

The Perils of Pursuing Peace in a Limbic World  
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Let me say first that anyone who pursues peace, particularly in today's hot world, is promoting the Common Good. The Common Good, by definition, is something that benefits all people, not simply a select few. As we live in a world that seems in grave danger of spiraling out of control at any moment due to unchecked violence, those who work to promote and teach peace and peaceful conflict resolution clearly are benefiting all of us – the Common Good, in other words. This is why we are honoring the Rev. Dr. Ronald Claassen tonight.

Ron's work, and the work of his colleagues, associates, and students, cuts across the grain of a basic and natural human inclination to seek conflict resolution by resorting to force and, inevitably, to violence. This is because, deep in our brain, we human beings are hardwired for aggression. While we are the proud owners of a highly developed central nervous system, nevertheless we share certain critical neurological structures with earlier forms of animal life.

Paul D. MacLean, M.D., coined the term "triune brain" to point to the fact that, roughly speaking, our brain evidences three fairly distinct levels of development.

The rudimentary brain that all vertebrates have in common is called the reptilian brain. The structures in this brain assembly govern basic life functions such as heart rate, breathing, digestion, and balance, but also the fundamental flight or fight response to danger. The reptilian brain also predisposes us to blindly follow the leader and to ruthlessly guard our territory.

The next development of the brain is found in all mammals (mammals being a subset of all vertebrates). This group of structures is called the limbic system. Limbic is from a Latin word that basically means rim, edge, or boundary. The limbic system surrounds the reptilian brain. Its specialty includes the ability to generate intense emotions and to use them to lay down permanent memories. In general, it is understood to be the seat of emotion.

So, when someone cuts you off on the highway, it is your limbic system in conjunction with your reptilian brain that urges you to get even by running him off the road.

Fortunately, you also have the neocortex that cautions you not to take such drastic action. The neocortex is the newest development in the brain, something we have in common with all primates. In the human brain, the area of the neocortex called the prefrontal cortex is more highly developed than in other primates. All of this development with the neocortex in general and the prefrontal cortex in particular allows us to reason, to use words instead of actions, to keep our emotions in check, to think

through short- and long-term consequences – to be peacemaking human beings, in other words, instead of only revenge-seeking, club wielding brutes.

It can be embarrassing to admit we have such primal drives. But we minimize or deny the existence of our brutish core at our peril. This is because when we turn a blind eye to our primal core, it will blindside us at the worst possible moments. We have to honor the original protective functions of these primal drives even as we learn to control and transcend them in a world where, ironically, they have become quite dangerous to our collective well-being if they are not well-managed.

And, of course, not all of our intense emotions are negative. We are capable of feeling deep, profound joy at a new birth, for example. Most of us yearn to feel happy, to feel fulfilled, to feel excited by a new quest. In truth, we all enjoy feeling a degree of emotional intensity, particularly when it is positive. But even negative emotions are better than nothing at all. Intense emotions give us a charge, they perk us up, give us a sense of meaning. Life is dull and drab without them. The goal is not to shut down on all of these intense emotions but to be in charge of them so that they don't propel us down destructive pathways.

It is important to keep in mind that these more primitive responses are never far from the surface. For better and for worse, they are easily triggered. And, unfortunately, there are a number of clever people in our world who know this and who have figured out how to exploit these intensely emotional responses for their benefit. Our society's emotional climate is dominated today like never before by all too many media executives, politicians, commentators, and advertisers for major corporations who know that the skillful use of intense emotion is a powerful way to drive people toward the decisions they want for the outcomes that will benefit a few. This tends to work against the Common Good. That is, these covert manipulations invariably run in the opposite direction. Because of this, we tend to live in world all too often created out of decisions made by our limbic system and its close ally, the reptilian brain, decisions that are not reviewed or modified by the processes governed by the neocortex.

This is the result of being bombarded daily by a wide range of stimuli that appeal to our intense emotions. These stimuli come from television, radio, movies, print media, the Internet, video games, and more. The content includes entertainment, news, and advertising. We have shocking news stories, shocking entertainment, shocking ads, and shocking video games. The more intense, the better. "A shooting leaves one man dead. Details at 11!"

We have radio DJs who call themselves shock jocks. We have TV and radio commentators, right and left, who broadcast their disgust about their incredibly stupid and/or dangerous enemies. We have politicians across the spectrum that use fear and innuendo to get elected and stay in office. We have video games that sell in the millions where teens and young adults not only can witness graphic violence but actually *practice* inflicting depraved violence on their victims complete with visual and auditory details. We have TV shows and movies that rehearse with amazing realism

what it looks and sounds like when someone is murdered, tortured, dismembered, and the like. Little if any of this aids the human spirit and it is hard to compete with these numerous sources of emotionally driven examples of, shall we say, "non-peaceful conflict resolution."

Unfortunately, it is all too easy today to shout down a peaceful approach to a problem. For example, it is a natural and universal human need to feel safe in one's community. That is why we have law enforcement. But law enforcement is designed primarily to stop or prevent crime that is imminent, not solve the root causes of criminal behavior. Last week, for example, we read in the newspapers that California is close to spending more on prisons than on education. All the shouting has led to longer sentences, more prisons, and a horrendous bill to pay for decades to come.

Clearly, none of this has done anything to solve the root causes of criminal behavior or to intervene in a constructive way to head off a life of crime. The latter is what Ron and others are proposing to accomplish by having Fresno County designated as a pilot site for a Restorative Justice project aimed at juveniles. Non-violent offenders, the vast majority, would have a chance to have their cases resolved through a community justice conference instead of by a judge. It has worked for years in New Zealand. What a blessing this will be for thousands of lives if this plan is adopted here in California's Central Valley.

Personally, I would also like to see hundreds of mental health professionals assigned to at-risk families to mentor them in basic life skills. Given a realistic case size, I believe this could help with efforts to reduce crime, health costs, and the need for public support. But a "lock 'em up and throw the key away" cry would easily overwhelm such a complicated, touchy-feely approach.

Given all this, what can a person do?

To overcome all of these challenges to peaceful conflict resolution, the first thing we can do is to recognize what we are up against. I know that most of you here already know this quite well. But we have to continue with our efforts to educate the larger public and we have to do this in a way that is in keeping with our goals: respectfully and peacefully. We have to help people understand that these skillful manipulators most often use fear and an appeal to grandiosity to achieve their ends. I suspect we are all pretty clear about what is meant by an appeal to fear. Grandiosity may not be as clear. By grandiosity, I mean the efforts to convince people they deserve to feel, be, and have the best, that indeed they are they best in the whole world, they are more special and more deserving than anyone else.

Second, we can redefine what we mean by peace. For many, peace conveys the sense of a state of inner and outer tranquility. What that can be one facet of peace, it is certainly not the only. As the quote by Whitehead in your program says, peace is not anesthesia. It is not a sleepy, boring town square where nothing happens. According to Whitehead and others, peace is the ultimate in intensity. As such, it is neither superficial nor shallow. Instead, it has ultimate breadth and depth. It is the fulfillment of all the many dreams that point toward *Shalom*, the Hebrew word for peace. The

word *shalom* conveys a rich set of meanings, including the sense of completeness, fulfillment, wellbeing, and harmony. Process thought would suggest this can only occur when a conflict has been resolved in such a way that the vital, unique essence of all parties finds a place in the new harmony. What could be more exciting than that?

Third, we can give more than superficial honor to those pursuing peacemaking. Peacemaking is not an easy, cushy job. As Ron and others can testify, it is hard, demanding work. If people are hungry for real challenges, for something more than a video game or an American Idol, for the kind of challenges to greatness that John Kennedy offered, then peacemaking is the road to follow.

Fourth, we can lay out clearly the costs of not pursuing peace. Today, we live in a world where even small groups have access to incredibly destructive weapons. The potential of a true apocalypse may generate enough fear to help us pursue peace. Yes, that will stimulate fear, but if we are honest and not manipulative, the fear will be proportionate to the actual threat.

Right along side that, we can remind ourselves of *how* we should pursue peace. As Martin Luther King said, we must pursue peace in a peaceful manner. Violence does not yield peace; if it did, surely there would be no wars by now. As Gandhi said, "Permanent good can never be the outcome of untruth and violence."

Sixth, religious leaders and followers need to be challenged and encouraged to preach and teach peace and not war, love and not hate, to emphasize our commonality with fellow human beings and the rest of the natural world instead of exploiting our fears by shouting out that our differences are reasons for exclusion, hatred, and killing.

Seventh, we need to actively pursue media reform across the board, ranging from entertainment to news to advertisements. In particular, we need to find ways to reverse the trends toward increasingly realistic images of violence, including those that put video game players in the role of rehearsing the best ways to inflict violence and mayhem on other people. We should be creating situations where the young and the old practice peacemaking.

How about peacemaking video games? The key to these peacemaking games would be the development of the skills and the ability to understand the mind, hearts, values, and core needs of the opposing players and use that understanding to work to a mutually satisfying outcome *without resorting to violence*. Any video game like this would have to incorporate the need for patience and persistence – two of the traits that have brought Ron to where he is today.

This is an important part of what we are honoring in Ron Claassen tonight. Ron has shown us the way for a better world through peacemaking. He and his many colleagues, associates, and students have been going down this critical pathway for many years now. Ron's persistent and patient efforts that he has made personally and through the programs he has helped to initiate and guide are busy making an incredibly positive difference in this world. Ron has been benefiting the Common Good, here and around the world. For this, Ron, we thank you!