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Why I Believe War Is Not the Answer

In 2008, my family and I traveled to Antigua, Guatemala to work with a local organization called Mission Impact to build a home for a family in the rural hills. We hiked up the windswept country, through beautiful forests while clouds dotted the sky. The children followed our van; they knew something exciting was going to happen. When we got to the house that might better be described as a one-room shack, nine little Guatemalan faces greeted us, as well as their mother holding the youngest. We learned later that she was the single parent because her husband and her oldest son had been murdered in a local dispute over land. I remember vividly the struggle we saw the family go through, yet they seemed matter-of-fact about their missing family members, as if it was “right” for them to die, it was inevitable.

Those images have stuck with me. There is a reason why the Hebrews passed down the story of Cain and Abel – to remember the first blood on the hands of humanity, and the story continues to this day. A neighbor harms another, we strike out in fear, hatred, ignorance, or simply because our country has sent us to perform our duty. There is just as much blood as patriotism on every person’s hands when they take part in that continuing story of humanity, in which we attack the other. We may even begin to see it as a necessary part of being human, this bloodshed.

It is indeed a primal part of us. It is in the fear of the other that we find the essence of war. There is a primal fear when we encounter that which we do not understand, be it another culture, or religion, or even race. War is the mechanism by which humanity lashes out to avoid the other, or obliterate them. It is a very natural thing to do, whether it be two people in a bar fight or two countries steeped in political enmity. War requires a group of people to paint the other as the enemy, but what happens when we begin to see the other as a fellow human just like us? I remember a poem about 9/11 by Mike Rosen, in which he attempts to explain how war would not bring his fellow New Yorkers back to life, how “that day had no black or white, because underneath that rubble everyone was grey.” What happens when the lines get blurred to grey? Can we escape this cycle?

Flying in the face of the natural human tendency of fear and violence, we see sacrificial love and nonviolence. These tools are the power behind lasting, positive social change, the source from which we begin to recognize common understanding, even in differences. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Nonviolence is a powerful and just weapon, which cuts without wounding and ennoble the man who wields it. It is a sword that heals.” The work of love and nonviolence is hard – it requires enormous compassion and commitment; but it is the “just weapon” which has brought greater human progress than war ever has.

This week I visited the Lorraine Motel, where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. It was indescribably powerful. As I think of war and violence, it is easy to despair, because if there is one thing history has taught us, it is that war is a vicious cycle. The road of violence never ends, for it always begets revenge, or as Jesus put it, “Those who live by the sword, die by the sword.” Yet as I looked on the hotel balcony where Dr. King was shot, I marveled at how the ripples of nonviolence

carry through his legacy. Love and understanding can spread just as quickly as violence, if we but open our hearts. When we recognize that war is not the answer, but instead begin to reach out to our neighbors, and with nonviolence effect social change, we will see lasting change that thrives beyond our present conflicts.