

Being the Solution in an Age of Crisis and Fear

Lawrence D. Hart

To approximate the language of William Faulkner, the American author, in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature, “We live in the age of universal physical fear.” We live in fear of a nuclear conflagration, and we have lived this way for so long that for many people, perhaps for most people, it now tastes normal. We live in fear that “this blue planet, our island home,” will be so degraded by noxious gases and poisonous wastes that it will become an uninhabitable toxic dump. We live in fear of catastrophic diseases that cannot be contained at their point of origin, or adequately defended against, but irresistibly spread over the whole earth, sickening and killing unimaginable numbers of men, women and children. We live in fear of global terrorism and, at least in America, of random violence on our streets. We live in fear of the capacity of drugs, whether illegal or prescription, to destroy and wreak havoc not only in the lives of individuals and their immediate families, but ultimately of entire countries and cultures. We live in fear of a global warming that will lead to severe and irreversible climate changes, triggering massive migrations that are likely to be resisted with brutal force by those living in more hospitable regions. We live in fear that the war in Iraq is merely the precursor of an apocalyptic battle for food, water, and energy. The movement of humanity across the centuries has, in many respects, been the relentless march toward this cataclysmic crisis of fear, of selfish ambition, and unutterable violence against truth, goodness and beauty. “We live in the age of universal physical fear;” and, yet, if we choose, we can walk down a different road.

The film *A Beautiful Mind*, the fictionalized story of the mathematical genius John Nash, tells of Nash’s long and terrible struggle with paranoid schizophrenia. It also tells the love story of John Nash and his wife Alicia who brought, not complete, but considerable stability, healing, and sanity to Nash’s tormented mind and spirit. In this movie’s climatic scene, John Nash is giving his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize, and he says to his wife and the admiring audience that his greatest discovery in this vast experiment of our existence is that: “Love is the solution to every equation of life.” Although a fictionalized account of John Nash’s struggle and the triumph of love, this film nevertheless expresses one of the largest and most fundamental truths that we can ever discover – “Love is the solution to every equation of life.” Love is the way out of human misery and unhappiness. Love is the way of discovering a meaningful life. Love is the means by which we are liberated from violence. Love is the saving antidote to the universal fear and anger that poisons the heart of humanity. The filmmakers mean, of course, for us to understand that a truly beautiful mind is one filled with the knowledge of love. It is this knowledge, this experience, of the Divine charity that shapes and forms a truly Christian pacifism. In the eighth verse of the fourth chapter of the little Epistle of First John, one of my favorite books of the New Testament, Saint John writes simply: “Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. . . for God is love.” Love is the solution to the age of fear “Love is the solution to every equation of life.”

This may seem like a rather simple solution, perhaps overly simple; and, yet, it is also the case that the simplest things are also the most profound. “All the law and all the writings of the prophets hang on this,” said Jesus, “that you love God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself.” Or, as the poet William Blake put it:

And we are put on earth a little space,
That we might learn to bear the beams of love.

Yes, “Love is the solution to every equation of life,” Greed offers no solution to anything, because greed can only take, or steal, from what is already there. Fear provides no solution to any of our troubles, because fear can only respond to a danger, real or imaginary, that is perceived as already present. Violence is no solution to our problems, because violence can only react to what already exists. Only love has the capacity to see the good that might be. Only love has the power to create something out of nothing. “Love is the solution to every equation of life.”

Evil is anti love and anti life. As children like to point out “evil” is “live” spelled backwards. Evil is what diminishes or destroys life in any of its forms – intellectual, emotional or psychological, physical, or spiritual. Greed, fear, anger and violence are all factors in the mathematics of evil, which is also the mathematics of empire. Empires are inherently greedy, fearful, and violent; and, therefore inherently evil. Not long ago I was watching Lou Dobbs, the angry old man of U.S. television. He was interviewing Richard Bahar who had written a major article on China’s competition for the resources of Africa in Fast Company Magazine, and Bob Safian, the editor of the magazine. Dobbs was astounded and angry that America is losing so badly in this “so far peaceful competition.” He was offended that the U.S. was “permitting” this to happen. The interview recognized that there is a limit to the natural resources of the earth. It would be possible, as I understand it, for this planet to support a population of thirteen billion, but only two billion at the rate of American consumption. But this interview was not concerned with sustainability. It was concerned with how the U.S. can dominate and acquire all the resources big business demands. The New York Times has asserted that, “China’s actions threaten the stability of the global economy.” Last year, for example, the Chinese had the “audacity” to consume one half the world’s cement, two times the world’s consumption of copper, and ninety percent of the world’s steel. The Institute for the Analysis of Global Security, contributing to the fear of ordinary Americans, has issued this ominous sounding warning: “Without a comprehensive strategy designed to prevent China from becoming an oil consumer on par with the U.S. a super power collision is in the cards.” What the American establishment wants to know is how can we gobble up more of the world’s rapidly diminishing resources? How can we counter, to use the provocative label, “Communist China”? How can we expand and strengthen the dominance of the American Empire? One must strain very hard to hear any voices questioning this arrogance, this presumptiveness. One must strain very hard to hear any voices asking the question of what needs to be done to sustain all human life with grace and dignity. Perhaps that is because we do not want to hear the answers. Certainly these are answers that can only be heard with deep listening – that can be heard only by listening with love.

“Love is the solution to every equation of life,” because love does listen. Empire, what Marcus Borg calls domination systems, command, demand, order, threaten, intimidate, direct and lecture but they do not listen. Empire each time it appears in human history, whether in Babylon or Rome or Britain or America, takes on a life and a power and a will of its own. The ring in J.R.R. Tolkien’s trilogy not only gives power, but also is itself a power, possessing and exerting control over the very one who thinks he or she possesses the ring. The people, the men and women, of what some are now calling the Anglo/American Empire, are just like people in any other time and place. Some of them are very bad, some of them very good, but most are a mixture of the two and at worst just garden-variety sinners. Like Tolkien’s ring, empire exploits and strengthens malevolent powers and the capacity for evil of the one who wears it -- of those most engaged with it. True evil is a power that erodes the ability to listen with empathy or sympathy to the perspective, aspirations, feelings or criticisms of anyone else, and undermines our aptitude for honest self-reflection. Barrack Obama has been intensely criticized in the U.S. for saying that he would talk without preconditions even to enemies. His position has been ignorantly caricatured as appeasement, as naive, as woefully weak. Before the attack on Iraq the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, as well as leaders from other mainline denominations, asked to meet with President Bush to explain why they did not believe this would be a “Just War.” Bush refused. His consistent reply was, “I am the decider.” On July 3, 1988 an Iranian passenger jet, Iranian Flight 655, was exploded by a missile fired from a U.S. warship sailing in Iranian territorial waters. Beside the crew one hundred ninety people died, including sixty-six children. The first president George Bush said in response: “I don’t care what the facts are. I will never apologize for America!” And that attitude, the attitude and mindset of empire, remains the general attitude and mindset in America today – a mindset greatly amplified, supported and strengthened by the media. The media, controlled by those at the top of the imperial heap, does, of course, sometimes criticize governmental inefficiencies, but the moral integrity or blind willfulness of empire is not questioned. Empire demands ultimate allegiance, which by Biblical and theological definition is idolatry. We cannot, as Jesus insisted, listen to two masters – two gods.

Although a Hindu, Mahatma Gandhi by reading the New Testament and discovering the non-violent teaching of Christ, deepened his own understanding of the Hindu tradition, and came to see love as the basic law of our being – “the solution to every equation of life.” The word Gandhi himself coined to explain his commitment to peace was *satyagraha*, a combination of the Sanskrit words for firmness and truth. *Satyagraha* connotes “creative force” or “soul force.” Gandhi sometimes translated it as “truth force” or “love force.” A concept important to understanding *satyagraha* is *ahimsa*, meaning the avoidance of violence and non-injury to any being. But empire has nothing to do with truth, or the avoidance of violence and injury, or with love.

While visiting Edinburgh a couple of years ago I came across a war monument in Princes Street Park – a kind of wall with an inscription. The inscription began by saying that the monument was in honor of all the Scottish soldiers who had died on far away

battlefields, and, as I remember, named places from all over the world. These soldiers, it said, had fought and died not for things like glory, or wealth, or power, but solely that others might be free. But that's not true is it? They didn't die for the cause of freedom in far away exotic India, but for the sake of empire. Nor, have American troops spilled their blood in Iraq for the cause of liberty. That they have died to deliver the people of Iraq from a cruel oppressor, or for the beautiful ideal of democracy is a lie from hell. The evidence that the invasion of Iraq was based on lies was wholly a lie, and nothing but a lie, has grown exponentially and is now irrefutable. Those men and women, those soldiers, men and women of immense physical courage, have in a tragic sense died in vain. That is a foul tasting truth to swallow, but it is the truth.

Now, I think it is important to say that empire is not linked to one political party in the U.S. Tolkien's ring has an evil influence over anyone who wears it. So, Bill Clinton bombed a factory producing baby formula and a pharmaceutical house to distract the people from his prurient use of a cigar. His administration claimed the right of the U.S. to use military force anywhere in the world where America's access to resources and markets is threatened. And Bill Clinton launched the so-called "Welfare Reform" movement that has seriously hurt the most vulnerable among us. The approval of recent legislation to finance covert operations against Iran could not have been done without the acquiescence of the Democratic Party. The authorization to spy on American citizens in violation of their Constitutional rights, or to approve the continuing use of torture could not have been done without the acquiescence of the Democratic Party. The emergence and phenomenal growth of Black Water, a murderous mercenary force with license to operate outside civilized law, could never have happened without the compliance of the Democratic Congress. Congress has even determined that the corporate media is to be held guiltless for having violated the U.S. Constitution by helping the president to illegally spy on the American people. The ring is itself an evil and corrupting power over whoever wears it.

Again, Empire has nothing to do with truth, justice, love or life. It has to do with mendacity, cruelty, destruction and death. Condeleza Rice denied the existence of "black sites" in Eastern European democracies – a system of prisons where kidnapped suspects are held, tortured and moved about as part of the U.S. rendition program. But we know Rice lied. She lied by not telling the whole truth. America, Bush has repeatedly and emphatically asserted, does not torture, but with a sly smile and a twinkle in his eye he talks about the usefulness of "enhanced interrogation techniques." When I learned that the Nazis had called them "sharpened techniques" it made me sick. Since the start of the Iraq War America has slid and slithered down into a deep and murky moral abyss. Supreme Court Justice Scalia, John McCain's model of what a Justice should be, has even said that in his view the U.S. Constitution does not necessarily bar torture, and, in fact, in certain situations torture might be justified. While the U.S. bullies, tortures, maims, burns and kills men, women, and children around the world, many of its own citizens go hungry, homeless, and are denied health care of any kind because they cannot pay for medical treatment. Earning power continues to go down, prices for necessities continue to go up, and more and more wealth is concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer people. Bush said, that the American people would have to make some real

sacrifices in waging war on terrorism, by which he really meant, of course, the war on Iraq. What he did not say was that the sacrifice would have to be made by working people and the poor. The hierarchy of any empire, the wealthy and powerful, reap the enormous profits of war, the common citizens pay its costs. Paradoxically, even if Iraq is eventually pacified the American people will lose the war. It is now estimated, that the true monetary cost of the Iraq War, with all of its violence and devastation and hatred, will come to three trillion dollars. The hand out I provided is a somewhat tongue in cheek suggestion of what love might do with three trillion dollars.

One time I was the guest on a radio program, and when the host asked about what we could do, what we maybe should do, for the justice of God and the peace of Christ. I am afraid I fumbled around and gave a rather anemic answer. A Black pastor, obviously used to dealing with the practical issues of peace and justice, called in and wanted to know if I was saying there was nothing we could do, and if that was what I was in fact saying how could I possibly be a man of God? I was a terrible embarrassment to myself, so today I want to try to suggest with a little more strength and clarity seven possible responses we might make as a believing community to empire, to violence, to injustice, and to war – some pragmatic ways in which we might find love to be the solution in an age of fear and crisis:

- (1) You may be familiar with the folk song that says: “If I had a bell I’d ring out freedom, I’d ring out justice, I’d ring out love all over this land.” The first thing we can do then is to ring out justice, and peace, and love. We can write – we can write newspapers, magazines, members of congress and parliament, and priests and bishops. We can gather and march and sing. We can hold to the truth, insist upon the truth. We need, to paraphrase William James, not worry about doing something large and dramatic, we only need to pay attention to the simple things that like water, which seems so weak, “has a way of trickling into the tiniest of crannies and bursting the hardest monuments of human pride.”
- (2) We need to encourage our bishops to become stronger advocates for peace. My own observation is that many bishops are eager to help the poor, and are very supportive of the Millennium Developmental Goals, but they are not so eager to speak truth to power and to oppose those policies and systemic problems, like war, that create poverty. Charity is fine with most everyone, especially with church members, but peace and justice with their troubling questions and challenges are often met with anger and strong resistance even in the faith community. As Brazilian Bishop Don Helder Camera observed: “When I fed the hungry they called me a saint. But when I asked why there are so many who are poor, they called me a communist.”
- (3) As a corollary to this I would hope that someone with the expertise and resources would develop training and educational events that would teach bishops, priests and deacons and lay leaders how to develop a ministry that is both pastoral and prophetic. I believe that “love as the solution to every equation of life” knows the way to hold pastoral and prophetic concerns together.
- (4) Walter Kronkite, news reporter and Episcopalian, endorsed U.S. Congressman Dennis Kucinich’s proposal for the establishment of a Department of Peace. “The

- Department of Peace would advise the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State on all matters relating to national security, including the protection of human rights and the prevention of, amelioration of, and de-escalation of, unarmed and armed international conflict. The Department of Peace, with a highly trained and dedicated staff, would be a constant counterpoint to the Defense Department. The Secretary of Peace would be responsible for developing and offering peaceful alternatives in the councils of war.” I think we would do well to advocate for a Department of Peace in the U.K. as well as the U.S.
- (5) Christians need to be clearly heard in resisting and renouncing the temptations of empire. In the Apocalypse John sees the Roman Empire, which along with Babylon is symbolic of all empires, as the ancient serpent, the primordial evil, who threatens all creation with chaos. John’s indictment of empire then goes on to picture empire as a great whore who rides upon the monstrous serpent and seduces the rulers of this world with promises of wealth and power. James Dobson, an influential fundamentalist in America, likes to boast of his stays in the White House and of how President Bush calls him “Jimmy Boy.” But we must not allow power and wealth to seduce us from the true love of God and each other; rather we must renounce them, and repent of them. “For only love is the solution to every equation of life.”
 - (6) I would even suggest, that the church in both the U.S. and the U.K. call for a period of honest and rigorous national self-reflection in an effort to find where we are complicit in the problems of the world – and to then repent and pledge ourselves to be more loving neighbors. And I would like to see people who are much smarter than I am write a Christian manifesto, a *Manifesto of Love*, picturing what a sustainable world a hundred years from now might look like.
 - (7) In Ephesians 4:15 St. Paul wrote: “Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.” The word “speak” is not there in the Greek. The verse literally says something like: “Truthing one another in love.” We are not only to speak truthfully, and to act charitably, prayerfully, lovingly, but we must become truth, we must become charity, we must become prayer, we must become love – that love that is “the solution to every equation of life.” The ultimate question is not what the church must do to promote peace, but what the church, and we as her members, must be. If you were to ask me if I do not think the teaching of Christ and the Apostles as given in the New Testament regarding peace, justice, compassion, truth and love are not a bit excessive, somewhat extravagant, I would say, “Yes, certainly. But then the love of God demonstrated in Christ dying on the cross is rather excessive, rather extravagant – isn’t it?” Alcoholics Anonymous has a slogan that is pertinent to our discussion, “Half measures availed us nothing?” That is why we must reject the notion of Just War, which has no Biblical basis to begin with, and that is why we must reject an easy, superficial, and popular form of Christian spirituality. “Half measures will avail the people nothing.”

In the early centuries of Christianity men and women saddened by the trivialization of the faith and the growing superficiality of the Church went into the Egyptian desert where they could live a more intensely prayerful life. One of my favorite

stories of these desert monks is about Father Joseph and his student Lot. One day Lot came to Father Joseph for spiritual advice. “Abba Joseph,” Lot said, “I sing a few psalms, I pray a little, I fast according to my strength, sometimes I silently meditate, and I cleanse my thoughts as best I can. What more can I do?” The old man stood up and spread out his hands toward heaven, they say his fingers were like shooting flames, and he said, “If you want, why not become totally fire.” If we want, if we choose, why not become fire? Why not become peace? Why not become totally love, “the solution to every equation of life?” Why not fire?