

Innocents
Rev. Jennifer Brooks¹
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"Perhaps the earth can teach us as when everything seems dead and later proves to be alive."
—Pablo Neruda

There are times when the story of humanity is painful and sad. Yet always, along with the catastrophes some humans seem to be able to create for others, there are voices of hope and sanity.

When Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh was still in Vietnam, there was a war going on. We call it the Vietnam war. It was not a good time for our country. But it was a terrible time for Vietnam. During this time of tragedy, Thich Nhat Hanh wrote a poem called "Peace."² It could not be published, because to utter the word "peace" was treason.³

One line from the poem: "in the garden, uncurling moist petals, / a new rose blooms."

Hardly subversive. Most of the poem is like that. But in context, the poet's opposition to government policies would have become clear in its closing lines: "When can I break my long silence? When can I speak the unuttered words that are choking me?"

Peace: a word that chokes those who are not allowed to speak it. Thich Nhat Hanh has since proved to be a great spirit, a voice of hope and sanity in the world. Forty years ago he was forged in the fire that is a noncombatant's place in war.

Fire.

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² Thich Nhat Hanh, "Peace," in *The Cry of Vietnam*, Unicorn Press, Santa Barbara, CA, 1968, p. 22:

They woke me this morning
to tell me my brother had been killed in battle.
Yet in the garden, uncurling moist petals,
a new rose blooms on the bush.
And I am alive, can still breathe the fragrance of roses and dung,
eat, pray, and sleep.
But when can I break my long silence?
When can I speak the unuttered words that are choking me?

³ Peter Y. Chou, writing at <http://www.wisdomportal.com/Peace/Peace-Poetry.html>, says: "In *Call Me by My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh*, (Parallax Press, Berkeley, 1999, p. 27), the following note appeared in the poem "Peace": This antiwar poem was written in Vietnam in 1964, when to pronounce the word "peace" meant you were "communist," helping the communists, or just defeatist. When Pham Duy, a well-known musician, put this poem to music, he used the title *A Dream*."

Many of us remember the images of Vietnamese Buddhist monks who set themselves on fire to protest the war. Thich Nhat Hanh wrote a letter to Martin Luther King to explain why. He said that these monks “did not aim at the death of the oppressors but only at a change in their policies.” He said that their goal was to end the “real enemies” of humanity: “intolerance, fanaticism, dictatorship, cupidity, hatred, and discrimination.” He said that these enemies “are present everywhere in our very hearts and minds.”

Always it seems that the great spirits of humanity, those who hold evil up to the light, are able to discover it also in their own hearts. Isn't that an odd thing? That the most courageous and compassionate of human beings look inward and seek to renew and restore their own spirits? What of the rest of us, who do not claim to be Buddha or Jesus or Gandhi or Martin Luther King or Mother Theresa or Thich Nhat Hanh?

We might turn this lesson into a question: Have the evils we abhor lodged within our own hearts? Gandhi said, “Be the change you want to see in the world.”

One of the ways we humans in the workaday world try to deal with evil is through the “rule of law.” We create laws that specify crime and punishment. Most of these are directed at individual citizens. But we also create laws that restrain governments.

The idea—central to democracy—is that if the leaders who constitute a government are subject to the rule of law, then monks won't have to immolate themselves in the public square to bring worldwide attention to its evil acts. Instead the law will provide a way for citizens to remove bad leaders from office.

The idea of the rule of law is not limited to any one country. It is an internationally accepted concept. Although democracy may be more effectively implemented in some countries than others, on a global level the rule of law is the accepted standard of conduct among nations. That's the idea of the Geneva Conventions; 194 countries that have agreed to the Geneva Conventions. The United States is a signatory.

We Americans hear about the Geneva Conventions from time to time, and most of us know a little about them. Most of us know that they specify humane treatment of prisoners of war. We're familiar with the the idea that the Geneva Conventions that protect noncombatants from harm—people like Red Cross workers or medics.

The rules that protect noncombatants are broader than most people realize. They are also quite specific. The general principle is that war is to be waged by combatants (soldiers, sailors, pilots). Combatants wage war against each other, not against innocent bystanders.

This idea has its roots in the Code of Chivalry from medieval times. Knights in armor vowed to protect innocent life. As a practical matter, burning crops and slaughtering peasants created long-term problems even for the victor. But the moral concept the knights embraced is that force should be used to combat evil; that *innocents* are to be protected.

We are approaching August 6, the anniversary of the day that America dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. There has been much discussion of the morality of this act. And the

morality of the bombing to rubble of German and Japanese cities has been re-examined, particularly the bombing of Dresden.

Although the current version of the primary document of the Geneva Conventions was entered into in 1949, it wasn't until 30 years later, 1978, that the nations of the world agreed to Protocol I.

This is the agreement that makes it illegal for signatories to use methods of war that disproportionately attack civilians.

Perhaps it's not surprising that it took so long to arrive at this agreement. Immediately following World War II, when the other Conventions were updated, the global community was gripped in controversy over the war's wholesale attacks on civilians and the use of weapons of mass destruction. It was fairly easy to reach agreement on the principles that prohibited the acts that had been carried out by countries defeated in the war. It was not so easy for the victors to agree to principles that might impugn their recent actions.

But in the next generation, the world's leaders were able to expand protections for civilians caught up in war. Today a nation agrees to distinguish between civilians and combatants:

- Attacks are to be only against military objectives.
- Combatants are not to use methods of warfare likely to cause unnecessary losses or excessive suffering. The methods used must not disproportionately affect civilians.
- Combat forces can't attack civilians.
- Civilians are to be protected from acts of violence.
- Families can't be separated.
- Water supplies can't be contaminated.

One hundred ninety four countries have agreed to *protect* noncombatants who are in a military zone. These rules apply to signatories of the Convention even when they are waging war against opponents who have not signed.

At its most pragmatic level, the 1978 Protocol requires governments at war to leave homes and villages alone. Towns and cities can't be burned or bombed or their populations dispersed. In the wars that are underway this morning, most involving countries that have signed the Geneva Conventions, do we have confidence that civilians are not under attack? Are we sure that bombs are dropped only on military targets?

When I think about the humanity's emergence in the history of life on Earth, it's easy to become discouraged. It's easy to point the finger of blame, to condemn, to castigate.

Yet there is room also for hope.

The nations of the world have agreed in principle to protect innocent life. It is a step, although it is *only* a step. War, by its nature, urges combat forces and their civilian leaders to actions that all of us should abhor. Once the demons are unloosed, they are difficult to control.

Still we take steps.⁴ They may be small, but they are steps. The first step is one of recognition, of *naming*. 194 nations have named it wrong to make war on civilians. The nation that does so despite its signature on this agreement knowingly violates its obligations under international law. It's a step.

⁴ Pablo Neruda (1904-1973), "Keeping Quiet" (sometimes titled "Prayers for the Earth") in *Extravagaria* (translated by Alastair Reid) Jonathan Cape (London, 1972), pp.27-29; original *Estravagario* (Buenos Aires, 1958). (Source information from Peter Y. Chou, <http://www.wisdomportal.com/Peace/Peace-Poetry.html>.)

Now we will count to twelve
and we will all keep still.

For once on the face of the earth
let's not speak in any language,
let's stop for one second,
and not move our arms so much.

It would be an exotic moment
without rush, without engines,
we would all be together
in a sudden strangeness.

Fishermen in the cold sea
would not harm whales
and the man gathering salt
would look at his hurt hands.

Those who prepare green wars,
wars with gas, wars with fire,
victory with no survivors,
would put on clean clothes
and walk about with their brothers
in the shade, doing nothing.

What I want should not be confused
with total inactivity.
Life is what it is about;
I want no truck with death.

If we were not so single-minded
about keeping our lives moving,
and for once could do nothing,
perhaps a huge silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death.
Perhaps the earth can teach us
as when everything seems dead
and later proves to be alive.

Now I'll count up to twelve
and you keep quiet and I will go.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Buddhist monk forged as a civilian in the fire of war, reminds us to walk the walk of peace in our own lives. "We walk for ourselves," he says; "We walk for everyone always hand in hand. Walk and touch peace every moment."

The dogs of war growl in our own hearts.

Let us learn to be peaceful, and then let us change the world.

ADDITIONAL NOTES

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has a website that includes the Geneva Conventions, which are at: <http://www.icrc.org/ihl.nsf/CONVPRES?OpenView>. Although 194 nations have agreed to the conventions, only 168 have agreed to the specifics contained in Protocol I (a summary of this Protocol is on the next page). The US has signed Protocol I but has not ratified it.

The ICRC's work in Côte D'Ivoire between 2002 and 2005 resulted in a calendar featuring children's art to illustrate Protocol I principles. The illustrations are beautiful and they make the principles clear and easy to understand. The child artists were rescued by the Red Cross during the internal conflict in Côte D'Ivoire. Four of the drawings and related principles are set out on this page. All of the images for the calendar, the principles they illustrate, and a summary of Protocol I by protections available for noncombatants can be found online. The summary is reproduced on the next page. Images for the calendar and the accompanying principles are available at:

http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/calendar-abidjan-res-16.03.05/%24File/09_m.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/7E258D32FD4A98C2C1256FDB002D775F%3FOpenDocument%26Style%3DCusto_Final.5%26View%3DdefaultBody10&h=270&w=180&sz=21&hl=en&start=196&um=1&tbnid=d4a_YFayTZ7SyM:&tbnh=113&tbnw=75&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dnoncombatants%26start%3D180%26ndsp%3D18%26um%3D1%26hl%3Den%26safe%3Dactive%26client%3Dsafari%26rls%3Den-us%26sa%3DN

**Displacement of villagers?
Only for their own security!
[Illustration 1]**



**The red cross emblem?
To be respected! [Illustration 8]**



**Dispersed families? Too much pain!
[Illustration 3]**



**Combatants and non-combatants?
The distinction is clear! [Illustration 9]**



Geneva Conventions, Protocol I

Summary by the International Committee of the Red Cross, April 6, 2004

International humanitarian law: the essential rules

194 Countries Have Signed the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols

The statements below summarize the essence of international humanitarian law. They do not have the authority of a legal instrument and in no way seek to replace the treaties in force. They were drafted with a view to facilitating the promotion of the law.

- The parties to a conflict must at all times **distinguish between the civilian population and combatants** in order to spare the civilian population and civilian property. Neither the civilian population as a whole nor individual civilians may be attacked.
- Attacks may be made solely against military objectives. People who do not or can **NO longer take part in the hostilities** are entitled to respect for their **lives** and for their physical and mental integrity. Such people must in all circumstances be protected and treated with humanity, without any unfavorable distinction whatever.
- It is **forbidden to kill or wound an adversary who surrenders** or who can no longer take part in the fighting.
- Neither the parties to the conflict nor members of their armed forces have an unlimited right to choose methods and means of warfare. It is forbidden to use **weapons or methods of warfare that are likely to cause unnecessary losses** or excessive suffering.
- The **wounded and sick must be collected and cared for** by the party to the conflict which has them in its power. Medical personnel and medical establishments, transports and equipment must be spared.
- The **red cross or red crescent on a white background** is the distinctive sign indicating that such persons and objects must be respected.
- **Captured combatants and civilians** who find themselves under the authority of the adverse party are entitled to respect for their lives, their dignity, their personal rights and their political, religious and other convictions. They **must be protected against all acts of violence** or reprisal. They are entitled to exchange news with their families and receive aid. They must enjoy basic judicial guarantees.