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War and Peace on Earth

Jonathan McRay

Every so often, people find a need to proclaim the end of something. Predictions about the end of the world come and go with regularity. Economists forecast the end of poverty or hunger. After Obama's election, it was the end of racism. There is also the famous end of history. Now, people are proclaiming the end of war.

According to this view, war is declining and humanity is now less prone to violence. We are apparently in the midst of the longest and most peaceful era in history. As we civilize the world with market economies and representative democracies, war becomes less and less frequent, evidenced by fewer wars between the great industrialized nation-states and less violence per person.¹

Perhaps we are now seeing a reduction in what has traditionally been defined as war. But definitions are misleading. The argument that there is less violence per capita is seductive, but it is a specious sleight-of-hand. Rather than an enlightened humanity becoming more peaceable, population rates outgrew narrowly-defined violence. The twentieth century was one of the bloodiest in history because the technological sophistication of modern civilization made it possible to do violence on the largest scale. Weapons of mass destruction are not the inventions of bad apples but the predictable results of this sophistication and the corresponding sophistry that if we have something we also have the right to use it. Battle fatalities may be diminishing but deaths of noncombatants have increased.²

War has not ended. Rumors of war are still constantly among us. This "new peace" depends on an economic system which hides violence from those who benefit from its constant waging. Just as wealthy nations have outsourced jobs, they have also outsourced war. This new peace comes with new kinds of war, and also very old ones. There are proxy wars in Central America and Asia, imperial invasions in the Middle East, and Nobel laureates changing war into a remote-controlled video game. There is the militarization of police and the engorged numbers of the imprisoned. There is debt and privatization, and the maintenance of slavery in numerous guises. There is the War on Poverty, the War on Drugs, and the War on Terror, all expansive wars with unclear objectives and even vaguer timelines.

And, often unnamed, there is the ongoing, ancient, but now unprecedented, devastation of land, sky, and water. When we reduce definitions of war to official declarations between sovereign nations, we ignore that we are at war with the earth.

1. Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011) is one of the most popular sources of this argument.

2. For critiques of this "end-of-war" story, specifically Pinker's account, see John Gray's "Steven Pinker is wrong about violence and war" (*The Guardian*, March 13, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/13/john-gray-steven-pinker-wrong-violence-war-declining>), David Bentley Hart's "The Precious Steven Pinker" (*First Things*, January 2012, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2012/01/the-precious-steven-pinker>), Douglas P. Fry's "Peace in our time" (*BookForum*, Dec/Jan 2012, http://www.bookforum.com/inprint/018_04/8575), and Edward S. Herman and David Peterson's "Steven Pinker on the alleged decline of violence" (*ISR*, no. 86, <http://isreview.org/issue/86/steven-pinker-alleged-decline-violence>).

A War By Any Other Name

“When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy its trees by putting an ax to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees people, that you should besiege them? However, you may cut down trees that you know are not fruit trees and use them to build siege works until the city at war with you falls.” (Deut 20.19–20)

This biblical passage is unnerving for modern readers, who cannot fathom protecting trees over human life or what seems like an arbitrary distinction between fruit-bearing and non-bearing trees. But this command seems to acknowledge that war against the sources of life wages an even worse war against people. The trees of the field and the field itself are our very life, so do not destroy them! There are the effects of war on the land, but there is also war on the land itself. Cutting down trees to attack a city is war within war.

The chaos in Syria is a modern example of these layers of wars. For centuries, Bedouin herders sustainably tended the Syrian steppes, extensive grasslands that make up over half of the country. Strict regulations determined when and how tribal commons and seasonal pastures could be used. But in 1958 the Syrian government opened the steppes to unrestricted grazing, a decision with unintentional and still unfolding consequences. Instead of the Bedouin’s managed and moved herds, unrestricted grazing meant overgrazing, which depletes the soil and its ability to hold water during droughts. In the past ten years, farmers noticed declining soil fertility and moisture, fewer wet season rains, warmer temperatures, and more dust storms from erosion. These are signs of desertification and, according to some researchers, climate change. Drought is normal, but this is not.

Syria suffered a drought between 2006 and 2010. It is the most devastating one on record, made worse by abuse of the steppe ecosystem. Agricultural production plummeted by a third as crops failed, livestock died, and the government ceased subsidies as prices for fuel and cereals rose. One and a half million people fled from rural areas to cities, already full of refugees from the US invasion of Iraq. Syria, once an exporter of food, became reliant on emergency aid. These conditions, along with the government’s oppression of its people, ignited the uprising of 2011. In this civil war, 250,000 people have been killed, with millions, nearly half the population, displaced and seeking refuge in countries like the United States where they are treated with suspicion, or outright rejected.³ Syria is the entanglement of wars within wars, an overwhelming counterclaim to the end-of-war theory.

War is not an exception to normal life; war today is business as usual. In this war against the earth, peacetime does not exist. Thoughtful and compassionate people will notice collateral damage everywhere: deforestation, soil erosion, the slaughter of species, decapitated mountains, dead zones, plastics almost outweighing fish in the ocean, factories and toxic landfills in poor communities of color, hunger and malnourishment and homelessness, displacement of people and natural cycles with machines and chemicals. If we are honest with ourselves, we will not be able to talk about any of these separately because they are all manifestations of an all-encompassing war, the one that could end all wars.

The roots of this war are complex, as are the causes of all wars. Usually, however, these causes stem from simple stories. The roots of this war are ignored and still growing. And those roots grow from the story that we are separate from the rest of creation. This war makes *the environment* a domain outside and distinct from us, by unmaking *home*, our dwelling places where we belong. War on the earth is war against us, because where does nature end and humanity begin? Made from dust and breath, we are also as much

3. For information on the Syrian war and ecological degradation see Gianluca Serra’s “Over-grazing and desertification in the Syrian steppe are the root causes of war” (*The Ecologist*, June 5, 2015, http://www.theecologist.org/News/news_analysis/2871076/overgrazing_and_desertification_in_the_syrian_steppe_are_the_root_causes_of_war.html), Alex Kirby’s “Climate change sparked Syria’s ruinous war” (*The Ecologist*, June 6, 2015, http://www.theecologist.org/News/news_round_up/2782946/climate_change_sparked_syrias_ruinous_war.html), and the research article “Climate change in the Fertile Crescent and implications of the recent Syrian drought” (*PNAS*, March 17, 2015, <http://www.pnas.org/content/112/11/3241.full.pdf>).

water as the rest of this planet. Our guts are populated by microbes that help us digest food grown for us by other microbes in the soil. Our lungs inhale the breath of trees; their leaves draw in our exhalations. We *need* them to survive and thrive because, in the realest way possible, we *are* them. Nature and culture are really differences of emphasis.

Maybe we need a concept like *nature* so that we recognize we did not make this world and it really does not need us. Surely there is something special about being human, but nature distracts us from the intelligence of plants, the empathy of animals, and the memory of soils. More often than not, separating the world into “nature” and “us” justifies a planetary manifest destiny. Soon after separating ourselves from the earth, we begin separating ourselves from each other. There is a direct line between the plundering of ecosystems and the breaking of bodies; the wealth of the earth is stolen from the displaced and extracted by the enslaved. Ecocide and genocide fit like hand and glove because attacking the sources of life means attacking the people who care for them.

Humans always have and always will need to use the energy of the earth. Our relationship to soil, water, air, plants, and animals is one of dependence. Broadly speaking, we enact this relationship in two ways: peace or war. We can learn the arts and skills to be peacefully dependent, or we can force others to do the necessary work for us. We have erred on the side of making violent our inevitable need to shape and use the earth. *War* is the name we give to violence that is organized by its willingness to kill for survival, and that is precisely how we defend the war against the earth: collateral damages are lamentable but necessary for freedom and security. From species of plants to ethnicities of people, war defines what is foreign as a threat to be exterminated. “A colony,” wrote the great journalist Louis Fischer, “by definition, is a place where an outsider is master.”⁴ We have made the world our colony and in doing so we have made ourselves outsiders.

The origins of this story of separation are debated. Maybe we started telling it when we began transitioning from foragers to farmers, or perhaps when we were intoxicated with Enlightenment industrialism. Maybe this story is as old as the book of Genesis. The earth is our dominion and we can do with it what we like. Simplistic readings like this conveniently delete the part where the earth and all its creatures are blessed days before people are made from a mud ball, but we have certainly been fruitful and multiplied, and we have filled the earth and subdued it. Or so we thought. Major civilizations shriveled up because the rich grew richer by exceeding ecological limits, and I think we can safely say that the current levels of extraction and inequity are unparalleled. Our industrial systems have set the climate on a slow simmer, the boiling point hotly debated. Apparently we never comprehended the vast expanses of the earth (Job 38.18), content to merely profit from them by convincing ourselves that we could conduct war against the sources of life and still get out of this alive.

One of the oldest strategies of war is cutting off the enemy’s lifelines, from salting fields to poisoning wells. War prevents opponents from replenishing themselves and thus starves them into defeat, like the Syrian government starving its own people. Our dominant treatment of the earth does exactly this. Industrial civilization prevents the land from healing itself and prevents communities from sustaining themselves, effectively turning the earth into an enemy. The salt from industrial fertilizers draws water from the bodies of soil microorganisms that decompose organic matter, enhance soil structure, suppress diseases and pests, and make nutrients available to plants. Their desiccated husks are collateral damage; without them, chemicals leach easily into groundwater and into the global cycle of water. This is the modern way to salt the fields of our enemies, except our enemies are not foreign nations but our own fields and the creatures in them, including the farmworkers who are often from foreign nations. We purposely salt our fields and pollute our water sources and then wonder at droughts, drying aquifers, and diseases.

The connection between chemical fertilizers and war is even more direct. Fertilizer industries grew quickly when the Second World War created a demand for nitrogen-based explosives. German insecticide researchers developed the nerve gas used in concentration camps. American and British scientists created the

4. *Empire* (New York: Duell and Sloan, 1943), 8.

popular and still widely-used herbicide 2,4-D, which later became a component in Agent Orange and was sprayed over Vietnam. But then the world war ended and companies needed somewhere else to sell their wares. Industrial agriculture was the perfect market.

Research on biological warfare and nitrate explosives increased the demand for pesticides and herbicides and provided the means to develop the major insecticides used today. After 1945, the United States made itself constantly ready for war, with military bases around the world mobilized by growing economic interests. Today, it is the world's leading weapons merchant and the largest user and exporter of pesticides. Some Pentagon contractors are also pesticide manufacturers.⁵

If we are nature (and what else could we be?), then we are abusing ourselves with chemicals in the air and water and food. When we spray chemicals we ingest them; when we degrade our waters, we degrade ourselves. Toxins, like nutrients, circulate in the air and water and into the bodies of people, including women and their breast milk which they give to their children. This is the most impersonal, and simultaneously the most intimate, kind of war, fought by no one in particular on everyone in general.

Manifestations of Peace

If we are nature, then, like every other creature or force, we have the ability to build or destroy. A tornado can wreck a stand of trees; a cool breeze can carry seeds on its breathy back. A rainstorm can wash out a hillside; a gentle shower can renew parched ground. We are like the wind and rain. But we will have to tell a different story.

The story we need says that war is not the constant past or the foregone future of humanity. In order to live here, we must use the earth in ways that allow us to continue using it. That is, we cannot be wasteful and violent. Just as war against each other is not inevitable or impossible to resolve, neither is a war against the earth. But our peace accord will not come through technical treaties like geoengineering or genetic modification. Only a radical transformation of this conflict will do.

Simply put, we need to figure out the practice of *enough*. Ancient prophets denounced the greedy rulers who built bigger storehouses in which to hoard their stolen wealth. What does it take to joyfully fulfill our needs without biting the earthly hand that feeds us? We are ignorant, and arrogant, to believe we can have security by pulling the ground out from under our feet. Humility, coming to know our place and how to live there, is the first antiwar principle. Making peace with the earth is the earth making peace with itself. We do not have to be parasites. We can be healing presences here.

Christian tradition is, in some ways, a long debate about violence: is war ever justified for the greater good or is nonviolence the only faithful response? If history is any indication, most Christians have decidedly affirmed the former. Among a minority band of outliers, who wish to trace their lineage through peace activists to pacifists to the early church, the answer is clear. War is never right because it destroys what we did not make; it assumes that the vanquished were beyond redemption, that some life is without sanctity. However, we cannot claim to be nonviolent or antiwar if we continually perpetuate organized violence against the sources of life. Arguments about war and peace are nearly pointless without this acknowledgement. If nonviolence has meaning, it should start with how we use land and energy, which also means how we treat those who do our most necessary work. The only true ceasefire would be learning to meet our needs without violence, against the earth and its human and nonhuman creatures.

This is the beautiful and difficult work of reconciliation. This work will have to be both personal and political. But, perhaps most importantly, it will have to be ecological and cultural. Its manifestations depend on several guiding rules:

5. Details on chemical fertilizers and war are taken from Ivette Perfecto, John Vandermeer, and Angus Wright, *Nature's Matrix: Linking Agriculture, Conservation and Food Sovereignty* (New York: Earthscan, 2010), 43–48, and “Industrial Agriculture’s War Against Nature” in *The Fatal Harvest Reader: The Tragedy of Industrial Agriculture*, ed. Andrew Kimball (Sausalito: Foundation for Deep Ecology, 2002), 92–105.

- ***Reduce dependence on violence and extraction.*** This is the first and most basic step. Opt out, divest, disrupt. Ask, what does it take to sustain my life? How much energy, food, water, and building materials are used by my household, town, city, and region, and where does it all come from? What powers benefit from the status quo of exploitation? We cannot sustain billions of people by the standards of middle-class Americans. There is nothing nonviolent in this.
- ***Revive discarded skills, materials, and people.*** If we reduce our dependence on violence and extraction, we need something to turn to. There are better ways to grow our food, build our shelters, and heal our relationships. Hopeful examples of human ecology abound, mostly intact in some places, mostly in tattered fragments almost everywhere else. We must learn to be weavers, so learn from and support peasant and indigenous movements around the world, especially in your country; study the history of land theft and its continuing reality; become disciples to the birds of the air, the flowers of the field, and the flow of water so you know what amazing possibilities are in your place.
- ***Return waste to cycles of fertility and creativity.*** Return does not mean regress. It means rotation, even revolution, turning the wheel of life, death, and life again. Return means aligning the circle of culture with the circle of nature. We are wasting incredible gifts. The United States has over forty million acres of lawn. Schools, local institutions, and houses of worship mow grass on arable land. Many people do not have meaningful work or support. Churches could be converted into care farms that offer therapeutic work for people with mental or physical disabilities, organizing centers and folk schools, hospitality houses, food hubs with certified kitchens. Neighborhood yards can be transformed into rotating pastures for sheep and goats. Return means redistributing the commonwealth of land, water, and air so that everyone has enough.

I live in a small neighborhood where I work with a community project that cultivates and celebrates works of mercy, justice, and ecological health. This neighborhood, historically known as the Wasteland, sits near major poultry factories, and one of Virginia's most polluted streams runs through it. A few years ago, we began renovating several dilapidated houses with recycled material and turning gravel driveways and neglected backyards into gardens and greenhouses. We planted trees for fruit and trees for firewood, began restoring the stream, and explored cooperative ways to deal with conflict and make decisions. We pick up food scraps by bike from a cooperative grocery store and a worker-owned restaurant to make compost on our site. We put in ponds and a compost-heated water system. One family uses no electricity, making their own candles and cooking and heating with woodstoves. Several neighbors collectively manage a few cows in the city and turn the milk into butter and yoghurt.

We offer education for sustainable living and social justice and we incubate projects throughout the city, hatching community gardens in Hispanic trailer parks, a bike path and corridor park that will connect neighborhoods to downtown, and growing produce for public schools and a transition home for formerly incarcerated men. We have a supportive home for friends that have often been kicked out, locked up, addicted, and unheard. And we learned they are also artists, students, mechanics, growers, cooks, and nurturers. For several years, we hosted refugees in a transition house. One family moved to Syria from Iraq when the United States invaded, only to flee several years later when the massacres began. Salvation Army, down the street, gave us a swath of yard for a neighborhood orchard and a large garden tended by a Congolese family, who we also connected to a local university where they use the extensive campus gardens to grow more food for family, neighbors, and market.

Our fumbling and fledgling efforts pose a question: how can we have lives of abundance that do not destroy but nurture the earth, that do not oppress but liberate its creatures? This question, as far as we are concerned, forms the foundation of a hospitable and nonviolent way of life. We are trying, as Peter Maurin said, to make a society in which it's easier to be good. The name of our informal collective, Vine and Fig, comes from a prophetic imagination: "Everyone will sit beneath their own vine and fig tree, and no one shall make them unafraid" (Mic 4.4).

Pockets of antiwar resistance seem insignificant, visions of vines and fig trees for everyone seem laughable. And they just might be. Battle scars mark all our dwelling places. The scope and scale of this brutal war is almost incomprehensible. None of these experiments will end the war by themselves, but this is not the point. The point is that we should do the good work anyway, resisting war and healing the world with our fingers crossed. Experiments like this link with kindred spirits across incredible distances and arise from the roots where they are, like an unceasing prayer. Another story—one of human life in peace and partnership with creation—is possible.

The point is that someday we will have to realize, as if we had known it all along, that this war against the earth, like every war, will never lead to peace.

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