

Peace within the Paradox

Ian Wallace

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The music's rhythm pulses through the air, through the ground, and through our bodies. We are moved by the beat of the drum. Our legs and arms bring us to jump and jive as we lose ourselves to dance. In this fullness of being, lost in the moment, I find peace. People speak of a sense of peace they find in running, in fishing, or gardening. Perhaps sitting down to meditate presents a challenge for so many because the stillness of our bodies reveals the maelstrom of thoughts and feelings always roiling under the surface; this frenetic internal activity is more easily set aside in the midst of physical activity. My talk today will focus on embracing the unresolvable contradictions within reality. How do we find peace when we are built of such restless stuff? We endeavor to build a world at peace, but must face ourselves as beings evolved by our entanglement with rival human bands. We find fundamental antagonisms both within the geopolitical strata, and in the molecularity of our passionate personal experiences. Let's explore the ways that we find peace at the heart of those contradictions.

There are three hackneyed phrases which make odd use of the word "peace" in some revealing ways. First is "peacekeeper," meaning a soldier, typically one sent from a wealthy, core country into a poorer, peripheral country with the mission of helping bring an end to an ongoing conflict. The irony enters in when the "peacekeepers" elicit further violence and unrest in the occupied country, or when the term "peacekeeping mission" is simply used as a euphemism for invasion.

The second expression is "peace of mind," as an advertising slogan for financial services. "Peace of mind" here means having enough money on-hand to deal with catastrophic problems arising in the course of life. Paradoxically, the use of the phrase implies that one is actually ill-at-ease with the future, seeking to mitigate that worry by accruing more wealth.

Lastly is the popular epitaph, *rest in peace*. The language in this phrase illuminates the way our culture frames death as analogous to sleep. While a sleeping *body* typically does lie peacefully, during sleep the brain is highly active in the work of processing information, as well as repairing its systems. Neurologically, sleep is anything but peaceful, and does not resemble

death. In death, all brain activity ceases, and systems are no longer being rejuvenated. One who has died is truly at peace, more so than at any time during life's struggles. In the case of those deceased, it is life's absence that implies peace.

Yet when we say that we seek peace, in our culture we don't typically frame this desire as a movement toward annihilation. We hope for peace to be integral to our active, living state of being. There are so many contradictions, antagonisms, and paradoxes surrounding this word. We must be onto something good! Living in peace is the ultimate mode of being which we can manifest as conscious beings, because peace exists within the fundamental antagonism between our restless striving and the finality of annihilation. In peace we can abide within the source of life: the radical, contradictory nature of reality itself.

There is a tension where the ordered structure of our chemical makeup meets with the irresolvable forces of chaotic entropy. This dynamic interplay meets on all levels of reality, from the tiniest quarks and leptons up to the birth and death of the universe. This fundamental tension between the apparent opposites only appears as an antagonism because we are enmeshed in the dance of these forces. The dichotomy is written into our neurology: the right brain fields the unknowable abstract, the left brain maps the concrete known. Our brains have evolved as components of the universe's seemingly contradictory principles. We operate within the structure of a material reality which makes us what we are. Our minds are fundamentally paradoxical: knowing, but at play within the unknowable, glorious in their ability to create meaning out of the irresolvable contradictions.

We think that we are the one's making meaning of the world, because we are built by the universe in such a way so as to think this. In the long struggle of our evolution, the transecting antagonism of creation and destruction which runs through all layers of reality pitted us against ourselves. We love and we hate. As we awaken to our own paradoxical nature we may have the chance to let the universe choose to know its own mystery through our dreams of peace.

Our ancient ape ancestors developed as an aspect of the landscape. Their territory centered around the food sources which nourished the band. The territory's boundaries were defined by the presence of other primate groups on their perriffery, each group enmeshed in their own ape-land assemblage. The land's integration of primate bands into its available resources

brought neighboring bands into interpenetrating antagonism. Displays of aggression between opposing groups of males expressed the land's division into resource bases for separate bands. Chimpanzees carry out this precise behavior on the boundaries of their territory. Anthropologists and archeologists have found increased warfare among hunter-gatherer groups to be directly correlated with resource scarcity. Evolution of our species selected for traits within males which compel confrontation with outsiders. The peace found within the band's territory, in one sense, existed in polarity with the territorial conflict regularly ensuing among males at the periphery of this space. So the groups of aggressive males can be understood to be peacekeepers.

There is another side to the story, however.

Each species of primate has one sex which instinctively, upon reaching sexual maturity, leaves the group it was born into, traveling out to join another group. In humans, as with chimpanzees, it is females who leave their original territory, joining a nearby band. Unlike with chimpanzees, however, humans keep in touch with the loved ones they have left behind. Women in hunter-gatherer societies establish and maintain broad relational networks throughout adulthood. Here we find a fascinating juxtaposition between the behavior of the two sexes: males aggressively grappling at the edge of their territory, females diplomatically slipping between territories. In the world of hunter-gatherers, women's broad social ties serve as valuable conduits for procuring resources during times of scarcity. It is the landscape selecting for *groups* capable of sharing resources more broadly. With these social ties acting as lines of flight out of closed territories, the women form a broader assemblage.

The functionality of aggression in males is also self limiting within the complex dynamic of human bands. Male aggression functioned as a key aspect of territorialization in the face of competing primate groups, but internally, aggression was strongly selected against, as the extremely long and vulnerable period of human childhood required a great amount of patience and tenderness to be shown toward offspring. Interdependence through the sharing of resources also selected for sociability and kindness. Males seen as bullies in a hunter-gatherer society are often killed by other members of the band. Peace is maintained through internal bloodshed.

Early agricultural societies became increasingly complex, and the execution of aggressive males was problematized by developing class hierarchies. Placing sins onto a scapegoat fulfilled the instinctive drive to maintain a peaceful balance by exercising violence.

In agricultural civilizations, the male drive to engage aggressively with outsiders formed more terrifying machines of military conquest, facilitating imperial assemblages. Complexities of enacting conflict on a broader scale required the procurement of resources to support the warrior class, as nothing is more dangerous to a feudal lord than a hungry militia. Coins were given as signs of value in order to retain the loyalty of soldiers. The currency was a sign of the king's dominion over the use of resources within the territory that his soldiers "protected".

Money stands as a sign for the fulfillment of desire. We want resources in our drive for survival. As social creatures we evolved to fulfill our needs collectively. Money then acts to signify social trust. So what went wrong, why do we speak of money as the root of all evil?

The lack that embodies itself within our animal being as desire is hard baked into reality. It is this lack that delimits creation and destruction. The lack propels the ongoing development of the material universe, as the balance of all things rests upon their impermanence.

A collective material reality had acted as a unifying principle for hunter-gatherer bands. They shared a desire for abundance, and an acceptance of the recurrent lack in nature's cycles. Through the exchange of lustrous metals as signs for the fulfillment of want, human beings entered a simulation of existence without lack, for the gold was seen as incorruptible, while all desired objects fade. This beautiful lie, however, was never available to everyone equally. Money has brought great peace of mind to those humans in possession of "sufficient" amounts of the stuff, but it developed out of militant aristocracies' domination of agricultural society. In the feudal state, money propelled a differential between those who could capitalize on the world's abundance through their position in the martial hierarchy, and those whose access to resources was limited by their lack of access to power.

The ultimate, inescapable power faced by all humans, rich or poor, is death. The knowledge that we will die one day fuels anxiety within the species. Patterned by simulation of escape from the lack, either through money, or through redemptive religion, we hold away from ourselves the acceptance of our mortality, not to mention the mystery of the infinite presence

within finite reality. We are built by the flux, dancing upon the irreconcilable forces of creation and destruction. One family of beings, all life on Earth plays with fate, reproducing in the face of oblivion. Our restless seeking and striving for meaning is paradoxically fulfilled when we can fully accept that the mystery exceeds our greatest possible capacity for *thought*. In this acceptance there is peace. Radical acceptance is the death of the ego's drive to frame the world in order to suit ourselves. Being free, then, to rest in peace, we awaken in the flow of experience.