

"Beneath the Stone"
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"One Tin Soldier"
by Dennis Lambert and Brian Potter

"Listen children to a story that was written long ago
About a kingdom on a mountain and the valley folk below
On the mountain was a treasure buried deep beneath the stone
And the valley people swore they'd have it for their very own

So the people of the valley sent a message up the hill
Asking for the buried treasure, tons of gold for which they'd kill.
Came an answer from the Kingdom, 'With our brothers we will share,
All the secrets of our Kingdom, all the riches buried there."

Go ahead and hate you neighbors, go ahead and cheat a friend,
You can do it in the name of heaven, you can justify it in the end.
There won't be any trumpets blowing come the judgment day.
On the bloody morning after...
One tin soldier rides away.

So the valley cried with anger, 'Mount your horses, draw your swords!'
And they killed the mountain people – so they won their just reward.
Now they stood beside the treasure on the mountain dark and red.
Turned the stone and looked beneath it ...
'Peace on Earth' – was all it said."

When I was a kid I remember One Tin Soldier playing on the radio. Being a visual child, I imagined in great detail the horrific battle between the Valley people and the Kingdom on the hill. Everyone on the mountaintop was killed – for what? The lyrics say for the secrets of the Kingdom and the riches buried there.

The story of One Tin Soldier is pretty clear and un-nuanced. It's a battle between good and evil – love and hate. And hate wins the day – or so it seems.

In this broken world of ours there is no shortage of this battle playing out in our time – terrorist attacks on our land and others – a horrific one in Nice just a few days ago - dictatorships in Syria, Zimbabwe and North Korea. Bloodshed, the killing and expulsion of innocents – soldiers of the valley, in many different forms, committing horrific acts – some soldiers doing it gladly, others are manipulated - many really didn't want to harm anyone. They're just doing what they were told – and there's the treasure – right?

The treasure, the big prize – after all that in the story, the Valley people turned the stone and looked beneath it – "Peace on Earth" was all it said.

Holy Baloney – what kind of prize was that? No gold, no silver? No nuclear secrets? No mansions? No well-established corporations? Nothing – just a few words on a stone.

I've often wondered what happened next. Maybe the Valley people were so angry about this sorry excuse for a prize that they turned on each other – more bloodshed. Or maybe they shrugged it off and marched off to bigger and better kingdoms with real prizes.

When I was about 11 or 12 I read a book called "Takers and Returners." It was about a group of neighborhood kids about my age or a little older who created a game to play. They divided themselves into two teams – One the Takers, the other the Returners. The objective of the game was that one team would take something and the other team would have to return it within 24 hours. It started out pretty low key – one team taking a rake from a neighbors garage – the other team returning it. But you know how these things go, right? It's a human tendency to keep pushing the envelope – so the stakes increasingly got higher. I don't remember all the details, but it went something like this:

Team One takes a TV from someone's living room. Team 2 returns it.

Team 2 takes garden furniture from someone's backyard. Team 1, waiting long enough for the owners to notice and react, hatch a plan and cleverly return it in the middle of the night.

Then the emboldened Team 1 takes the beloved dog of a young boy down the road. Team 2 struggles – the dog runs away. They can't find the dog.

Team 2 figures it will come back at some point – in the meantime they up the ante by stealing a car. You know that 12/13 year olds don't know how to drive – right?

They drive it way too fast down the residential street – out runs the dog. The impact was swift – the dog never had a chance.

The battle went too far and ended in tragedy. What was the prize? – the thrill of the game? Winning? One-upping. The kids, realizing what they had done were filled with remorse. Needless to say they never played the game again, instead spending their time picking up the pieces. What was revealed to them was despair, sadness and love – especially the love the boy had for his dog. Everything else just seemed stupid.

Maybe the Valley People realized they went too far when they turned the stone and read the message. Maybe they were forever changed when they realized the evil of their ways. Like the Grinch, whose heart grew 4 sizes that day when he heard the Who's singing in Whoville even after he had taken all their prizes.

I'd like to believe this – that the Valley Soldiers laid down their swords, wept for the peaceful Kingdom that they ruined and lived a life of love and peace forevermore.

Anger and hate are so often the main ingredients – but as bad as things get – they don't always win the day. Yes. There are bad guys – there are people who are hell-bent on doing harm, but look underneath some of the worst of our human actions and you'll discover our deeply compassionate humanity. Take Orlando – in the days and weeks after the shooting the demonstration of love pouring out of the LGBT community was astounding – these people who have been criticized and marginalized for centuries. Candlelight vigils – solemn and peaceful Pride parades. And just this week there was a viral video showing a group of black lives matter demonstrations and a group of counter demonstrators. The leaders of both groups decide to meet in the middle – instead of a battle they hug – then both groups come together starting hug one another and praying together. This is the stuff of Jesus – and Ghandi and Martin Luther King. Confronting hate with love.

Last summer I had the privilege of visiting the 9/11 Museum in NYC. Yes – 19 terrorists stormed the twin towers – the twin mountains of NYC as well as the Pentagon in DC killing over 3000 people – a horrific act of hate. But you know what? This museum does not give the terrorists that much airtime. For the most part, the museum is about love.

All I saw was love. Images of people risking their lives for others they didn't even know. Banners reflecting grief and hope. A spray painted sign at ground zero simply saying "God Bless". The faces of everyone who died. Letters. Video stories of humble heroism. While I was there I observed the visitors responding to the exhibits as much as the exhibits themselves. There again – I saw tears, compassion, respect. Beneath the rumble – love is revealed in its purest and rawest form.

These battles don't just play out on a global or national scale, but on a personal/emotional and spiritual level as well. Richard Rohr – calls this the True Self and the False Self. The True Self is our humble compassionate, non-judgmental self – the Divine indwelling. In Hinduism this is called Atman. The false self is the superficial self – the egoistic self. The part of us that judges and compares – that wants to win for the pure power of it – to bulldoze others ideas, fashion choices, appearances. Becoming aware of this false self is very powerful. Rohr says one key sign that we're living the false self is when we constantly take offense. We all do it to some extent – I am certainly not immune. It's very hard to overcome the False Self in our culture because the foundation and infrastructure of our society is constructed with concrete of our collective false self.

The False Self makes us worry so darn much – about silly things like your spouse buying the wrong brand of toothpaste, or a server at a restaurant not attending to you in a way that you would like. The driver in front of you is too slow at the traffic light. Stuff like that.

When Jesus is asleep on the boat while his disciples are having a emotional breakdown in the midst of the storm – he calmly gets up and asks them what all the fuss is about – and he calms the waters. The disciples are amazed. Do you get this? It's so simple, but it's so hard. Staying calm in the midst of a storm. Through practice I'm learning to be more mindful instead of stressful. I focus on my breathing when my mind wants to have a hissy fit because someone is taking way too long to write a check in the grocery store – who does that anymore? Yup – internal battles can manifest inside of us under the most mundane situations.

Sometimes the only way to break down the edifices of the false self and the collective false self is going through a period of pain and suffering. Rohr says – "Until one has experienced absence – some degree of abandonment, loss or despair one doesn't have a longing or even a space to see what's happening." It is these life forces – loss of a loved one, addiction, depression, trauma or despair – hitting rock bottom – these life experiences destabilize the false self.

Every religion uses the language of suffering and transformation. We know this to be true in the Christian Tradition. In Buddhism it's called the 4 noble truths – there is suffering, there is a reason for suffering, there can be an end of suffering, there is a path to that leads to the end of suffering.

This battle plays out in the ancient Hindu Text - the Bhagavad Gita. With Krishna – the warrior God by his side Arguna must battle his evil cousins (some of whom he loves). Krishna guides Arguna, but will not fight. This is a battle against the forces of the false self – some call it the dharma field. And during the battle almost everyone dies. Arguna is ultimately victorious, but not without immeasurable pain.

Elie Weizel, the Jewish writer and Nobel Laureate who recently passed away, knew a thing or two about suffering and transformation. After witnessing and experiencing the worst kind of human atrocities he recognized the human condition for what it is –

broken and loving. In a 2002 address he said, "People say occasionally that there must be light at the end of the tunnel, but I believe in those times there was light in the tunnel."

Light in the tunnel... After the war Weizel spent the rest of his life writing and teaching about the human condition.

How can we participate? How can we help heal the wounds of our human story – wounds that are raw right now – in this time.

One of the cardinal virtues in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions is the practice of Ahimsa which simply means to do no harm – to practice nonviolence in every thought, act and deed. In Christianity it means becoming Christ-like and with that loving thy neighbor as thyself. Not one of us can do this entirely – certainly not me, but we can set the intention.

Ahimsa - Making your every thought and action be an offering to God, or if you're uncomfortable with the language – then an offering of peace. And, this is important especially for those who are anxiety prone, don't concern yourself with the outcome. Practice being present in every moment - in your thoughts, your interactions with others, your work – may these all be an offering.

And when the moment is finished – do it again, and again and again.

In your communities reach across the aisle and offer a hand in peace. In your high schools, break out of your groups – your comfort zones – and offer yourself in peace. In our divided political climate it might mean trying to understand where the other side is coming from – is it fear? Can we at least embrace the fact that we all are afraid to some extent – but we all love the same way. And almost all of us love our families, we all stop at traffic lights, we send our kids to schools, and care for our elderly.

Just yesterday, the spiritual director, Diane Berke sent us this message and I'll use it for my closing.

"Let us be gentle with ourselves during this time. Let us treat ourselves and others with kindness. May we be aware of our own prejudices and judgments, may we be safe spaces for one another. May we acknowledge and understand our humanity and our fear, and use this knowledge of ourselves to create a better world together. May we always honor the divine that is inside all of us."

And I say: May this world be blessed with peace and love. May we all play a part in it.

Amen, Shalam, Namaste

Benediction:

Elie Weizel said:

"We know that every moment is a moment of grace, every hour an offering; not to share them would mean to betray them."

May you go forward in peace – may your every moment be blessed. Spend some time this week seeking the love underneath the anger and hate in our world.

Thanks be to God.

