



Greg Hildenbrand

# Guns, Mental Illness, and Jesus: *Violence in America*

by Greg Hildenbrand



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## Dedication

This book is dedicated to the victims of violence in our society, the numbers of whom are unfathomable. May the murdered and injured, their families and friends, find comfort. I pray for the perpetrators of violence in its many forms for they, too, suffer tragic consequences in this life or beyond. In a very real sense we are all victims of senseless violence because it destabilizes our families, communities, and social structures. May we passionately and relentlessly pursue non-violent ways to resolve our differences, assure safety for all, and provide for all reasonable needs until our social systems are redesigned in fair and just ways for everyone.

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## Introduction

On Tuesday, May 24, 2022, an 18-year-old gunman walked into two adjoining Uvalde, Texas classrooms of fourth graders and murdered 19 students and two teachers with an assault rifle. He died in a shootout with law enforcement personnel. Prior to entering the school he shot his grandmother in the face. In the immediate aftermath of the incident, there were three overly-simplified, predictable, and repeating themes identified by various talking heads in response to this all-too-common tragedy: guns, mental illness, and Jesus. One side of the gun issue claims there is too little regulation over access to guns, the other side claims there is too much. Untreated mental illness, while a problem in all segments of society, is certainly a factor in these acts of violence. And finally Jesus – we need more of Jesus.

Regarding gun regulation, the argument that guns don't kill people, people kill people, is dismissive. Likewise for the related platitude that our problem is not guns but people. While true on the surface, these types of reasoning ignore the fact that disturbed people with a chip on their shoulder *and* access to lethal weapons can take or maim an innocent life with a gun that they might otherwise harm less seriously, if at all.

In addition, I tire of the justifications of Second Amendment rights, responsible gun ownership, and self-defense needs. I personally believe we should begin gun control discussions with a proposal to make

unlawful the selling, carrying, or owning of *all* guns, *all* gun parts, and *all* ammunition by civilians, except perhaps for non-military-grade rifles for hunters who eat what they kill (excluding cannibals). It would likely require several generations of continued ugliness to substantially cleanse our nation of guns in hands guns should not be in, but it is a long-term solution that deserves consideration. That position is unlikely to get beyond the words on this page, but I believe it is the correct place to begin. Whatever individual liberties we are granted must be assessed and regulated based on their likelihood to infringe on the liberties of another, along with the seriousness of those infringements. We cannot, however, solve our lethal violence problem with gun control alone.

I find it particularly rich that the politicians and other officials pointing fingers at mental illness are the same people, along with their like-minded predecessors, who consistently gut funding from mental health services. Mental health is an issue wherever mass violence erupts, but to think we can write off these events by saying the perpetrator was mentally ill, as if it cannot be helped, without doing anything to improve the availability, accessibility, and affordability of comprehensive mental health services is irresponsible and a tactic to divert attention away from meaningful gun regulation. We cannot, however, solve our lethal violence problem with improved mental health services alone.

What irks me the most in these all-too-common, *post-tragic-gun-violence* pontifications, however, is the platitude that we need more of Jesus in our world. Yes we do, but is there any doubt that most of those throwing the *Jesus* solution out there are simply trying

to distract from the need for gun control or improved mental health services? I suspect they have no accurate idea of what more of Jesus in our lives would mean. Do they really believe Jesus would support *anyone* carrying guns? To believe that means they are following a different Jesus or reading a different gospel. Are they referring to the Jesus that would not allow violent resistance to save his own life?<sup>1</sup> The Jesus that told us to turn the other cheek when struck by another?<sup>2</sup> The Jesus that sent his closest friends out into the world (unarmed) like “sheep in the midst of wolves”?<sup>3</sup> Is *that* the Jesus these voices are calling for more of? Because *that* is the Jesus of the Bible, and he is unwaveringly and inarguably nonviolent. There is no gun-toting, bad-guy killing, Constitutional-originalist Jesus in the Bible. I do not know how anyone can read “...those who take the sword will perish by the sword”<sup>4</sup> or “...love your enemies”<sup>5</sup> or “...do not resist an evildoer”<sup>6</sup> and still believe more of Jesus would ever justify gun ownership or violent responses to violence.

It is tragic that a nation professed by many to be a *Christian* nation, implying that it follows the uncompromisingly nonviolent life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, has become the most gun-toting, Second-Amendment loving, *violence-against-our-neighbors* nation in the history of mankind. To become a safer nation of people that love God and love others, as Jesus taught, will require nonviolent approaches and commitments on many fronts. Highly restrictive gun

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 26:53

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5:39

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 10:16

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 26:52

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 6:44

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 5:39

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ownership, comprehensive and accessible mental health services, and a deeper understanding of what following Jesus requires will be a good start.

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June 2023

# Part 1: Guns and Violence

## Chapter 1: Guns and Fear

*Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.<sup>7</sup>*

While gun ownership is embedded in the DNA of the United States, the accessibility, accuracy, and lethality of the weapons available to citizens today is spurning an unprecedented epidemic of gun violence that has spread to all social, ethnic, and cultural corners of the country. Gun violence related to gangs and drugs has been rampant for decades; but with only occasional spillover onto persons outside of those cultures, it was easily dismissed by the mostly-white, mostly well-to-do majority as the collateral impact of poverty, gangs, and drugs. No more. The United States is increasingly

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 16:24-25

fraying at its cultural seams and countless innocent victims of all ages, races, and socio-economic backgrounds are being lost. There is no safe place to hide. Not school. Not church. Not entertainment districts. Not home.

The United States has more guns in civilian hands than civilians. Why are increasing numbers of people feeling the need to arm themselves? One reason, among others, is *fear*. We fear losing our stuff or losing our life to someone with a gun so we feel we need a gun, too. Not only that, we want a gun that is at least as lethal as whatever the person wishing to do us harm is carrying. Not only that, we need several guns of various types so we can have them in several locations so one will be nearby when and where needed. Guns in cars, guns in bedrooms, and guns in handbags. Do not get me wrong; the threats are real. What I wish to address, however, are our assumptions about the most effective and Christ-like responses to those threats.

Violence was rampant in Jesus's day, too. The Roman Empire was brutal. Although they did not have guns, they did have swords, spears, axes, scourges, bows and arrows, stones, and of course, crucifixions. Although there were robberies and murders in Jesus's day, there is no indication that Jesus condemned the ruthless government or the criminals. He did, however, have a LOT to say about how we should respond to violence. First and foremost he told us not to fear. That directive is repeated so many times throughout scripture it is almost a cliché. Jesus says, "Do not fear those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul..."<sup>8</sup> Jesus explained his stance against violence by saying,

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 10:28

“...all who take the sword will perish by the sword”<sup>9</sup>. Jesus understood in a way we do not that violence begets violence. The cycle of violence perpetuates itself until sufficient numbers of people say “Enough!” and meet violence with non-violence. That cycle is tragically illustrated in abusive families. Parents who abuse their children were almost certainly abused by their parents, who were probably abused by their parents. We can either prepare to respond violently to threats of violence, assuring the continuation of the cycle, or we can commit to breaking the cycle with a non-violent response, even at the cost of our own life. Unfortunately, it may cost the life of a loved one, too. Jesus again: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”<sup>10</sup>.

Two pillars of non-violence in our recent history – Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. – committed to the sorts of non-violent responses that Jesus preached. And it cost them their lives. Their stories illustrate how difficult an act of great love it is to stop reacting violently to violent acts. Any efforts on their part to fight the violence inflicted upon them and their followers with violence would have resulted in even more bloodshed. Most importantly, however, is that sufficient numbers of people *endured* the violence until their violent persecutors finally gave up. Significant, though not final, changes ensued. I am reminded of D-Day on the beaches of Normandy as the allies prepared to overrun the German machine gun nests entrenched above the beaches. General Eisenhower knew it would require a tremendous

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<sup>9</sup> Matthew 26:25

<sup>10</sup> John 15:13

number of soldiers to die in the face of relentless gunfire until the German machine guns jammed, ran out of ammunition, or were overwhelmed so other soldiers could get to the nests and incapacitate them. True, this is an example of a violent reaction to a violent situation, but the soldiers who died on those beaches performed a sacrificial act of love *absorbing* the onslaught, at the cost of their own lives, in order to allow others to come behind them to liberate the people Germany occupied.

There is a reason Jesus preached that we should be willing to give up our lives instead of committing violence against another. He modeled in his crucifixion.

The reason Jesus taught that we should be willing to give up our lives instead of committing violence against another is the same reason he told us not to fear those who can only kill the body. That reason is that our lives are infinitely greater than our time on earth; yet, how we respond during our earthly span of days is impactful on the greater life. Preserving our earthly lives should never trump what is needed for the greater life. That greater life is the *kingdom of heaven* Jesus spoke so frequently about. It is the life from which our bodily existence arose, in which we live and move today, and into which we consciously return when we die. Jesus invites us into that kingdom while we are still on earth and encourages us to participate in bringing that kingdom to earth for everyone. Jesus never implied that bringing that kingdom to earth would be easy or without suffering and loss.

Jesus was not saying we should be careless with our lives. He himself was cautious about spending too

much time near the Jewish and Roman leaders during the early parts of his ministry because he knew they would have him killed as his influence grew. Even the night before he was crucified he asked God to reconsider his fate: “... *Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me...*”<sup>11</sup> He clearly did not relish what he was about to go through. On that night as he prayed, Luke’s gospel records “*In his anguish...his sweat became like great drops of blood falling on the ground.*”<sup>12</sup> Even though he did not look forward to his fate, he knew it was the right and necessary thing to do for the greater life, for the kingdom of God, because that greater life is far more important than any individual life including his (and ours). He knew, in a way we can only know by faith, that physical death is not the end but a passage back into the greater life. He showed this by his resurrection.

And this is Jesus’s message for us: *It is better to surrender our earthly life to violence than to react in a way that perpetuates the violence.* Jesus told us not to fear. When we choose to allay our fear by arming ourselves, however, we miss the message completely. Jesus did not tell us not to fear so that we could save the life we think we’re living. Jesus told us not to fear because our life is *much more* than the life we think we’re living. If and when we meet violence with violence, we simply perpetuate and expand the violence in our world for this *and* future generations. Will our one act of laying down our earthly life in a non-violent response, in itself, transform the world into a peaceful co-existence? Probably not. It did not with Jesus’s death. But it will be a step toward that

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<sup>11</sup> Mark 14:36

<sup>12</sup> Luke 22:44

end – one step of many required. More importantly, our non-violent response will not add to the violence.

From what I read and understand of Jesus's life and teachings, there is no other way to bring about peace on earth. Once enough of us commit to non-violent actions and reactions to the violence around us, we will no longer be a threat to those who feel they must use violence to get what they want or need from us. When we know our days on earth are but a fraction of the greater life within which we exist, our fear dissipates. Likewise, we come to understand that all the possessions we value so highly are of the earth and will be lost to us after we pass anyway. If someone tries forcibly to take something in our possession, we will not resist violently because, ultimately, it is not ours to possess anyway.

Many folks believe self-defense of life and property is a right which cannot be taken from us. While that is true in the context of the laws of this nation, is it the way of a follower of Jesus? It may be legal, but is it Christian? Personally, I find it impossible to read the gospels and believe following Jesus requires anything less than non-violent responses to whatever happens to us. I understand it seems non-sensical and counter-cultural. But Jesus's life and teachings are counter-cultural and often non-sensical from an earthly standpoint. It is why he was crucified. Should we expect less for ourselves? And his is not the only non-sensical story in the Bible, which is full of them.

I acknowledge that others come to different conclusions and choose to arm themselves against the rampant threats of violence today. How we respond is between us and God; but it does matter. Our responses send a message to the world that reflects our personal

faith in God's goodness and protection. The life and teachings of Jesus are difficult to follow, and I am far from a consistently faithful follower. I do believe, however, that if we are to effectively address today's violence, following the non-violent model of Jesus will be required.

When I turned eighteen I was required to register for the military draft – which forced young men into military service based on a randomized list of birthdates. The year I might have been drafted the lottery number for my birthdate was 57. Estimates indicated the draft would take all qualified persons with numbers from 1 to somewhere between 55 and 60. The majority of those selected would be sent to Vietnam, a brutal war most people never understood the purpose of and fewer supported. I daresay, most of us still do not. I spent many restless nights in paradoxical fits of uncertainty. Although I was only loosely attached to a church, I was aware of Jesus's teachings on non-violence. I remember a question on the draft form asking whether I had a moral or religious objection to killing another person (my paraphrase from memory). I remembered the commandment: *Thou shalt not kill*, and marked "Yes." I was assigned the status of CO (Conscientious Objector), which apparently didn't prevent anyone from being conscripted into military service, and I was relieved when the draft ended before the selection process that year began.

What haunted me on those restless nights was an image of coming across a Vietnamese soldier with a gun pointed directly at me. Would I kill him before he could kill me? I did not know. I did not want to know. I resolved, intellectually, that I would die before killing

another, especially for such an ambiguous war, but could I actually do that? After all, wars are not conflicts between the fighters but between the political elites that conscript the fighters into battle. I would have no personal issue with my “enemy.” Complicating matters were images of an “enemy” soldier threatening the lives of others in my platoon. Would I kill the “enemy” in order to save the lives of my platoon-mates? Which would be the more Christ-like act? I did not know. I still do not know.

Please understand. I was not wrestling with my patriotic duty as a US citizen. I was wrestling with the conflict between what my country required and what Jesus commanded, at least as I understood the two. I could not reconcile them at the time, nor can I today. My paternal grandfather served in World War I, my father served in World War II. My uncles served in the military, as did a number of cousins and friends. I appreciate the sacrifices numerous generations made in order for me to have the life I have today. I am privileged because of them, and I owe veterans of every generation my gratitude and respect. So, this is not intended to be a judgment on those who serve in the military. I am simply sharing the personal dilemmas I wrestled with.

My tepid commitment to non-violence presented another dilemma when I got married and had children. Like my images of being a part of a platoon whose lives were being threatened by an “enemy” combatant – would I commit violence against someone threatening to do violence to my wife and children? As I read and understand the life and teachings of Jesus, the answer would have to be “No.” Certainly, I could put myself between an attacker and my loved ones, certainly I

could sacrifice my life in hopes of saving theirs, but could I actually kill the attacker, even if I were capable of doing so? I did not know. I still do not know. Jesus said no one has greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends (and, presumably, family). Jesus did *not* say "No one has greater love than to lay down *the life of another* for one's friends" (or family or government).

I honor the memories of those who fought and died in service to our country. I honor those who were wounded and maimed – physically and/or emotionally. And I mourn for the lives lost and maimed in countries where violent conflicts are rampant. But I wonder if, going forward, we can reimagine what it means to bring about what is best for our world in the context of the life and teachings of Jesus the Christ. What would *that* look like? The United States was established and has been forcibly maintained by violent actions against others from its founding to its territorial expansions to its kidnapping of African peoples to provide cheap labor for its enterprises. That violence has trickled down onto our streets, into our schools and churches, and into our homes. It is in our DNA. It is endemic. But must it always be that way? It is time to begin a significant transformation.

*Above all, trust in the slow work of God. We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay...And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability – and that it may take a very long time.* Pierre Teilhard de Chardin<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, excerpted from *Hearts on Fire*.

Following Jesus disallows violent responses toward another, even as an act of self-defense. *And* it disallows violent responses toward another doing violence to others. *And* it disallows using violent means to accomplish individual or collective objectives no matter how consistent those objectives are with what we believe to be the greater good. In my opinion, the Christian rule of thumb is that if an objective requires violence to accomplish, it is either the wrong objective or the wrong time to work toward it. Non-violent action is counter to our national culture, but for would-be followers of Jesus it is required. We must be willing to lay down the life we think we are living with acts that establish the *line-not-to-be-crossed* of non-violent living. Non-violence is a necessary step toward establishing, in time, a non-violent world, which is a necessary step to bringing the kingdom of God to earth. In the words of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Jesuit contemplative, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, we must learn to "...trust in the slow work of God."<sup>14</sup> Granted, such trust is difficult to maintain in the face of rampant violence.

We should not, however, confuse non-violence with silent assent to the violence of others. Passivism does not mean doing nothing in the face of violent injustice. We should absolutely make our voices heard and persist in every reasonable activity against violence short of committing violence ourselves.

If we think security comes from having a gun or other lethal weapon at our disposal, or if we think it is better to perpetuate our earthly life by committing an act of violence in response to the violent threat of

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<sup>14</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, excerpted from *Hearts on Fire*.

another, then our sense of security is built on a false premise. Is it that we believe we can arm ourselves sufficiently to overpower anyone who threatens violent action against us? Or do we want the ability to make anyone who violently injures us pay for their dirty deed with physical suffering of their own? Our primary motivation to arm ourselves with lethal weapons is fear, in spite of the numerous biblical dictates not to be afraid. We are most often afraid of losing the control we think we have over the life we think we are living. First of all, we do not control nearly as much of our lives as we think; and second, nothing of the earth can harm the larger life within which we live our earthly lives. Jesus's life and teachings remind us that life is infinitely more than our earthly existence and encourage us to strive for greater awareness of the greater life of which we are inseparably a part. Most of us refuse to trust that God keeps us safe within that greater life.

Jesuit peace activist Fr. John Dear writes, “The unveiling of...God’s reign of peace happens, according to the Gospels, through our participation in the cross of Jesus – that is, through our willingness to practice active, non-violent, suffering love for the human family: for justice, disarmament, and creation.”<sup>15</sup> Aspiring Christians should understand that the path of Jesus leads to the cross. We will suffer, but we will suffer for the greater good. Many of us will die young and of very unnatural causes. It will require many thousands or millions of people committed to non-violence in the face of death and suffering over many generations to bring about the transformation to

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<sup>15</sup> Fr. John Dear, *Unveiling Jesus*. Printed in *Oneing*, Vol. 10, No. 1, The Center for Action and Contemplation, 2022, p. 32.

a non-violent world. The United States, however, as the most violent of all nations, is the necessary place to begin.

Once a critical mass of people ceases to react violently, however, things will change. When guns, ammunition, and gun parts are outlawed for civilian use, the numbers of guns will gradually drop as guns wear out, break, run out of ammunition, or are otherwise removed from circulation. Law enforcement personnel will gradually become less fearful of and anxious about those they confront being armed, making violent escalations and confrontations less likely. Fewer guns at large will decrease our perceived need for guns intended for self-defense.

When Jesus said that those who live by the sword will die by the sword<sup>16</sup>, he affirmed that whatever sense of power and security we gain from possessing and using violent means will only last until someone with greater weapons, greater skill, or greater numbers of violent actors overpowers us. More violence is never a solution, only an act of escalation that exacerbates the problem. Violence perpetuates violence and cannot lead to a peaceful world. As Jesus hung on the cross he said, “Father, forgive them: for they do not know what they are doing”<sup>17</sup>. Perhaps it is time we learned.

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<sup>16</sup> Matthew 26:52

<sup>17</sup> Luke 23:34

## Chapter 2: Guns and Immaturity

*But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.<sup>18</sup>*

In the last chapter I focused largely on our desire to arm ourselves for purposes of self-defense, with the intent to threaten, incapacitate, or kill someone who is threatening us or threatening to take something in our possession, whether those threats are real or imagined projections. I find no justification for gun possession for these purposes in the life and teachings of Jesus. I confess my feelings about civilian uses of firearms are mixed. Although I choose not to participate in activities with firearms, I do not necessarily see hunting for food as problematic, nor do I have a problem with shooting firearms at non-living targets for entertainment. So called “trophy” hunting or hunting for the pleasure of killing another living being, is bothersome to me. Shooting a coyote that is killing the chickens from whom one derives food is not problematic to me. There are other ways firearms are used, however, that have nothing to do with hunting, food provision, or target practice. The other excuses

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<sup>18</sup> Matthew 5:39

given for firearm possession, in my opinion, are rooted in immaturity and greed.

As I consider immaturity as a motivation to possess guns, I will address those who forcibly take something from another (like the adult version of a 2-year-old), but I will also consider greedy people (who may or may not possess guns) who create conditions that leave swaths of humanity in a state of want such that violent means become the best option to fulfill basic needs. Both sources of greed stem from immaturity and a lack of understanding our interconnected natures, the former being a personal greed of wanting something one does not have, and the latter being both a personal and societal greed of wanting more than one currently has while the basic needs of others go unmet. The former typically brings violence upon one to a few other people in isolated incidents. The wake of the latter tends to devastate numerous innocent victims over wider areas and longer time-frames across our nation. Indeed, the latter is often the cause of the former. Both are tragic and difficult to understand or know how best to address. That I attribute violent greed to immaturity should not imply that I minimize its potential impact. With easy access to military-grade weapons by civilians today, one immature person can inflict more damage more quickly to more people than an entire military battalion of old. The nature of the immaturity of which I speak has to do with the level of behavioral restraint an individual is capable of acting out of and not with the degree of devastation they are capable of inflicting.

Guns provide a false sense of empowerment to those who feel powerless. And greater numbers of guns provide greater perceptions of power. The same

occurs with more powerful and capable guns. In that sense, we can attribute a lack of or loss of a sense of power as a cause of much of today's gun violence. That perceived lack or loss of power is what I label as immaturity, at least in the context of the life and teachings of Jesus. If the immaturity we suffer from manifests in the perceived lack or loss of power, what is limiting our ability to mature into less violent beings? How can we, as a society, restore an acceptable level of perceived power? How can we open non-violent options to those feeling powerless, isolated, lost, angry, or hopeless?

Our sense of power and our sense of control over our life and life-circumstances are directly related. If we feel life is being done *to* us instead of *by* us, we feel like victims instead of participants, and we seek ways to reestablish a sense of control over our lives. Increasingly, that sense of control is gained at the butt-end of a gun. Not only is that dangerous to others, it is ultimately an ineffective way to obtain what one is actually seeking, a case I attempt to make with this book. Our immature belief that a gun can restore a sense of control over our lives, that a gun can help us obtain what we want or need, is an example of allowing the ends to justify the means. What we need are more non-violent means that allow people to accomplish reasonable ends without resorting to violence.

Maturity, in this sense, has little to do with age and much to do with the non-violent options one is capable of identifying and accessing as reasonable responses to life's challenges, as well as the degree of personal threat we feel from those challenges.

*For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother ... and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me...<sup>19</sup>*

Immaturity expresses in countless ways when it comes to gun ownership and violence. Immaturity results from a limited ability to see beyond one's individual, physical and/or social environment. It is the unwillingness to consider options beyond what one thinks will bring the quickest satisfaction for whatever need one has, whether it is to quash a threat or fulfil a desire. As individuals in our society became more isolated due to COVID, from its social distancing and online learning, and from social media and texting becoming increasingly the norm for interpersonal interactions, we learned to judge others based on severely limited samples of their lives. This limited sampling is reflected in our government, where two political parties wield the vast majority of power, limiting our political options to those that serve one or both parties. The fewer the number of options we perceive available to us as individuals, the more immature and uncreative our thoughts and actions become. The fewer the number of options we perceive as a society, the more immature society becomes. Likewise, the fewer the number of options for spiritual formation offered by our religious institutions, the more immature our spirituality becomes. And immaturity on these fronts leads to defensiveness, sometimes to the point of violence.

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<sup>19</sup> Matthew 10:35-37

Typically, we think of maturity as something that develops over time, both individually and culturally. That appears not to be the case today. Rather, we seem to be digressing. Except for an occasional wave in passing, we do not know our neighbors. We sacrifice time-worn perspectives by increasingly hoarding and isolating our elders into nursing homes. Even many churches, under the guise of spreading the gospel, present a limited gospel when compared with the expansive, inclusive, service-oriented life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. When we know so little about our neighbors, when we lose the wisdom of our predecessors, and when our religious institutions lose sight of their purpose by shrinking into modes of self-perpetuation, we become ignorant of vast swaths of reality existing outside the small portion of the world we allow into our awareness. We fail to notice how the walls of bias, prejudice, and harsh judgment hem us in. We limit our social events and media attention to that which supports what we already think and how we live. As such, we learn little that is new and lose much of what we once learned. Our options and choices for doing right and good shrink to a minuscule portion of the available options and choices. And we sometimes feel we must violently preserve and protect our tiny understanding of right and wrong to keep the small world we are comfortable with from collapsing. We have lost the ability to envision a broader, grander, and more inclusive life.

Jesus's warnings against aligning too closely with one's family, as quoted above, had to do with the common tendency to define and restrict one's world to the limited context of a small, homogeneous social unit. Many of the social units of his day were tribes –

precursors to today's gangs – where one found safety and acceptance in a small, tightly-knit, exclusive group. When we place our loyalties with a single family, tribe, race, or nation, we align ourselves against other families, tribes, races, or nations, and they become our enemies. We forget that they, too, are children of the same God. When we adopt shrunken views of right and wrong, good and evil, acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and life-styles, our way of life becomes easily threatened because its foundation is unstable and small. We believe we must staunchly defend more of the little we find acceptable in order to hold together the limited world-view we have contracted into. Jesus pulled his followers out of their homogeneous groups and taught them to live a less-threatened, more *tolerant-of-others* life. He taught that we are to love our enemies, not prepare to kill them. Others do not threaten us; they expand us.

How different would our world be if we expanded our views of what is possible, what is acceptable, and of what does NOT threaten us? Our immaturity makes us frail, scared, and constantly defensive. It is easy to think and act like we know it all when the universe of knowledge from which we draw is small. It is lazy and immature, however, to assume we possess all, most, or even a top tier of the available and relevant knowledge. Jesus invited people out of their small social units into a larger reality that did not necessarily exclude their former social units, but widened their perception and acceptance of reality so they could include other, and eventually all social units. That is the sort of maturity that is sorely lacking today.

We know that social media sites use algorithms to keep us engaged by scrolling a continuous stream of posts similar to what we linger over or click on from those sites. Twenty-four hour news outlets present news stories through an intentionally skewed lens intended to reinforce what they know we think and believe, based on our engagement with their broadcasts. Religious institutions provide worship and other experiences based on the known preferences of their members. Politicians support positions consistent with what polls say enough voters support to keep them in office. It is an addictive, self-affirming, and perpetuating cycle of bigotry. In these diverse and restrictive ways, we are unwittingly encouraged by narrowly-defined parameters to remain in the cesspool of our own biases and prejudices. We are convinced that what we believe is right because it is supported by media, church, and politicians, when in fact their support is contingent on ours. It is a self-perpetuating cycle of closed-mindedness and immaturity.

We are being seduced into an ever-shrinking perception of reality. We intend to go to news broadcasts and social media sites to learn what is going on in the world. We attend church to learn about God and spiritual life. We elect politicians to move our society forward. Because of the way these institutions are designed, however, we seldom learn anything new, we do not grow in significant ways outside of our existing boundaries, and we conclude that those who do not agree with us are wrong. Our attempts to expand our horizons, no matter how sincere, do the opposite. Those who control how social and news media functions, and those who filter what religious institutions offer, and the political powers on both

sides of the political isle do *not* have what is best for humanity or our world in mind. Rather, their own personal and institutional survival and prosperity guides their actions. It is a devious form of evolutionary selection, but instead of moving the species forward, it keeps us stuck – and captive. Worse, it digresses and contracts us into smaller and more closed-minded manifestations of who we are capable of becoming.

Arguably, the most egregious example of shrinking into an artificial reality is the realm of video-gaming, particularly violent gaming. Although I am not a gamer, I can imagine the thrill of being put into a position of ultimate power over circumstances and others with very little consequence for the decisions one makes, other than perhaps being sent back to an earlier stage of the game. An enormous sense of control and power is available in such an environment. A social outcast or a self-proclaimed nobody can become a story-book hero of epic proportion, killing the “bad guys” or the evil ones (however one defines bad or evil) and receiving love, acceptance, and accolades from their imaginary community. Of course, the reality inside the gaming world is not the reality outside of it. It is not surprising that a number of mass murders are committed by persons obsessed with violent gaming.

The non-gamers among us can dismiss this example as not applicable to us since we do not participate in gaming. We delude ourselves by that dismissal, however, because most of us create similarly imaginary and unreal worlds through the media we consume and the limited numbers and types of people and view-points we allow into our daily existence.

Personally, I have no direct experience of homelessness, of being a social or ethnic minority, of food insecurity, of drug cultures, or of the countless manifestations of trauma so prevalent today. I can easily pretend these all-too-common life-experiences are unreal or irrelevant. I can easily create an imaginary world where those types of tragedies exist only on news shows or where the victims are only receiving what they deserve. I can essentially “kill off” these “others” by pretending they do not exist or do not matter. To do so, however, I must shrink my life experience into something far less consequential than the reality, exactly as one does in video-gaming. I do not see those outside my small circle of family and friends – my “game” – as real people with real lives. If I do not acknowledge all others as my equals in the family of God, their lives have no value to me, nor does their suffering concern me.

Which brings me to the paradox of today’s immaturity. We cannot mature socially or spiritually without recognizing, acknowledging, and living into our interconnectedness and equality with all beings. Yet, our world makes it increasingly easy to live life as a virtually isolated loner. We cannot know, respect, or value the lives of others nor can we mature by continuing in this way, which makes immaturity and guns a lethal mix.

*Love God. Love neighbor. Love self. Love period.*  
Rev. Jacqui Lewis<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Rev. Jacqui Lewis, *Love Period* podcast.

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/love-period-with-rev-dr-jacqui-lewis/id1559937758>

Because we are inseparably interconnected with all beings, we cannot mature into our truest nature without first accepting others as possessing equal value and equally deserving of the respect we desire for ourselves. When Jesus told us to love our neighbor as ourselves, he did not mean to love *only* our neighbor. Rather, we must also love ourselves by understanding that we, too, are worthy of love and respect. This is not an insecure, narcissistic type of self-deceiving love, but an understanding that we are the beloved of God, even with our seemingly numerous imperfections and selfish tendencies. At our core, at the level of the being we were created to be and are becoming, we are children of God, made in God's image and likeness. Fortunately, God sees the finished product, the consummated being, and not the immature stage of becoming we currently and individually display. The key to loving our neighbor is to acknowledge the consummated being in them, too, instead of the immature 2-year-old they may act like at times.

In order to perceive a *being-in-the-making* in others, to see through the overly-defended, exterior appearance of so many people, we must learn to listen to and understand them in undefended, open ways. It requires faith that there actually is a *being-in-the-making* within everyone. Once we acknowledge and speak to that maturing being, we not only find it easier to love and respect them, we also find them less threatening. We still may not agree with them, but agreement with another is not a prerequisite for acting in loving ways toward them. At this level of engagement we can identify the many similarities between us instead of emphasizing the few points of difference. We will likely

find that our personal desires and deepest hopes are complimentary, and that we can perhaps accomplish together as brothers and sisters what is out of reach to us as separate beings. Jesus encouraged us to see the good in others, not only to help us love them as neighbors, but because by seeing the good in others we are better able to see the good in ourselves. In fact, the two capabilities develop together.

Valerie Kaur, a Sikh author, writes, “Deep listening is an act of surrender. We risk being changed by what we hear... the goal of listening is not to feel empathy for our (neighbors), or to validate their ideas, or even change their mind in the moment. Our goal is to understand them.”<sup>21</sup> This is the type of undefended attention required to love our neighbors. We become vulnerable enough to risk being changed by them. It is not our charge to *change* others; it is our charge to *love* them. Deep love requires deep understanding. There is an old adage that familiarity breeds contempt, which is true when we view others through our overly-defended biases by trying to determine how they threaten us. We cannot see through the defended exterior of another until we seek to understand them from a place of undefendedness in ourselves. We listen to them in search of what they perceive that we do not, instead of searching for ways they are wrong. When we see deeper into the core of their being, they will reflect our inner most selves, not as a duplicated image of us in our world, but as a reflection of us as we most likely would be in their circumstances.

When we connect with someone in a way that affirms our interconnectedness and celebrates our

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<sup>21</sup> Valerie Kaur, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love* (New York: One World, 2020), pp. 143-144, 156.

similarities, we will not hate, harm, or kill them. This requires an open-mindedness that does not arouse our sense of defensiveness. Our sincerely held beliefs are not threatened simply by respecting and acknowledging others for theirs. Such familiarity only breeds contempt when we receive others from a threatened space that presupposes our superiority over that person, which is an assumption built on the false premise that we are or need to be superior to them or anyone else.

As a volunteer crisis counselor, my heart aches for the countless numbers of people in deep despair because they feel unheard, unacknowledged, unappreciated, and unseen. The opposite of love is not hate; the opposite of love is apathy – not caring, not seeing, not appreciating. The despair felt by many often leads to violent acts, most often against themselves, but sometimes against others too. When we are in despair, we contract into a very small life-space that we fear will simply disappear and take us with it if we cannot find a way to be heard, understood, and acknowledged. Violence is one way to gain such acknowledgement. It is an immature cry for help. Being acknowledged by another does not require violence, however, when someone will listen respectfully and with the intent to understand.

## Part 2: Subtle Violence

### Chapter 3

### Non-Physical Violence

*How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.<sup>22</sup>*

In the previous chapters I focused on physical violence, particularly gun violence. And while physical violence is an epidemic in our society today, it is far from the only or even the most common manner in which we do violence to others. Non-physical violence is rampant and can take many forms, including verbal abuse, neglect, and vicarious aggression. It is often the precursor to and foundation for direct acts of physical

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<sup>22</sup> James 3:5b-6

violence. Non-physical violence is so widespread and endemic to most of us that we fail to recognize it as violence at all. *“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt them,”* was commonly proclaimed on playgrounds when I was a kid. But the truth is that words *do* wound, and their wounds often cut deeper and fester longer than physical wounds. Ditto for woundings from apathetic neglect, which can kill infants and result in chronic, emotional scarring in the rest of us. Vicarious aggression in the form of video games, violent media, and many sporting events are common methods of expressing violent tendencies through others.

The author of the epistle of James labels our tongue as a fire.<sup>23</sup> The book of Proverbs, among others, has much to say about the power of our words. For example, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue...”<sup>24</sup> Our words have power, and the manner and context in which we use them channels the impact of that power. Just as electricity can be channeled to heat a home or to electrocute someone on death row, so our words can build up and encourage, or they can wound and destroy. We often feel justified in verbally lashing out at someone we feel has wronged or threatened us, believing we are not being violent because we are not harming them physically. We joke, “At least I didn’t murder them,” even though we may believe the world would be better off without them. Jesus, however (as Jesus was wont to do) calls us out for our thoughts and words even when we have no intention of acting on them. “You have heard that it was said...’You shall not murder’...but I say to you

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<sup>23</sup> See James, chapter 3.

<sup>24</sup> Proverbs 18:21a.

that if you are angry with a brother or sister you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council.”<sup>25</sup> In this excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus likens the impact of angry thoughts or insulting words against another to actual murder. Who among us would not be found guilty many times over if held to that standard?

It is significant that Jesus correlates aggressive thoughts and aggressive words because thoughts precede words, and both precede aggressive acts. There is a sense in which the violent act has already been done the moment we think about it. There is a negative energy projection that cannot be retrieved once it has been unleashed, even when the physical consummation of the thought does not manifest immediately. In fact, the negative, aggressive energies we send out into the world collectively coalesce into the negative, aggressive, and violent acts we witness in and from others. The tragic violence manifesting physically in our world is fueled by the collective, aggressive energies we each contribute. That energy has to go somewhere for embodiment unless and until we learn to control it at its source – which is us. Which is me. Which is you.

Which is why Jesus insisted that we love our neighbors (and our enemies), and why he gave such a broad, inclusive definition of who qualifies as a neighbor (spoiler alert: it’s everyone). Loving someone does not necessarily mean we agree with them, support what they support, or even that we like being around them. Loving someone *does*, however, require that we do not harm them or even wish them harm. Loving

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<sup>25</sup> Matthew 5:21-22.

others does not mean that we must tolerate abuse from them. It may mean the most loving and appropriate place for some troubled souls is in jail. It does mean we wish for what is best for their personal growth given the circumstances of their life-experience. We know that abuse festers abuse and violence begets violence, passing from generation to generation. Our loving response is to neither ignore nor tolerate violence, but to minimize its impact as we work to break the perpetuating cycle of negative, aggressive energy flowing to and from ourselves and others. And that work begins with and in us.

*The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.*

Elie Wiesel<sup>26</sup>

Verbal aggression, like its physical counterpart, is an *active* form of violence in that we take a direct action at or against someone with our words, whether or not the other is physically present. Verbal aggression can be passed through various mediums including email, social media, gossip, letters to the editor, and face-to-face conversations. Our aggressive and negative thoughts and words, even when not directed at a specific person, contribute to the aggressive and negative energies present in our world. In a very real sense, we are spewing unrecognized and unhealed disappointments and frustrations with ourselves onto innocent and unsuspecting persons, not unlike how injuries unintentionally occur to victims of random shootings or drunk drivers.

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<sup>26</sup> <https://quotefancy.com/elie-wiesel-quotes>, accessed August 9, 2022.

There are also *inactive* or *indirect* forms of non-physical violence that can be deceptively destructive in their impact, if in less overt ways. One common such form of violence is *neglect*. I categorize neglect as inactive in the sense that it is not something *directed at* another, but something *withheld from* another. Neglect is a particularly egregious form of aggression because it does not result from ignorance of the need of another. Rather, neglect is the withholding of something we not only are capable of providing, but we also *know* the other needs. There is a type of withholding due to indifference, as when we withhold something because we do not care enough to acknowledge the need of another. But there is also withholding as an intentional, conscious act.

Conscious neglect is often intended to punish another for poor or unappreciated behavior. Neglect can be relatively benign, like the *silent treatment* couples sometimes impose on each other as expressions of dissatisfaction. Prolonged neglect can have lasting impacts, like when parents withhold attention and affirmation from their children. That sort of treatment results in numerous psychological challenges for neglected children as they enter adolescence and adulthood because they continue needing the affirmation and attention they sought and desired as children, but now their seeking is largely unconscious and often manifests in unhealthy ways.

Author Elie Wiesel (1928-2016), a Holocaust survivor, reminds us that hate is not the opposite of love. The opposite of love is indifference. Neglect actually ratchets indifference up to a high level, which is what makes it violent because the purpose of the neglect is to inflict punishment or revenge on another.

Instead of expressing aggression in a physical way, it is done in an emotional or relational way.

Using neglect as an expression of power is a strategy either to gain control over another or to make the perpetrator feel better about themselves through the suffering of another. Both motivations are similar to when people use guns for power over others. Our motives are important to examine when we find ourselves intentionally withholding something from another. If someone on the street asks for money for food because they are hungry, I have several choices – I can ignore them (by pretending not to hear), I can refuse (perhaps by saying I have no money), I can buy food for them, or I can give them money. Assuming the person is in need, and assuming I am able to give them money or food, either of the first two options could qualify as neglect. If a needy co-worker stops by my desk to visit, I have several options, one of which is to tell them I am too busy to talk. If I am not actually too busy, am I neglecting my co-worker's need for attention? Am I driving them to a less-healthy alternative to have their affirmation needs met?

In a *Daily Meditation*, Richard Rohr wrote, “Repressing feelings and sensations relegate them to our unconscious ‘shadow’ self. They don’t go away. They come out in unexpected and often painful ways.”<sup>27</sup> Our aggressive behavior toward others originates within, regardless of whether it manifests in physical or emotional violence, or whether it manifests in direct action or conscious withholding of something needed by another. Indeed, violence is all around us, and we are both victims and perpetrators. Because its

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<sup>27</sup> Richard Rohr, *Daily Meditations* for August 10, 2022. [www.cac.org](http://www.cac.org), accessed August 10, 2022.

roots are often in the distant past and because it may not leave visible scars, it can be difficult to recognize, name, and heal. Learning to recognize, name, and heal our wounds as well as identifying our own violent, aggressive tendencies is where we must begin.

*A lot of giving and receiving has a violent quality, because the givers and receivers act more out of need than out of trust. What looks like generosity is actually manipulation, and what looks like love is really a cry for affection or support.*

Henri Nouwan<sup>28</sup>

Violent, aggressive acts are not always physical. The majority of the violence manifesting today is non-physical. Physical violence begins as some form of non-physical aggression. Harsh words exchanged between participants at potentially triggering events – car accidents, parties, sporting events, and the like – can escalate into defensive and often violent physical acts. The post-incident blame focuses on the perpetrator of the physical act, as perhaps it should, but with little consideration given to other contributors in the non-physical aggression leading up to the incident.

There is a well-hidden form of violence that is not, in itself, an act of violence as much as a symptom of underlying aggressive attitudes and unjust social systems. It is not as likely to result in acute physical harm as it is to perpetuate chronic social injustices under the guise of mercy. This occurs in countless acts of charity participated in by many of us. As with acts of neglect and other forms of aggression, carefully

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<sup>28</sup> Henri Nouwen, excerpted from *You Are the Beloved*, Convergent Books, 2017.

examining our motivations for participating in such acts of “mercy” is important in determining if we are (1) providing the type of help a person really needs and wants, (2) providing help that addresses the underlying causes of the chronic need as well as the acute need, and (3) not simply covering our guilt for perpetuating the unjust social systems we participate in and benefit from.

While the most egregious of these acts of “mercy” may be the lavish charity events put on to attract obscenely wealthy people (and television audiences), those events are imitated on a smaller scale everywhere. Such events usually include an abundance of food, drink, entertainment, and pampering of attendees. Granted, those events raise a *lot* of money for their designated charity. They also, however, *cost* a lot of money to present. One must wonder if those paying the price of admission are doing so out of guilt for the comparatively little they otherwise do for those in need, out of a desire for positive publicity, or to actually help meet a desperate need in society. If their motivation is guilt or publicity, they are likely perpetuating and benefiting from the systems causing the need, if subconsciously. If their motivation is to maximize their financial contribution to the need, would they not better accomplish that end by contributing their money directly to the organization and not making the organization incur the costs of facilities, food, and entertainment for their extravagant evening?

Of course, charitable motivations for most of us have a combination of motives. Henri Nouwen writes that our acts of *generosity* are often acts of manipulation, even though that may not be our overt intent. We

desire to be affirmed as good, caring people, but when we primarily seek personal affirmation, our motivations are not charitable but narcissistic. It is easy to say a problem is too big for me to have an impact, so I write a check and feel I've done my part. True acts of charity, however, require plugging the leak that is causing the need. True acts of mercy can be messy, uncomfortable, unnoticed, long-term, and personally unfulfilling. We do them, however, for purposes greater than our own need.

This was illustrated for me on a mission trip to Honduras. I thought I was going to assist with a construction project to help ease the misery and poverty of the people there. I certainly saw extensive poverty, at least by Western standards, but I did not see misery. Rather, I saw more joy, generosity, and contentment than I see here. I realized they did not need my physical labor, my physical presence, or my arrogant belief that my lifestyle is superior to theirs. They needed money for building materials and worker salaries, which was included in the amount I was charged for the experience. My presence, however, required them to also fund drivers, translators, lodging, and cooks. If my motivations were truly charitable, I would have donated the entire cost to the organization and, if I decided to go, pay extra for the additional expenses they incurred on my behalf.

The violence in many of our charitable offerings occurs as we try to make those we offer to help more like us – help persons of color be whiter, encourage foreigners to act American, throw money at the poor so they can appear more middle-class – while ignoring the systems that perpetuate their need. We can honor, celebrate, and support the cultures, ethnicities, and

unique sets of God-given gifts of others without threat to our own and without *manipulating* them for subliminal purposes that affirm our goodness. When we make our assistance conditional on others conforming to us, even indirectly, we do violence to their being.

*There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of our activism neutralizes our work for peace. It destroys our own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of our own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.* Thomas Merton<sup>29</sup>

Another form of non-physical violence that is seldom considered as such is *self-violence*. Contemplative author Thomas Merton described this violence six decades ago, partially reproduced above: we allow ourselves “to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns” which “destroys our own inner capacity for peace.” The issue of violence against self is not new. Two thousand years earlier, the issue was identified in the gospels with the story of Mary and Martha,<sup>30</sup> where Martha “was distracted by her many tasks” and too busy to sit in the presence of Jesus, as Mary was doing.

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Image Books, 1965.

<sup>30</sup> Luke 10:38-42

Jesus tells Martha, “...there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part...” In any given moment, there is need of only one thing. We miss that one needful thing when we are too consumed in busyness to enter the moment and experience it. *That* is violence against oneself.

When the Bible tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves,<sup>31</sup> it is both a commandment and a statement of fact. The factual statement is *we can only love our neighbor as we love ourselves because that is the only way we know how to love*. If we love ourselves poorly, we will love others poorly. If we do violence to ourselves, we will do violence to others. Learning to love others better necessarily requires learning to love ourselves better. The violence in our world is violence directed inward but expressed outward. And when we are too busy or distracted to enter the present moment, we cannot achieve the inner peace required to maintain an orientation of non-violence, either internally or externally.

We have a desperate need for unscheduled, uncommitted time in our days, a Sabbath, if you will. Just as adequate sleep is required for our brains to process our daily experiences, without which we go insane, so we need regular time to decompress, rest, and take a conscious, wide-angle view of our lives. Some of us were raised to believe if we are not busy with something we are not worth the oxygen we consume. That attitude leads to a lot of unnecessary commotion and silliness. Our true identity, however, is not a product of what we do but of who we are. We cannot live into who we truly are without committing

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<sup>31</sup> A commandment repeated in various ways throughout the Bible, including Matthew 22:19.

regular quiet time to allow our deepest self to emerge. Our motto has become, “Don’t just stand there, do something!” Doing what is ours to do is important, but we also need the corollary, “Don’t just do something, stand (or sit) there!” We lack balance, and that lack of balance destroys our inner peace and ability to gain clear perspectives to guide and manage our work. Regular and intentional time for contemplation is a necessary prerequisite to effective action.

A rather sinister, if subconscious factor in our penchant toward busyness is the fear of what might overtake us if we slow down. Most of us have unresolved and mostly subconscious angers and frustrations, with ourselves and others, that clamor for attention when we sit quietly. The problem with using activity to keep these demons at bay is that they do not go away. They fester until they can be examined and acknowledged, sometimes with professional assistance, so we can enjoy quiet, unstructured time for the reflection and renewal that is Sabbath.

Part of our need for Sabbath is mental and emotional, but it is also physical. As a volunteer crisis counselor I remind many of my callers of the four elements of self-care: adequate sleep, adequate hydration (water), healthy food, and moderate exercise. We cannot attain mental or emotional stability by ignoring the basic physical needs of our bodies. Sleeping poorly is endemic because of excess worry and stress. Being too busy is a poor tradeoff for unhealthy eating or lack of exercise. We fall into a violent loop where the violence we do to ourselves spills onto those closest to us and out into the world. A less violent world is only possible as we work to ease the violence churning within.

## Chapter 4: Aggressive Media

*And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet.<sup>32</sup>*

In an earlier chapter I mentioned a common form of non-physical violence which I will expand upon here – that of aggressive media. Violent video games may be the most obvious source of violent media, but we kid ourselves if we do not also include aggressive social media posts, violent television shows and movies, many sporting events, sensationalized newscasts, and other virtual forms of non-physical connection, entertainment, and communication. All are seductive, influential, and addictive. The question of whether one's engagement with aggressive media leads to physically violent expressions outside of the media experience is a hot topic. Certainly, an interest in or

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<sup>32</sup> Matthew 24:6

obsession with violent gaming is present with many perpetrators of mass violence, but one cannot conclude that everyone who participates in violent gaming becomes a mass murderer. Everyone who consumes (and thus supports) any form of aggressive media, however, does contribute to the overall culture of violence.

There's an old saying in the news business: "If it bleeds, it leads," meaning violence in media sells more of the advertising that supports the media outlet. Violent or extreme stories are more popular to many consumers than non-violent or *feel-good* stories. In that sense, the physical violence in our culture is but the tip of an enormous and volatile iceberg. The problem lies buried beneath our hunger to consume such media. One of the underlying needs in our attraction to aggressive media is that of *control*. There seems to be an increasing sense of loss or lack of control over one's life and circumstances, and watching violence occur to "bad people" in media is one way to assure ourselves that those abusing their power get what we feel they deserve. Which raises the question: Why do we feel so powerless? Similarly, watching stories of tragic events happening to others is equally enticing, perhaps because the suffering of others makes us feel better about our lot in life. In addition, news outlets are forever inventing ways to claim some occurrence as the *worst* in history or the *most extreme* this or the *bleakest outlook* for that. Granted, many events today are sensational, but the media knows how we clamor for evidence that we are living in the *most* dramatic, desperate, and difficult times ever. Not only is it not true, it is pathetically silly. We seem to have developed an insatiable hunger for extremes.

Given all of this, is it any wonder that people seek opportunities to participate in and consume horrific acts of virtual violence in life-like, vivid color and surround sound? If we cannot gain a sense of control over our lives and life-circumstances, why would we not want to experience that control virtually if given the opportunity? I remember enjoying the early video game, Pac Man, in which a *circle-with-a-mouth* consumed dots along the paths of a maze, trying to eat as many dots as possible before getting consumed by a *monster-in-a-colored-sheet*. The technology was primitive by today's standards, but the concept was the same: consume as many others as possible before being consumed yourself. Today, instead of a grainy *circle-with-a-mouth* eating dots, we have very life-like figures with realistic-looking weapons committing horrendous atrocities against other life-like figures. I don't recall anyone claiming that playing Pac Man led to physical violence against others. The primary difference is in the realism of the media expression, even though the underlying aggression and sense of power and control is arguably similar.

There are not nearly as many variables to control in a virtual environment where we are not dealing with actual, free-will exercising, power-hungry human beings. As children we are under the thumbs of our parents. In school, our freedom is restricted by teachers and school requirements. In adulthood we have bosses, the government, and financial realities holding us back. It seems like someone outside of ourself always has control over us. Video-gaming appeals to, among others, those who feel powerless, unacknowledged, unknown, and unappreciated by the world around them. It provides an environment where

they can be known and do “good,” in whatever way they define good. Participants assume a *god-like* status – powerful and in control. Does aggressive video-gaming plant ideas in malleable minds, encouraging attempts to replicate their virtual experience in real life? That appears to sometimes be the case. Does it allow others to express their aggressions in safe ways so they are better able to successfully engage with an often-difficult and unjust world? I suspect that, too, may be true in some cases. Is it possible to consume aggressive media strictly for entertainment purposes? For me, that is an open question. Regardless, the foundational desire or need for placating our aggressive energies is rampant and apparently growing.

*The soul doesn't know itself by comparison and differentiation. The soul just is. The soul knows itself through what is now and everything that is, both the dark and the light. The soul triumphs over nothing and therefore cannot be defeated because it is not in the game of succeeding or failing. It does not need to separate the dark from the light. Everything belongs.*

Fr. Richard Rohr<sup>33</sup>

Forms of violent media other than violent video-gaming may be less obviously aggressive, but they are more widely accepted, embraced by greater numbers of people, and contribute more to the overall culture of violence in society. These include aggressive social media posts, sensationalized news shows, and some sporting events – especially American football. The primary root of our aggression is the need to compare

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<sup>33</sup> Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs*, Crossroad Publishing, 2019, p. 72.

ourselves favorably with others, as well as the related need to label everything as good or evil, right or wrong, and acceptable or unacceptable. Certainly, a large part of what fuels our need to differentiate is language itself because once we name what something is, we automatically assume *what it is not*. In truth, nothing is as concise as its name implies because nothing is entirely one thing. In truth, everything is exponentially more similar to everything else than it is different. For example, 99.9% of the DNA shaping every human being is shared by every other human being. Even so, our attention is drawn to the 0.1% difference. Everything is a unique mix of countless numbers of shared elements that are lost in our naming.

And that is the fuel that feeds our aggression – that everything is a mix of everything, but we obsess over and protect how different and special we believe ourselves to be. The elements we ingest and breath in everyday that sustain the body we know as us were once stardust from the far corners of the universe. More recently those same elements made up the bodies of beings from eras, cultures, civilizations, and races different from our own. When our time on earth is done, those same elements will make up other earthly bodies. Literally and figuratively, we are One – all of us, from the beginning to the present, to the time when there is no more *us*. Once we label something as different or *other* than us it is a short journey to labeling them as our enemy, as undesirable, or as a threat. When we perceive something as different, it induces fear because of our seeming lack of knowledge about or familiarity with that person or thing. That person is from another culture, or that dog is a breed I am not familiar with, or those religious beliefs differ from

mine, so they must be wrong or inferior. Our egos, seeking differences instead of similarities, view them as a threat.

As author Richard Rohr points out above, our essential nature – our soul – does no such differentiating. It does not label things or people as bad or good, right or wrong, sacred or desecrated. No one thing or person is bad, wrong, or desecrated in and of itself. What is bad or wrong about something or someone is what we and others have done to or withheld from them, including what we imply from our posts on social media. *That* is what desecrates. And when we attack someone on social media, or when we support news broadcasts that tell stories intentionally designed to make one person or group appear inferior, or when we *hate* a sports team other than the team we support, we desecrate something or someone that was created sacred. In that sense, we do violence to them. We also, however, do violence to ourselves since there is so little actual difference between us. Our egoic propensity to differentiate and judge is at odds with our divine essence, our true self, our soul.

When we attack others via social media, even when our posts only indirectly indict another, and even when our critical posts are veiled in complementary language, we attempt to show ourselves as superior by showing another to be inferior. That is how our egos operate when unchecked by love and reason. Our egos are insecure and easily threatened when they are allowed to stray from the inclusive and communal context within which they exist. Social media, through the algorithms that determine what we see, encourages our egos to stray into an isolated, self-obsessed, *holier-than-thou* mode where it must do violence to others to

protect and preserve its tiny, but seemingly-precious differentiation. If we want a less violent world, we must begin by moderating our own ego's tendency to equate difference with threat. We must first seek and celebrate our similarities, and then we can celebrate and learn from each other via our differences.

*Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing.*<sup>34</sup>

The form of aggressive media that most exposes my aggressive tendencies is that of sports. This is particularly humbling to confess because I consider myself a non-violent person, even as I faithfully follow and cheer for my favorite teams. When I was younger, I loved participating in sports. While not blatantly evil, sporting events do organize one group of people against another in battles of strength, will, and/or intellectual prowess. It is the nature of games that one team wins and others lose. Each group attempts to exploit the individual and collective weaknesses of the other in order to triumph. It is that exposing and exploiting of weakness that causes a conflict within me because, as a spiritual person, I feel obligated to build others up instead of taking advantage of their all-too-human frailties.

Even so, I am a sports fan, including the often-violent American football. My justification is in claiming it is the grace and beauty of a well-executed long pass and catch that draws me. But I sheepishly

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<sup>34</sup> This quote is attributed to a number of coaches, including Vince Lombardi, famed coach of the Green Bay Packers. Perhaps the earliest attribution (1948) is to Henry "Red" Sanders, football coach for Vanderbilt University.

confess I also enjoy watching powerful hits and bone-crushing runs through the middle of the line-of-scrimmage. Of course, individual players get hurt in every game, sometimes seriously, but the more debilitating and chronic injuries manifest in the years after a player's career has ended due to the accumulation of lesser injuries. Most serious players, amateur and professional, have numerous physical ailments and many suffer serious and chronic mental and emotional issues – all for the love, and sometimes financial rewards, of a game. Those of us who are fans make the short-term financial and fame rewards possible. In that sense, I am partially responsible for a great deal of suffering.

Let's face it, competition, in all of its manifestations, involves a greater or lesser degree of aggression. Wherever there are few winners, there will necessarily be many losers. If we do not win whatever is at stake from our opponent, even if only bragging rights, we find ourselves lacking something we desire, perhaps even our sense of self-worth. Competitive games typically do not promote a spirit of abundance and plenty for everyone. Rather, they promote a philosophy of scarcity, where the winner takes a lot and everyone else shares a little. This is true in sporting events, but it is also true in business, college admissions, and too many other competitive elements of society where bounteous rewards go to the most skilled, the smartest, the cleverest, the luckiest, or the most privileged while leaving others with considerably less.

Perhaps what bothers me the most about bigtime sporting events, aside from the player injuries, is the aggression directed toward the opposing team – not

only by the players but also by the fans. A saying I enjoy using goes like this: *My two favorite teams* (hypothetically, of course) *are the Kansas City Chiefs and whoever is playing the Dallas Cowboys*. It is a *not-so-subtle* jab at the Cowboys and their fans, driven by the fact that the Cowboys have a long history of winning more consistently than the Chiefs (recent history excepted). Even good-natured ribbing over sporting prowess, as a player or a fan, has an aggressive component – maybe not a seriously harmful one, but aggressive none-the-less. Today's sporting competitions are less-violent remnants of *fight-to-the-death* competitions in coliseums of old where thousands of spectators would watch someone be killed by another fighter, lion, bear, or other deadly opponent, all for the purpose of entertainment. In that sense, our aggressive appetites have perhaps moderated over the years.

The philosophy of scarcity and attitude of *winner-take-all* would not be as destructive if it were limited to sporting events. Unfortunately, the application of who deserves abundance that is drawn from sports is too often applied to more critical areas of life, including who has a right to what quantities and qualities of healthcare, food, housing, education, clean water, and countless other essentials. That is where the violence, though more subtle, has even greater and more tragic impacts. And because the inequitable and unjust systems of distribution were created by social forces generations in the making, they are difficult to identify and extremely resistant to meaningful adjustment.

Do sporting events promote violence? Probably so. I wish they didn't because I enjoy them. Perhaps if we better distinguished between what is a game and what is a life-and-death struggle for many, and if we

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adjusted the reward distribution systems accordingly, we would at least cease treating human suffering as a game. Perhaps we can find ways to enjoy activities with others without also needing to prove ourselves superior and expecting corresponding rewards.

## Chapter 5: Systemic Violence

*Cain said to Abel, “Let us go out to the field.” And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him.<sup>35</sup>*

We can point fingers of blame at those who commit *violence-against-innocents* in our society, as we probably should. We should not, however, think we are addressing the source of violence by locking away those convicted of such acts. Rather, we are only tackling a symptom, and symptom management does not resolve the underlying problem. In order to address the root causes of violence we must do more than incarcerate those convicted of violence. We must also examine our history and the social systems evolving from it.

Human beings, presumably since the beginning, have frequently resorted to violence to get what they want, whether that is property, food, safety, recognition, or a sexual partner. Even the Bible, in the story of the initial offspring of the allegorical first

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<sup>35</sup> Genesis 4:8

humans, records Cain killing his brother Abel out of jealousy. The Bible contains many stories of people going after what they desire using violence, including horrific acts against those with no power to resist or harm the aggressors. Some are quick to use these stories as a justification for violence – that if it's in the Bible, God must have ordained and blessed it. This is not only a lazy reading of the Bible, it is also a gross and bold assumption about what God does or does not condone.

The clearest model the Bible provides for what comprises a Godly life is found in the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. And the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth are unwaveringly non-violent, even to the point of giving up his own life instead of taking violent action to preserve it. It is a sad commentary that many who claim to be followers of Christ feel justified in arming themselves against threats to their earthly being.

Civilizations throughout history have risen and fallen by violent means, and the United States is no exception. Our early European founders fled what they perceived as tyrannical authorities, only to tyrannize the indigenous people inhabiting this land in order to establish their societies in the ways they saw fit, usually through threatened or actual violence. When we needed cheap labor to feed our insatiable hunger for inexpensive goods and services, we tyrannized peoples of Africa, uprooting and enslaving them as property. Today, with overt slavery prohibited, corporations employ underpaid and overworked labor in other countries to keep our prices artificially low. The violent oppression serving our capitalistic system has simply

moved offshore where it is less visible, but the violent injustice remains unchecked.

It is interesting to examine why we feel the need to resort to violence to achieve our aims. Several possible reasons come to mind for me. The most serious, from a religious perspective, is the *lack of faith* that God will protect us and provide for our needs. Granted, God works in and through us and our actions. If we believe, however, that God works in non-violent ways, as Jesus modeled for us, then our faith should assure us there are non-violent ways to achieve what we need.

A second cause is *impatience*. We tend to want what we want as quickly and cheaply as possible, even when it causes others to suffer. It is easy to forget that our timeline for receiving what we desire is not always in sync with God's timeline in providing it.

A third reason is a *lack of vision* of alternate, more just and sustainable ways of obtaining what we desire.

A fourth reason is a *lack of maturity* in the sense of believing that we have a right to whatever we want as long as we pay a “fair” market price for it. This is an expression of our feelings of entitlement and positions of privilege.

One problem with how we understand violence is our belief that it must be physical to be deemed as violence. Granted, we are making headway in identifying and targeting emotional and psychological violence, but the violence embedded in our economic and social systems continues largely unchallenged. Most of us today did not create these systems, but many of us perpetuate and benefit from them. Anyone with an investment-based retirement account (myself included) benefits from the violence that private equity

inflicts on businesses and their employees to fuel their insatiable appetite for higher profits. Our political systems are skewed to favor politicians and those who support them, resulting in government-imposed actions that widen the gap between the haves and have-nots. Even our religious organizations, in their quest for self-preservation and self-justification, spew violent threats of hell and exclusion against those who practice and believe differently.

Violence is violence regardless of its source and mode of transmission. Until we recognize and transform our violent systems there cannot be peace in our world, individually or collectively.

*Go to him now, he calls you, you can't refuse. When you ain't got nothing, you ain't got nothing to lose. You're invisible now, you've got no secrets to conceal.* Bob Dylan<sup>36</sup>

For all its benefits, our capitalistic economy is a structurally violent system. It is a significant contributor to the violence in our society and is probably a predictable outgrowth of the motivations behind the initial European settlers' migration here in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. They sought escape from what they considered oppressive rule in their former homelands. They sought lives of *freedom*, which to them meant living and working independently with minimal governmental interference, keeping and controlling more of what they possessed and produced. They dreamed of a type of independence where succeeding or failing in life was based on what they believed to be

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<sup>36</sup> Bob Dylan, *Like a Rolling Stone*, Song lyrics, *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965)

their own efforts. It formed the *American dream*, and continues as such for millions today. As the population expanded enough to require its own government, social structures were established to codify the opportunities for attaining this American dream. Unfortunately, the structures established benefited the initial, mostly white settlers at the expense of the indigenous people living in long-running communal systems prior to the European invasion. The new systems, consistent with most oppressive systems, were prejudiced to favor those who created them. Still today, although laws prohibit overt discrimination and oppression, minority populations, persons of color, and others lacking means or influence struggle to meet their most basic needs because of a system designed with them on the outside and subservient to those on the inside. It is not necessarily that our predecessors were evil or desirous of oppressing others, but they did place accommodating their desired lifestyles above the needs and desires of the lives already in place here and elsewhere. The systems they designed were not inclusive enough to fairly provide for the various groups populating the land. The new systems did not so much exclude outsiders as it forced them to adapt to the ways of the new settlers or to be oppressed by them. In other words, they had to act and live like white Europeans in order to benefit from the system. And when the desires of the new settlers were in conflict with the lifestyles of the non-adapting existing peoples, violence often ensued.

Capitalistic systems are built on the assumption that resources are scarce, so everyone must claim what they are able to claim as they are able to claim it. That orientation of scarcity encourages hoarding and violent

action, sometimes in physical ways, to assure the obtaining of one's *fair* share. And those best able to accumulate resources – the ones the system favors – reap the greatest amounts in material rewards. The biggest problem with abiding by an attitude of scarcity is the greed that accompanies it. The system makes it easier for those who already have an abundance to gain even greater abundance regardless of the cost to those with little. Because there is no lasting satisfaction to the material rewards a capitalistic system bestows, however, even those with much more than they could possibly need consistently feel they need more. There is no security, economic or otherwise, in systems that skew resources to select groups at the expense of others.

The result has been the unprecedented and ever-widening gap between the haves and the have-nots in our society. This manifests in vastly differing amounts of access to adequate housing, healthcare, and education, as well as in food insecurity, ridiculous wage differentials, and few opportunities to improve one's socio-economic existence. Those at the lower end of this social continuum experience a powerlessness and lack of control that those at the higher end do not experience or appreciate. As those in the lower economic classes find themselves sinking ever lower due to inflation and the hoarding of resources by the upper classes, their sense of powerlessness and despair grows. In the words of modern-day prophet, Bob Dylan, "When you ain't got nothing, you ain't got nothing to lose."<sup>37</sup> Desperate people resort to desperate, often violent, measures.

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<sup>37</sup> Bob Dylan, *Like a Rolling Stone*, Song lyrics, *Highway 61 Revisited*, 1965.

Currently in the United States, there is coalescing a significant population of people formerly in the middle class finding themselves increasingly pushed down and even out of the social systems that once sustained them. Like the indigenous peoples, persons of color, LGBTQ+ folks, and others forced to the fringes of society, the systems in place for two-and-a-half centuries are failing them. The *American dream*, forever portrayed as available to anyone willing to work hard enough to attain it, might as well have its entrance on Mars because there is no reasonable way for them to get there thanks to the entrenched, violent, and unjust systems working against them.

*Religions, governments, and all corporations and organizations are highly capable of evil while not recognizing it as such – because it profits us for them to be immoral.*

Fr. Richard Rohr<sup>38</sup>

Increasingly in recent decades, society has begun ostracizing a relatively new group of people from the fruits of our economic system. I describe this group in generic, stereotypical terms which I know do not fairly portray individual variations or situations. I am not a part of this group, so my view is of an outsider looking in. This group, however, presents a contemporary example of oppression and exclusion by social systems designed and maintained by those of privilege. I present this analysis not only to call attention to a serious and growing problem, but to illustrate why it is in everyone's best interest, including those of privilege,

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<sup>38</sup> Richard Rohr, *What Do We Do With Evil?: The World, the Flesh, and the Devil*. CAC Publishing, 2019, p. 46.

to willingly restructure our violent systems in more inclusive and equitable ways.

Unlike the ethnicities and orientations we traditionally associate with oppressed people, this particular group, while including some minority members, is mostly white and of European descent. A generation ago they were either firmly in the socio-economic middle class or grew up in the middle-class lifestyle of their parents. Some are *blue-collar* folks, meaning they or their parents work(ed) in various trades like manufacturing, mining, and other important industries that those not pursuing higher education often gravitate toward. Another part of this group has an advanced education but cannot find work in their fields of expertise that pays enough to support a reasonable lifestyle. Others had good jobs out of high school or college but have since lost those jobs to corporate downsizing, automation, job migration, or other circumstances. Retirees with inadequate income, as well as those drowning in medical debt or student loans are also in this group. It does not discriminate for age, race, ethnic background, or education. The employed members of this group often must settle for a fraction of the salary they or their parents once earned, sometimes with no benefits, guaranteed hours, or job security.

Here is what separates this group from other groups of historically oppressed people: *they were not always oppressed*. They were once participants in and beneficiaries of the same socio-economic system that now fails them. They *know* what they are missing. It is not just that the fruits of the system are unavailable to them, the fruits of the system have been taken away. They resonate with the *Make America Great Again*

(MAGA) sentiment (emphasis on the word *again*) because they desire a return to better days gone by. Some, though not all, gravitate to politicians like Donald Trump, who popularized the phrase in his 2016 presidential campaign. For long-oppressed people, by contrast, there is nothing great to return to because little has changed for them in recent history.

An estimated 60% of Americans live paycheck-to-paycheck today, meaning they are one medical condition, one car or home repair away from not meeting their basic living expenses and possible homelessness. Living without a financial cushion and with no reliable or adequate income to recover from financial challenges is exhausting, stressful, isolating, and demeaning. It feels shameful. Large swaths of people who were once proud participants in and contributors to the American economy find themselves at the mercy of relatives, on welfare, or relying on shelters and food banks as temporary and undesirable bridges to sustain themselves until something changes. They have no idea, however, *what* will change, *if* anything will change, or *when* changes may occur. In the meantime, they grow increasingly desperate. And angry.

Anxiety, depression, and suicide rates have risen to near-epidemic levels over the past generation. Those rates have always been high in more traditionally oppressed populations, but they are rising exponentially in this new group. A subsection of this group were participants in or supporters of the riots in Washington, D.C. on January 6, 2021. The MAGA group is particularly threatening to the status quo because many are well-armed and trained in combat techniques, having served in the military protecting the

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systems they feel (with good reason) have since abandoned them. They are ready for a fight.

Being outside the systems of economic and social power limits one's options for changing the systems. Martin Luther King, Jr, Mahatma Gandhi, and Jesus provided models for non-violent paths to change, but few representing the oppressed are calling for or organizing such non-violent responses. Many likely feel they cannot wait for non-violent movements to play out, even as they doubt such plans would work anyway. That being the case, it seems likely we will experience increasing violence against the system in the foreseeable future in response to the violence the system has inflicted upon those it oppresses.

If those of us who benefit from and sustain the current socio-economic systems do not restructure those systems in inclusive and equitable ways, including for those historically left on the outside, the oppressed minority will become a majority, and the systems will be changed without us, probably violently.

*(Systemic trauma) is happening right before our eyes; yet the response of American citizens has been muted by the argument that what they are seeing and hearing is not oppression at all; it is compliance with laws. But those laws just happen to be rife with ethnocentrism, rejection of the stranger, racism, and structural oppression of the poor. Barbara Holmes<sup>39</sup>*

Systemic violence and oppression seldom have specific culprits to blame, making them difficult to track, identify, or change. Our current systems have evolved

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<sup>39</sup> Barbara A. Holmes, *Crisis Contemplation*, CAC Publishing, 2021, p. 67.

over many generations. While we tend to point fingers of blame at political and organizational leaders, they too are (privileged) victims as well as perpetrators, like many of us. Elected officials make up a tiny and mostly transient part of the system. Some people hypothesize the existence of a *deep state*, or an exclusive, secretive group that controls the entrenched governmental processes, policies, and machinations. Personally, I suspect the system has just grown too big to be controlled or redirected in any significant way. It appears to be self-perpetuating and self-protecting as it absorbs attempts at change into its unwieldy being without significantly altering its inherent injustices.

Should we blame the career bureaucrats who administer, monitor, and carry out the various governmental functions? They, too, are both victims and perpetrators of injustice. Even the privileged folks who primarily reap the benefits of the system are victimized, at least somewhat, by the discontent, accusations, and violence the opposition to the system creates and directs back at them. Regardless of its origins, the system has evolved a purposeful existence of its own, quite apart from the intentions of anyone running or overseeing its various components, including those who wish the system to remain as is. It appears we do not control the system; the system controls us.

None of this is to say our elected officials and career bureaucrats do not have a hand in perpetuating the unjust system. I have long believed the two parties in America do more to preserve the two-party status quo than to make meaningful changes for the citizenry, regardless of their largely-staged outrage at the positions and people of the other party. The system

rewards those who feed it, and politicians and those who fund them are at the top of that list. The career bureaucrats, while supposedly politically neutral, are not incentivized to make significant changes to the system because the system supports them, too.

Government programs designed to help people out of poverty often keep many more people stuck in the system than are ever freed from it. The Medicare and Medicaid programs, intended to fund healthcare for those who cannot otherwise afford it, restrict the prices providers can charge for the care of their patients. Over time, providers have understandably raised prices on everyone else to make up the difference, often charging many multiples of what they can legally charge someone insured by a government program. One sign of a system resistant to meaningful change is when the system's "balloon" is squeezed at one end and another part bloats in response. The unintended and tragic consequences of many well-intentioned government actions are staggering.

Unfortunately, I do not know how to change the stubborn status quo. The system may need to be blown up and rebirthed, even though doing so will cause long-term destabilization and suffering for millions in the country and world. Of course, the system may collapse of its own weight one day. The challenge will be to guide the collapse so the suffering is shared in a way that the *haves* will not simply accumulate more.

That the system does significant violence to wide swaths of people is clear. Is there a better system? Can the system be restructured in more just and equitable ways that do not leave increasing numbers of people outside of it? I hope so. If history is any indication, however, the gap between the *haves* and *have-nots* will

continue to widen until the *have-nots* become a significant-enough majority to overthrow the *haves* and destroy the system. A new system will be established that, in time, will also overly reward the *haves* until it, too, is overthrown. Sadly, it may be an inescapable cycle.

At some point we need to recognize and accept responsibility for our part in systemic violence. Contemplative author Barbara Holmes writes, “No matter how tenuous and invisible the bonds of community may be, individuals must, for their personal and collective safety, work out their survival together.”<sup>40</sup> When enough of us change the way we conduct our lives in relation to others, particularly in relation to those in need, perhaps the system will do less damage. Jesus did not complain about the oppressive Roman system but went about the business of serving others with whatever freedoms the system allowed. Perhaps we should do the same.

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<sup>40</sup> Barbara A. Holmes, *Crisis Contemplation*, CAC Publishing, 2021, p. 67.

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## Part 3: Mental Illness and Violence

### Chapter 6: Mental Illness

*In the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, “Let us alone! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?”<sup>41</sup>*

With this chapter I shift the focus to mental illness, which is always a factor in acts of violence and mass murder. Although I will treat mental illness as a separate cause of violence, it does not stand apart from our social systems and norms. Mental illness exists on a continuum, and we all display greater or lesser degrees of it depending on the internal or external

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<sup>41</sup> Luke 4:33-34a

situations we find ourselves in. In fact, I will argue that certain religious organizations, beliefs, and practices today have become (arguably) contributors to mental illness. Although mental illness is typically understood and treated as a medical condition, I believe it is equally a social condition – that families, communities, and other environmental influences contribute to or exacerbate the deviations from societal norms that result in mental illness.

Let me begin with a disclaimer: I am an *arm-chair psychologist*, not a professional. Although I have a decades-old degree in Psychology, lived experience with mentally ill family members, and some training in crisis counseling, I am not qualified to diagnose or treat mental illness. As such, what follows are the reflections of a psychological outsider, an *outsider-looking-in*, and should not be taken as advice for dealing with behavioral deviations in oneself or loved ones. What follows are generalized perspectives and observations on a serious issue, not solutions to specific cases.

Here is a simple definition of mental illness: *behavior outside of societal norms*. Mental illness can be acute, meaning short-term, or chronic, meaning expressing over an extended timespan. We can slip into and out of the realm of mental illness for a few minutes, as in a momentary fit of rage, or for decades. Because this definition is grounded in societal norms, some behaviors that result in being labeled as mentally ill change with times, places, and cultures. In that sense, mental illness can be contextual or *time-space-and-culture-dependent*. Truly, some who were considered mentally disturbed when alive are admired, posthumously, for their brilliance today. I think of artists like Vincent Van Gogh and composers like Robert Schumann.

Theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's musings were roundly rejected as heretical by his religious superiors. We sometimes say these people were *ahead of their time* as we look back on their social interactions and work because they were often shunned by their peers and sometimes died broke and alone. Ludwig van Beethoven and Abraham Lincoln were possible candidates for a mental illness diagnosis. Even Jesus was accused of having a demon, a first-century reference likely corresponding to today's mental illness, by the religious authorities of his age. The other point from my definition is that mental illness involves *behavior*. Many of us *think* of seriously deviating from social norms, but until we actually act on those thoughts, including making them known to others, we are not usually considered mentally ill.

I emphasize the *time-space-culture* component of mental illness to illustrate that mental and emotional deviations cannot be understood outside of their specific context. Does the fact that someone does not blend well with their environment warrant the label of mentally ill? Perhaps, but not necessarily, because many of us do not blend well in certain environments. Because we cannot know what is going on inside another, human motivations for behavior remain mysterious. The fact that some who do not blend well with their environment strike out in ways that cause tragic devastation and suffering, however, cannot be denied. As such, mental illness cannot be ignored or minimized.

Mental illness, in a sense I will develop in the coming pages, involves social isolation. Today, social isolation combined with our unprecedented access to and inescapable bombardment from biased news

reporting, divisive social media posts, and the virtual realms of online chats and gaming, the gap between individual and societal factions grows rapidly and increasingly wider. Does that mean most of us are now mentally ill?

*We don't live in the world of reality, we live in the world of how we perceive reality.* Bryan Singer<sup>42</sup>

For purposes of this discussion, I define mental illness as *behavior outside of societal norms*. A few visual illustrations may assist in clarifying that definition. One basic assumption is that our individual and societal norms are a product of the *portion* of reality we attend to, individually and as a society. Everything outside of that portion of reality is *unreal* to us, as if it does not exist in our conscious awareness. In addition, we label those who may be attending to other portions of reality as mentally ill whenever their behavior becomes troublesome.

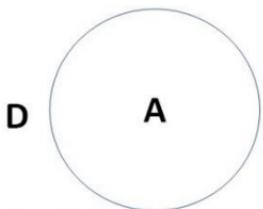


Figure 1: One person's reality

Figure 1 represents one person's *reality*, inside of circle A. If we assume that area A includes everything this person consciously perceives – physically, intellectually, and emotionally – then everything in area D (outside the circle) is *unreal* to that person. For example, we know our physical eyes are capable of perceiving only a tiny fraction of the entire light

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<sup>42</sup> Filmmaker Bryan Singer,  
[https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/bryan\\_singer\\_181122](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/bryan_singer_181122), accessed September 27, 2022.

spectrum. What our eyes cannot perceive is in area D. It is not that area D does not exist; we simply do not have eyes capable of perceiving it. Microscopes, telescopes, infrared imaging, and other visual instruments prove the existence of realities beyond our unaided sight. Likewise, our ears only perceive a limited range of auditory frequencies, so while a regular whistle exists in area A, a dog whistle exists in area D (unless you're a dog).

Other determinants of what is in area A or D for a specific individual include their emotional and intellectual abilities to perceive. Unless we are trained in advanced mathematics, Calculus will exist in area D where it is *unreal* to us because it makes no sense. Our ability to process emotions is dependent on our emotional maturity. Emotions that fall into area A for one person may well fall into area D for another. Those emotions are thus *unreal* to the second person and cannot be understood and sometimes not even acknowledged.

Whatever falls into area D for a given individual is outside of their conscious reality. Just because what exists in area D is unreal for one person, however, does not mean it does not exist, only that everything in area D is unavailable to or unconscious for that person. Education, life experiences, cross-cultural and spiritual training can expand area A into greater parts of area D.

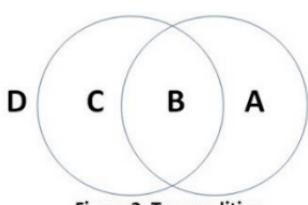


Figure 2 represents the realities of two people, A and C. Area B shows where their realities intersect as a shared reality. Area D is outside of reality for both people. Because their shared realities

include a relatively small portion of their individual realities, these two people likely share little in common. They can increase their shared area, B, through the expansion of their circles of awareness into more of the other person's circle.

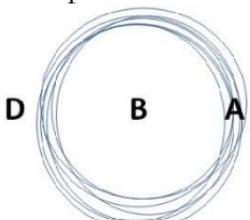


Figure 3: Many Realities

Figure 3 represents the combined realities of many people, such as a community or society, where the overlapping circles, A, represent what is real to representative members of that group. Area B represents their shared reality, or what they all agree is real and are capable of understanding and attending to. Area D represents what is unreal to everyone in this society. Whatever exists in area B establishes the norms for this society.

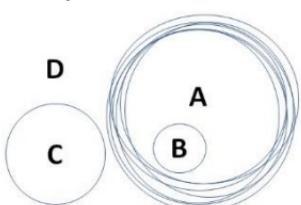


Figure 4: Alternate Realities

Figure 4 represents a community's reality, but with a couple types of deviations from that reality, or what we diagnose as mental deficiency or illness. Circle B represents someone

who can only perceive a small portion of the greater shared social reality (A). Person B has difficulty being fully functional in the larger social context (A) because so much of it is *unreal* to him or her.

Circle C represents someone whose perceptual reality is completely outside of the societal reality. In this case, the person likely sees or hears things no one else sees or hears, so we diagnose them as schizophrenic, psychotic, or some other form of dissociative mental illness. For most such people, their

circle of reality remains at least *partly* within the societal circle, so some people in the common reality are still able to connect with them, although in severely limited ways. Area D, of course, represents what remains *unreal*, imperceptible, to everyone.

When I define mental illness as *behavior outside of societal norms*, I refer to behaviors that are either far enough outside of or too restricted within the common circles, represented by area A in Figure 4, to be noticeable and troublesome. There are numerous limitations to what individuals and societies perceive as *real* – physical, intellectual, and emotional – none of which is proof that whatever is in their *unreal* category, area D, does not exist in other perceptions of reality.

## Chapter 7: Religion and Mental Illness

*But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!<sup>43</sup>*

With regard to religion and mental illness, certain religious organizations promote a view of “God’s reality” that resembles area B in Figure 4. It recognizes

and acknowledges only a small and exclusive portion of the greater societal reality (A) as acceptable for conscious integration into one’s life, usually based on literal and

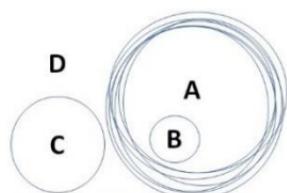


Figure 4: Alternate Realities

restrictive interpretations of religious texts and/or the limited understanding and self-serving preaching of a charismatic religious leader.

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<sup>43</sup> Matthew 23:13,24

In such instances, we find a theology of fear that attempts to force its followers into a highly restrictive way of living and believing with threats of condemnation to an eternal hell for anyone refusing to obey. This sort of theology crosses the line into mental illness when its fanatical leaders and followers attempt to impose their restrictive dictates onto others. We can find this sort of distortion of religious doctrine in every major belief system. Although these religious fanatics often draw a lot of attention to themselves, their actual presence within and influence on the greater society is usually small, relatively speaking. These religious groups tend not to resort to violence to promote their beliefs, although individual members within may feel justified in committing certain acts of violence based on the teachings espoused.

On occasion we find extreme religious cults that are actively violent and can be considered as falling into area C of Figure 4, in that what they consider acceptable for human life is almost entirely outside of accepted human norms. Jim Jones' *Peoples Temple* in Jonestown in the 1960s and 1970s comes to mind. David Koresh and the *Branch Davidians*, whose *Mount Carmel Center* was located near Waco, Texas in the 1990s are another example. These groups intentionally live on the fringes of or entirely outside of the rest of society and often feel justified in using violent force, internally or externally, to protect their socially deviant practices.

My point is that just because someone or some group of people claim to stray from societal norms because it is the will of God does not make it so. Jesus of Nazareth saved his harshest criticism for the religious fanatics of his day – the scribes and the

Pharisees. Those two groups consistently mislead others with their ultra-conservative and literal interpretation and application of religious texts, even though they tended not to hold themselves to those standards as rigidly as they demanded from others. They were also received higher social status from the Roman government because they helped the Romans keep the behavior of the masses under control.

Religious teachings and practices cross the line into mental illness, as I have defined it for this book, when they encourage and support behaviors that draw followers outside of accepted social norms, particularly when they promote violence.

We know the boundaries of our conscious awareness, as represented by circle A in Figure 1, can be expanded significantly into what was once area D through education and experience. Most of us have boundaries

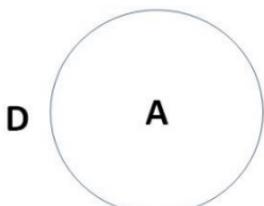


Figure 1: One person's reality

that have grown considerably over the course of our lives in spite of the structural limitations of our physical senses and intellectual and emotional capacities. A limiting factor to the scope of our area A is in how much of area D we

are *willing* to allow into our conscious awareness. In terms of being acceptably integrated participants in society, however, it is important that our area A be mostly inclusive of the collective awareness circles of others in our society even though our circle A may be much larger than the collective circle A. When our area A exists too far outside of the majority of society, or when it constricts into a limited portion of society's

collective area A, we will struggle and likely be labeled as mentally ill, defined as *behavior outside of societal norms*.

Everything within the boundaries of area A is something we feel some measure of understanding about and control over. By control I do not mean we can direct the impact of everything in area A, only that we have enough familiarity to be able to predict the likely range of outcomes from our interactions with everything in area A, if only to a limited degree. If anything or anyone challenges the integrity of our boundaries, we feel threatened and become defensive, sometimes violently so. The intensity of our response depends on how far outside our accepted boundaries the new possibility we are being challenged with exists. Most of us are open to having our boundaries stretched in gradual ways, but few will welcome a major or sudden shift because we self-identify with our boundaries – what is within circle A is *me*, what is outside is *not me*. A threat to our boundaries is personal. Interestingly, the less socially active and involved we become, particularly across racial, cultural, and socio-economic divides, the less malleable our boundaries become. We are less willing to consider other realities, understandings, truths, possibilities, and definitions of right and wrong. We become increasingly closed-minded, or in biblical verbiage, *hard-hearted* or *stiff-necked*.

It seems that *hard-heartedness* accelerated during the isolating periods of COVID because we spent far less time in the physical and emotional presence of others. Increasing numbers of people transitioned many of their social networks into virtual platforms like social media, video-gaming, and/or commercialized news shows. These types of non-physical social networks

constrict our reality because we experience only a small, carefully-crafted sampling of the realities of a limited number of people within an artificial social structure. We become hard-hearted, intolerant, and judgmental when we allow the boundaries of our individual world to be defined by a small, artificially-crafted reality. Our boundaries not only shrink but they become increasingly hardened, making it even more difficult for new ideas and understandings of reality to enter. In other words, more of the collective social reality becomes *unreal* and threatening to us as we become increasingly isolated from a representative cross-section of humanity, and we may progressively display characteristics of mental illness, both individually and collectively.

Arguably, we have experienced a hardening and shrinking of individual boundaries like no other time in recent history. This is clearly evident in American politics, where Democratic and Republican circles of acceptance have contracted into much smaller, more entrenched versions of their former selves. Their *shared realities*, where compromise and working together for the collective good are possible, are seemingly minuscule. And millions of Americans shrink their circles accordingly.

The problem with the hardening of our boundaries is that area D, which is outside of our individual and collective accepted realities, is the realm of new ideas, life-altering discoveries, peace, creative solutions, and everything needed to move our species and our planet forward in positive ways. We cannot, however, advance our lives if our area A boundaries will not budge. The solutions in area A have already been discovered and implemented. Without open-

minded, respectful, and intimate social and cultural interactions, we cannot escape imprisonment within our own inflexible boundaries.

*We have done the people of God a great disservice by preaching the gospel to them but not giving them the tools whereby they can obey that gospel.* Fr. Richard Rohr<sup>44</sup>

Figure 5 illustrates a positioning of religion and spirituality in perceived realities. Area A signifies one person's perceived reality. Area D represents realities that are outside that person's ability to perceive, but

that could become known through education and experience. Area E represents that which is beyond our ability to perceive as *real* because of the limitations of our 3-dimensional, time-and-space existence. We

cannot predict, control, or understand area E. Assuming God exists beyond time, space, and 3-dimensional limitations (area E), then our souls also originate outside of time-and-space, at least as we conceive of it. The physical bodies housing our inner, eternal, area E selves are capable of perceiving only small portions (A) of a much greater reality (E).

The realities of area E are beyond the reach of science and are the realm of God. Because nothing in area E can be scientifically proven, its reality can only

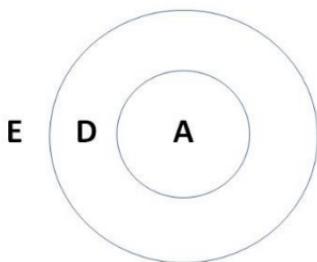


Figure 5: Beyond 3-Dimensional Reality

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<sup>44</sup> Fr. Richard Rohr, *Daily Meditations*, September 13, 2022, [www.cac.org](http://www.cac.org).

be imperfectly theorized and indirectly illuminated through *faith*. Area E is the realm of what we call archetypes, legends, and myths, which we treat as fantastical stories that are inconsistent with the seemingly factual events of our 3-dimensional experience. Which is *not* to say these stories are not true or real, only that we cannot understand them as such with our current perception tools. We must receive the stories as metaphors or analogies. Jesus often noted we have eyes but do not see. We need different methods of perception to glimpse the realities Jesus perceived as he attained Oneness with God. And this is what Richard Rohr refers to in the epigraph to this section, that we religious folks give people the gospel (the good news of *our* Oneness with God) without giving them the tools to perceive, obey, or live it.

Many writings in scripture and other sacred texts originate in area E, but some religious leaders teach them as factual realities in area A. Examples include the virgin birth of Jesus, the story of Noah's ark, Jonah surviving being swallowed by a whale, and the raising of Jesus's crucified body. Some say if we do not accept these writings as factually, historically, and 3-dimensionally true, we are heretics and have no hope in this world or beyond. Many religious teachings are unacceptable to increasing numbers of people because they try to sell unintelligible area E realities as area A facts. Although religion has always attempted to teach area E realities through the use of metaphor and analogy, only recently has it attempted to convince folks of the literal, area A reality of the teachings. We can only rationalize such a leap from E into A by dismissing or ignoring our everyday experiences. This was perhaps easier in past generations when church

membership was a societal expectation. We actually pervert and limit the profound truths contained in area E stories when we teach them as area A realities.

Where spirituality differs from religion, in my view, is that spirituality is rooted in areas A *and* D, from which it works to build bridges into area E. It does not ask us to make non-rational leaps from A to E. Spirituality is neither at odds with nor limited by religion, reason, or science. Spiritual practices aim to focus our awareness into the present moment, where areas A, D, and E touch each other, and where our Oneness with God can be glimpsed. Contemplative practices like silent prayer, sacred reading, body prayers, chanting, and reflective meditation serve as bridges to realities where time is no longer sequential, space is not incomprehensively vast, and life is not confined within three dimensions.

The preaching and teaching of God's expansive, loving, and all-inclusive nature is increasingly being replaced in some churches by inflexible dogma, purity standards, judgement, and exclusion – all of which appeal to those whose area A is small. The independent, non-denominational churches, which draw the largest numbers of people today, are also the ones that formulate their teachings and doctrines from the smallest pool of religious tradition, experience, and scriptural understanding. In fact, many rely on the theology of a single, charismatic pastor. This movement is consistent with my thesis that we, individually and communally, are experiencing a shrinking of and separation in what we accept as good, true, and tolerable. Which is exactly what we see in our politics. It is also what we witness in mental illness.

## Greg Hildenbrand

And which we also find in many who support the gun culture of America.

## Chapter 8: Societal Mental Illness

*Bipolar disorder, formerly called manic depression, is a mental health condition that causes extreme mood swings that include emotional highs (mania or hypo mania) and lows (depression)...Mayo Clinic<sup>45</sup>*

It appears our circles of reality, individually and collectively, may be shrinking. I attribute this, in part, to our social interactions becoming increasingly virtual instead of face-to-face. In the model I am using, mental illness (behaviors outside of societal norms) occurs when one's circle either shrinks significantly in relation to others or when one's circle shifts outside of the societal reality.

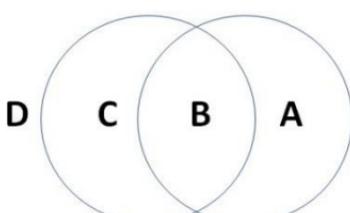


Figure 2: Two realities

Figure 2 represents the realities of two people, A and C. Area B represents what both A and C agree is real and true. When area B is large there is strong alignment

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<sup>45</sup> [Bipolar disorder - Symptoms and causes - Mayo Clinic](#), accessed October 18, 2022.

between persons A and C. A small or non-existent area B is indicative of a lack of alignment. Circles A and C can also represent political parties, religious denominations, and any other grouping of people.

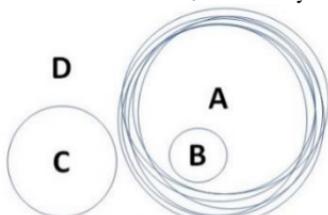


Figure 4: Alternate Realities

Figure 4 represents a communal reality where area A is the community's shared reality. Circle B represents someone or some group whose reality exists within a small portion of the societal reality. Circle C represents someone or some group whose reality is completely divorced from the rest of the community.

One of my brothers lived two decades with adult-onset bipolar disorder. During a time when our shared reality was well-aligned, I drew Figure 4 for him. I told him that in his manic states, it appeared that his circle of awareness pulled away from the rest of us, like area C, so whatever he perceived was inaccessible to us. He heard voices and saw things the rest of us could not. He entered states of mental illness that were labeled paranoid, schizophrenic, and psychotic. Powerful drugs and time were required to shift his reality back into alignment with ours. When I shared this diagram with him, he confirmed that this was what it felt like to him, too. He knew when his reality was shifting even though he felt powerless to stop it. Nor did he necessarily want to.

When my brother's reality shifted, he displayed behaviors that, although perfectly rational to him, were unacceptable and disruptive to the rest of us. His interactions with society from his manic state were frightening, frustrating, and confusing because others

did not respond as he felt they would if they understood what he understood. At times he threatened violence, although he was not normally a violent person. He had tremendous difficulty focusing on what were mundane tasks (area A) for the rest of us and would spend inordinate amounts of time on grandiose plans to save the world or avert some global catastrophe. What is curious (and unnerving), given how much of reality we cannot perceive, is that his reality *might* have been more insightful than ours. Perhaps he *could* see solutions inaccessible to the rest of us. He could not act on them, however, from outside of the common reality. My reality aligned better with that of society, but does that mean it is more *real* in any way other than society's agreement? As my mother and grandmother approached their deaths, they too heard and saw things the rest of us could not. No one, however, would have considered them mentally ill.

I share my brother's shifting circle of reality because it may help illustrate the shifting realities we see in our world today, as well as illustrate how this sort of mental illness can lead to violent behavior. As our political circles of reality pull farther away from each other, the opportunities for legislative action in the common interest shrink proportionally. As churches condense and harden their teachings and practices into smaller portions of God's all-inclusive nature, the opportunities for us to serve society as religious believers also shrinks proportionally.

My fear is that we are shifting towards groupings of social realities with little in common, meaning there are few opportunities for working and subsisting peaceably together. It is mutually beneficial to have

inclusive realities that do not deny or threaten what is real to others (within acceptable boundaries), while encouraging open-minded consideration of and respect for the realities of others, which is the template Jesus modeled for Christians. As the boundaries of our realities become impermeable, our world shrinks and seems constantly vulnerable. And we will react, sometimes with physical violence, other times by isolating ourselves from those we believe threaten our boundaries. Family against family, nation against nation, or in the case of my brother, one person against the world. Those of us who take pride in being aligned with societal norms should take care not to allow today's acceptable boundaries to become hardened against consideration of what is outside those boundaries. Only by expanding our circles of reality will we learn, grow, and progress.

*Serious mental illness is a mental, behavioral or emotional disorder...resulting in serious functional impairment, which substantially interferes with or limits one or more major life activities.<sup>46</sup>*

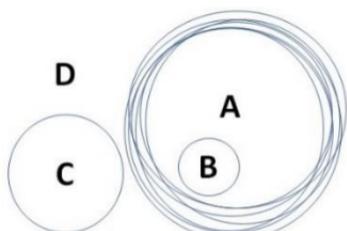


Figure 4: Alternate Realities

I will now turn my attention to circle B, which is a severely limited perception of reality within the accepted societal norms (A), but that rejects significant portions of those greater norms, often

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<sup>46</sup> <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/what-is-mental-illness>, accessed October 24, 2022.

violently. To illustrate the point I use an extreme example from the last century, Adolph Hitler. One of Hitler's stated aims was to create a superior race of people. He (supposedly) envisioned a pure race that eliminated or reduced human illness, physical and mental disabilities, and other *undesirable variations* he believed perpetuated inferiority within the species. Of course, Hitler's vision of a "pure" race was Aryan (non-Jewish), Caucasian, and of Nordic descent. Hitler's skewed circle of reality was like area B – acceptance of only a small portion of the greater social reality. Tragically, Hitler had the charisma to sell his warped vision to a wounded nation, along with the means to wreak havoc and terror on the world for many years as he attempted to shrink society's area A to the size of circle B.

Hitler's "goal" (no doubt a cover for his prejudicial obsession with power) of reducing illness and functional inabilities is within the socially acceptable norms of circle A. What made him crazy and dangerous was his refusal to acknowledge the worth of large swaths of what makes up the greater social reality, including the incredible diversity of races and countless types and varieties of abilities. Hitler's solution was to eliminate or enslave those who did not meet his racial preferences or did not possess what he judged as worthy abilities. Had he been truly focused on reducing or mitigating illnesses and debilitating conditions for society at large, the methods he used would have been very different, and he might have been celebrated as a champion of humanity. The distance between serious mental derangement and well-adjusted societal functioning is sometimes subtle, but the behaviors and impacts are light years apart.

It is interesting to consider how one's circle of reality shifts or shrinks (circles B and C) from the greater reality. I previously suggested that our increasingly virtual social interactions are contributing factors. Indeed, most, if not all, perpetrators of recent mass shootings were social loners whose primary social interactions were online. I consider them examples of circle B where their reality was a small, artificial sampling of society. Like Hitler and his followers, it is easy to believe oneself superior and powerful inside a small circle because of the limited numbers and lack of diversity within it. Some area B folks justify horrific behaviors because they perceive those outside their circle as *objects* and as something *less than* people like themselves. Other area B folks passively withdraw because the larger world is beyond their ability to grasp.

Dementia is an interesting case that may be an area B phenomenon, at least as it appears to some of us on the outside. Because we cannot know what another person actually experiences internally, however, we cannot know whether their worldview has shrunken to a small part of or shifted outside of area A. It is also possible their circle of reality has expanded well into area D, and they find little in area A worthy of their engagement.

Shifts in consciousness outside of the societal perceptions of reality have numerous causes and triggers. Chemical imbalances, genetics, and birth abnormalities are among them, as are stress, trauma, and aging. The use of consciousness-altering substances like drugs and alcohol can also result in a shift. The late spiritual teacher, Ram Dass, once claimed that God came to the United States in the form of LSD, a psychotropic drug popular in the 1960s.

Indeed, the descriptions of psychedelic drug experiences often resemble forays into area D, which are well beyond any waking reality most of us can perceive unaided.

The point of this extended consideration of mental illness as it relates to societal violence is that a person's perception of reality *relative to society's collective perception* determines how they will relate to and behave within or against that society. The increasing instances of violence against powerless victims are indicative of individuals becoming isolated from realities different from their own, whether by choice or circumstance. In the words of Christianity's namesake, Jesus the Christ, we are to love God, love others, and love our enemies, regardless of where their circle of reality exists relative to ours. Loving and caring for people, *all people*, must override our value judgements about them if we are to decrease the violence in our time. Attempting to bring society's *loners* back within the boundaries of society is a Christ-like strategy to reducing societal violence.

Greg Hildenbrand

## Part 4: Spiritual Nonviolence

### Chapter 9: Spiritual Nonviolence

This section draws from an essay by Rosemary Lynch and Alain Richard titled, *The Decalogue for a Spirituality of Nonviolence*.<sup>47</sup> Each of the ten points of that essay will be used as an epigraph for the various sections of this chapter. The ten tenants of that essay were condensed and restated by the Center for Action and Contemplation (CAC) under the title of *A Spirituality of Nonviolence*<sup>47</sup> and published in Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation for October 26, 2022. Taken together,

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<sup>47</sup> Rosemary Lynch and Alain Richard, "The Decalogue for a Spirituality of Nonviolence," in *From Violence to Wholeness*, Ken Butigan with Patricia Bruno, Franciscan Nonviolence Center, 1999, p. 18.

<sup>48</sup> [www.cac.org](http://www.cac.org), *A Spirituality of Nonviolence*,  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rF7pqKJ\\_aRo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rF7pqKJ_aRo)

these works form the basis inspiration for what follows under the title of *Spiritual Nonviolence*.

The ten tenants of the CAC's *A Spirituality of Nonviolence*<sup>49</sup> are as follows:

***A Spirituality of Nonviolence***

1. *I recognize the sacred in all people.*
2. *I accept myself deeply.*
3. *I recognize that what I resent in another also lives in me.*
4. *I renounce the 'us-them' mentality.*
5. *I face my fear with love.*
6. *I accept that New Creation is a community act, not a solo act.*
7. *I am part of the whole creation, not master over.*
8. *I am ready to suffer to help liberate the Divine in others.*
9. *I will celebrate when the presence of God is accepted.*
10. *I will slow down and plant seeds.*

## **Part A: Recognizing the Sacred**

*To learn to recognize and respect the sacred in every person, including in ourselves, and in every part of creation. The acts of the nonviolent person help to free this sacredness in the opponent from obscurity or captivity.*<sup>48</sup>

The initial statement *A Spirituality of Nonviolence*<sup>49</sup> is this: *I recognize the sacred in all people.* This statement hints at

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<sup>48</sup> Rosemary Lynch and Alain Richard, "The Decalogue for a Spirituality of Nonviolence," in *From Violence to Wholeness*, Ken Butigan with Patricia Bruno, Franciscan Nonviolence Center, 1999, p. 18.

<sup>49</sup> [www.cac.org](http://www.cac.org), *A Spirituality of Nonviolence*,  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE7pqKJ\\_aRo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE7pqKJ_aRo)

the heart of our justification for doing violence to others – we do not recognize or respect them as sacred. To see someone as sacred we must first recognize that they, like us, are intentionally-created, beloved children of God with a divine purpose. They are not interruptions to or roadblocks in our life but are integral and necessary parts of what is ours to experience. We are often deceived because others seldom act in what we consider sacred ways, especially during times of exhaustion, stress, or conflict. Concluding or assuming that someone is not sacred reveals a basic misunderstanding we easily fall prey to: that *we are what we do*. Just because we have an unholy moment or day or year does not make us less sacred; it makes us human. Not only are we not what we do, we also are not what we think or what others think about us. We are children of God, loved and created in God’s image. Just because the outer expression does not always accurately reflect the inner potential does not diminish our sacred essence.

A significant underlying cause of violence is our lack of knowledge, understanding, or appreciation of the life-experience of others. It is difficult to value someone we do not know, just as it is difficult to wish anyone ill who we know well. I hear this was a source of internal conflict among some of the Russian soldiers tasked with the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. They felt an inherent kinship with the Ukrainian people that made it feel as if they were doing violence against family members. It is much easier to feel justified in doing violence against another when we see them as something less than human and certainly not as sacred. We *objectify* them in the sense of devaluing their worth based on our (usually ill-informed) opinion of their

surface identity with a race, nationality, sexual orientation, or other trait that has nothing to do with their inherent status as a sacred child of God. We have witnessed the objectification of large swaths of humanity playing out in horribly tragic ways throughout history, from the Nazis murdering Jews, Americans (and others) enslaving Africans, and the founders of this nation destroying the lives of indigenous peoples. In each case, unspeakable violence was justified by proclaiming the way of life of one group of sacred people to be less worthy of preservation than the way of life desired by the group in power.

How do we reduce violence in our world? It begins by seeking and honoring the sacred in everyone else. We must learn to focus on where our lives intersect with others, not on where they diverge. We should be curious and interested, impressed and affirming, accepting and loving. When we learn to hold onto the certainty that the sacred essence is present in everyone, it will reveal itself.

## Part B: Accepting Self

*Active nonviolence call us to accept deeply “who I am,” with all my gifts and richness, with all my limitations, errors, failings and weaknesses, and to realize that I am accepted by God.<sup>50</sup>*

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<sup>50</sup> Rosemary Lynch and Alain Richard, “The Decalogue for a Spirituality of Nonviolence,” in *From Violence to Wholeness*, Ken Butigan with Patricia Bruno, Franciscan Nonviolence Center, 1999, p. 18.

The second statement from *A Spirituality of Nonviolence*<sup>51</sup> is *I accept myself deeply*. Most of us deny how often we act as though the opposite were true, i.e., *I reject myself deeply*. It is this self-rejection, this self-disappointment, even this self-loathing that forms the foundation for our rejection of certain others and our justification for violence against them. When we compare ourselves with others, as we frequently do, we usually feel we do not measure up well against them. Of course, we are comparing a small sampling of what we know about another with the totality of what we think we know about ourselves, so it is never a fair or accurate comparison.

Our self-rejection has a couple of different expressions. First, we might not feel ourselves worthy or capable of any meaningful task or action, so we withdraw and do nothing. On the other hand, we might compensate for our feelings of inferiority by being overly critical of the sincere (and imperfect) actions of others, sometimes even sabotaging those efforts. *Both* are acts of violence on our part, the first by doing nothing in a situation calling for action, and the second by negating the efforts of those trying to help a difficult situation. Instead of striving to be an active part of a solution we become an inflammatory part of the problem, all stemming from our refusal to accept ourselves in a deep way.

It is easy to base our acceptance or rejection of a person on their individual traits. One's traits and their created essence are not the same, however. Our behavioral traits do not define us anymore than our

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<sup>51</sup> [www.cac.org](http://www.cac.org), *A Spirituality of Nonviolence*,  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE7pqKJ\\_aRo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE7pqKJ_aRo)

race, nationality, or sexual orientation define us. Acceptance and rejection of traits are *attitudes* or orientations that can change by reframing how we see, develop, and utilize the traits we possess and/or witness in others. The various traits we judge as positive or negative, useful or useless, exist on a continuum from immature or unconsummated expressions to more mature or consummated expressions. All of our actions fall somewhere between the two extremes, but wherever we fall today is not a life sentence condemning us to remain at that stage of development. As we learn to accept our less mature expressions as just that -- *less* mature -- we allow ourselves the grace to improve. It is our essential nature that guides us toward maturity. Being human is not an exercise in perfection; it is an exercise in growth and development.

The first step in developing a personal commitment to spiritual nonviolence is to recognize the sacred in others. The second step is to recognize the sacred in ourselves. Indeed, the first is not possible without the second. Once we learn to accept that we will always be a work in progress, complete with various failings and falling short of expectations, we will be better able to accept the same *imperfections* in others. Less mature traits do not equate to less worth as a person. As we mature, we cease considering others as a threat to our personal sense of worth, and we are less likely to react violently to them, either through neglect or through direct harm. The admonition to be kind because everyone is fighting a hard battle, applies here. Being kind to others, certainly, for their all-too-human frailties, but also being kind to ourselves for the same reason. Accepting ourselves deeply provides the

necessary foundation for the nonviolent treatment of others.

## Part C: Recognizing Resentment

*Active nonviolence calls (me) to recognize that what I resent, and perhaps even detest, in another, comes from my difficulty in admitting that this same reality lives also in me.<sup>52</sup>*

The third statement from *A Spirituality of Nonviolence*<sup>53</sup> is *I recognize that what I resent in another also lives in me*. Of all the wisdom passed along by our predecessors, this is arguably the most difficult and profound lesson for us to learn, understand, and integrate into our relationships. What we see in and experience from others that we do not like is almost certainly a projection of something we do not like in and refuse to recognize or accept in ourselves. The truth is exactly as blunt and unyielding as that. It cannot be sugar-coated to make us feel better about ourselves or to justify our feelings that others are inferior to us. The habits, mannerisms, and other qualities we find intolerable in others are reflections of what annoys us about ourselves that we refuse to acknowledge, accept, and love. Others, particularly those closest to us, serve as mirrors to our inner selves. *Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the most annoying of all?* (Spoiler alert: it's *me*.)

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<sup>52</sup> Rosemary Lynch and Alain Richard, “The Decalogue for a Spirituality of Nonviolence,” in *From Violence to Wholeness*, Ken Butigan with Patricia Bruno, Franciscan Nonviolence Center, 1999, p. 18.

<sup>53</sup> [www.cac.org](http://www.cac.org), *A Spirituality of Nonviolence*,  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE7pqKJ\\_aRo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE7pqKJ_aRo)

This is *not* a new or revolutionary teaching. It is so uncomfortable for most of us, however, that we ignore, discount, or do not allow ourselves to process it. Psychiatrist and author Carl Jung (1875-1961) wrote: *Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves.*<sup>54</sup> He observed that if the annoying acts of others were not part of us, we would not be bothered by them. Predating Jung by 1900 years was Jesus the Christ who commanded that *we shall love our neighbor as ourself*. This well-known command is usually loosely interpreted as a nice suggestion for how to treat others. Instead, it is a factual declaration that *how we love, accept, and treat ourselves is exactly how we will love, accept, and treat others*. It cannot be otherwise. What we dislike or repress in ourselves, we will dislike in others just as certainly as the sun will rise in the east and set in the west.

And the practical lesson from this is not that we should simply accept annoying traits in ourselves or others as the way things must be, but that we should understand annoying traits as points on a spectrum spanning from immature to mature expressions of those traits – temporary expressions that can and will mature, given the right circumstances. As such, we can all reach higher levels of maturity once we accept the point on the spectrum where we find ourselves as a beginning and not a fixed point. We cannot eliminate impatience in others, for example, but we can look deeply into the causes and triggers of impatience in ourselves and learn more mature responses to our personal causes and triggers of impatience. By so

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<sup>54</sup> CarlJungDepthPsychologySite.blog, posted December 14, 2019.  
Accessed January 16, 2023.

doing, we will gradually experience less impatience from others, patience being the more mature form of impatience.

In this context – by recognizing that what I resent in others also lives in me – we come to understand that the source of the resentment we can actually do something about is internal, i.e., with me, and not external, i.e., with another. In fact, we *cannot* effectively impact the source of the resentment we experience except by identifying and healing it in ourselves. And that is good, if somewhat disheartening, news because it provides an element of control for us. When we justify violence against another to teach them a lesson or to eliminate their bad, annoying, or unacceptable behavior, we will never bring lasting peace or changed behavior because we will continue projecting our own unchanged internal resentments onto others. Peace, love, and acceptance from others can only emerge from within ourselves. The bad news is that whatever qualities we project onto those around us will be projected back to us. Which is, of course, also the good news.

## Part D: Non-Dualism

*Active nonviolence calls (me) to renounce dualism, the “we-they” mentality. This divides us into “good people/bad people” and allows us to demonize the adversary. It is the root of authoritarianism and exclusivist behavior. It generates racism and makes possible conflicts and wars.<sup>55</sup>*

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<sup>55</sup> Rosemary Lynch and Alain Richard, “The Decalogue for a Spirituality of Nonviolence,” in *From Violence to Wholeness*, Ken Butigan with Patricia Bruno, Franciscan Nonviolence Center, 1999, p. 18.

The fourth statement from *A Spirituality of Nonviolence*<sup>56</sup> is *I renounce the “us-them” mentality*. This statement encourages us to deeply examine our perception of ourselves as separate, independent beings. We are only separate in the shallowest and most illusory of understandings of the nature of the life in which we participate. Granted, our three-dimensional perceptual abilities appear to support the illusion that our individual natures and the well-defined boundaries between us and everything else in creation are real. That, combined with our ego-driven need to see ourselves as superior to most others, leads to a whole host of *sins* that often result in violence to ourselves and others, *sin* being that which separates our conscious awareness away from God and others. Our false perception of ourselves as independent from, superior to, worthier than, or inferior to anyone or anything else is *sinful* because it separates us from consciously living in the truth that we are all children of God, co-equal parts of the body of Christ, along with everything else in creation – not better, not worse, not the same, but equally loved, accepted, needed, and deserving of respect and honor.

The larger life of which we are a part reaches infinitely farther and deeper than the three-dimensional limitations our physical senses are capable of perceiving. We know this from the scientific and experiential proof of realities we cannot directly perceive, from cell phone signals, to x-rays, to the unconscious motivations that determine over 90% of

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<sup>56</sup> [www.cac.org](http://www.cac.org), *A Spirituality of Nonviolence*,  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE7pqKJ\\_aRo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE7pqKJ_aRo)

our thoughts and actions. Dimensions of life beyond our senses abound wherever we perceive nothingness. There is an invisible (to us) webbing that binds and connects all things together, and we only perpetuate our ignorance by denying its reality.

It is understandable that we adopt an *us-them* mentality because seemingly everyone has been conditioned to act and behave as if they were separate beings. It is nearly impossible, however, to perceive our interconnectedness without first believing in its possibility, not unlike how it is difficult to perceive God's existence until we first dare to believe in it. Once we so believe, however, we find supporting evidence all around us.

One of the consequences of the *us-them* mentality is the false belief that we can advance our life at the expense of another, as opposed to the truth that we can only advance our life in lasting, meaningful ways by advancing the lives of others. Because our lives are interconnected, we progress and regress together.

Another consequence of the *us-them* mentality is that we blame others for our problems instead of looking within for causes and solutions. In the eerily humorous words attributed to Theodore Roosevelt, "If you could kick the person in the pants responsible for most of your trouble, you wouldn't sit for a month."<sup>57</sup> Our egos like to blame others for our personal shortcomings because it makes them feel superior and not responsible for our troubles. Once we see that we are all *us* and that there is no *them*, our motivations and behaviors become more inclusive,

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<sup>57</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/26224-if-you-could-kick-the-person-in-the-pants-responsible>. Accessed January 30, 2023.

generous, and other-focused. Not to mention less violent. To renounce the *us-them mentality* requires that we act as if our fates and those of others are inseparably tied. Doing harm to others – physically, mentally, or emotionally – harms us, too. Once we begin habitually acting as if this were true, the supporting evidence will abound.

## Part E: Facing Fear

*Active nonviolence calls (me) to face fear and to deal with it not mainly with courage but with love.<sup>58</sup>*

The fifth statement from *A Spirituality of Nonviolence*<sup>59</sup> is *I face my fear with love*. When we refer to the fifth statement from *The Decalogue for a Spirituality of Nonviolence* (see the epigraph for this section), we find an interesting contrast between facing our fears with *courage* and facing our fears with *love*. The distinction is not subtle. Courage seeks to overcome or defeat our fear, as if beating it into submission. Acting courageously is often acting in spite of, or without regard to our fear-inducing reservations. Love seeks to understand and embrace our fear, to discover what lies behind it, to get to know it, particularly any unresolved issues in our past that may be unreasonably and subconsciously contributing to our fear. Courage leads to action and is an important quality in certain fearful

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<sup>58</sup> Rosemary Lynch and Alain Richard, “The Decalogue for a Spirituality of Nonviolence,” in *From Violence to Wholeness*, Ken Butigan with Patricia Bruno, Franciscan Nonviolence Center, 1999, p. 18.

<sup>59</sup> [www.cac.org](http://www.cac.org), *A Spirituality of Nonviolence*,  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE7pqKJ\\_aRo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE7pqKJ_aRo)

situations. Love also leads to action, but to action based on a deeper exploration of the causes of the fear.

Our fears are usually based in ignorance. We fear what we do not understand. Sometimes, that fear is healthy and reasonable, as when we sense danger in a situation that actually *does* present a serious threat to us or others. Other times, however, arguably even most times, what we fear poses no tangible threat. Instead of reacting in fear, curiosity is the more appropriate response. When we succumb to our fear, our sympathetic nervous system prepares our bodies to fight or to flee. We become tense and reactive. We may act in ways we later see as irrational, unnecessarily violent, or otherwise inconsistent with the image we strive to project and wish to portray to others.

In their younger years, our children slept with a nightlight. The dim light in the room helped them to see and recognize their familiar surroundings should they awaken during the night confused or frightened. As I age, once again I find value in nightlights, not because I think there might be a monster in the corner, but because my monsters now are unseen walls, closed doors, and furniture that I might run into or trip over in a semi-conscious state. In both cases, a little light is helpful because our normal way of perceiving and feeling safe in our surroundings requires light to visualize their familiarity. Adding metaphorical light to a fearful situation or relationship means attaining understanding or knowledge that was previously lacking.

One of the ills that Jesus healed was that of *blindness*. We typically assume he healed the physical sight in others, and perhaps he did. But he also healed spiritual blindness by providing the light of knowledge

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where there was darkness, wisdom where there was ignorance. *I was blind, but now I see.*

If facing our fears with blind, hard-charging courage is the *bull-in-a-China-closet* method of overcoming our life-challenges, then facing our fears with love is its contemplative and measured counterpart. Both methods are courageous and lead to action with regard to what we fear, but love's method is far less violent. A bull in a China closet leaves much destruction in its wake. If we worry that love's method of fear-resolving is too time and energy consuming, we should consider how long it will take and how costly it will be to repair the damage of blindly powering through our challenges.

Reducing the violence in our world begins with reducing the violence in our individual thoughts and actions. Reducing the violence in our thoughts and actions begins with learning to face our fears with a healthy sense of curiosity. In most cases, we should not seek the quick elimination of what we fear without regard to the cost. Rather, we should see our fears as gaps in our knowledge, as opportunities to learn and grow, as well as invitations to love and accept parts of God's creation we might otherwise reject.

## Part F: Creating Community

*To understand and accept that the New Creation, the building up of the Beloved Community is always carried forward with others. It is never a “solo act.”<sup>60</sup>*

The sixth statement from *A Spirituality of Nonviolence*<sup>61</sup> is *I accept that New Creation is a community act, not a solo act.* Individuality is deeply ingrained in the Western mindset. In our politics and religion, we seek one individual to elevate as the face of a movement, thus creating an idol. We then worship that individual by showering them with wildly disproportional attention, rewards, and expectations. We hold individual achievement as the pinnacle of a well-lived, successful life.

The world witnessed this type of idolization the night before I began writing this piece with the 2023 Super Bowl. I am a die-hard Kansas City Chiefs and Patrick Mahomes fan (who won the 2023 Super Bowl and Most Valuable Player award, respectively), so I have nothing against them personally, but this very current event reminds me of the problems our idolization of individuals creates. Yes, credit was given to other individual performers, like Coach Reid, Travis Kelce, the offensive line, the defense, etc., but the farther removed the attention strayed from the face of the franchise, Patrick Mahomes, the more generic the praise became. Obviously, there cannot be a

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<sup>60</sup> Rosemary Lynch and Alain Richard, “The Decalogue for a Spirituality of Nonviolence,” in *From Violence to Wholeness*, Ken Butigan with Patricia Bruno, Franciscan Nonviolence Center, 1999, p. 18.

<sup>61</sup> [www.cac.org](http://www.cac.org), *A Spirituality of Nonviolence*,  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE7pqKJ\\_aRo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE7pqKJ_aRo)

championship for any individual without the supporting efforts of teammates, position coaches, and countless unnamed and modestly-paid staff who wash uniforms, cook meals, and tend the playing fields. While this should be obvious, we still elevate one person to hold up as the standard, to be the hero, to be emulated. The anonymous masses coalesce around the individual star, whose stardom is only possible because of the supporting cast. There are, however, no individual accomplishments (or screw-ups), because everything worthwhile is the result of a community effort.

Of course, the elevation of individuals is not limited to professional sports. It is rampant in music, politics, education, and even religion. Few individuals raised to such high pedestals remain there for long. The various media outlets and finicky publics that fuel the rise to super-stardom make the fall quick and decisive. Even super-stars are subject to declining physical and mental abilities, as are we, not to mention the moral and ethical lapses that often accompany stardom. The public proclamation of individual greatness and the expectation of perfection it brings is not reality, nor does it reveal how we must work together for good or nothing good will happen.

When the face of a movement is exposed as a fallible human like everyone else, the masses often feel deceived. But the deception is attributable to the insatiable desire of the masses to find *a person* who personifies the perfection that eludes them personally, not to mention making them feel superior to others by association. Such perfection, however, is only attainable in community.

As a Mahomes fan, I do not believe his goal was to become an idol held in higher regard than his teammates and supporting casts but rather was to do the best he could with the capabilities he had *in the context of his community*, the Kansas City Chiefs. Behind the face of every meaningful movement or accomplishment is a community of characters without whom the face would be but one of many, which is a fairer reflection of reality anyway.

Shaping and building a new, non-violent world will not be accomplished by a single hero but by a community committed to the work required. Our goal, therefore, should not be to become the Patrick Mahomes of non-violence – to manifest the *New Creation* single-handedly with our brilliance and super-human skill – but to faithfully perform the part we are best suited to perform and that is required for the collective work to be accomplished, however humble that part may seem. We do it not to become the face of anything, but because it needs to be done and because its accomplishment requires us to do our part within the community. Community work does not typically bring fame or fortune. But it does bring change. And change is what we need, not another soon-forgotten face.

## Part G: Love, Not Mastery

*Active nonviolence calls us to see ourselves as a part of the whole creation to which we foster a relationship of love, not of mastery, remembering that the destruction of our planet is a profoundly spiritual problem, not simply a scientific or technological one. We are one.<sup>62</sup>*

The seventh statement from *A Spirituality of Nonviolence*<sup>63</sup> is *I am part of the whole creation, not master over*. Because most of us have been raised and educated in a society that promotes and even worships individual achievement, the thought of aspiring to be a *part* of anything worthwhile seems like underachieving. We have been conditioned, essentially from birth, to strive for the position of *master* and not *participant* or *contributor* or *behind-the-scenes-laborer*. While it is appropriate to gravitate toward those activities and behaviors we are naturally gifted for, it is inappropriate to hide or refuse to share our natural gifts because we believe them to be inferior or non-spectacular. Jesus said, “You are the light of the world...let your light shine before others...”<sup>64</sup> He did not say only the socially-defined brightest lights should shine. We need light of all intensities and natures. He also discouraged glorifying ourselves over others, regardless of our individual roles.

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<sup>62</sup> Rosemary Lynch and Alain Richard, “The Decalogue for a Spirituality of Nonviolence,” in *From Violence to Wholeness*, Ken Butigan with Patricia Bruno, Franciscan Nonviolence Center, 1999, p. 18.

<sup>63</sup> [www.cac.org](http://www.cac.org), *A Spirituality of Nonviolence*,  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE7pqKJ\\_aRo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE7pqKJ_aRo)

<sup>64</sup> Matthew 5:14-16.

There is a real sense in which we *are* the light of the world, that the world *does* revolve around us, and that we *are* the center of the universe. This is where the 3-dimensional, time-and-space limitations of our life on earth restricts our perception of reality. We are taught that we are an insignificant speck from an insignificant town on an insignificant planet in an insignificant solar system which is a minuscule part of an insignificant galaxy located in a forgotten alley of a vast universe. That is the message our sciences and powers of observation teach us because that is the way the world appears in three-dimensional, time and space reality. The Spirit and our spiritual natures, however, are not limited in that way. The lives of our souls do not occur in chronological time, nor are they limited to three-dimensions. When we understand that God looks out from and experiences the created universe through our eyes and experience, we understand that our vantage point *is* the center of all creation (as is true for all other beings, too). This makes no logical sense until we accept that the *center* is not a single point in space or time.

Our intuition that the world revolves around us is not untrue, even though it is a non-sensical stance in a three-dimensionally-limited perception of reality. It does, however, ring true with our deepest intuition. *Together* we are the center of the universe, even though it seems inglorious to our earthly egos to share that distinction with everyone and everything else. I think what trips us up is our identification with our small, earthly self – the imaginary entity that *is* a tiny speck in the universe – instead of with the greater self that is a physical manifestation through which God experiences all of creation.

One implication of being intimately interconnected with all other parts of creation – past, present, and future – is that whatever happens to others, happens to us, too, including what happens to our environment. In that sense, the title of *master* becomes meaningless and irrelevant. Those who take the roles of *leader* and *follower*, of *healer* and *wounded*, or of *builder* and *destroyer* are equal parts of One Being encompassing *all* parts – equally valued, vital, interdependent, and worthy – so the apparent differences between the various roles become unimportant. The focus turns to what is necessary and away from what is attention-grabbing. It is only because we seek a position of seemingly greater importance than others that our behaviors are sometimes violent. Violence comes as we attempt to attain or retain a role that society overvalues. There is no need for violence when equality is understood and accepted. Being content with being *a part* is where true glory thrives.

## Part H: Suffering to Liberate

*Active nonviolence call us to be ready to suffer, perhaps even with joy, if we believe this will help liberate the Divine in others. This includes the acceptance of our place and moment in history with its trauma, with its ambiguities.*<sup>65</sup>

The eighth statement from *A Spirituality of Nonviolence*<sup>66</sup> is *I am ready to suffer to help liberate the Divine in others*. Suffering is a nearly forbidden word in today's Western culture, as if by speaking it aloud we increase the chances of bringing it nearer. We go to great lengths to prevent, avoid, or minimize suffering, and we have made significant progress in alleviating many causes of suffering from past eras. With the invention of and common accessibility to indoor plumbing, heating and air conditioning, personal vehicles, the internet, and antibiotics we have made our lives easier and more comfortable in many ways. But has our overall level of suffering decreased or merely shifted form? I suspect the latter to be the case.

It is easy to believe that more money in the bank or fewer pounds on the body or moving to a new town, job, or relationship will alleviate our personal suffering and put us in a happier and more contented space. While I believe we can sometimes escape certain types of suffering, we cannot erase suffering from our lives by changing our physical, earthly circumstances. Suffering, both individual and communal, is a spiritual

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<sup>65</sup> Rosemary Lynch and Alain Richard, "The Decalogue for a Spirituality of Nonviolence," in *From Violence to Wholeness*, Ken Butigan with Patricia Bruno, Franciscan Nonviolence Center, 1999, p. 18.

<sup>66</sup> [www.cac.org](http://www.cac.org), *A Spirituality of Nonviolence*,  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE7pqKJ\\_aRo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE7pqKJ_aRo)

issue that often manifests physically, but cannot be resolved in the ways we typically approach problem-solving. In fact, and frustratingly paradoxically, suffering can *only* be alleviated by embracing it, by getting closer to it, and by accepting it as a life-long companion. None of which is to say we should cease our efforts to relieve dehumanizing and life-threatening forms of suffering, only that we should accept that eliminating one type of suffering will not stop suffering, in the form of difficult challenges, from resurfacing in other forms. If suffering has spiritual (meaning subconscious) roots, the fact that we *will* suffer from something is beyond our control. Buddhism recognizes suffering as a foundational element of earthly life. The cure, which is deeply unsatisfying to most Western minds, lies in *non-attachment*, meaning accepting that to live is to suffer and willingly accepting whatever is given us to bear. Learning to live contentedly *in spite of* our suffering is the key to a joyful life.

When we view suffering from a broader perspective we see that it lights the fire by which we leave our comfort zones and grow into more mature states of being, even though it often requires tremendous discomfort to dislodge us from our status quo. Suffering has a Divine purpose, not because it is painful but because it is a necessary stage for change to occur. In the context of our current theme of nonviolence, suffering is how spiritual forces lead us to a new, nonviolent life. Because suffering is a spiritual issue, we must search deeply within for what it seeks to change in us. What am I denying about myself and projecting onto an external situation or person? If we are to address suffering, our own or that of others, we

must accept that suffering is internally, not externally generated. To blame others is to miss the point and perpetuate that form of suffering.

Liberating the Divine within ourselves makes us less likely to react violently toward others because it gives conscious purpose to our suffering. Helping others liberate the Divine within themselves, even if it causes hardship for us, makes them less prone to violent actions and reactions, too. Perhaps the question we should ask is not, “How can I reduce my personal suffering?” but “For what higher purpose am I willing to suffer?” Once we learn to co-exist with suffering in various forms, taking on suffering for other purposes is not a problem to be avoided but part of the work we willingly do for the greater good.

## Part I: Celebration

*Active nonviolence calls us to be capable of celebration, of joy, when the presence of God has been accepted, and when it has not been to help discover and recognize this fact.*<sup>67</sup>

The ninth statement from *A Spirituality of Nonviolence*<sup>68</sup> is *I will celebrate when the presence of God is accepted*. In the same way that suffering is an inseparable part of life we learn to accept and embrace, so is celebration. Sometimes we feel that celebrating is inappropriate when there is so much suffering in the world.

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<sup>67</sup> Rosemary Lynch and Alain Richard, “The Decalogue for a Spirituality of Nonviolence,” in *From Violence to Wholeness*, Ken Butigan with Patricia Bruno, Franciscan Nonviolence Center, 1999, p. 18.

<sup>68</sup> [www.cac.org](http://www.cac.org), *A Spirituality of Nonviolence*,  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE7pqKJ\\_aRo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE7pqKJ_aRo)

Celebration, however, does not mean everything is perfect in our world any more than the presence of suffering means that everything is horrible. As we read the stories of Jesus we realize he attended and/or shared parables of banquets, parties, and other celebrations, often using them as metaphors for the kingdom of heaven. Indeed, dining and being in fellowship with others is not only fun, it can also be healthy and holy. Celebration does not mean everything is as it should or could be, only that the present state of things is good *here and now*. The present moment is worth celebrating even when much work remains to be done. Indeed, celebrations can rejuvenate us in ways that energize the work we have yet to do.

Jesus shares many parables about the return of something once lost and the ensuing celebration. In Luke 15:1-7 he tells of a person with 100 sheep who loses one of them and leaves the other 99 to find it. When he finds it he rejoices and celebrates with friends. Jesus says, "...there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance." In the next verses (Luke 15:8-10), Jesus tells of a woman who lost one of her ten silver coins and drops everything to search for it. When she finds it she calls together friends and neighbors to rejoice. Jesus says, "...there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." The next verses (Luke 15:11-32) tell the story of the prodigal son who leaves his father after demanding the share of his father's property he would have inherited upon his father's death. The son squanders the inheritance and returns to the father, begging to be treated only as a hired hand. The father

rejoices in the return of his son and makes preparations for an enormous celebration. In each of these parables, life was good in the moment and worthy of celebration. No grudges, no weeping over what was lost, just a joyful celebration for what had been restored.

This week's statement about spiritual nonviolence encourages us to celebrate "when the presence of God is accepted." For many of us, the conscious awareness of God's presence in our lives has been lost. Those who do not consciously accept God's presence often find themselves unmoored, insecure, and fraught with anxiety, even though God's presence is there whether they accept it or not. *Conscious* acceptance and acknowledgement of the divine presence makes an enormous difference in the lives of individuals and communities and is cause for celebration wherever it occurs. That acceptance does not mean we're gaining something we never had, but that we are reawakening to a beautiful something we've always had but was lost, forgotten, or ignored. It is truly life-changing.

Having someone rediscover the presence of God within them is good news. It makes them feel and behave in a more compassionate and less violent manner. It is good for them, yes, but it is also good for the rest of us. As more of us accept that divine presence is a foundational reality of our lives, our world becomes a more loving, more pleasant, and less violent place for everyone. And that is cause for celebration.

## Part J: Slowing Down

*Active nonviolence calls us to slow down, to be patient, planting the seeds of love and forgiveness in our own hearts and in the hearts of those around us. Slowly we will grow in love, compassion and the capacity to forgive.*<sup>69</sup>

The tenth statement from *A Spirituality of Nonviolence*<sup>70</sup> is *I will slow down and plant seeds*. Slowing down and planting seeds are two practices that tend not to be widely popular in today's culture, although there is some limited movement toward both. We are accustomed to equating our worth with our production, and so slowing down seems to be the road to Loserville. In reality, and as we are painfully learning, *not* slowing down is a road to collapse: physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Planting flowers and vegetables from seeds is less expensive than planting from already growing versions, but seeds take more time and attention to get to what we perceive as the goal – flowers and vegetables – and so many of us happily pay more to get what we want quicker. Slowing down and planting seeds requires patience and the desire to find the wonders of our moments.

It is said that the best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago; the next best time is today. I worked in a nursery into my mid-twenties and was amazed at how many of the people wanting to buy trees opted for the fastest growing varieties, even those people who were

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<sup>69</sup> Rosemary Lynch and Alain Richard, “The Decalogue for a Spirituality of Nonviolence,” in *From Violence to Wholeness*, Ken Butigan with Patricia Bruno, Franciscan Nonviolence Center, 1999, p. 18.

<sup>70</sup> [www.cac.org](http://www.cac.org), *A Spirituality of Nonviolence*,  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE7pqKJ\\_aRo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE7pqKJ_aRo)

relatively young. In spite of warnings that fast-growing species tended to be brittle, subject to significant wind damage, short-lived, and seldom had attractive fall colors, many people felt that planting something that would look like a tree quicker was worth any possible future disappointments. Although I understand the time-saving attitude better as I age, I still mourn the beauty and durability that is lost, as well as the downstream problems we create in our desire to cut corners to get what and where we want as quickly and cheaply as possible.

The violence inherent in our desire for cheaper, quicker results is largely invisible to us because we fail to perceive the line connecting our decisions of the past to our current situations. Much of the concurrent violence to get things quicker and cheaper is done to underpaid and overworked laborers in other countries, not to mention the often-significant damage to our environment that may not manifest until a future generation. All because we are unwilling to invest sufficient time and funds for something more beautiful, sustainable, and fairly sourced.

Throughout this series of essays I have emphasized the importance of accepting personal responsibility for the violence around us, as well as accepting the challenge to begin by reducing the violence we personally initiate, directly and indirectly, through our purchasing and other choices. Committing to *slowing down* and *planting seeds*, in whatever ways those metaphors are best applied in our individual life situations, is a good and necessary place to begin. Allowing beauty, sustainability, and fair sourcing to factor into all of our interpersonal decisions and acquisition habits will reduce the amount

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of violence we contribute to the world. It will also give us a new and deeper perspective about our needs and desires, including whether they are worth the cost to meet at all. It is a matter of love and forgiveness – loving and forgiving ourselves, loving and forgiving others, and loving our planet and the greater life of which we are a part. It requires patience and finding joy in the processes and journeys of life instead of attempting to fast-forward over our days toward some desired result that may or may not ever manifest. We must consider not only the immediate impacts of our behaviors, but also what we leave in our wake. There is far less need for speed when our desire is focused on experiencing the inherent beauty of the moments we are given as they arrive.

## Part 5: Nonviolence and Love

### Chapter 10: Nonviolence and Love

*You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also...<sup>71</sup>*

The message of Jesus is inherently and undisputedly nonviolent. There is no evidence, biblical or otherwise, that Jesus approved of physical violence against others, even in self-defense or to save the lives of others. Jesus did not passively accept the state of his world, however, living and teaching active confrontation of

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<sup>71</sup> Matthew 5:38-39a

injustice, only in nonviolent ways. There is likewise no evidence that Jesus intended to establish a new religion or encouraged anyone to abandon their current religion. There is no evidence he encouraged people to worship him, let alone to aggressively encourage others to worship him. Jesus was a devout Jew and did nothing to destroy, replace, or evangelize the Jewish religion, although he was unapologetically critical of certain factions of its leadership and practices. What Jesus modeled and taught was a *way of life* that can be practiced under *any* religion. His was a universal way, which is one of the foundational meanings of the *Christ*, which is a universal title and not one reserved for a single individual. Jesus taught a way to *internal transformation* that would draw us closer to God while helping heal the world around us, within or without a specific religious structure. Rather than worshipping him, Jesus encouraged people to *follow* him: to live as he lived, to treat others as he treated others, and to offer one's life in service to a higher purpose.

There is, however, ample evidence that Jesus encouraged his followers to respond to aggressive others nonviolently, with love, surrender, and submission, even at the cost of their possessions and lives. Yes, they were to speak truth to power. Yes, they were to confront injustice. And yes, they were to be willing to sacrifice their lives for the way of Jesus, but there is no indication Jesus encouraged the sacrifice of anyone else's life for that or any other way. It seems to me an obvious conclusion that physical violence of any sort or for any reason is a significant obstacle in the path to union with God, to approaching and entering the kingdom of heaven, which was the goal then as now.

There are a number of events that have since led to the life and teachings of Jesus deteriorating into a new religion worthy of violent defense instead of a nonviolent way of life characterized by love and inclusion for all, as was originally intended. One of the most significant happened in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century when certain segments of the early Christian church became a sycophant of the Roman government. By becoming the official religion of Rome, much of the violence being done to early Christians by the Romans ended, but that tenuous peace came at a tremendous cost. A measure of security was gained, but the independent voice of the Church was lost. Instead of exposing the system and its leaders for their abuses, injustices, and corruption, as Jesus did in his day, the Church had to look the other way and remain in the “religious lane” established for it by the government. Criticism against the powers and principalities of the day could result in the loss of its cherished and protected position as the official religion, even though its prophetic voice had been largely neutered.

This Church-Government partnership reared its ugly head during the Crusades of the 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, and 13<sup>th</sup> Centuries, when the Church encouraged and supported massive bloodshed of primarily Islamic peoples for a land-grab cloaked in religious garb. The Crusades, perhaps more than any other event up to that time, firmly established the Christian Church as a violent instrument and co-conspirator in governmental greed done under the banner of Jesus of Nazareth. In my opinion, Jesus would have rolled over in his tomb (had he still been there).

Of course, a few centuries later was the establishment of what we now know as the United

States, which was founded as *one nation under God*. I have already addressed the horrific violence utilized in building and maintaining our nation from its beginnings to today, so I will not repeat it here. Suffice it to say that whenever the names of God or Jesus are invoked to justify violence against others, my heart sinks, as it does when violence is done against innocent others out of fear, want for notoriety, or whatever motivation some might believe justifies physical harm to others. Clearly, there is a disconnect between what our state and federal laws allow, i.e., “Stand Your Ground” laws, and what following Jesus requires. What is needed is compassion and mercy to help break the cycle of violence in which we find ourselves.

*Then Jesus said to him (Peter), “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.”<sup>72</sup>*

How is it that so many Christians – professed followers of Jesus the Christ – have become such staunch gun-toting, Second Amendment, *Stand-Your-Ground-law* advocates? Either there is something I am missing in the Gospels or they are twisting the life and teachings of Jesus to fit their own concept of what it means to be a Christian. I suspect the latter. Is there another way to interpret sayings like “Turn the other cheek”<sup>73</sup> or “Love your enemies”<sup>74</sup> or “Those who take the sword will perish by the sword”<sup>75</sup>? While I understand that some people feel the need to arm themselves against

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<sup>72</sup> Matthew 26:52

<sup>73</sup> Matthew 5:39

<sup>74</sup> Matthew 5:44

<sup>75</sup> Matthew 26:52

the threat of violence, I cannot understand how, in the same breath, they can claim such actions are consistent with the life Jesus modeled and taught. It would be more honest to admit they are arming themselves to assuage their own lack of faith in God's care. Yes, this can be a dangerous world, as it was in Jesus's day. Yes, too many innocent people are victimized by violence every day, as was also the case in Jesus's day. Some believe that because violence is so prevalent in the Bible, God must approve of it. Just because horrific violence is recorded throughout the Bible, however, does not mean the biblical authors correctly understood what God was or was not blessing. If one believes that Jesus was God incarnate in a human body, as Christians claim, why would we not use the inarguably nonviolent life and teachings of Jesus as our standard instead of cherry-picking supposedly God-supported violence recorded elsewhere in the Bible that directly opposes what Jesus lived and taught?

Despite the nonviolent life and teachings of its namesake, Christianity has been attached by a violent element since its early beginnings by individuals and organizations claiming to know, speak, and act within the will of God as they join with a well-armed, well-funded governing body.

A more recent event in the church's history that served to fuel, support, and perpetuate the violent leanings of certain Christian factions occurred with the rise of Protestantism, which occurred during the (so-called) *Age of Enlightenment* of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. This period was an outgrowth of the invention of the printing press in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, which made books widely available for the first time. The availability of books encouraged increasing numbers of people to

learn to read. One result of increasing literacy was a growing obsession with the written word, which was both a blessing and a curse to religion and spirituality. Intellectual analysis became the revered and preferred method of seeking, speaking, and “proving” truth. The fatal flaw residing within intellectualism, then as now, is that truth *cannot* be captured in or reduced to words without being balanced against other ways of knowing. One result for religious belief was in driving faith out of the hearts and bodies of individuals, where believers accepted that there are non-logical aspects of life that must be accepted on faith, and into their heads, where all that was needed was an acceptable source of written information that could be interpreted literally. Learning *about* God replaced the focus on experiences *of* and *with* God.

Protestantism is a byproduct of the *Age of Enlightenment* and grounded its beliefs and practices on written *words*, largely rejecting the non-logical practices and traditions that characterized many of the Catholic church’s offerings, including mystical, intuitive, and bodily forms of worship. Instead of accepting the limitations of intellectualism and embracing the vastness of what cannot be reduced to words, many Protestants chose to limit their understanding of God’s nature to a literal reading of the Bible, as if it were written to be reliably factual and historically accurate. Which is to say that they declared the Bible *inerrant*. Because the Bible does not hold up well to intellectual scrutiny, particularly in the areas of historicity and internal consistency, fundamentalist proponents had to abandon elements of the intellectualism they once embraced and justify their conclusions with non-logical arguments like, “If the Bible says it, I believe it!” Faith

and belief, however, are far more than intellectual concepts. It is not that words or intellectualism are evil or entirely wrong, but they are severely limited in their ability to present the deeper and larger truths about life which must strike a balance between what makes logical sense and what is in sync with the intelligences of intuition, emotion, and other non-intellectual ways of knowing.

The *intellectualization* of Christianity has supported and emboldened the violent elements within Christianity in ways completely contradictory to the life and teachings of Jesus the Christ.

*...if I understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.<sup>76</sup>*

The *Age of Enlightenment* redefined what was considered knowledge and wisdom, both in religious and secular circles. Protestantism took the new obsession with the written word and established a branch of religion based on varying degrees of literal interpretations of the Bible. Never mind that the Bible had inspired generations for centuries because its teachings and stories were understood largely as metaphors applicable to many different cultures, eras, and individual situations. Jesus taught in parables for the same reason, not that they would be understood literally but so they could be applied more broadly for more people in more situations and different ages and cultures. Because intellectual analysis relies on facts for

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<sup>76</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:2

its conclusions, intellectualism required the Bible to either be factually correct or to be considered less than truthful. For many, there was and is no middle ground, metaphors and analogies be damned.

Author and teacher Richard Rohr points out that a literal understanding of sacred texts is the lowest level of understanding we can attain. Because literal understandings are the least spiritually mature, the intellectualization of Christianity has made our quest for spiritual maturation and union with God more difficult. One problem with literalism is that its conclusions crumble once a better argument is made, which always occurs eventually. When we base our beliefs on words or creeds, our beliefs have no solid foundation because words are simply metaphors for something larger. Words are limited representations or descriptions of realities, but they are not the realities themselves. Therefore words, while powerful and useful, are illusions. When humankind elevated the power of words to preeminence a few centuries ago, as witnessed by the rise of Protestantism, it took a step away from our broader understanding of and participation in a larger reality.

One key deficiency in intellectualism was stated well by the apostle Paul, himself an intellectual, 2000 years ago in his first letter to the Corinthians. In his discourse on love he says, "...if I understand all mysteries and all knowledge...but do not have love, I am nothing."<sup>1</sup> Love is not beholden to the rules of intellectual discourse; indeed, without love intellectual discourse is meaningless. We can fill libraries and lecture halls with eloquent words describing what love is and is not, and many authors and speakers do, yet all fall infinitely short of the actual experience of love.

And so it has become with many applications of modern-day Christianity: it lacks what it most seeks to attain, which is the love of God. God does not exist or express in words; God exists and expresses in experiential, tangible love.

When we base our understanding of truth on words, whether that truth is religious, political, or educational in nature, our truth only endures until someone comes up with better words that align truth in a different direction. What we seek and need is a truth that stands unwaveringly, regardless of the words within which we attempt to describe or capture it. Grounding our truth in the wordless nature of love provides that stable, nonverbal grounding. Whether we imagine love underlying our words, rising above them, or encircling them is immaterial. Our words, even our biblical words, must be interpreted by, subservient to, and applied within the context of love.

And this is one way that violence has crept into Christianity. Different people have different methods of defense for when their deeply-held beliefs are challenged, whether that belief has to do with their personal safety or their concept of God. When words fail us, we must fall back onto something else. Jesus taught us to fall back onto love, even when others fall back onto violence. When we believe our earthly existence is the most important aspect of our life in God, we will protect and defend it with all means possible, often violently so, and we miss the entire lesson of Jesus's death and resurrection. Our lives are infinitely more than our days on earth, however, and it is that larger life that is always safe within God's care and cannot be harmed or defiled by earthly tragedies. Thus the oft-repeated mandate to not be afraid, to not

give in to our earthly fears. Nothing here threatens our larger life. Like Jesus, we too will be resurrected into the life of God from which we came.

While on earth we are to embody love for God, love for others, and love for ourselves, regardless of what is done to us. It makes no logical sense, but it is truth as truth was lived, taught, and embodied by Jesus of Nazareth.

## Epilogue

On these pages I have attempted to respond primarily to the “*What we need is more Jesus*” platitude that is often bandied about in response to the tragic and increasingly common mass shootings dotting our landscape. Meaningful gun control and investments in comprehensive mental health services cannot be allowed to be overshadowed by such religious drivel. Yes, more of “Jesus” would be helpful, but few understand what that implies. It would certainly include meaningful gun control, significant investments in comprehensive mental health services, removal of “rights” to self-defense, and the overturning of the Second Amendment. Using the *turn-to-Jesus* argument to draw attention away from the critical issues of gun control and mental health services is not only wrong, it is heretical.

My prayer in writing this is that faithfully following the life and teachings of Jesus the Christ, regardless of one’s religious beliefs, if any, will one day be more the norm than simply giving lip-service to Jesus, ignorantly using his name and twisting his teachings into something that justifies continued violence against others.

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## Endnotes

All biblical references come from the *New Interpreter's Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV), Abingdon Press, 2003.

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