In the Eye of the Hurricane:
Finding Peace amidst Terror, Violence and War

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“My family and I celebrated the arrival of New Year in the famous French Quarters in New Orleans. I left with the feeling that life cannot be too bad, when an old man could sing the blues in New Orleans, with his white hair flowing in the wind, and lucky pennies dropping into his hat from Heaven. As long as we are free to sing and share our sorrows, there is hope for tomorrow.”

This is what I wrote in my Editorial for Positive Living E-Zine last year. But the New Orleans I knew isn’t there any more. It is hard to cling to good memories, when harsh reality pummels you like angry waves. Now, the motto of New Orleans “Let the good times roll” seems so distant and so incongruent with the horrors that are still unfolding before our eyes.

The blind fury of Hurricane Katrina

The Big Easy has fallen on hard times. For almost a week, most of the once vibrant city was drowning and dying in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. New Orleans has been laid waste and reduced to a city of ghosts. The landscape is now a ghastly panorama of death and devastation – buildings in ruins, piles of wreckages, and corpses floating in grimy floodwaters. The once proud Superdome, packed with bedraggled refugees, has become an abyss of suffering, desperation and despair. So many images of faces distorted by agony tell an unforgettable tragic story.

Helicopters are rushing in and out, frantically rescuing stranded survivors from roof tops, tree tops and makeshift rafts. Fully armed combat troops are stepping in to stop the anarchy of looting, shooting and burning. Bodies can be found everywhere. Homes have become sodden tombs. Many have succumbed to death after days without food, water or medicine – they died alone on a rooftop, in their attics or in wheelchairs, waiting for help that arrived too late. The death toll could exceed 10,000. Much of New Orleans has become a ravaged war zone in a third world country. The bowl-shaped city looks more like a large cesspool, with enough toxins and bacteria to contaminate all the living things in the Gulf region. The world looks on in shock and disbelief. How could such a humanitarian and environmental catastrophe be happening in the United States?
Nature and humans have conspired to create a living hell. The worst tragedy is the mayhem created by looters and rapists, who preyed on the most vulnerable Katrina survivors. Neither hunger nor poverty can justify these cowardly acts of re-victimizing helpless Katrina victims. These hoodlums crept out from their dark hiding places to their new found freedom under the sun, but they have only succeeded in exposing the dark belly of New Orleans – its corruption, injustice, sexual and violent crimes -- for the world to behold.

But the outpouring of good will has turned the tide. More and more stories of individual heroism have come to light. Relief workers and ordinary folks risk their lives to rescue others. There are many instances of people helping and caring for the sick and wounded. Strangers in every part of the United States have generously opened their hearts and their doors to receive the displaced refugees. Throughout the ordeal, so many have kept their faith and expressed their deep gratitude for being alive.

Gerard Baker of London Times has summed it up well regarding the duality of human nature:

“CATASTROPHE, as is the natural order of things, brings out the best in most humans, and the worst in some. When Katrina struck the US Gulf Coast this week, the first images reflected man’s instinctive compassion, heartening tableaux of daring rescues and selfless giving. Then, of course, came the looting, the inevitable exploitation of misery that contributes the insult of human depravity to the injury of natural disaster, a pitiful reminder that in the race to the bottom, even the most heinous of the elements are no match for the baser instincts of Man. “

The positive psychology of peace

In the midst of chaos, terror, and deaths, how can one find peace? What can positive psychology offer to these exhausted and broken people living in putrid squalor? How can they find serenity, hope and joy when they are going through so much pain? Ever since 9/11, I have been wrestling with these questions. One finding that has emerged again and again in my research is that authentic positive psychology cannot be built on positive illusions and whitewashed walls that will collapse under pressure; it can only be built on the rock solid foundation of confronting and transforming dark reality through cultivating inner resources.

Joe Lasties, a drummer of the legendary New Orleans Preservation Hall Jazz Band, told reporters, "I go around the world sharing the joy that is New Orleans. And because of that joy, I know my city is going to survive. The New Orleans people are the type of people, well, you can't keep them down. Through the joy of the music and the spirit of the people, we're always going to bounce back."
Indeed, New Orleans will rise again, stronger and better. But it will take a lot more than music to revive a city that has been completely destroyed by storm, flood and lawlessness. It will take more than money and technology to rebuild a shattered cultural fabric. In times of troubles and disasters, we also need courage, compassion and faith, which will enable us to discover grace under pressure, and hope in hopeless situations.

According to LifeSiteNews.com, Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco has called for a state-wide day of prayer: "As we face the devastation wrought by Katrina, as we search for those in need, as we comfort those in pain and as we begin the long task of rebuilding, we turn to God for strength, hope and comfort." Themes of need for cleansing and purification have also been openly discussed by local political and religious leaders, who are well acquainted with the ferocious history and the dark side of New Orleans.

One positive thing that can be said of total destruction is that it offers a rare opportunity for renewal and new beginnings. Like a clean sheet of paper, it invites us to fill it with visions of bold imagination, hope and faith. Perhaps, at the end of successful reconstruction, New Orleans will shed its old image of “Sin City” to earn the new title of “Shining City” as a shining example of recovery.

The psycho-social-spiritual aspects of rebuilding are equally important as the physical and financial reconstructions. New Orleans needs to recover her soul, purified and strengthened.

Elsewhere, I have written on the positive psychology of peace making and community building. In this article, I want to explore the inner workings of humanity that are responsible for both peace and war. More specifically, I want to focus on the steps we need to take in order to experience peace in the eye of the hurricane.

Is peace an impossible dream?

To deny the dark side of humanity is to ignore warnings about the destructive powers of Hurricane Katrina. We need to know our shadows in order not to be trapped by them. We need to descend to hell to appreciate heaven. Likewise, the positive psychology of peace must be built from the carnage of war and violence.
The world has lurched from one disaster to another. Most of the catastrophes, such as armed conflicts, the Holocaust and terrorisms, were created by human beings. It is very sad that after thousands of years of blood-soaked history, human beings have not yet learned how to live together in harmony and resolve their differences through dialogue.

Might makes right – the use of power remains the preferred way to resolve conflicts and achieve one’s own goals. We see this principle at work everywhere – from the halls of higher learning, chambers of law makers to the mean streets. Power seems to be an irresistible addiction, more destructive and powerful than crack cocaine and methamphetamine. Individuals drunk with power can never have enough of it – they keep on expanding their power base regardless of the human cost. Absolute power in the hands of a single mad man can destroy millions of people.

Just last month, we remembered the end of World War II, in which some 17 million troops died, including more than 400,000 Americans. Millions more civilians perished.

At the same time, we commemorated the 60th anniversary of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Close to 200,000 civilians perished in the blinding flash of nuclear explosions.

As we remember that dirty and costly war, how can we forget the Jewish Holocaust (Levi, 1995), the Nanking massacre (Chang, 1998), and the thousands untold stories of atrocities committed by human beings against other human beings?

Some veterans can still recall General Douglas MacArthur’s hopeful words: "A better world shall emerge out of the blood and carnage of the past." But where is it? Shortly after the end of World War II, we had the Korean War and the Vietnam War, which again claimed millions of lives. What has been accomplished by these sacrifices? Where is lasting peace?

**Ethnic cleansing and genocide**

The world is still at war. Hitler's style of campaign of terror against the Jews is still being copied around the globe. The pandemic of ethnic cleansing and genocide continues to spread, inflicting high causalities, especially against civilians, for no reasons other than ethnicity. Samantha Power (2003) has
documented most of the acts of genocide in the 20th century, including Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, the grisly killings in Bosnia and Srebrenica, and the massacre in Rwanda.

Hatzfeld (2005) interviewed many who took part in the Rwanda genocide, where an estimated 50,000 out of a total population of 59,000 Tutsis were hacked to death by their Hutu friends and neighbors. How could such a large scale of killing, rape, infanticide and torture go on right before the watchful eyes of the United Nations? How could ordinary people get swept away in the orgy of butchering their neighbors and friends?

In the 21st century, genocide is still happening in spite of the declaration of Universal Human Rights by the United Nations. According to the report *Darfur in Flames: Atrocities in Western Sudan*, The National Islamic Front (NIF) government forces have joined the Arab militias in indiscriminate attacks and massive bombing of civilian targets. This campaign of terror in Darfur could approach the scale of Rwanda without UN interventions.

**The invisible war of terrorism**

Since 9/11, after President George W. Bush’s launching of his war on terror, the world has experienced an invisible but ever expanding warfare of terrorism. There are no recognized borders or cognizable enemies. By whatever names they are called – terrorists, militant Islamists, Al Quade, or Jihad groups -- they are the most fearsome enemies, because they are fearless of death and they may be living among us (Emerson, 2003).

The theatre of terrorist attacks has expanded to Europe. The March 11th, 2004 Madrid train bombings were a series of coordinated terrorist bombings, which killed 191 people and wounded 1,460. On the 7th of July, 2005, a series of four bomb attacks struck London’s public transport system during the morning rush hours. No amount of security can prevent suicide bombings in an open society.

As the war in Iraq drags on, the potential threat of a full-scale civil war hangs heavy. When that happens, the bloodbath in Iraq can over flow to other parts of the region. Peace cannot prevail until the different ethnic/religious groups are willing to settle their differences through dialogue.

What is fanning the flames of terrorism which seem to be spreading across the globe? It seems naive to blame it all on America’s foreign policy. Ominous
threats to human civilization will likely come from extreme nationalistic and religious fanatics, who are willing to sacrifice their own lives and innocent people in order to impose their ideology on others. There can be no truce, no peace, until people with different ideologies can sit across the table and work out a way so that they can share the planet earth without destroying each other.

**Small steps towards peace**

Scholars have been pondering long and hard on the horrors of violence. They may be defective losers trying to exact revenge and assert power. They may feel justified to gain what they cannot get by peaceful means. They may want to destroy their rivals to maintain power and control. They want to expand their empire to leave a legacy. They may feel called by God to advance their beliefs by force. Theories abound in trying to explain the phenomenon of violence and war -- Social Darwinism, human depravity, class warfare, power motive, Type A personality, dysfunctions, families, capitalism, nationalism, or ideological dogmatism. We may never understand how people could commit the most heinous acts of cruelty and atrocity against other human beings. But we can learn to take small steps towards peace.

In the last few months, it has been nearly impossible to watch the TV news without being bombarded by images of violence, terror and wars around the globe. How many more million years will it take for humans to evolve into cooperative, peace loving creatures?

The sad truth is that as long as there is one ambitious person who wants power more than anything else, there will be no peace on earth. The basic desire for power is one of the common threads running through all human conflicts. We have not yet learned how to handle power in a wise and humane manner. The only proven way to prevent the corrupting influence of power is checks and balances, but why should the powerful and mighty willingly subject themselves to restraints and accountability? Those who are addicted to power can never be satisfied with the power they have. Like all other drug addicts, they cannot stop themselves – they need to be stopped. But who will stop them?

Another sad truth is that there are still no organizations, no nations, which have the political will or capacity to prevent a power-crazy man from killing masses of innocent people. The powerful but dangerous leaders are often feared and even admired. Most people would remain indifferent as long as the violence does not directly affect their self-interest.
The world was far safer, when people fought each other with swords and arrows. With more and more people acquiring the technology of nukes and biological warfare, it is a distinct possibility that some dirty bombs may one day explode in our public transit systems or shopping malls.

In such a violent world, what can we do as individuals? Can we find peace by escaping to a remote desert or mountain, far away from the madding crowds, and living alone in harmony with nature? Should we be peace activists, marching and demonstrating for world peace? Perhaps, we can begin by cultivating peace in our own lives.

We are living on borrowed time. Terror may strike anytime. The Big One may erupt when we are least prepared. The end may come like a thief at night.

We are living on mortgaged time. How many have sacrificed their lives so that we may live in peace and freedom? How many more must die to secure peace?

Can anyone measure the price of peace? Can anyone quantify the human suffering and grief of losing a loved one?

I hear the distant gunshots, and I see the carnage of war. But we can still celebrate peace as long as it lasts. Let’s dance to the joy of living, without shackles of hate, because we have learned to forgive.

The long march to peace begins with a single step. And peace is every step, says Thich Nhat Hanh (1991). We can learn to breathe peace and make peace right in the moment, regardless of how desperate the situation. To be fully alive, to be mindful of the moment, is to savor and share peace.

We can walk with peace by remembering our common humanity. In one of his sermons, John Donne wrote these oft quoted words:

"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."
In Stockholm on August 9 2002, on the occasion of commemorating the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, Joy Kogawa said: “When we murdered the other, we are murdering our own family, our Isaac, our Ishmael, our Jesus, our children, our futures. The enemy whose face is hidden from us is our friend, our close relative, someone we love.”

Each day, we can make small steps of peace. We can choose to turn the other cheek rather than strike back. We can refuse to play the power game and suffer the consequence of doing what is right. We have to learn to let go and let God in the face of grave injustice. We need to celebrate our differences by embracing our common humanity.

We can learn from Jesus the way of peace in our everyday walk. He promises: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid” (John's Gospel, 14: 27).

Jesus has indeed shown us his way to peace. It is the path of humility, poverty, self-denial, suffering and death on the cross. Gandhi dared to follow this path and gave his life for it. Do we have the courage to follow the way of peace? Each small step of peace makes world peace more likely.

As the storm of violence swirling around us gaining its destructive power, we can stay in the quiet center of the storm – an inner sanctuary of peace, mindfulness and selflessness. What abide are love, hope and faith even in the wake of Katrina.


Paul T. P. Wong, Toronto, ON, Canada. 4,763 likes · 4 talking about this. Psychologist, Speaker, Researcher. Paul T. P. Wong, Ph.D., C.Psych. is Professor Emeritus of Trent University and Adjunct Professor at Saybrook University. He is a Fellow of APA and CPA and President of the International Network on Personal Meaning (www.meaning.ca) and the Meaning-Centered Counselling Institute Inc. (www.meaningtherapy.com). Editor of the International Journal of Existential Psychology and Psychotherapy, he has also edited two influential volumes on The Human Quest for Meaning. A prolific writer, he is one of the most cited existential and positive psychologists. Paul T. P. Wong is a Canadian clinical psychologist and professor. His research career has gone through four stages, with significant contributions in each stage: learning theory, social cognition, existential psychology, and positive psychology. He is most known for his integrative work on death acceptance, meaning therapy, and second wave positive psychology (PP 2.0). He has been elected as a fellow for both the American Psychological Association and the Canadian Psychological Association. A description of tropes appearing in John Dies at the End. A web serial-turned-published-book by author David Wong (actually Jason Pargin, former head editor â€” Dave and John are two college dropouts living in the middle of an "Undisclosed" town in Illinois. John is a deranged, irresponsible, carefree, slacker/rocker/drug enthusiast. Dave is an apathetic, bored, snarky withdrawn young man with a traumatic past and the tendency to get dragged along with whatever John happens to be doing. After a run-in with a living hallucinogenic drug at a party, the pair gain the ability to see ghosts, demons, and into other dimensions. Hilarity Ensues. So does violence. And monsters. And weirdness.