

Reconsidering Militarism

Essays on Militarism & Pacifism

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Reconsidering Militarism

Militarism pervades our lives. We humans devote a substantial portion of our resources, attention, spirit, and labor to this endeavor. Regardless of where we live, what we do for work, or what we believe, we are in the thick of it. Since we invest so much in militarism, we should, from time to time, evaluate how well it serves us.

What Is Militarism?

It's difficult to have a useful conversation about militarism without first clarifying what we mean by the word. In regard to dictionary definitions, the word *military* refers to soldiers, arms, armed forces, and war. The word *militarism* refers to the systems, beliefs, goals, and rationale which support military endeavors. Militarism has many facets, but three characteristics are essential.

First, *militarism is a system for protecting our own interests*. This is militarism's core purpose. Even when there is talk of protecting the interests of others, it is commonly understood that we wield military force, ultimately, when our own interests are at stake.

Second, *militarism is a system dependent on many institutions*. While military forces are the face and hands of militarism, many other institutions constitute the mind, heart, and soul. Militarism could not exist without support from politics, commerce, religion, academics, science, media, and entertainment.

Third, *militarism is a system dependent on tools of coercion and harm*. Remove these tools, and militarism no longer exists. (For example, when military forces conduct disaster relief, with no thought of

coercion or harm, such work falls outside the scope of militarism.) Although militarism has many tools at its disposal, the tools of coercion and harm are prerequisites.

In short, we can say that militarism is institutionalized self-interest, dependent on tools of coercion and harm.

Why Do We Support Militarism?

Because we invest heavily in militarism, it is in our interest to be very clear about what we get in return. Our reasons for supporting militarism boil down to these:

- We believe that militarism is critical to our survival. We all need food, water, shelter, and the conditions for general health, safety, and freedom. Militarism is our premier plan to ensure that we get these essentials.
- We believe that the more resources we control, the more likely it is that we will be satisfied. Militarism is our ultimate tool to achieve satisfaction.
- We believe that militarism is a relatively quick means of resolving conflicts. Our interests are typically tied to short-term calendars (the next business opportunity, the next election, etc.), so we are not inclined to invest in solutions that we know will span many years.
- We believe that the mere threat of coercion and harm is a useful tool for building respectful, stable, and sustainable relations.
- When others get in the way of our interests, we believe that an act of coercion has the potential to resolve the conflict. We believe that forcing others to act against their will can be a useful tool for setting things right.

- When others get in the way of our interests, we believe that an act of harm has the potential to resolve the conflict. We believe that retaliation, punishment, and elimination can be useful tools for setting things right.
- Nonmilitary approaches to conflict resolution involve substantial uncertainty. We cannot design a cooperative resolution unless we give genuine attention to the interests of the adversary. This openness leads down an unpredictable path. We believe that militarism offers better certainty.
- We believe that militarism serves our financial interests by providing employment and education to some and wealth to a few.
- We believe that militarism is good for building our sense of community. We feel that by wielding tools of coercion and harm, we strengthen our identity and self-esteem.
- We believe that military activity is inherently honorable, and that warriors are, by definition, heroes.
- We believe that military attacks deserve military responses. An eye for an eye is how we teach others a lesson. A tooth for a tooth is how we maintain our self-respect.
- Militarism is our tradition. While there are a multitude of ways to respond to conflict and acts of malice, we believe that our warrior tradition deserves high regard due to its extensive history.
- We believe that militarism incorporates the highest callings of our various religious and ethical traditions.

One is unlikely to subscribe to all of the above reasons for supporting militarism, but these are the reasons that we generally put forth.

What Are the Costs of Militarism?

At first glance, our devotion to militarism seems reasonable. We see a system that promises to keep us safe and secure. We see opportunities for education, employment, and wealth. And we see a way to protect valued customs and beliefs.

If militarism delivered such benefits, our investment might make sense. But the daily news and the record of history report different results: conflicts persist, safety is elusive, resources are depleted, our environment is undermined, individuals are hurt, communities are damaged, and the human spirit suffers. A small portion of the world's population certainly enjoys some benefits from militarism but, on balance, we all suffer greatly from its costs. These include:

- **Financial Resources:** When we think about the costs of militarism, we tend to focus on the national military budget and the significant taxes we pay to support it. These financial resources, while substantial, are only the beginning of what we contribute.
- **Natural Resources:** As a global community, we also devote much of our land, fuel, water, minerals, and other natural resources to militarism.
- **Human Resources:** A large portion of the world's labor force is directly or indirectly dedicated to supporting militarism.
- **Intellectual Resources:** We devote much of our political creativity and attention to military affairs. More important, a large portion of the world's academic and technical skill is committed to the service of militarism.
- **Spiritual Resources:** Militarism works to benefit ourselves at the expense of others. Since our spiritual lives typically call us to do the opposite, we pay an inner price to maintain our support for militarism.

- **Suffering:** The most profound cost of militarism is the great suffering it causes in our world.

Physical and emotional suffering: To protect our various interests, we continue, generation after generation, to threaten and harm each other with weapons, confinement, coercion, torture, deceit, humiliation, and dehumanization.

Environmental destruction: Not only do our military programs deplete us of immense quantities of energy, land, and other natural resources, they leave an immense wake of pollution and waste.

Heightened conflict: We know that whenever we coerce or harm others, we leave them dissatisfied, hurt, angry, and vengeful. Militarism promises us security and safety, but it necessarily delivers unrest.

Lost resources: Militarism creates a severe drain on our economic, human, intellectual, and natural resources. All of our efforts for a better society suffer from this large-scale diversion of assets.

Social violence: Militarism has deep and historic links to racism, sexism, homophobia, and economic exploitation. It simultaneously empowers and draws power from these bitter traditions.

Spiritual disintegration: The highest callings of most ethical and religious traditions include respect, kindness, patience, compassion, understanding, and generosity. Our hearts lean toward these practices, yet militarism pulls us in the opposite direction.

The role of militarism in our lives somehow eludes cost-benefit analysis. For most people, the benefits of militarism are doubtful and the price paid is sobering. If we were to simply assess a list of pros and cons, militarism would appear to be a poor investment.

Ten Questions

Regardless of our political inclinations, here is our dilemma: we divert a massive stream of our resources toward militarism, the benefits of this system are far from certain, militarism causes great suffering in the world, and more than a few of our reasons for perpetuating this system cause us to wince. Something is not right.

We could certainly turn away from this uncomfortable tangle, permitting the status quo to continue. Or, we could start to unravel the knot. These ten questions are a useful place to begin.

- (1) How well does militarism deliver on its core promises? Are we satisfied? What is the quality of safety, security, and stability that militarism provides?
- (2) What is the full range of options at our disposal for resolving conflicts? Are there less costly, less harmful, and more reliable systems than militarism for resolving conflicts?
- (3) If we could expand militarism without regard for its costs or suffering, at what point would we be sufficiently militarized? What benchmarks would indicate that our interests are sufficiently protected?
- (4) Do we believe that we can ensure our own well-being without ensuring the well-being of others? The observable nature of our situation is that we are all inextricably connected. If we hope to secure our food, water, and necessities for any reasonable period of time, we need to ensure that everyone else in the global community has such things as well. To the extent that we deny this connectedness, we devote our lives to defending and fighting, we miss collaborative opportunities and, ironically, we risk losing our food, water, and necessities. Is it possible that militarism is hindering, rather than improving, our quality of life?

- (5) If the costs, suffering, and poor results associated with militarism are troubling, why do we not invest as heavily in nonmilitary alternatives?
- (6) If we are among the relatively small portion of people who benefit financially from militarism, what would it take for us to forgo this benefit in order to ease the global burden?
- (7) Is militarism our best tool for cultivating identity, self-esteem, and honor? What other ways can we, as individuals and as national communities, develop these qualities?
- (8) For those of us who are inclined toward a particular religious or ethical tradition, how do our highest aspirations relate to our support of militarism? Regardless of our tradition, we are likely taught that: maintaining a kind intention is more important than maintaining a defensive stance; benefitting others is more important than benefitting the self; offering generosity is more important than possessing resources; offering patience is more important than being right; and offering compassion is more important than distancing ourselves from the suffering of others. Militarism flips these values. How do we handle this contradiction?
- (9) How comfortable are we with uncertainty? What would it take for us to tolerate more uncertainty, for longer periods, in order to make space for nonmilitary approaches to conflict?
- (10) When we plant apple seeds, we do not expect to see orange trees. When we employ tools of coercion and harm, should we expect to build outcomes that are fair, respectful, stable, and sustainable? How do we understand the relationship between means and ends?

Our initial attraction to militarism is certainly understandable, but the price is high, and the poor results do not match the bold promises. For our own sake, and for the sake of our world, we should answer these questions with some care and precision.

The Notion of Civilian

It's time to let go of the view that some work for the military and others do not. In this heavily militarized society, we are all military. There are no civilians.

Understandably, most of us are not eager to part with this distinction. Those who regard themselves as military embrace the military-civilian divide because it serves the narrative of distinction: those in the military are set apart from civilians for greater work and greater risk. The military-civilian divide also builds camaraderie among warriors: the rank system, the restricted areas, the secrecy, the protocols, all serve to create a culture apart.

Those who regard themselves as civilian embrace the divide because it provides comfortable distance from the uneasy work of militarism. Coercion and harm are the defining responsibilities of this system, and most folks find such business unpalatable. (Of course, the military takes on other work from time to time, such as construction projects, refugee assistance, and disaster relief. But the essential work of the military is to exercise coercion and harm to serve our interests. Take away the construction projects, and the military continues. Take away disaster relief, and the military continues. But take away the business of coercion and harm, and there is no military.) The military-civilian divide provides civilians with a buffer to separate one's conscience from one's support for distasteful activity.

Even within the military, there is a civilian-like divide. Very few military personnel ultimately engage in the specific actions of coercing or harming others. Most personnel can claim to be behind the scenes, providing administrative, technical, or logistical support. In other words, most military personnel can effectively feel like civilians when

they want to. If they are ambivalent about the business of coercion and harm, they can find relief in simply being an office worker, a medic, a researcher, a mechanic, and the like.

While the notion of civilian provides many of us with solace, it is an illusion. We might not be on the military payroll, and we might not wield arms or threats on the front lines of conflict, but we are all vital players in maintaining the military ecosystem. The front line warriors are able to function only because the rest of us do our part.

Taxpayers offer the ultimate support, agreeing to provide all the necessary resources to ensure that we can wield effective force when it serves our interests. Legislators direct this wealth into the vast economy of military contractors, subcontractors, and ancillary businesses. Civic leaders readily equate patriotism with militarism. And citizens offer unflagging devotion to the entire enterprise, reliably electing legislators to maintain and expand this system. Even in our daily lives, we see clergy linking the obligations of faith to support for the military, we see educators promoting military life as a way to fulfill civic duty, we see academics devoting their intellect to developing weapon systems, entertainers rallying support for the latest military operation, toymakers selling combat as play, and so on.

In short, civilian is indistinguishable from military. Civilians are essential and full-fledged participants in the business of militarism. If civilians failed to do their part, militarism would unravel quickly: resources would dry up, morale would drop, logistics would falter, and missions would cease.

The notion of civilian is a notion of separateness. If we have any desire to move toward a demilitarized society, we will need to abandon this notion. In other words, we will need to acknowledge the uncomfortable fact that we all directly and substantially support militarism by the choices we make in our daily lives. As we pay more attention to the extent of this connectedness, more options become apparent for how to demilitarize. The business of coercion and harm will not subside until we reduce our cooperation. In the meantime, we are all military.

Sticks or Stones

All weapons are the same.

We quibble over who gets hurt (soldiers or civilians), or how many get hurt (one or one thousand), or how a weapon delivers its damage (bullets or poison gas), but these incidentals distract from the essentials.

All weapons serve the purpose of harm. By definition, weapons are tools to injure, defeat, or destroy. Weapons are not tools for caring, educating, or healing. Weapons are not tools for reconciliation or community building. Weapons are tools to bring down our fellow human beings.

All weapons bring harm to those who create them. To envision a weapon requires a desire to harm. To design a weapon requires sustained attention on how we might best cause harm. To fund a weapon requires a commitment to harm. And to build a weapon requires labor for the purpose of enabling harm. If we devote our vision, attention, resources, and labor in these ways, we incline ourselves to justify the use of harm. And the more we justify the use of harm, the harder our hearts become. This dehumanization we work upon ourselves is more destructive than any weapon we wield against others.

All weapons require the repulsive act. Go to your enemy's home. Force him to the street. Tie him to a tree. Stab him with a knife. Stab him again. Then again, and again, until he bends to your will, or until he dies, or until you collapse in nausea. How is the brutality of this act different from envisioning an attack drone, or designing it, or paying for it, or piloting it, or firing it? When the enemy finally falls, when the

weapon has been used, what remains is the repulsive act – the harsh will of one human being forced upon another. Sometimes, the act is clear, as in a stoning or a beating. Other times, the act is hidden in an elaborate process, behind thousands of policymakers, taxpayers, engineers, and technicians. The repulsion is greater when the scheme is elaborate, because we have figured out a way to ease our consciences by distancing ourselves from the final result. Whether we stab someone to death or arrange for the government to take care of the messy details, a weapon always depends on the repulsive act.

All weapons backfire. Using weapons always works against our purposes. When we want to build peaceful relations, our use of weapons creates antagonism. When we want to secure our economic interests, our use of weapons breaks apart the very relationships that are necessary for our well-being. When we want to teach others a lesson, our use of weapons only fuels their anger and resolve. When we want to stop the tyrant from harming others to get his way, our use of weapons reinforces the notion that harming others is how one gets their way. We cannot injure, defeat, or destroy without repercussion. Even if we were able to annihilate an enemy and all their allies, removing all traces of their existence, the backfire would still be felt: our hearts would be scarred by the act of erasing. No matter how brutal or mean-spirited the enemy, if we choose to destroy rather than transform them, we join their ranks. By using a weapon – whether a fist, a bullet, or a bomb – we work against whatever we hope to gain.

All weapons are weapons of mass destruction. A weapon of mass destruction harms thousands, not just a few. It wreaks havoc for miles, not just around the block. It breaks a community, not just an individual target. Although nuclear bombs and chemical weapons typically come to mind, all weapons ultimately fall into this category. Even a hand, fashioned into a fist and thrown against an adversary, is a weapon of mass destruction. On a personal level, this is true because an essential part of each victim is their circle of family and friends and the wider circles encompassing their local, national, and ethnic communities. A gunshot necessarily harms more than the soldier: the bullet also hits the mother and father, the sister and brother, the grandparents and cousins,

the best friend, the neighbors, the religious community, the nation, and the people. On a cultural level, it is also true. A stone hurled at an adversary weakens the human project: it generates fear and defensiveness in the community, it diverts attention and resources from our efforts to improve community life, and it encourages our young to embrace the myth that might makes right. Any use of a weapon ripples out and injures us all. All weapons render indiscriminate harm.

The worst harm associated with a weapon occurs before the weapon is used. All weapons are fueled by the intention to harm, and it is this intention which causes the worst damage. If we remove the intention to harm, a bomb is just a piece of technology, and a stone is just a stone. But, when we add the intention to harm, we convert these materials into weapons capable of great destruction. The greater devastation, however, is in our hearts. It cannot be televised, but the damage is horrific: we abandon patience, we dismiss those with differing perspectives, we lift the rudder of respect and drift about with disregard, we turn to defense rather than generosity, we assume the worst in others, and we turn away from suffering. Sticks and stones may break our bones, but the intention to harm dissolves our humanity. At the moment we choose to take up a weapon, the great damage is done.

The elaborate weapons of our time are no different than the simple weapons of old. If we are concerned about these weapons, the path to change begins with an investigation of our intentions.

The Last Resort

We regard military action as our last resort – a costly and troublesome tool to be used only when all else fails. Except for the ardent warrior (who is eager to fight at any provocation) and the complete pacifist (who rejects military action as a matter of principle), most folks believe that we should try other alternatives before wielding tools of coercion and harm. This belief makes our thriving militarism more palatable, but is it accurate? The claim that militarism is our system of last resort bears three problems.

First, the mere threat of military action is a significant tool of coercion and harm. Weapons don't need to be fired in order to do their damage. If you are aware of my superior arsenal, and my willingness to use it, you will make your choices accordingly. If you know that I have a history of using coercion and harm when I don't see any other option to get my way, your freedom and decisions will feel constrained. Your comfort and ease will be under my shadow.

Our militarism is powerful precisely because it is a threat. It is a looming presence. We don't even have to mention it in order for this threat to play actively in negotiation. Everyone knows it is there. We rarely implement the threat, but that is irrelevant. Our desire to satisfy our interests is met whether we drop the bomb or simply refer to it. If we are to be honest, because we rely so heavily on threat, we should rank militarism as our first resort.

Second, we experiment with a curiously short list of alternatives before resorting to military action. There are countless nonmilitary ways to prevent a conflict from arising, to resolve a conflict before it becomes a crisis, to relieve a crisis, and to reduce the likelihood of a conflict recurring. For example:

- We could work to be certain that we have a thorough and accurate understanding of the perspective, needs, concerns, intentions, and feelings of our adversary. To the degree that our adversary sees that we understand these essentials, or at least that we are making a genuine effort to understand, space opens for more collaborative and constructive engagement.
- We could work to address the needs of our adversary by contributing our skills, labor, and other resources. As needs are met, conflicts wane.
- We could offer respect, courtesy, and good faith, even when these things are not reciprocated. Consistent use of these practices leaves the door open for transforming an adversarial relationship into a collaborative one.
- We could accept certain sufferings without retaliation or anger. Such action creates a moral dissonance which the adversary might resolve by a change of mind or a change of heart.
- We could invest in the design of imaginative solutions for economic, social, and political collaboration. In other words, instead of thrashing out the lowest common denominator or mutually acceptable solution, we could expand our commitment to create a mutually beneficial solution. We could generate options that incorporate substantially greater goals, different resources, different partners, different methods, and different timeframes.

Even in the hardest cases – dictatorship, invasion, attempted genocide, and the like – we have proven tools besides military action. (The Albert Einstein Institution, at aeinstein.org, offers a wealth of resources and successful historical examples.) There is no need to submit to oppression or stand by idly as others are injured. Instead, there are a variety of psychological, economic, social, and political tactics useful for undermining an oppressor's power. In general:

- We could withhold consent, cooperation, finances, resources, skills, labor, knowledge, property, tools, and other things necessary to sustain an oppressor's power.
- We could encourage others to withhold the above sources of power.
- We could engage in nonviolent intervention, including nonmilitary disruption of the oppressor's institutions, facilities, and procedures.

We dabble in all these options, but we hardly invest the time, energy, and resources in them that we do in militarism. In practice, we do not exercise these alternatives with diligence or rigor. And we certainly do not research, develop, and perfect these tools as we do the tools of militarism. To say that military action is our last resort, again, seems incorrect.

Third, military action, due to its very nature, never finishes the job. A conflict never resolves until some sort of reconciliation takes place. Military action only postpones this work in a costly and painful way. The last resort, whether we like it or not, is some sort of cooperation.

If military action were indeed our last resort, humanity would have annihilated itself generations ago. Even during the celebration of a battle won, warriors as well as anyone know that the deep-rooted causes of the conflict have not been resolved. We only need to speak with the “loser” in a military conflict to understand that the conflict is not over. The “winner” walks away triumphant but leaves its adversaries dissatisfied, hurt, angry, and vengeful. These feelings set the stage for old conflicts to resurface and new conflicts to emerge.

We expect that military action will finally bring an end to a conflict, but acts of coercion and harm necessarily leave a mess. A different kind of work needs to be done in order to genuinely resolve a difficult situation. Our true last resort in conflict resolution – our alternative when all else fails – will always be a risky and tentative experiment in cooperation.

For these three reasons, we should abandon the myth that militarism is our system of last resort.

We also might go a little further and explore our desire to have a last resort. By definition, a last resort is an option we would rather not use because it has undesirable side effects, but we keep this option ready because we believe it is our final best chance to achieve our goal.

In the context of conflict resolution, we desire a last resort as a final option to get our way. If all else fails – that is, if our meager efforts to achieve a mutually satisfactory resolution fail – we want a backup plan that will provide us with a unilaterally satisfactory resolution. In the case of militarism, this includes the possibility of harming or coercing our adversary. We prefer to get our way via rational persuasion, or financial incentives, or maybe even compromise. But if such measures fail to get us what we want, we like to have another option at the ready.

This “last resort mind” is toxic. It poisons our efforts to build a sustainable community. By nourishing a backup plan to get our way, we taint and diminish our attempts at cooperation. Our desire for a trump is a sign that we are not committed to exploring the full range of possibilities for collaboration.

The antidotes to this mental state are, naturally, interior practices. In particular, we could shift our primary interest from benefitting ourselves to benefitting others. We could exercise more generosity than consumption, more patience than certainty, and more compassion than turning away. We could train ourselves to act less on impulse and more from a place of equilibrium and attentiveness. We could sharpen our awareness of the fundamental qualities of life, including incompleteness, pervasive interdependence, and unceasing change. If we want to break free of the grip of a last resort, these are our tools.

Memorial Day Choices

Memorial Day serves two purposes, and we should not lump one with the other. At its core, the holiday is a time to remember warriors who have died in military action. Most of us have at least one relative or friend who fought, died, and is now held dear on this day. If this remembering and holding dear were the extent of our observance, the day would serve us well. May our departed loved ones rest in peace.

The second purpose of the day extends well beyond our need to remember. Consider the familiar rites: we conduct military parades and wave the national flag; we bestow honors on all who have ever worked in the military; we set aside bravery and heroism as military traits; we speak of our need for military force, and how we could not be free without it; we rally moral support for current military activities; and we pray for divine intervention on behalf of our warriors in the field. In short, we create a civil liturgy that beckons us to greater militarization.

If we are not eager to spread militarism – with its attendant suffering, steep costs, environmental hazards, and challenges to the path of kindness – we can reconsider our role in this liturgy. We are permitted to separate the act of remembering our loved ones from the act of promoting militarism. We are not obliged to tie these two activities together.

This coming Memorial Day, consider some alternatives. For example, instead of praying for divine intervention to aid our warriors, consider petitioning the heavenly powers to assist our diplomats. If our prayers for diplomatic results are successful, there will be no need for military supremacy.

Instead of decorating the graves of warriors only, consider decorating the graves of all who have followed their consciences and given their lives to build a better world. By doing this, we set aside the myth that dying in the course of military action is a greater thing than dying in the course of diplomatic action, or community organizing, or parenting, or teaching, or providing social services. Sacrifice, commitment, and bravery arise in all walks of life.

Instead of organizing military parades, which celebrate our power to threaten, coerce, and harm when faced with conflict, consider organizing parades which celebrate our diverse communities and our power to engage one another with openness, respect, and collaboration. If waving our national flag is a potent symbol of our vision and commitment, consider how our future might be if we waved our world flag instead.

Instead of remembering only our unknown warriors, consider remembering all the unknown individuals who have been victims of war: the countless civilians, the countless innocents, the broken families, and all those who have suffered from the redirection of resources from social needs to weaponry. The tomb of the unknowns must have wide gates.

Memorial Day is a public liturgy. Our allies, our adversaries and, most important, our children are watching. As we remember those who have died in military action, our challenge is to remain aware of the messages we send. In our heavily militarized world, the way we observe this holiday makes a difference. With every symbol, word, and action we choose, we either lend our support to greater militarization or we take a step toward demilitarization.

A Pacifist Primer

Pacifists oppose war. While this statement is true, it is only a small part of what it means to be a pacifist. For all of my adult life, I have been a pacifist and associated with pacifists. We are a minority, largely misunderstood, and often disparaged. In light of our precarious standing, I would like to clarify what many of us mean when we say “I am a pacifist.”

Pacifism is often viewed as cowardly or naive opposition to the use of physical violence. Many believe that pacifists avoid conflict due to some utopian hope that conflicts can be resolved without courage, sacrifice, or direct engagement with the adversary. I will address this myth by reviewing the *analysis*, *intentions*, *methods*, and *training* that are, in my opinion, central to being a pacifist.

Analysis

Conflict is the tension we feel when we interact with others whose goals appear to be incompatible with ours. Often, the tension is bearable and we learn to live peaceably with our adversaries. Occasionally, the tension is intolerable and we must act to relieve it.

How we approach conflict is the primary ethical, spiritual, and practical problem in our lives. If we fail to handle a conflict well, we suffer, or our adversaries suffer, or perhaps both. Thus, before we engage our adversaries, we need to be clear about our intentions and our methods.

The popular approach to conflict, as highlighted in our media and modeled in our entertainment, encourages us to maintain the following

intentions: (a) define your desired results before engaging your adversary; (b) achieve your desired results using whatever means necessary; (c) achieve your desired results as quickly as possible; and (d) if suffering must occur, ensure that your adversary suffers more than you. To support these intentions, we are encouraged to use methods such as deceit, coercion, stress, confusion, threats, humiliation, distraction, exploitation, dehumanization, and violence.

This approach to conflict has many adherents, it enjoys a long history in human affairs, it is easy to understand, and it is reinforced daily throughout our culture. Nonetheless, pacifists reject this approach for three primary reasons.

First, although the popular approach to conflict has the potential to bring quick results, these results typically lack substance. Current symptoms of the conflict might be suppressed, but deep-rooted causes are ignored. Alleged solutions are short-sighted and inadequate. The conflict appears to be resolved, but soon thereafter the celebrated resolution begins to unravel.

Second, the popular approach to conflict is filled with suffering. We leave our adversaries dissatisfied, hurt, angry, and vengeful. These feelings set the stage for old conflicts to resurface and new conflicts to emerge.

Third, although the popular approach to conflict is often marketed in moralistic terms, it typically abandons the highest callings of most ethical traditions. Little value is placed on engaging our adversaries with respect, generosity, understanding, or compassion.

In light of these concerns, pacifists seek an approach to conflict that offers more substance and less suffering. Riding roughshod over our adversaries might provide short-term results and immediate gratification, but pacifists are more concerned with sustainable results and genuine reconciliation. To this end, we suggest an alternative with a completely different set of ground rules.

Intentions

Pacifism is an approach to conflict based on four intentions:

Use Means Consistent with the Ends Desired: This is the intention to engage our adversary using methods that embody the outcome we desire. We reap the fruit of what we sow. Thus, if we desire to live in a world where practices such as respect, understanding, truthfulness, and compassion are the norm, then we must endeavor to use these methods when approaching conflict – even under the most demanding circumstances.

Touch the Adversary's Heart: This is the intention to connect with our adversary on a personal level so that our conflicted relationship can change. If we use force to compel our adversary to change their actions, we do nothing to address their concerns, and we can expect that they will return to their original course as soon as the opportunity arises. If we use persuasion to change the mind of our adversary regarding a particular conflict, we do nothing to address conflicts involving other matters. However, if we use methods that touch our adversary's heart, we cause them to pause, and we open a door to a new relationship that will enable us to approach current and future conflicts more fruitfully. A change of action or a change of mind might yield some short-term relief in a conflicted relationship, but a change of heart redefines the relationship.

Leave Room for Error: This is the intention to make allowances for the possibility that we are mistaken. Due to our limited capacities as humans, there is always a chance that our perspective on a conflict is incorrect or incomplete. Thus, we should use methods that are flexible enough to: (a) provide our adversary with some benefit of the doubt; (b) provide us with opportunities to gather more information about the situation; (c) leave space so that we might have a change of mind or a change of heart; and (d) allow us to explore options that might be better than anything we can envision at the moment.

Intend No Harm: This is the intention to abandon any desire to hurt our adversary. In the heat of conflict, we consider bringing harm to our opponent directly or indirectly, physically or emotionally, quickly or over time. In moments of reflection, though, we know that these desires undermine our efforts to resolve conflict. Harmful intent only fuels the fire. Thus, when we approach our adversary we are challenged to intend no harm, intend no offense, intend no humiliation.

Methods

How might we engage our adversaries in a manner consistent with these four intentions? Pacifists offer the following ten methods. These methods have been practiced and promoted for ages. Nonetheless, when push comes to shove, when we face our most critical conflicts, we rarely use these tools. In light of the intentions outlined above, pacifists suggest that these methods deserve fresh consideration.

Each method below can be practiced in the familiar settings of conflict: families, organizations, communities, politics, commerce, and international relations. Each can be exercised with dignity and honor. Not every method is suitable for every person or every situation. But as we increase our skills with these tools, we can customize methods appropriate for the conflicts we face.

Good Faith: In all relations with the adversary, maintain truthfulness, keep my word, be trustworthy, bear no intention of deceit.

Unconditional Respect: Value the adversary under all circumstances. Show high concern for his or her well-being. Do not take advantage of any misfortune the adversary experiences. Defend the adversary from third party attacks. Show respect even when respect is not reciprocated.

Humble Engagement: Before approaching the adversary, review my contributions to the conflict. Maintain an openness to the possibility that I am mistaken about one or more critical elements of this conflict. Give the benefit of the doubt to the adversary. Be prepared to offer

apologies, and to correct any misunderstandings I might have. Extend forgiveness. Refrain from insulting the adversary directly or in communications with others.

Correct Understanding: Make genuine and multiple attempts to learn more from the adversary about their perspective. Inquire: How do you see the circumstances? How is this situation impacting you? What are your key concerns? What are your intentions? What are your feelings? Analyze their perspective for new information and insights, and be prepared to revise my perspective. Share my revised understanding with the adversary to confirm my accuracy.

Sensitive Clarification: Clarify for the adversary important information about myself: how I see the circumstances, how this situation is impacting me, my key concerns, my intentions, my feelings. Share this information in a manner likely to be digested by the adversary. Be sensitive to timing, location, manner, and content. Even when my intentions are good, evaluate the potential impact of my sharing. Minimize sharing that is likely to make the adversary defensive and closed-minded. Maximize sharing that is likely to open a path for future interaction.

Selfless Service: Work to address the needs of the adversary. Touch the heart of the adversary by offering assistance with no taint of self-interest. Also, work to address any external circumstances that might be contributing to the conflict. Demonstrate good will and sincerity by serving with no desire for compensation, recognition, or reciprocation.

Material Generosity: Contribute resources to help address the needs of the adversary. Abandon my illusions of security in favor of offering concrete assistance to the adversary. Give freely of my money and possessions. Place the adversary's well-being over my own.

Purposeful Self-Suffering: Use self-suffering to demonstrate my sincerity to the adversary. Suffer the adversary's attacks without responding in kind. Instead of retaliating, knock on the door of the adversary's heart by responding unexpectedly: lower my defenses,

share my resources, make genuine attempts to understand and address the needs of the adversary. Use self-suffering to create a dissonance that the adversary might resolve by a change of mind or a change of heart.

Courteous Non-Cooperation: When facing a demand from the adversary to act against my conscience, politely decline to cooperate. Do not participate in, contribute to, or consent to activities which rend my heart. Maximize the possibility of touching the adversary's heart by making an effort to use some of the aforementioned methods before proceeding with non-cooperation.

Honorable Self-Defense: When I am under attack, when I have lost my stamina to experiment with other methods, and when I feel unable to touch the adversary's heart, the option remains to defend myself honorably. This means attempting to free myself from the adversary's attack while simultaneously maintaining a genuine intention to bring no harm to the adversary. This method includes techniques such as: verbal protest, aikido-style actions that redirect the adversary's energies, physical escape, identifying those who provide support to the adversary and touching their hearts, and resolute non-cooperation with the adversary in the face of threats and attacks.

Training

The intentions and methods outlined above are embraced by many, but their use is generally limited to low-risk conflicts. Pacifists push the limits by suggesting that these intentions and methods are suitable – even necessary – for high-risk conflicts.

In order to approach a high-risk conflict as a pacifist, one strives to maintain these intentions in the heat of the moment. One strives to wield these methods instinctively and competently while under pressure. Hence, a pacifist invests in three areas of training:

Technical Training: Much is known about the very practical aspects of each intention and method outlined above. A pacifist attempts to develop proficiency in each area, drawing especially on the fields of psychology, interpersonal relations, and group dynamics. Particular attention is given to developing skills in communication, facilitation, and collaboration.

Spiritual Training: We are powerless to maintain these intentions or wield these methods unless we are spiritually fit. In order to approach conflict fruitfully, a pacifist trains in the very concrete practices of tolerance, patience, compassion, understanding, generosity, and voluntary simplicity. We try to develop nonattachment to views and possessions. We try to rid ourselves of strong aversions and strong desires. And we try to increase our ability to ease the suffering of others, regardless of whatever suffering we might endure. Support for this type of spiritual training can be found in most religious traditions.

Daily Experimentation: A pacifist trains by experimenting with these intentions and methods daily. As one consistently applies this practice to the small concerns of life, it becomes easier to approach the larger conflicts with skill and courage.

Pacifism is not a panacea. As pacifists, we always risk some degree of failure: our skills might be inadequate to the task; our adversaries might not be moved; we might suffer emotional distress, loss of property, physical injury, or death. On the other hand, we also risk some degree of success: we or our adversaries might have an insight or a change of heart, opening the door to a resolution and long-term benefits which could never be achieved through intimidation or violence.

In failure or success, the pacifist approach to conflict enjoys a ripple effect. Whenever we engage our adversaries with integrity, respect, and compassion, we throw a stone into the waters of the status quo. Sooner or later, the ripples touch our adversaries and other neighbors. In small but certain ways, these ripples promote the evolution of the peaceable society.

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