

The Persuasiveness of War

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I don't preach from the Christian Bible as often as I might. Many Unitarian Universalists seem to have issues with the book, which is understandable, since it has been used to justify many hateful emotions, judgments, and actions. But, as a product of human imagination and culture, the Bible contains much that is good and useful and wise along with much that is less good, less useful, and less wise.

But it does make sense for us to study parts of the Bible that have been taken, directly or not, as foundational elements of our social and political beliefs. And there are few verses that have impacted our culture more strongly than the one that people use as a justification for revenge: "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."

How many times have those words been quoted, in literature, in films, in life, as a rationale for revenge, for the execution of an inexorable judgment? This is the sense conveyed in the version found in Deuteronomy 19:19-21, "So you shall purge the evil from your midst. The rest shall hear and be afraid, and a crime such as this shall never again be committed among you. Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot."

Show no pity. This is the message here. How many have taken this to heart and behaved heartlessly? How much human suffering has been rationalized away by this hateful verse?

But this is not the earliest place this idea appears in the Bible. Deuteronomy was written by leaders with a particularly coercive agenda at a time when the Hebrews were already a settled civilization. They adapted this from an idea from the time of the exodus, written centuries earlier when people lived in smaller communities with limited political organization, a time when people tended to take justice into their own hands.

The issue being addressed at that time was one of overreaction. A family or village might raid another to steal livestock, perhaps injuring or killing a

shepherd in the process. Family and friends of the victim, enraged by this, were going *en masse* to slaughter the entire family or village of the perpetrator. This is what is being addressed in Exodus 21:21, where it says, “If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn wound for wound, stripe for stripe.”

Far from being a justification for extreme punishment, this verse was intended to restrain excessive retribution, to limit the response to match the injury. Don’t kill a village because of the actions of one person; don’t kill a family because one of its members injured someone you know. Rather than a requirement, this verse was intended as a restraint to the passions for revenge. *No more than* an eye for an eye or tooth for a tooth.

So this verse was actually a humanizing influence quite different from how it has usually been interpreted in the centuries since. It introduced the idea of proportionate response, that the reaction should not exceed the scope of the initial violation. And it also introduced the idea of protecting non-combatants from injury; that, in a sense, civilians should be spared from the horrors of war.

That might still be a new idea today.

Another, more modern, misunderstood quote comes from the 19th century Prussian military strategist, Carl von Clausewitz, who famously said that “War is merely the continuation of policy by other means.” While this is usually taken to mean that the political process is so inherently abusive and coercive that it is merely a form of attenuated violence, a closer reading of Clausewitz reveals a different meaning. It is that war is a form of communication, of negotiation, of persuasion that cannot be taken out of its human context. He actually defined war as “an act of will directed toward a living entity that reacts.” In his book, *The Power of Communication*, Helio Garcia comments on this: “This simple observation is quite profound. War, at its essence, isn’t about fighting or killing, at least not for their own sake. Rather, it’s about an outcome. A reaction. A change.”

Like the “eye for an eye” reference from Exodus, Clausewitz’s definition of war was not intended to expand, but rather to limit war’s scope. He also came up with the term, “the fog of war,” to describe how the passions of combat, violence,

killing and loss can replace reason with confused passion. When this happens, war ceases to be a form of persuasion and becomes mere senseless violence directed at a dehumanized enemy.

Clausewitz favored limited warfare designed with an understanding of the enemy's needs as well as vulnerabilities, so that the sense of discourse is never lost or obscured, laying the groundwork for a respectful peace once the issues at stake are resolved, one way or another.

He also introduced another important idea, that warfare is a form of communication, a form of rhetoric, and as such, two questions immediately suggest themselves: First, what is the message being sent; and, two, is the message being heard?

I'd like to share a simple example from my life here. Cats have been a part of my household for most of my adult life. Owning cats means teaching cats about behaviors that are unwelcome, about learning how to modify their behavior. This is a communication process, a rhetorical process, sometimes edging over into warfare when it becomes necessary to use physical forms of persuasion.

One form of persuasion I learned to use was a squirt gun. Cats generally don't like having water squirted in their faces and will usually stop doing things that result in the discharge of a squirt gun. At least most cats will. One of my cats, named Pica, had lived independently for a year or so before becoming part of my household, so she had some very independent habits and attitudes. When I squirted her in the face, she startled and stopped, looked me right in the eye with a feral fierceness and then turned back to what she was doing. A second squirt produced the same result. After the third squirt, though, she turned that feral fierceness into action and jumped at me with slashing claws.

She wasn't going to be influenced by my squirt gun. Pica responded by turning on me with an anger that brooked no further discussion. From then on, whenever she misbehaved, I picked her up, held and petted her until she calmed down. She became a gentle, obedient, and loving pet.

Violence doesn't work on people or creatures who interpret it differently than you do. The rhetoric of physical coercion, warfare, depends on combatants sharing the same meanings for their actions.

Garcia quotes George Bernard Shaw, who “once famously said that the biggest challenge of communication is the illusion that it has taken place. Each labors under the misapprehension that he has made himself understood. At best there isn’t a meeting of the minds; more often there’s outright misunderstanding. Sometimes that misunderstanding escalates.”

One of the most frequent forms of escalation is like that between me and my cat, Pica. Let’s say one party kills someone on the other side to send a message, “don’t do that.” This is often received as a message that actually says, “I do not respect you. Your lives and your feelings are not important to me. I will kill you if I feel like it.” This is not a message that tends to further relationship. It can become a misunderstanding that escalates into greater and greater violence as each side grows progressively more violent, leading to the fog of war far more than to any increased understanding of mutual interests or concerns.

It’s amazing how consistently and thoroughly we can dedicate ourselves to misunderstanding one another. I once saw a film of a couple of American GI’s mistreating a North Vietnamese prisoner. Most Americans don’t know that Vietnam has been a Buddhist country for a thousand years; that its people study, learn, and practice the Buddha’s teachings in their daily lives. Many Vietnamese are thus capable of great calm and composure under physical duress, able to endure painful mistreatment with a mindfulness bewildering to the American perspective.

As they took turns kicking their prisoner, the GI’s joked and mocked him, saying that, because he didn’t cry out in fear or pain, that he wasn’t really human, that he must not really feel what they were doing.

Their kicks taught the prisoner nothing other than that this was something to be endured and survived. From the Vietnamese perspective, the Americans were the ones behaving in an inhuman manner. Our efforts in Vietnam were doomed because we had no basis for understanding the people with whom we were in conflict. There could be no relationship, no communication, no resolution without some form of respect for the shared humanity of those we fought. We were lost in the fog of war.

Our American military endeavors have tended to follow this pattern, over and over and over, up to and including those today. One poignant example comes from the area between Pakistan and Afghanistan, usually referred to as “tribal lands.”

They are not actually tribal lands, strictly speaking, any more or less than all lands in that part of the world. This is a distinct sociopolitical area known as Waziristan, which has existed for perhaps thousands of years. It has its own culture and values.

One cultural value relevant here concerns mutual recognition and respect. Honesty, straightforwardness and respect are so important to these people that it is said of them that they will grant their sworn enemy sanctuary in their own homes if he asks, but they will fight to the death anyone who tries to force them through the gates of heaven.

Like my cat, Pica, the Waziri people don't care why you choose to use force. If you use force, they will resist to the death. Force will never persuade them to change their minds about anything. But they will make room for those who treat them with kindness and respect, even if they disagree. And so what do we do? We send in unmanned drone missiles to “teach them a lesson.” What do you think they learn?

Like the GI's failure to understand that the behavior of their captive could have been due to moral strength rather than some kind of mental defect, Americans have often misunderstood and judged behaviors based on moral values other than their own, even if they might embody the highest of moral values.

Take the Potlatch ceremonies of the native peoples of the Pacific Northwest. Warfare was unknown to them. They settled their conflicts through generosity rather than violence. The standing of a tribe was not based on how much it possessed, but rather on how much it gave away. Tribes would take turns hosting the dancing and worship festivals, each trying to outdo the others in generosity, sometimes to the point of impoverishment.

But standing and status were valued more highly than possessions and comfort, so the values of the Potlatch culture was rooted in generosity, with tribes

willing to go hungry sometimes for the privilege of being respected for what they had given to others.

It seems that Americans could understand violent conflict much more easily than competition based on generosity. The Christian missionary, William Duncan, wrote in 1875 that the potlatch was “by far the most formidable of all obstacles in the way of Indians becoming Christians, or even civilized.” The Indian Act of 1884 outlawed the practice.

How is it that we can be more understanding of murder than of generosity?

I believe that America has lived so long in the fog of war that, as a culture, we have lost the ability to understand the relational, rhetorical nature of conflict; that war is a continuation of policy by other means. We have so committed ourselves to an unworkable set of assumptions about human nature and relationship that we fail to see that simple truth at the center of our lives: people respond to love more reliably than they respond to hate. Machiavelli said that it is better to be feared than to be loved. He was wrong. It may be safer for a tyrant to be feared than loved, but why would we want the safety of a tyrant when we could choose to have the joyful, loving fulfillment of relationships that engage human hearts and minds in collaborative community?

If we want to communicate, we need to learn how to make ourselves understood. If we want to be understood, we first need to understand.

May it be so.