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 Arlington Street Church
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Practicing Peace

Jarvis Masters is a prisoner on death row at San Quentin. Jarvis Masters is in his cell, reading by the light of the television. He has the sound turned down. Every once in a while, he glances up at the screen, sees something that piques his curiosity, and calls out to other prisoners on his cell block to ask what's happening.

“The first time, someone yells back, 'It's the Ku Klux Klan, Jarvis, and they're all yelling and complaining [and blaming who they always blame].”

“About half an hour later, he yells again, 'Hey, what's happening now?' And [someone yells back], 'That's the Greenpeace folks. They're demonstrating about the ... rivers ... being polluted, and the trees ... being cut down, and the animals ... being hurt, and ... [the] Earth being destroyed.'

“[Later still, Jarvis] calls out again. [And for the last time that evening, someone yells back,] 'O, Jarvis, that's the U.S. Senate, and that guy who's up there now talking – he's blaming the other guys, the other side for all the financial [mess]....”

“Jarvis starts laughing and he calls down, “[Hey, guys!] I ... learned something ... tonight. Sometimes they're wearing Klan [sheets], sometimes they're wearing Greenpeace [tee shirts], sometimes they're wearing suits ... but they all have the same angry faces.”¹

The same angry faces. American Buddhist nun, Pema Chödrön, is speaking:

“A fundamentalist mind is a mind that has [closed]. First the heart [hardens,] then the mind [calcifies] into a [certain perspective,] then [we] can justify [our] hatred of another human being because of what they represent and what they say and do....

¹ Jarvis Masters, “Angry Faces,” in *Finding Freedom*

“The next time you get angry, check out your righteous indignation, check out [the] fundamentalist [mind] that supports your hatred ... [of that] politician, [that] head of [a big company], ... [that] individual who has harmed you” or someone you love....

“If [we] look back at history, or [we] look at any place in the world where religious groups or ethnic groups or racial groups or political groups are killing each other, or families have been feuding for years and years, [we] can see – because we're not particularly invested in [their] ... argument – that there will never be peace until somebody softens what is rigid in their heart.”

This is it, beginning, middle, and end:

* Until we hold up the mirror and take a good, hard look at our own righteousness and fundamentalism, nothing will ever change.

*Until we deeply examine the cause-and-effect chain reaction that starts with shuttering our minds and hardening our hearts, the war – the war in the world, and the war within – will not stop.

War begins in our hearts.

War ends,
and peace begins,
in our hearts.

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Have you ever had someone die whom you really disliked – someone really difficult, someone who betrayed you, maybe an enemy? Do you remember how it felt when they died?

I'm going to step out onto the high wire of spiritual inquiry without a net, now. This is the “afflicting the comfortable” part of the sermon, and I'm using myself as an example! Two questions for our reflection:

What died when they died?
What lived on?

Here's my story: I adopted my two younger daughters in Peru. When they were babies, I did a lot of public speaking and advocacy work about adoption. Early on, a very unhappy woman showed up at one of these gigs. When I agreed to sit and speak with her afterward, she told me that she would have been happy if only she had not been

relinquished for adoption. From that day, forward, she made it her personal mission, as she said it, to “stop me.” She began to stalk me.

When I was flown to San Francisco, she spent good money on a ticket and flew all that way to show up to disrupt my talk, but never made it past the conference registration desk. After witnessing the all-female security force in action – I'll admit to you, it was thrilling! – I remember feeling bad about that scene. Over time, though, I began to despair. She trailed me, and subsequently parked outside my house, waiting for me to get home each night. The details aren't important – stalkers seem all to have graduated from the same stalking school – but her behavior escalated, and became more erratic, more threatening. Mostly, I was too mad to be scared.

Months later, one Sunday afternoon, I was the last person to leave here, and headed out to the alley to drive home. At the time, there were dense bushes growing against the church foundation. She emerged from behind a bush, and made a gesture as if she had a gun in her hand. Time slowed down. We just stood there, looking at each other in the bright sunlight. It was the first time we had been face to face since that long-ago meeting. Her hand was empty. She looked defeated, exhausted. All the violence and defiance had gone out of her. She mumbled, “Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you,” and walked away. My knees felt weak.

Not long afterward, a Provincetown parishioner called me here to say that she had taken her own life.

I remember ... I didn't even feel relief. I just felt sad. I felt sad for her misguided mission; sad that she was so utterly alone with her madness; sad that she had lived on a steady diet of hatred until it sickened her, poisoned her, and killed her. What's really amazing to me today, though, is that I remember the name of the person who called to say she'd died, but I can't remember her name.

And here's the point: What did it do to me, to my soul, to experience the erosion of my compassion until slowly, almost imperceptibly, it was replaced by powerlessness, righteousness, anger, and fear ... until she died?

Shantideva, the great eighth century Indian Buddhist scholar, asked, If these ancient, long-lived patterns – these ways of thinking that are the wellspring only of unceasing woe, that lead to our own suffering as well as the suffering of others – if these ways of being still find their lodging safe within our hearts, how can peace ever come to

this world?² And he goes on to say that, even after the enemies are all dead, the alliances have shifted, the nations have fallen ... even then, the impact of our negativity and hatred is very long-lived. We look in the mirror to find that we have become carriers of that disease.

So how can we begin to change that?

In the face of an incoming hit, the spiritual practice is not to rush to the last time we were hurt and circle the wagons and fuel that wound, throwing wood on the bonfire of our anger and self-righteousness. Instead, determining to free ourselves from the habit of cleaving to the fundamentalism of the closed mind and the hard heart, we summon the courage to break that habit: to change our minds and experience a true change of heart.

The real work of the peacemaker, as Pema Chödrön says, is to find the soft spot and stay there, “cultivating the seeds of peace.” I don't know how this would have looked with my stalker, but it's a worthy spiritual inquiry. How would it look in your life? On a global scale, His Holiness the Dalai Lama refers to the Chinese government as “my friends, the enemy.”

I'll to close with a story I've told before, the story of a vet determined to stop the war within. He writes,

“I ... served as a field medical corpsman with the Marine Corps ground forces in the early days of the war in the mountainous provinces on the border of what was then North and South Vietnam. Our casualty rates were high, as were those of the villagers we treated when circumstances permitted.

“When I attended my first meditation retreat ... it had been eight years since my return. At least twice a week for all those years, I had sustained the same recurring nightmares common to many combat veterans: dreaming that I was back there facing the same dangers, witnessing the same incalculable suffering, waking suddenly alert, sweating, scared.

“At the retreat, the nightmares did not occur during sleep. They filled [my] mind's eye during the day, [during seated meditation], during walking [meditation], at meals. Horrific wartime flashbacks were superimposed on a quiet redwood grove at the

2 paraphrased, at best!

retreat center. Sleepy students in the dormitory [were superimposed on] a makeshift morgue on the DMZ.

“... As I relived these memories as a thirty-year-old spiritual seeker, ... what I came to see was that, ... for the first time, ... I was also enduring ... the full emotional impact of experiences that, as a twenty-year-old medic, I [had been] simply unprepared to withstand.

“I began to realize that my mind was gradually yielding up memories so terrifying, so life-denying, and so spiritually eroding that I had ceased to be consciously aware that I was still carrying them around. I was, in short, beginning to undergo a profound catharsis by openly facing that which I had most feared, and therefore most strongly suppressed.

“At the retreat, I was also plagued by a more current fear – that having released the inner demons of war, I would be unable to control them, that they would now rule my days as well as my nights. But what I experienced instead was just the opposite. The visions of slain friends and [dead] children ... gave way to other half-remembered scenes from that time and place: the entrancing, intense beauty of a jungle forest, a thousand different shades of green, a fragrant breeze blowing over beaches so white and dazzling they seemed carpeted by diamonds.

“... For the first time ... what also arose at the retreat was a deep sense of compassion for my past and present self: compassion for the idealistic, young, would-be physician, forced to witness the unspeakable obscenities of which humankind is capable, and for the haunted veteran who could not let go of memories he could not acknowledge he carried.

“Since that first retreat, the compassion has stayed with me. Through practice ... it has grown to sometimes encompass those around me as well.... [And] while the memories have also stayed with me, the nightmares have not. The last of the sweating screams happened in silence, fully awake, somewhere in Northern California [decades] ago.”³

Beloved spiritual companions, when we turn off the sound and look up, we, too, will see that all angry faces are the same ... including our own. But when we openly face that which we most fear, we release the inner demons of war. The war that starts when

3 Quoted in Jack Kornfield, *A Path With Heart*, pp. 28-29

we shutter our minds – war in the world, and the war within – will not stop until we choose to change our minds and experience a true change of heart.

War begins in our hearts.

War ends,
and peace begins,
in our hearts.

May war end.
May peace begin.
Let it begin with us.