

Peacemakers #5 Bookends

My waitress had taken my dirty breakfast plate and refilled my decaf. I paged through the New York Times, slurping. Murmurs arose. Jen, the morning-shift waitress, whispered to regulars what the kitchen Sony blurted. Hijacked planes had slammed into New York's World Trade Center towers. Online, I saw the south tower fall, then the north tower. Thousands died. The nation grieved. Al-Qaeda's Arab street-cred skyrocketed.

The bookend moment arrived this May. United States stealth helicopters flew low and fast into Pakistani airspace. Navy Seals landed in an Abbottabad residential compound, where they conducted a brief firefight. The soldiers killed, among others, Osama bin Mohammed bin Awad bin Laden, founder of al-Qaeda's terror network. Some Americans rejoiced, even cavorted in streets. I could not join them; inside, I shuddered that we (with our taxes and votes and acquiescence) had murdered another human being. Yet neither could I deplore President Obama's decision to assassinate the Saudi-born terrorist.

The concept of "evil" is a problem among peacemakers. Sentiments about evil also have bookends. At one end, some peacemakers deny that evil exists. Here is how their argument goes. Accusations of evil, according to evil-skeptics, emerge when intemperate people fail to invest the energy necessary to understand and show compassion to opponents. All humans have constructive impulses, as well as demented ones. One must appeal to the good in others, without triggering ugly motivations in them or us. What appears as evil is nothing more than mis-comprehended good. The evil-doer is confused enough that he has failed to recognize the injurious outcomes of his good intentions. "Evil" disappears, so the evil-skeptics argue, where peacemakers interject sufficient education, listening, compassion, and patience. The evil-skeptic often finds in the concept of "evil" a theological distortion of reality. Carefully-crafted, compassionate conversation unmasks evil. Behind that veil wilts a confused human in sore need. When that person feels understood and valued, he will see the harm he creates and desist.

Mohandas Gandhi stood with the evil-skeptics. In Gandhi's view, no matter how monstrous a man's evil acts, beneath that horrid crust lay a soft heart ready to be touched by innocent suffering. Gandhi survived World War II. He advised Germany's Jews to resist non-violently, ending Hitler's national manhunt. Jews could offer themselves publicly and peacefully for imprisonment or slaughter. That spectacle would lionize human dignity. Gandhi believed that annihilation of innocents saps armies. If India were invaded, Gandhi said he would erect a human wall of willing unarmed victims, perhaps millions, as cannon fodder. (*Satyagraha*, §§ 165, 169, 178).

As a peacemaker, I travel only so far with Gandhi and evil-skeptics. One must begin in all circumstances assuming that those who injure do so uncomprehending. One educates. One listens. One shows perseverance in compassion. One corrects oneself, where necessary. These steps remedy most conflicts, and chasten most erring actors. But some prove recalcitrant. These persons intentionally erode meaningful community in familial, societal, or international relations. They persist despite compassionate listening and generous education and longsuffering patience. Adamantine pathologies drive such people. A cacophonous host of defects and mishaps (for example, substance abuse or psychoses or habitual violence) hurtle them beyond the pale of normal human relations. Responsive measures must meet the challenge of pathological evil. Coercion may, in the ugliest circumstances, prove necessary. Gandhi's pacifist vision fails in these dark fastnesses. Ideological non-violence would require one to spectate preventable horrors, rendering peacemakers a hapless audience to abuse or genocide. Aspiration to unattainable personal sanctity would hobble us. That I cannot condone. Gandhi would call mine a deficient spirituality. At some level, I agree. But still . . .

Many peacemakers are conflicted. The non-coercive bookend of peacemaking beckons, but seems to require that, in extremity, a coercive response remains possible. We long for utopian remedies in which the coercive bookend atrophies from long disuse. Sadly, at least for now, without both bookends, the upright books of life tumble.

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