

Chapter 3

WHEN WAR IS EXCITING

The Story of the Mysterious Stranger

Mark Twain wrote famous novels like *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, but he also wrote a lot of short stories. One that he wrote toward the end of his life, in 1905, was called "The War Prayer." It was about how the people of a town were acting when a war was starting. He never said which war it was. He probably meant it to cover wars in general.

It starts out with a lot of excitement. There are banners flying and glorious parades of the town preparing for war. There are outbursts of enthusiasm, and much admiration for the young men who were in spanking fresh new uniforms and going to fight. These were brave men, full of courage and willing to make sacrifices.

Finally, everyone got together to pray at the church. The minister gave a very long prayer, asking God to watch over the noble young soldiers and help them crush the foe.

Suddenly, an aged and mysterious stranger appeared. He had a long white beard and wore a long white robe. He went up to the pulpit as people watched him, puzzled, and waved his hand to the minister to leave the pulpit so he could address the congregation. The startled minister did. So the mysterious stranger told them this is what they were actually praying for.

"Help us to drown the thunder of guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with their little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst, sport of the sun-flames of summer and the icy winds of winter, broken in spirit . . ."

The stranger then told them that if that was what they really wanted, once they understood what it was they were asking for, it would be granted. They should just be clear that was what they were asking for.

The last line of the story was "It was believed this man was a lunatic, since there was no sense in what he said."

When Excitement Leads to Violence

The story from Mark Twain could be used to illustrate the idea of "distancing" that we talked about before. The mysterious stranger was telling the townspeople the truth, but their minds were cut off from what war actually does. They had put up such a distance in their own minds between what they were doing and what would happen to other people because of what they were doing that they saw the man as making no sense at all. He was interfering with their sense of excitement.

There are a lot of things that make people see war as a good idea. They have to stop thinking about all the pain that it brings in order to do it, but forgetting such things

is easy when they're caught up in the excitement of it all.

Back in 1910, a man named William James wrote about how appealing war can be at times. He had written a textbook in psychology that was the main one used for several decades, and he had done a lot of studies in different parts of psychology. But he was upset about how he saw people getting all excited about wars that he thought his country, the United States, had no business getting into. He suggested that there were things that made war appealing to people. If we want to get rid of war, he said, we need to find other ways of getting those things.

Here are some of the ways that people see war as a good thing:

- People have pride in themselves because they belonged to a bigger group. They are part of a vast project. It gives them a feeling of being more alive as part of the group that's going to achieve something so very grand.
- It gives a feeling of meaning and a feeling of purpose. People can get bored with their lives, and feel that they're just doing this work and that work and then they have to do it all over again. Then they can welcome a feeling that they're going to help get something done that is much more grand and more lasting.
- People can take any bad feelings they have about themselves and act like it's someone else's fault. Instead of admitting to themselves that they are uncomfortable about some things about themselves, they can make the enemy a target of those feelings.

It's the enemy that really has the faults or causes the problems.

- When there is an enemy outside the group, the group itself holds together better. Because everyone is facing a common enemy, they stop arguing with each other. There can be an awful lot of arguments between people when things are normal, so it feels good to people when everyone drops quarrels over little things. People are united. The outside threat means everyone is thinking about how to deal with the enemy, not how to win arguments with each other. When the war is over, the ordinary arguments people have with each other will start up again. Many people remember the sense of unity during the war with fondness, and miss it.
- There are some virtues in war that really are admirable. Courage, discipline, and self-sacrifice for the greater good are all things that soldiers show during war. People naturally like to think of themselves as having these, and showing that they have them. People who are not soldiers admire the soldiers that do have them, and this makes sense.
- Finally, there is a sense of certainty that comes with war. People who felt anxious because they don't like being uncertain about things find it a relief to be able to be certain. They know that they are right and the enemy is wrong. They know that they must take action and the enemy deserves whatever happens. The sense of excitement puts an end to having to think things through more carefully or to be more realistic.

All these things will not only make people more willing to go to war, but change how history is written afterwards.

History books often talk way more about war than would make sense for what actually happened.

Suppose there were a book that said something like this: "There was this one war that lasted 3 years, and these are the two sides that fought, and here is what they fought about, and here is how they went about it, and here is who won and why. Then there was 300 years of peace. Then there was this other war that lasted 2 years, and these are the two sides that fought, and here is what they fought about, and here is how they went about it, and here is who won and why."

In those 300 years, there were people who lived their whole lives knowing no war. Neither did their parents and grandparents before them. But the amount of time given to talking about the wars can leave readers thinking that people were just fighting all the time.

You can look at your own history books to see how they do this. Sometimes periods of history will even be defined as being before, during, and after a certain war. How well is the reader of the book going to understand how people were actually living at the time, if they are constantly thinking about what happened in war? If we want to know what was really going on, then the study of peace in history will also be important.

Competition is more exciting to talk about ^{than} cooperation is. There have even been people who look at the history of all of life that way. One show called the history of earth the "Four-Billion Year War." Yet if we were to measure competition and then measure cooperation, we would find that there has been way more cooperation all throughout the past.

Even things high in competition, like a bunch of football games where one team becomes the champion, still have to have more cooperation than competition. A large number of people have to follow rules and follow them well with each other. If just one person goes into the middle of the

football field and sits down and reads a book, then there is no more football game until this non-cooperating problem is removed.

Even a war requires more cooperation than bloodshed. It can't happen unless large groups of people cooperate together as armies.

So even competition can't be done without cooperation, and of course there's plenty of cooperation without competition at all. The buildings all around you are there because people cooperated in building them. In a war or riot or act of terrorism, they can be destroyed in a matter of seconds. But right now, the buildings aren't destroyed. They are there.

When buildings are destroyed, it naturally comes to our attention. We get excited because it's so out of the ordinary. We do still need to remember what the ordinary is.

How Do We Stop the Violence?

The idea that William James had was that if people find they like war because of some of the good things about it, we need to find other things that aren't war that will do those same good things. Having purpose in life, not being bored, having courage, all these kinds of things do make sense to want to have. There have to be less harmful ways than war to get them.

Nonviolent campaigns do have a lot of the same features. People who were active in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, or movements to liberate their countries from dictators in the Philippines or foreign occupiers in India, find the same things. In fact, if we were to count all the countries that had nonviolent movements that got some kind of major change done in the 20th century, we would find that 2/3 of people live in a country where this happened! There was a sudden outburst of nonviolent campaigns during the 1900s, from India to Africa to Eastern Europe and many other places.

Being active in a campaign like that gives people pride in themselves because they belong to a bigger group. The group will achieve something grand, so they get the same feeling of being more alive. It relieves boredom and gives a sense of purpose in the same way. The group still needs to hang together well and not argue over small things, so a sense of unity is there. Courage and discipline and self-sacrifice for the greater good are every bit as needed in nonviolent campaigns as they are in wars.

Two of the points are a little different for nonviolent campaigns as they are for wars, though. In wars, people who have bad feelings about themselves can act like it's the enemy's fault. In nonviolent campaigns, the people who are the target of the campaign are not treated as enemies. They're not cut off in the mind. They're not thought of as diseases or parasites or garbage, but instead as real people that can be talked to. Even if they act for a long time like they can't be talked to, the nonviolent campaigners keep at it. They keep treating the people who are mistreating them as if they were real people who need to be convinced to behave differently. While it may take a long time, when the change does come, it's more likely to be permanent. There isn't long-lasting fuming the way there would be after a war. So the feeling of accomplishment is actually better.

When a war is "won," the victory can be all undone as the people who lost demand a re-match. Many people think this is what happened after World War I. The losers wanted to become winners again and we got World War II. When a nonviolent campaign is "won," that means a change happens. But no one has "lost." People have become convinced that the change was a good idea. So the change sticks.

The other way a nonviolent campaign is different from a war is that people don't deal with feeling anxious about how uncertain they are by deciding to be certain. They decide instead to not feel anxious about being uncertain. The opponents may be able to come up with some points

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for them to agree on. Being able to handle the fact that not everything is fixed and clear actually helps the campaign.

Of course, there are other things besides nonviolent campaigns that can also give people some of the satisfactions that come with excitement, courage, group unity, and so on. There doesn't need to be any people who are opponents at all. We want to get rid of diseases, help people who are poor or homeless, keep our environment healthy, see that everyone gets a good education, and a lot of things like that. If a group of people is standing in the way of letting those things happen, then a nonviolent campaign is needed. But ^{if} ~~of~~ no one is standing in the way, then we just need to get to work.