I think the only reason I survived with this pain is so that I could live to meet your veterans, take their hands, look into their eyes, forgive them and help them forgive themselves and heal.”

It is not only in Viet Nam that peoples are transcending the instinctual resorting to violence and instead offering compassion, understanding and forgiveness. Think of the success of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in healing South Africa of its apartheid legacy. Today a similar movement is occurring in Liberia to help that country heal and reconcile from its civil war. And let us remember that, immediately following 9/11, the nations of the world did not first arm themselves in self-defense, but rather offered us compassion and solidarity. Do our people want such lessons, such a vision? We have heard from families of 9/11 victims. Very many have declared, “Do not strike back, do not kill others, do not use my lost loved one to justify more killing. Do not kill in my name; do not kill in theirs.”

Finally, what about those we call upon to do our fighting, to make our country safe from the orcs we imagine are out there trying to destroy us? I recently spent a week with members of an American ranger battalion who enlisted to defend our homeland and now in their twenties have experienced 3 – 6 combat tours and have participated in both battles and atrocities. I asked them what the lesson of 9/11 and the Iraq War should be? This is what they said:

“9/11 took me from enlistment through fierce patriotism to fighting with all my soul against committing atrocities.”

“We had many sacrifices on 9/11. Sacrifice should create awareness.”

What awareness, I asked, should 9/11 and this war bring us?

“That we are terrorists as much as anyone else,” they answered. And, “If I had a choice, I’d fight on their side because they are truly protecting their country from invaders.”

Therefore, our young rangers declared, we Americans must learn to “see the world through other people’s eyes.” And “see violence for what it is all the time, whether someone does it to us or us to them.” And that we “say no to any and all unjust violence, no matter who causes it.”

These, then, are some of the spiritual lessons we must draw from violence: Your dead are our dead. Your fallen are ours as well. Do not strike back. Do not let our losses rob others of heart or life. Live for our lost ones. Give their lost lives a life-affirming meaning. Accept destiny rather than say it was wrong or should not have happened. Find forgiveness. Offer forgiveness. Do not hate others but look at ourselves. Ask why others may want to hurt us rather than hurt them in return. Do not reflexively and instinctually strike back when we are in pain, but like Quang Duc sit through our pain, take it, tolerate it, until it transforms into acts of peace and forgiveness and restoration.

I had a vision just after 9/11. As our president stood before the world declaring that we would hunt, punish and kill those who had hurt us, I imagined a scene from the book of Jonah. When reluctant Jonah finally arrived in Ninevah and declared that God would destroy that great city because of its wicked ways, the king believed the prophet. He put on sackcloth and ordered his citizens to repent as well. And the city was saved.

I envisioned a president of the United States, the most powerful person leading the most powerful nation on the planet, putting on sackcloth and standing before the world. I imagined him saying, “We did not realize that so many of you are angry and hurt and hate us to this degree. We are sorry. We will not strike back but instead will listen as you tell us of your pain and rage. We will hear your story and forgive. Let us join together at this terrible moment, and in this great pain, and make our suffering and rage and loss one. As did that wise king of old, rather than destroy great cities, together let us save them from mutual destruction.”

This is our best opportunity to end hatred. Through 9/11 we Americans joined with the rest of the world in receiving a shared and common wound. That wound is what the world has been feeling, and screaming about, and doing violence over, ever since Isaac and Ishmael became alienated as brothers over the broken legacy from their father. That wound is the horrendous pain and fear in all our hearts and lands that is caused by violence and warfare, greed and oppression. Everyone feels it. Everyone causes it. Now we know. Now we can say to the world, we share your pain because we understand it, we feel it too.

Like the Vietnamese, in order to stop the hate we must forgive others for any hurt they caused us and forgive ourselves for being frightened and hating and causing pain. We must find the common humanity that is capable of transcendent love, but also admits that we, as much as anyone else, can tend toward hatred, violence and evil. We must be willing to feel pain rather than cause more. We must be willing to sit and talk with people we fear. We must hear their stories and understand their points of view. The writer Michael Ortiz Hill quotes an African proverb: “an enemy is someone whose story I have not yet heard.” Rather than rendering others we fear into orcs, we must listen to their stories, feel our pain without striking out, allow ourselves to meld with our former enemies into one common humanity, and forgive.

Marble Mountain is a mountain sacred to the Vietnamese people that during the war was also the scene of terrible fighting. A simple plaque stands there amidst the pagodas today. It broadcasts an old Buddhist teaching. Our veterans and theirs embrace, in mutual respect and forgiveness that brings great healing, in front of that plaque that reads:

Hatreds never cease
By hatreds in this world.
By love they cease.
This is an ancient law.