On War by Jim Millar - 7th November 2010

Introduction

Warfare has occupied what seems a disproportionate amount of time, money and lives in the history of our country. I have no personal experience of warfare, other than the TV coverage given to the various smaller but no less vicious conflicts of Iraq, Afghanistan and the Falklands, which have taken place during my lifetime. It was not so for my grandparents generation who endured the horrors of the Great War. My paternal grandfather was badly wounded in Flanders. Of my great uncles, Willie was killed in Flanders, George was shell shocked and Sandy returned from the war to board the first ship to America and was never heard of again. I'm sure you all have your own family experiences of war.

Since Thursday is Armistice Day, the day when we remember those who have fallen in conflict, I thought today I would consider the subject of war, somewhat analytically, from the perspective of a scientist and religious naturalist. I have entitled my address today "On War". It is a title I have taken from the book of the same name by Major General Carl Philippe Gottleib Von Clauswitz.

Von Clauswitz served in the Prussian army during the Napoleonic Wars and his treatise on war is still widely regarded as a definitive work on the subject. Von Clausewitz is often quoted from his work, perhaps the most famous being, *"War is not merely a political act, but also a political instrument, a continuation of political relations, a carrying out of the same by other means,"* often just shortened to *"war is politics by other means"*.

Getting to the heart of the matter with thrust of a Prussian rapier, he said, "*War therefore is an act of violence to compel our opponent to fulfil our will.*"

Violence, that is to say physical force (for there is no moral force without the conception of states and law), is therefore the **means***;*

the compulsory submission of the enemy to our will is the ultimate **object***. In order to attain this object fully, the enemy must be disarmed; and this is, correctly speaking, the real aim of hostilities in theory. It takes the place of the final object, and puts it aside in a manner as something not properly belonging to war.*

To summarize then war is an act of violence carried out by a state for the political purpose of compelling another to comply with its will. As a British Citizen then, I am forced to consider, under what circumstances, if any, I am prepared for my government to undertake acts of violence on my behalf, and for what ends.

Address

Some societies in our past have been totally dedicated to warfare. Perhaps the most famous example is that of ancient Sparta.

The great social experiment that was Spartan society began in the 7th Century BCE. Sparta geared her whole society for war. Every male child underwent brutal military training from the age of 7 until at 18 there were inducted into the army. The story is recorded by ancient writers of the Spartan mother handing

her son his shield with the words "with this shield or on it" that is win the battle or don't come back alive.

Sparta was able to field an army of 9000 tough professional soldiers who would dominate the Peloponnese for a few hundred years. But ultimately Spartan society, like all societies based on domination of its neighbours by military force, failed. There are a couple of reasons for this.

First it ran out of warriors. Each battle reduced its manpower which their small elite population was unable to replace. By the time of the Battle of Lucretia in 379 BCE the Spartan army was largely composed of mercenaries and press ganged allies, officered by Spartans. Sparta was crushed by the Theban Army and that marked Sparta's end as a dominant power. The situation was not dissimilar to that of Nazi Germany at the end of the war, when the Wermacht was largely populated by Volksturm, old men and teenage boys. War is simply not sustainable by any population.

Second it failed economically. In a classical "guns v butter" economics scenario, war is simply non-value added activity. Those engaged in it are not contributing to the Gross National Product of that society. There is an opportunity cost. Every battleship built is at the cost of a hospital that could have been built. There are still those today who believe that a war can boost the economy. This is known in Economics as the "Broken Window Fallacy". This is how it works…. A hooligan throws a brick through a shop window. The shopkeeper pays the glazer £1000 to replace the glass. The glazer spends the £1000 in the other shops in town. Hey… we've just boosted the local economy by £1000. Breaking windows must be a good thing! This of course is nonsense. No new wealth has been created. The £1000 would have been spent on other goods and services anyway. The simple fact is that military spending adds no value to an economy and must be paid for by increased taxation, cutting expenditure elsewhere, or increasing debt. One American economist talking about the U.S. bombing of Iraq, suggested, with heavy sarcasm, that it would be better if the US air force would drop refrigerators into the North Atlantic instead. At least it would give the white goods industry a boost! Is it any wonder that Germany was able to undergo a post war economic miracle, having been prohibited from all but a minimal spend on defence by the allies, whilst bankrupt Britain still held delusions of Empire? Warfare is economic suicide.

At the other end of the spectrum we have societies and philosophies that are totally dedicated to peace. Perhaps Buddhism is the most well known example. Buddhism is essentially a peaceful tradition. Nothing in Buddhist scripture gives any support to the use of violence as a way to resolve conflict. The first of the five precepts that all Buddhists should follow is "Avoid killing, or harming any living thing." There is a wonderful story I pulled from the BBC website which illustrates this.

> *A Vietnam veteran was overheard rebuking the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, about his unswerving dedication to non-violence.*
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> *"You're a fool," said the veteran - "what if someone had wiped out all the Buddhists in the world and you were the last one left. Would you not try to kill the person who was trying to kill you, and in doing so save Buddhism?!"*

Thich Nhat Hanh answered patiently "It would be better to let him kill me. If there is any truth to Buddhism and the Dharma it will not disappear from the face of the earth, but will reappear when seekers of truth are ready to rediscover it.
"In killing I would be betraying and abandoning the very teachings I would be seeking to preserve. So it would be better to let him kill me and remain true to the spirit of the Dharma."

While I admire much of Buddhist teaching especially its non-violent approach to conflict resolution, as a naturalist I cannot accept its nihilistic world view. I do not accept that I should disengage from the miseries of this life to avoid the endless cycle of rebirth and reach a state of nirvana. I am a complex multi-cellular creature, the product of billions of years of evolution. I had no existence before my conception and I do not expect to have anything I would recognize as conscious thought after my brain activity has ceased.

The name of the game in evolutionary life is survival and the passing on of my genetic code. Like every other creature on this planet, I wish to go about this business without interference by others, especially my fellow humans. If I am attacked, I will seek to deter my attacker. If this fails, I will seek to avoid conflict by running away, but if necessary I will resort to violence to ensure my survival or that of my offspring. I do not think that this is unreasonable – just the natural course of action of any creature on this planet. The idea that I should stand by and watch my daughters being murdered so that the Dharma will not disappear from the Earth is, from a biological perspective, an insane course of action, based on a dangerous delusion about the nature of life on this planet.

Now of course if I demand the right to self defense I must also give that right to the members of the police and armed services who are employed by the state to ensure that I can go about my business in relative safety. However I can see problems arising with this. Exactly under what circumstances is this to be done? To execute a regime change in Iraq? Not in my name. Can science help me here?

A few years ago researchers in the U.S. used computer simulation to test various strategies for a society to adopt for its continuing success. The most successful strategy turned out to be "an eye for an eye". Live at peace with your neighbors. If they attack you adopt a war footing until they are ready to resume peaceful relations again. This sounds reasonable but somewhere at the back of my mind I'm hearing Gandhi saying, "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind". This strategy is the one adopted by the state of Israel. Unfortunately they do not seem to have been able to get out of the war footing and establish peaceful relationships with their neighbors.

It seems to me that this approach is based on the assumption that there will always be violence and war and are in effect coping strategies. Perhaps if we can find the cause of the problem in the first place we can eliminate the problem altogether. Can science help me here?

Yes it can. Apparently it all comes down to Empathy. What is empathy? There have been many attempts to define it. Heinz Kohut has, "Empathy is the capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person".

D.M.Berger has , "The capacity to know emotionally what another is experiencing from within the framework of that other person, the capacity to sample the feelings of another, or to put oneself in another's shoes".

This sounds great, but what on earth has it to do with violence and warfare. Well actually….everything. Let me read you just a sample of the recent scientific research in this area.

ScienceDaily (Apr. 11, 2010) — Researchers from the University of Valencia (UV) have investigated the brain structures involved with empathy -- in other words, the ability to put oneself in another person's position -- and carried out a scientific review of them. They conclude that the brain circuits responsible for empathy are in part the same as those involved with violence.

"Just as our species could be considered the most violent, since we are capable of serial killings, genocide and other atrocities, we are also the most empathetic species, which would seem to be the other side of the coin," says Luis Moya Albiol, lead author of the study and a researcher at the UV.

This study, published in the most recent issue of the Revista de Neurología, concludes that the prefrontal and temporal cortex, the amygdala and other features of the limbic system (such as insulin and the cingulated cortex) play "a fundamental role in all situations in which empathy appears."

Moya Albiol says these parts of the brain overlap "in a surprising way" with those that regulate aggression and violence. As a result, the scientific team argues that the cerebral circuits -- for both empathy and violence -- could be "partially similar."

"We all know that encouraging empathy has an inhibiting effect on violence, but this may not only be a social question but also a biological one -- stimulation of these neuronal circuits in one direction reduces their activity in the other," the researcher adds.

This means it is difficult for a "more empathetic" brain to behave in a violent way, at least on a regular basis. "Educating people to be empathetic could be an education for peace, bringing about a reduction in conflict and belligerent acts," the researcher concludes.

So here we get to the heart of the matter. Violence and warfare do not start with a punch or a cannon's shot, but up here in the human brain, and it is due to a lack of empathy. Due to a lack of emotional intelligence.

Some years ago as part of my continuing professional development as a teacher, I undertook a course in Empathy. I was first psychoanalyzed and shown to be a typically emotionally retentive West of Scotland male. Well, my wife could have told them that. Develop your empathy I was advised. Get in touch with your female side, for in truth, Women are much better at empathy than men which is why, so often, violence and war is associated with men. I myself have learned much from the study of goddess spirituality and the women's peace movement and their approach to non-violent conflict resolution.

Human behaviour is largely learned and the bad news is that empathy can be reduced and thereby our propensity towards violence increased. This is particularly important in the development of the brain in young people where the neurobiological consequences of early experiences can shape later behaviour. Is it small wonder that Sparta's warriors were the stuff of legend? These poor unfortunates had every ounce of empathy there were born with literally beaten out of them from the age of seven.

The good news is that empathy can also be learned and as I quoted earlier from the Spanish researcher,

"Educating people to be empathetic could be an education for peace, bringing about a reduction in conflict and belligerent acts,"

If we want to reduce violence in the world we must study empathy, practice empathy, teach empathy in our schools. Challenge every political ideology or religious philosophy which diminishes empathy. Our traditional western cults are very low on empathy. Psychotic gods lead to psychotic devotees. The bible, for example, is a very low empathy book. Homosexuals – kill them. Disobedient children – kill them. Rape victims – kill them. Amelekites kill them and their wives and their children and their livestock. I do not believe that this is the word of god, but the work of men. Aye and some quite disturbed one's at that. Is it any wonder we see our fellow humans murdered or persecuted because they belong to the wrong cult or the wrong sex or the wrong tribe or have the wrong sexuality? All the crusades, the jihads, the executions, the honour killings, the genital mutilations, all because of a basic lack of empathy. Perhaps the bible and other books like it needs to come with a government health warning….this book may damage your mental health. Perhaps the next British prime minister who seeks to resolve political problems in some foreign land by the spending of our young people's lives in a pointless violent conflict, needs to be told that he is need of psychological counseling and asked to step down.

However, by understanding our emotional intelligence, by developing and practicing our empathy skills and strengthening the neural pathways in our brains, by developing the ability not only to listen to others but to understand them and the consequences that our actions have on others, it is possible to resolve areas of conflict with win-win solutions instead of as Von Clauswitz put it, *"Imposing our will on others".*

We do this, not at the command of some imagined deity or ancient guru, but because we as modern human beings living in the age of science understand how our own human biology works and we are prepared to take the responsibility of managing it. If we as Unitarians truly believe in

·The inherent worth and dignity of every person;

·Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

·The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;

·Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Then let us start by preaching and practicing "the gospel of empathy" and maybe, just maybe, somewhere down the line, violence and war, even a just war, can be confined to the dustbin of human history and humanity can enjoy the benefits of just peace.