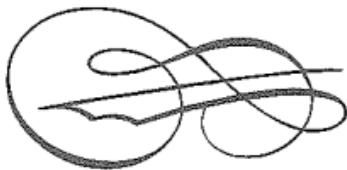


THE *American
Voice*



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No. 47

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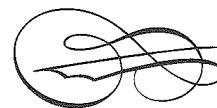
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*Published triannually by The Kentucky Foundation for Women, Inc.,
332 West Broadway Suite 1215, Louisville KY 40202 USA. Distributed by
B. DeBoer. Subscriptions \$15/year, back issues \$5. Third-class postage
paid at Louisville KY. ISSN 0884-4356. Typeset (in Garamond) and
printed by Fetter Printing Co. Design by Julius Friedman.*

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WEAPONS, COERCION, LIBERATION



Greg Mello

Nuclear weapons are New Mexico's largest industry, and I can report to you that business around here is booming. Funds for research and development have never been higher. New weapons are being designed and deployed.

All this, and more, is an important story to tell, and it is my job to tell some parts of it often, although I notice that the context in which questions like these can be raised, i.e. moral discourse, seems to be fading.

That moral discourse is, in the broadest sense of the term, simply human discourse, and it is important to speak it. Because without use, moral discourse, which values ourselves and each other absolutely, without reference to price, convenience, or comparison, will join the thousands of human languages vanishing into the black hole of global anti-culture, or be silenced by the hiss emanating from the coils of the Internet.

If we don't speak up, our collective silence will be taken as assent, not just to improved nuclear weapons but to far worse things just around the century's corner. And if we only speak up meekly, won't that really *be* assent, with ominous consequences? An authentic song of protest, a celebration, or a cry of grief—even a litigation—nourishes the human spirit and keeps our traditions alive. Such activity creates its own tangible community, and soul, in which we are renewed.

Soul is really what it is all about. For it is primarily souls, more so than bodies, at which the missiles are aimed. If so, the greatest damage they inflict is “collateral”:

helping deter the dignity and value of human beings, and hence helping break our resistance to becoming commodities, the consumers and the consumed. This damage may or may not be anyone's conscious goal, but "structures of sin" (Pope John Paul's phrase) have a kind of consciousness all their own. So strip away the layers of ideology, and I think you will find that the real target of each warhead is human conscience.

The self-presentation of a warhead is revealed in its very name: the head or mind of war, in this case, total war. Such a mental state corresponds to the way of life the Hopis call *naqoyqatsi*, "war-life," a fair description of how most of us live. In this sense, the "Cold War," in which hundreds of millions of civilians were coldly targeted for near-universal death, continues. This cold war is indeed substantially about coldness and the suppression of human warmth. Like so much about nuclear war, "nuclear winter" has already happened. It is a condition of our hearts, and of the heart in our body politic, in which economic oppression and ecological disaster become acceptable because they are neither instantly cataclysmic nor yet quite universal.

Fortunately, the story of weapons is only part of our story. Like you, I am also a Buddhist—and like you, a so-called "engaged Buddhist," whether I want to be or not. So we can together tell another story, and, if we would save ourselves and all that we love, I think we must tell it, with all our hearts and lives. If necessary, we can use words, as St. Francis advised.

For as much as weapons are about coercion, our story is about liberation. And unless we can tell it—that is, unless we can really establish human liberation as the core of our identity, our decisions, the institutions in which we work, and our way of life, and not just as a hobby or as our other responsibilities allow—liberation will forever be for us a receding mirage, and we will live, not just under a bushel basket, but figuratively and even quite literally under the gun.

Without our whole effort—which is itself a very real liberation—few of our children's children may in any full sense of the term even live at all. Why? Because "living" is being radically redefined for us by the engines of organized greed, which are finding ever more effective ways to subdue and commodify consciousness and even bodily life. Bill Gates calls Microsoft's goal "the mediated life," and it is the goal of his industry to sell such a life to you, or you to it.

The liberation in our story, the one we celebrate together or not at all, is not a transcendence from this world but into it. We liberate ourselves into true responsibility, an ability to respond. The Cold War of separation from life has an all-too-personal meaning. Disarmament, as it turns out, is not a grandiose or faraway goal. This is hugely encouraging.

"Disparities in wealth and prosperity between nations which have access to energy and information and those which do not will increase [by 2045], creating jealousies that manifest themselves in violence, especially terrorism. . . [Our] national interests in other parts of the world will thus be dominated by assured access to markets and by security concerns based on the potential of less fortunate peoples to steal or disrupt the affluence they envy. The developed world could become a fortress of affluence, holding the less developed world in line through a combination of rationed access to technology and threats of military power. . .

"Distinctions between police and military organizations, especially in terms of organization, training, and equipment, will blur and perhaps disappear as the most frequent use of armed organizations becomes pacification, counterterrorism, and the apprehension or elimination of individuals or groups. . .

"Means of effective, truly surgical destruction. . . will be similarly routine and essential."

—a contributor to the U.S. Air Force study, *New World Vistas: Air and Space Power for the 21st Century*

If we live and practice in the First World, we are likely to be aware that we too have weapons in our hands, or in our wallets, with plenty of blood on them. We are in many ways

forced to be affluent, and that affluence is wrested, in substantial and increasing part, from the poor and from the exhausted earth. We are very substantially imprisoned within choices that are destructive to us and to others, and we know it. The truly ethical life is not an easy option, and the possibility of genuine enlightenment in harmony with the matrix of bloody karma that passes for civil society today is problematic. In devising our paradigms of religious practice, we have not adequately taken these facts into account.

Even if we do not know them precisely, we feel the horrifying statistics in our bones. Every day, 36,000 children under the age of five die. Others barely live: today there are about 190 million chronically malnourished children under the age of five. Should world grain prices rise, many of them will die. The Super Bowl will continue, of course.

Are such problems hopelessly intractable? Well, taken on a human scale, they obviously are not. I could feed many children with the money I spend on a good restaurant meal. This is not theoretical. We all know very well that it is possible to put that money in an envelope and send it to organizations that will use it wisely and efficiently, sometimes essentially without any overhead at all. There is no question: real lives, or fields, or forests can be saved. While there is much I cannot do, there is also much I can.

While strategies are important, the ratio of what I can accomplish and what I cannot is not. Why? Because the mental preoccupation with abstract quantity is itself a symptom of our disease, a kind of violence in itself. We have to get real.

The resources are there—in us, in our pockets, in corporations, and in government. Did you know that the budget for any one of our three nuclear laboratories is larger than the entire budget of the World Health Organization? Suppose that just 1% of the U.S. defense budget—almost three times this amount—were redirected toward the needs of the very poor?

It does not happen because we have not asked for it

loudly and insistently enough. We are right to fear our latent violence, but overall we are far too timid and polite. We are enmeshed in bloody structural violence. We should choose active nonviolence instead, whether expressed in our degree of noncooperation with evil structures or in our struggle with them. Our children will need such a tradition even more than we.

Most of this global genocide is as unnecessary as it is unnatural. The food is there, the medicine is there, the organizational talent is there. The circumstances that have led us into a planetary crisis unrivaled since the end of the Mesozoic are not exactly “acts of God.” The children, their families, along with entire ecosystems, the species that vanish every day, the vast tracts of farmland, the cultures and even nations—these have been selected for their participation in a “final solution” by the invisible hand of the market, which is really not that invisible after all.

“It is, however, becoming evident—and I think it is an experience of an essential and universal importance—that a single, seemingly powerless person who dares to cry out the word of truth and to stand behind it with all his person and all his life, ready to pay a high price, has, surprisingly, greater power, though formally disenfranchised, than do thousands of anonymous voters.”

—Vaclav Havel, “Politics and Conscience,”
in *Living in Truth*, ed Jan Vladislav,
Faber and Faber, London, 1986.

What is “the word of truth”?

For activists as well as for everyone deluged with the lies of mass culture, it is urgently important to find this out. What does it mean to stand behind the word of truth with our persons and our lives, “ready to pay a high price”? Havel is not calling us to pay “a high price” without a priceless recompense: “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.” The liberating truth is the lived truth—a person, not a thing.

Havel is ostensibly writing about courage in our political life. But there is ultimately no difference between our political and our spiritual lives. To attempt to surgically separate these parts of ourselves, in thought or in action, is deadly. We have one life, now.

Perhaps we should wash our mouths out with soap if we utter the word "spiritual." It is, one may observe, very easy for "spirituality" to be a surrogate for irresponsibility these days. Or "practice," for that matter—another useful but dangerous term that risks desacralizing the rest of our lives. For if we artificially create divisions in our lives, we create busyness, a truly terminal modern disease. The whole life is wholly consecrated, wholly alive, holy. We can't balance our lives between warring goals. Even one goal, let alone a goal "out there," is too many.

Upon arriving in China, Dogen asked the monastery cook he met at the dock, "What is practice?" He received the answer: "Nothing is hindered in the entire universe." Making this a personal reality is our life-long vocation, not just as Buddhists but, more simply, as human beings, and not just individually but as a community.

So the question facing us is not one of our so-called "spiritual" versus our "political" lives, versus some other lives we are supposed to have. Neither is it a question of how to "engage" our "Buddhism"; we are engaged and cannot be otherwise, so we might as well be engaged consciously. The question is whether we are alive or whether we are dead. The question is not whether we will live in truth, but whether we will live at all.

In the end, all we have to offer—to each other, to ourselves, to our planet, to our religious practice—is simply ourselves. Nothing more is necessary or relevant, and nothing less will do. Aitken Roshi reminds us that, should we fail to take the radical bodhisattva position, "we will not even be able to die with dignity."

Sometimes we may find ourselves discouraged, either

in our religious practice or in our efforts for peace and justice in the world. Many of us could, I am sure, create topographic maps of the canyons of despair, very detailed. But even so, "The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Well, where is it?

In Zen services, we recite Hakuin:

*This very place is the Lotus Land,
This very body, the body of Buddha.*

How do we present our mature understanding of this—and by "mature," I mean how do we creatively personalize it *in our lives and in our communities*? Sometimes we, in Zen at least, may misread the arcana of our curriculum as if they were for meditation only, or for mental resolution and private demonstration in a little room. How do we present the living body of Buddha—let us say the joyful *Sambhogakaya* body of mutual interdependence and intersupport—as, say, our Sangha? Or, say, in our uses of money? Our children's school?

Failing such a convincing presentation, what then? Failing to stop the nuclear bomb project, what then? How can we sustain hope—a rather gauzy and ethereal feeling if there ever was one?

Perhaps it's really best not to bother. "I feel so much better now that I have given up hope." Whew. But to the extent that we invest ourselves in it, hope gains a very solid body—ours. Our question might better be: How do we sustain ourselves?

With friends, I think, above all. But surely not just the social friendships that can be squeezed into the interstices of a coercive mass society. What sustains are friendships that carry weight: vehicles of mutual commitment, realization, and *creative organization*—in short, friendships that embody what Robert Thurman has called "the Buddha's social revolution."

In Barbara Kingsolver's novel, *Animal Dreams*, a character named Haille, who is working in Nicaragua as an agronomist, writes to her sister back home:

"Codi, here's what I've decided: the very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof. What I want is so simple I almost can't say it: elementary kindness. Enough to eat, enough to go around. The possibility that kids might one day grow up to be neither the destroyers nor the destroyed. That's about it. Right now I'm living in that hope, running down its hallway and touching the walls on both sides.

"I can't tell you how good it feels. I wish you knew. I wish you'd stop beating yourself up for being selfish, and really be selfish, Codi. You're like a mother or something. I wish you knew how to squander yourself."

"The very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for." Many people in our society have essentially given up all hope. "Wait a minute," they say, "I tried hope once or twice—disappointment is the outcome." And it is true: hope vested externally will always disappoint, sooner or later. This disappointment seems to be a necessary experience. It can be very fertile. T.S. Eliot wrote, in *The Four Quartets*,

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope,
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing . . .

Such waiting is extremely active and vital. But without active inquiry, our budding hope is trained and narrowed, *a process that is quite coercive for most people in our society*, to become the privately directed "hope" of an individual, where it might more accurately be called ambition. And this loss of hope is made all the more likely by the widespread failure of religion.

But when we stand "in that hope," as Haille says, or within our vow, simply and without inflation, quite alone, our death is there too—no longer excluded, no longer a feared stranger. Such an awakening of bodhicitta removes fear. "Perfect love casts out fear," as Paul says. The very substantial decline of fear—which is to say, of neurosis ("inauthentic

suffering," as Jung called it)—is not the final fruit of Buddhist practice, accessible to a few only, but the simple result of knowing one's heart's desire and living within it, in unexpected solidarity.

This is certainty, not hope.

"I wish you knew how to squander yourself," Haille said. Like Kannon, with a thousand hands. Like a flower, bearing seed in autumn for a winter that is coming and a spring we will not see.

One hears so much about having a balanced life, as for example from liberal activists who must balance, they feel, the personal and the political—or Zen students, who must balance practice with making a living, etc. Forget it! Impossible! Why don't we lose our balance, for once? As Thoreau said in a letter, we must make our living by loving.

It is very instructive that Kingsolver has Haille express her living hope in terms of "elementary kindness." Look at the early Christian church about 125 AD:

"They walk in all humility and kindness, and falsehood is not found among them, and they love one another. They despise not the widow, and grieve not the orphan. He that hath, distributeth liberally to him that hath not. If they see a stranger, they bring him under their roof, and rejoice over him, as it were their own brother: for they call themselves brethren, not after the flesh, but after the spirit and in God. . . And if there is among them a man that is poor and needy, and they have not an abundance of necessaries, they fast two or three days that they may supply the needy with their necessary food."

—Aristides, cited in Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*.

This is a high standard. The consumer society in which we live has other things besides "elementary kindness" on the altar. It is, as they say, a dog-eat-dog world. *Enlightenment is hardly possible in harmony with such a society*, just as effective political reform is hardly possible in it for many of the same reasons. *Nobody is going to live "in the world, but not of it."*

"As for conforming outwardly, and living your own life inwardly, I do not think much of that. Let not your right hand know what your left hand does in that line of business. It will prove a failure. Just as successfully can you walk against a sharp steel edge which divides you cleanly right and left. Do you wish to try your ability to resist distension? It is a greater strain than any soul can long endure. When you get God to pulling one way, and the devil the other, each having his feet well braced—to say nothing of the conscience sawing transversely,—almost any timber will give away."

Henry Thoreau,
letter to Harry Blake,
August 9, 1850

Our personalities are constrained by the way we live, the machines we use, and the institutions of which we willy-nilly are a part, and the belief systems we need to function in them. As the 19th-century strategist Clausewitz put it, we may not believe in war, but war believes in us. So there is a limit to my embodiment of the Way, which is set by the world in which I live. Our world provides a kind of "glass ceiling" for our realization, to use a current business metaphor.

We are, thus, not really liberated. Where there is a failure to embody the Way, there is a failure to even know the Way, because true knowing is through the body and mind, not separate from anything. Our minds and we ourselves are not separate from our wildlife, our checkbooks, or our communities.

*Every wolf's and lion's howl
Raises from Hell a Human soul.
The wild deer, wandering here and there,
Keeps the Human soul from care...

The beggar's rags, fluttering in air,
Does to rags the heaven tear.
The soldier, arm'd with sword and gun,
Palsied strikes the summer's sun...*

*One mite wrung from labourer's hands
Shall buy and sell the miser's lands:
Or if protected from on high,
Does that whole nation sell and buy.*
—William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence"

To the extent that we realize anything in our meditation that is not embodied in our characters, which is to say our lives, we have realized it in imagination only. It is a good start. We may be careful about some aspects of our practice, but perhaps not quite careful enough about, say, what we do for a living, that is, what we do with our bodies and minds most of every day. We don't eat meat, but we drive about in cars that comprise, in their total "karma," a war against community and against some very real people far away.

I am worried that in much of the Buddhist world, we seem to have given up on changing anything but our own minds. We have gone inward, and wonder why our practice doesn't bear more fruit. But we do not need to glue something onto our Buddhism to make it "engaged." Isn't it more about rethinking our lives in all their aspects? We don't need "engagement" to accomplish some social or political goal, as worthy as that may be. And although there are projects, projects *per se* are not the real point. Neither do we need a kind of merit-based "good work" ethic, so prevalent in our culture, which all too often has its root in a kind of guilt. It seems that what we need is, rather, to help each other lead wholly consecrated, mature lives.

Perhaps the social face of Buddhism has nothing to do with politics *per se*, with disarmament or permaculture or prison reform *per se*, but with the quality of relationships and institutions we can create, which will then transform us. Institutions are nothing more than patterns of and for relationships. If we abjure them, we limit ourselves to what we can do in institutions set up for other purposes, usually profit.

Neither our religious nor our political aspirations can be

realized unless our friends' basic economic and security needs are met, until children are cared for and loved by an alert community as well as by their parents, until the anguish and loneliness many people feel in their hearts is addressed.

How do we sustain hope? The answer is that we live it. More simply, we are it. Do we despair of creating a peaceful and just society? Well, let's not. Let's create one. It is a work within our power. To think globally is questionable, but to act locally is definitely possible and indeed is the only option. And to act locally means, I think, to act *very* locally, with and for family and friends, first and foremost. The answer to coercive, structural violence is Sangha. □