

PEACE

War is over (if you want it.)

—John Lennon

Over thousands of years of recorded history (and, we may presume, many more thousands of years of unrecorded history played out in grass shoes and antelope skin), innumerable philosophers, sages, deities and elementary school teachers have shared a single message: If a man strikes you on the cheek, turn and offer him the other. The way of heaven is to benefit others and not to injure them. Nonviolence is the first article of faith. [Humanity] must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God. The ordinary rest of us, sincerely and wholeheartedly, except for the sociopaths, seem to agree. Every living creature, from the nameless mollusk cleaning slime off some kid's aquarium all the way up to Denzel Washington, prefers that its little community not be blasted into fragments by another little community. And yet we keep making new wars, over and over and over, and solemnly we ask God to bless them. Does this make us liars and hypocrites, or profoundly incompetent? It passeth understanding.

Maybe peace is too hard for us. Responding peacefully to conflict or aggression requires enormous reserves of self-control, imagination, and patience. Force, as anyone who's used a hammer to fix a car knows, can be glorious, linking us to volcanoes and Category 5 hurricanes and the Old Testament God who did all that terrific smiting. A good peace, on the other hand, is boring. A peaceful resolution unfurls by degrees, unpretentious as a moth, and triumph is marked not by snapping flags and trumpets but by a little breeze. And to achieve this Mister Rogers moment, the Self, which seethes with righteous conviction, must be made to sit quietly while the Inner Grownup thinks calmly and creatively and—this is probably the hardest part—from someone else's point of view. It's certainly easier and more satisfying in a Terminator sort of way, to just smack the other guys until they stop arguing.

As a species we've been reluctant to admit that some of us really like violence, despite what our spiritual leaders

say, so we invented a rationalization that makes war a servant rather than an enemy of peace. Twenty-four centuries ago Aristotle wrote, "We make war that we might live in peace." More recently, and presumably without irony, the Colt .45 was called the Peacemaker, World War I was "the war to end all wars," and America christened its newest long-range surface-to-air missiles "Peacekeepers." All this implies either deep cynicism or a touching faith in the idea that we can threaten some populations into quiescence like so many popsicles. But in such cases is it peace we're imposing, or submission? What happens if someone notices there's a difference?

Peace, of course, is not simply the absence of war. Peace is a kind of ease, a happiness with what is rather than what might be, and this applies to the contents of our heads as much as to the borders of our nations. War may be an especially virulent form of dis-ease, but it's not the only manifestation; conflicts within the self can be equally disturbing (and equally fatal). Some people believe peace is a pipe dream, impossible to realize—a whiff of envy or hate, a little competition, and we're supposed to bash the other guy with a rock. We're Number One. But some civilizations have managed to sustain peace for generations, despite poverty, jingoism, drought, flood, earthquake xenophobia, imperialism, propaganda, and TV. Wouldn't it be great if we all wanted it?

Jane Mushinsky