DAILYGOOD
News that Inspires

Working for Peace in a Violent World
by Matthew Legge

“Life eats life.” — Joseph Campbell

Joseph Campbell studied spiritual traditions from around the world and found that the violence inherent in life is one of the uncomfortable truths they all grapple with. Life eats life. Our world is perpetually destructive and creative. Can peace be consistent with such a violent world, or is it a total fantasy?

In his article “On Staying Sane in a Suicidal Culture,” Dahr Jamail describes his personal struggles with post-traumatic stress disorder after working as a war correspondent in Iraq: “I was unable to go any deeper emotionally than my rage and numbness. I stood precariously atop my self-righteous anger about what I was writing, for it was the cork in the bottle of my bottomless grief from what I’d witnessed.” How often do our firm beliefs and hard-line moral convictions cover our pain and fears in a world in which life eats life? One day, Jamail went to meet a stranger for tea, eco-philosopher Joanna Macy. “After quietly pouring our mugs full, she looked me straight in the eyes and said, slowly, ‘You’ve seen so much.’ My own grief beginning to be witnessed, tears welled in my eyes immediately, as they did in hers.”

Acknowledgement—seeing and being seen—is an ancient and deeply powerful experience. Having a complete stranger just sit with you while you do something painful reduces the pain you experience compared to doing it alone. In her 2010 performance artwork “The Artist is Present,” Marina Abramovicì spent a grueling eight to 10 hours a day in silence, looking into the eyes of strangers. Many who participated were moved to tears.

Quakers often describe the feeling of entering into silence together as an experience of coming home. Perhaps they’re finding a deeper experience of themselves because of this new openness in the presence of others. I expect I’m not unique in having discovered that it’s much easier to be critical of someone behind their back than when I’m sitting with them. I often seem to understand people better when we’re able to see each other in person. Suddenly the “other” shifts from being a simple idea I wanted to hold onto to something much richer—a real person. Buddhist Author Stephen Batchelor says, “Just as you peer out beyond yourself to scrutinize others, so do they gaze from their interiority to wonder about you.” He imagines the shared message of our gazes as this: “Do not hurt me.”

Joanna Macy went on to tell Dahr Jamail the importance of inner seeing—taking stock, acknowledging the pain we experience from the violent world we live in. “Refusing to feel pain, and becoming incapable of feeling the pain, which is actually the root meaning of apathy, refusal to suffer—that makes us stupid, and half alive,” she explained. “The most radical thing any of us can do at this time is to be fully present to what is happening in the

world."

We hope for a lasting peace, a stable peace, a hiding place of permanent peace. Yet we are in a world of flux. In any moment something terrible might happen and, thanks to the internet, we can stay up to date about it. With an endless stream of awful news, how can we react? We're witnessing life eating life.

The work of Joseph Campbell and countless others makes it clear that the destructive aspects of the world, and the knowledge that each of us will die, has forever been a deep challenge to reconcile with a celebration of life. It's not getting easier. There's a web of relationships in a globalized world that make it difficult to live without being destructive. Even when sincerely striving to be peaceful, we may still be violent. When trying to help, we can cause harm. The laptop I use to write about peace runs on Congolese conflict minerals. Even something as simple as a toothbrush has a vast meaning when we explore it:

"An electric toothbrush needs circuit boards dotted with materials of tantalum in a capacitor to store energy; neodymium, dysprosium, boron, and iron magnet to provide the power to spin brushes at 31,000 strokes per minute; batteries made from nickel and cadmium or lithium. The 35 metals needed come from 6 continents." (Robert Howell in a book review of The Elements of Power by David Abraham in Resilient World, August 2016.)

Environmental destruction and forced labor uphold many of these supply chains. We can reject violence, but our lives, from toothbrushes to treasured childhood toys, can be full of its products. Add to this that the average lifestyle in countries like Canada is profoundly unsustainable and causing havoc on a planetary scale while inequality continues to increase. Some level of inequality might be a good thing, but an article by Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson in The British Medical Journal explains a bit of what major inequality can mean:

"Inequality matters because, as a robust and growing body of evidence shows, the populations of societies with bigger income differences tend to have poorer physical and mental health, more illicit drug use, and more obesity. More unequal societies are marked by more violence, weaker community life, and less trust. Inequality also damages children's well-being, reducing educational attainment and social mobility."

Are our social and political structures themselves sometimes forms of slow violence, what Rob Nixon described as "a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space?"

Whatever we call it, we can get a sense of why Jamail saw the culture around him—one avoiding so many pressing issues—as suicidal. Part of our blindness to the deeper structures of violence is our omission bias. If we push someone to their death, we consider ourselves guilty of murder, but if we don't bother to catch a falling person, we're not so sure. We have a sense that what we do matters more than what we don't do.

So how can we engage in a violent world? Honesty and openness help in building power-with and finding our power-from-within. A Canadian Quaker book of wisdom and advice says, "Let us be open to discern how the seeds of destruction of our planet are present in our ways of living. We are thankful that so much joy and beauty has been offered to us." We can try to do the work of seeing ourselves and our own lives, observing for signs of violence we may not want to witness, while remembering to be thankful for all

the good things we come across! We can celebrate life without claiming that we're separate from its problems.

In a violent world, we humans are ever-resilient builders of community. We engage in design-led changes, thinking through the life cycles of products and building them in sustainable ways. We trade, share, and reuse to reduce our dependence on destructive production and over-consumption. We buy fair trade when the option is available and within our means. We make ethical investment decisions. We access better information than ever before, using it to make informed purchases. A few go so far as to grow their own food and live simply as an expression of spiritual connection with life. Others chose to take personal risks like finding it morally right to withhold taxes that would go to pay for war. Yet with all this, the calamities we face demand large-scale changes, and our best individual efforts can't extricate us.

Studies suggest that nonviolence training makes people newly alert to the harm and avoidability of many kinds of violence. What was a narrow frame suddenly opens. However, seeing violence and choosing a response is still a process fraught with ambiguity.

To reduce our tendency to rationalize our decisions, it helps to be clear about our values, to define the rules of the game. In doing this, though, power-over judgments have a tendency to creep up. I think it's great that so many of us are able to see the connections of various problems—to name them and to challenge each other about them. But we can readily speak from pain in ways that mostly just multiply pain. We get a bit too good at dissecting the world to find violence lurking, and we forget to build ourselves up by building up those around us.

We can always go further in calling more and more of life "violence," but at some point we lose all balance and our efforts are no longer fruitful. They turn into a quest for an impossible purity, a power-over attempt to make people and the world fit with our abstract ideas about how we imagine they should be. In 1939 [Quaker] Friend Horace Alexander saw violence and worked for change. In doing so he explained that since war "involves the mobilization of all the human and material resources of the State, it is hardly possible for any citizen to keep clear of all entanglements. Each of us must draw the line somewhere, with charity towards those who for reasons that we may not appreciate draw it elsewhere."

Whatever approaches we choose, we can take care not to try to escape from life. As Jamail and countless others have discovered, we can't be healed through lying to ourselves about what's happening. Hugh Campbell-Brown once put it succinctly during a Quaker meeting: "Pain is like counterfeit money, it keeps getting passed on until someone accepts the loss." We benefit from having the right kinds of space for acceptance of the fullness of life, and for expression of the fears and challenges we go through in a violent world. (And there can be long-term health costs when we fail to do so.)

Here's an outlier who's a fascinating example—Friend Helen Steven. She saw violence and went to remarkable lengths to engage. She was arrested many times for peaceful involvement in social change campaigns, at one point risking losing her house over her arrests! She wrote that throughout these years, each time she admitted her fear and vulnerability, her isolation melted. Others felt empowered to really see her and help. "By making ourselves totally open...by reaching down beyond our deepest selves to the very ground of our being, who knows what may happen? We are in effect offering a blank check of our lives. This may lead us in directions we had never dreamed of, to new

challenges and new ways of living adventurously."

On the other hand, we might reject that we have responsibility for violence. This could be based on all kinds of ideas. Here's an incomplete list:

Believing we humans are too small to know what's right and so shouldn't try to change things. (Uncertainty leading to faith in the status quo.)

Faith that nature or the divine will help solve society's problems without us having to engage. (Faith-based determinism/fatalism.)

Believing that trying to change things is impossible or too difficult and will ultimately fail, so isn't worth our efforts. (Fatalism/ pessimism/defeatism.)

Believing that everything is all right or is going to be all right. (Pure optimism/denial.)

Believing that there are many problems but others should change them because it's not up to us or we don't have the knowledge/resources/expertise/energy. (This is along the lines of what's called social loafing.)

Fear that our enjoyment of life and our peace of mind may be lost if we try to change things. (Self-preservation/denial.)

Wanting to live some way, but simply not doing it (Inconsistency/ denial.)

Perhaps you resonated with some items on this list. That's OK! It's good to listen to ourselves. When our beliefs are right for us, they help us feel alive. If we discover ways that our beliefs are cutting us off from a celebration of our lives, they may need to be explored further —acting on our peace concerns can actually be good for us on a personal level, both in the short and long term.

A study that followed 3,617 people from 1986 to 2006 as they aged found that "volunteer work was good for both mental and physical health. People of all ages who volunteered were happier and experienced better physical health and less depression." This wasn't just a statistical trend—becoming active with important social causes contributed to lowered depression in the same individual study participants. Another study showed reduced chronic pain. This appears to have been in part because of having a sense of purpose. Similar positive effects, at least in the short term, have been shown when donating to good causes. Brain scans suggest that giving feels rewarding. Such findings make it "clear that helping others, even at low thresholds of several hours of volunteerism a week, creates mood elevation." (Meredith Maran, "The Activism Cure," Greater Good Magazine, 2009.)

This is a reminder that we can benefit from becoming more deeply involved in life, not to brood or fixate on our roles in violent systems but to care for and connect with each other. We cannot escape the destructiveness of the world, but we need not be crushed by it. Even as the peace virus tests and pushes us toward our edges, it can empower us and help us heal.