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The Nuclear Apple



Image by Ana Itonishvili.

“The greatest danger to human civilization and the planet is the inability to believe that tomorrow can be different . . .”

So writes Derek Johnson of the Global Zero movement, an organization committed to a world free of nuclear weapons. Let’s put it this way: If we can cooperate in our own collective suicide — a.k.a., nuclear war — surely, *surely* we can cooperate in creating a world that transcends such a possibility. Or are cynicism, war and profit so thoroughly worked into the human social structure that I’m kidding myself? You can’t put the genie back in the bottle, people say, superstitiously (it seems) condemning themselves, or at least their children, to inevitable self-annihilation.

How do we turn Sept. 26 — declared by the United Nations to be (I kid you not) the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons — into a reality? Or does the human future have nothing to do with “us”? Are we just spectators of our own lives, stuck in the world our leaders continue to bequeathed us — a world in which “peace” is maintained at gunpoint and standing armies are what God has wrought?

Is disarmament — nuclear and otherwise — possible only in some parallel universe?

The point I’m reaching for is this: Transcending war is not only possible, but we’re a lot closer to doing so than we realize, and by “we” I mean mainstream consciousness, believers in the genie that science let out of the bottle. Believers in what you might call the “nuclear apple.”

Johnson, writing about that first successful atomic explosion, in the New Mexican desert on July 16, 1945, describes it thus: “. . . it is a moment of awe and terror: the power of human resolve pushing past preconceived limits, a door we were never meant to open swinging wide.”

I couldn’t help but picture humanity sitting innocently in the Garden of Eden. Hmmm. Let’s see what this tree has to offer. Science, in service to the God of War, takes a bite of the nuclear apple and now we know more than we were ever supposed to know. Within a generation, not only did we drop two humorously named atomic bombs (Little Boy and Fat Man) on two actual Japanese cities, but we launched what became known as the Cold War and began testing and building multi-thousands of far more powerful nuclear weapons. Seventy-eight years later, Planet Earth remains stuck — not simply with its knowledge of nuclear weaponry, but in competitive conflict between nuclear powers and their allies. While about half the planet is calling for disarmament, the nuclear powers shrug and declare it to be impossible.

That’s a lie!

Tomorrow can, indeed, be different. What’s missing, as far as I can tell, is a uniting spiritual — religious? — belief that this is so. Yeah, we ate the nuclear apple, but let’s not forget: Countless millennia of bellicose human history and prehistory created the context in which that happened. Despite an infinite amount of human awareness that war is stupid and pointless, that it accomplishes nothing except its own perpetuation, humanity has continued to organize itself with war as its political core. This means big powers with standing armies. This means the ongoing development of nuclear weapons across the globe — no matter that something will inevitably go wrong and . . . oops. Boom! Destruction is mutually assured.

So with all this said, how the hell can tomorrow be different? My thought on the matter amounts to this: Humanity is in the process of transcending the nuclear apple, of learning how to think beyond war and domination, winning and losing. We're in the process of learning how to value conflict and work with it, rather than merely fearing and attempting to quash it. This is no small change. We are in the process of creating a structure of spiritual belief that is bigger than war. All of us are involved in it, and will be for the rest of our lives.

Loving war has always felt easy and natural: "normal." I remember as a boy, sometime in the mid-'50s, attending a military show with my family at a local park known as Ford Field. Families sat on the hillside and down below, literal tanks rolled, guns were fired, smoke and noise filled the air. After the display, as the soldiers withdrew, the boys in the crowd (and maybe the girls too) swarmed down to the shooting site in search of souvenirs. I found a flattened bullet shell, which became my lucky charm for the next few years. I carried it in my pocket. In church — in the midst of the boring service — I quietly held the bullet, as though in boyish (yikes) worship.

My point is that war goes deep in the human psyche and, despite the hell it creates, our inner adolescent all too often refuses to surrender his belief in it. Humanity has not fully transcended the social organizing principle of war — not when you toss in the corporate profiteering that accompanies it, or the political usefulness of a good enemy.

But as I say, many, many courageous people are involved in pushing humanity to transcend war. The threat of nuclear war makes this crucial. Human evolution is in the spotlight. We must find peace in our souls — in our collective soul. I will continue to write about our evolving, but for now let me close by celebrating Veterans for Peace and the Golden Rule Project.

In 1958 a group of Quakers set sail for the Marshall Islands, in a boat named the Golden Rule, where they intended to put themselves in the way of a planned nuclear test at Bikini Atoll. They were stopped by the Coast Guard, arrested in Honolulu — but a global outrage took hold, which ultimately resulted in the Limited Test Ban Treaty of 1963.

Members of Vets for Peace recovered and rebuilt the boat. They note on their website: "The reborn Golden Rule is sailing once more, to show that nuclear abolition is possible, and that bravery and tenacity can overcome militarism."

Love plus courage, folks! This is part of it — evolution in action.

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