

# **The Peaceable Kingdom Come**

the Rev. Edmund Robinson  
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I have always hated and feared physical violence. When I was about eight, I was in a school car pool with my younger sister, and there was a fellow named Charlie who had a few issues and would pick on my sister. When I reported this to my mother, she told me I must stick up for my sister. So I did the next day, and Charlie beat the tar out of me. I went back to my mother and said, "I want to stick up for my sister, but can't I reason with him first?" That was the last physical fight I have been in in my life, and perhaps that revulsion against physical violence is what has made me so interested in it as a subject of study.

I went to college in the 1960s, a time when violence was very much on our minds, both from the war in Vietnam and from the riots in the inner cities. I wanted to devote my time and energies to dealing with the issues of the day, so I decided to write my senior thesis on urban violence. But as much as I read, I could never figure out how to approach a subject so big and amorphous. On the day I had set to begin writing, I can remember sitting in the university library's cavernous reading room for eight hours and all I had to show for it were thirteen first paragraphs crumpled up in the wastebasket.

But I am still a sucker for the subject, so when I saw that Steven Pinker had written a new book called "The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined<sup>1</sup>," I had to get it.

Pinker as his name might suggest, loves to puncture conventional wisdom. In a book called the Blank Slate a few years ago, he took on the liberal notion that human nature is a blank slate on which anything can be written. Pinker showed that our hard wiring, the product of years of evolutions, had left us with some definite instincts and behavioral traits which we ignore at our peril.

In the new book, he tackles the question of whether the modern age is really more violent than previous times in human history and prehistory, and concludes that it is not. With great flair he marshals the known studies done by other scholars to make a compelling case that, whether we're talking about war or just murder, the present age is less violent than all the ages which preceded it, and by a huge factor.

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<sup>1</sup>Pinker, Steven, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* New York: Viking Press 2011.

Now the prophet Isaiah, back there in the Eighth Century BCE, had a vision of a time when, as we often misremember it, the lion would lie down with the lamb. The actual quotation is (Isaiah 11)

6 The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.

This passage was the inspiration for the Quaker artist Edward Hicks' famous painting, "The Peaceable Kingdom," which is reproduced on your order of service cover. This painting, in turn, inspired a choral piece by Randall Thomson called "The Peaceable Kingdom" which our choir performed about a year and a half ago. When they sang it, I preached a little homily and said I was a bit disturbed by Isaiah's images, the idea that the lion is going to make peace with the lamb by becoming a vegetarian. It seemed unrealistic that peace would be achieved through such an upset of the natural order. Fortunately, Pinker's book looks for peace within the natural order.

Pinker's book comes at a time when we are all weary of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and yearning for peace. Our sixth principle commits us to affirm and promote "the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all."

Peacemaking was the subject of the Statement of Conscience debated and adopted by the General Assembly of the UUA in 2010. This is an outgrowth of centuries of Unitarian and particularly Universalist theology.

We may popularly see Jesus as the Prince of Peace, but orthodox Christianity has features which do not point towards peace. Its central idea is that Jesus saves humanity from its original sin, the sin incurred when Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In the orthodox view, humanity is mired in this sin and the only salvation is for all to accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. If the world is a violent place, it is because not enough people have accepted Jesus.

Universalists long ago rejected Original Sin, and rejected as well the idea that only Christians will be saved. In 1935 the Universalists adopted a statement of faith which read: "A faith in God as Eternal and All-Conquering Love, in the spiritual leadership of Jesus, in the supreme worth of every human personality, in the authority of truth known or to be known, and in the power of men of good will and sacrificial spirit to overcome all evil and progressively establish the Kingdom of God."

There has always been an essential optimism about Universalism. It does not measure our progress down from the mythical perfection of the Garden of Eden, but measures up from our

animal past. Universalists do not wait for the last trump to sound or look for a magical restoration of Eden, we roll up our sleeves and get to work building the Kingdom in the here and now.

A lot of people over the years have scorned this optimism as naive or misguided. It has been particularly hard to maintain a faith in progress or a trust in a loving God in the face of the Twentieth Century horrors such as the Holocaust. Many people maintain that God died at Auschwitz.

Indeed, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, in the moral accounting, the shock was so pervasive, that the whole idea of moral accounting, of proportionality studies, seemed offensive.

Pinker, however, is willing to look at facts and figures. And this is why his book is so affirming. I know, he is one of the outstanding atheist voices of our time, so it is a rich irony that he might affirm a Universalist religious vision of human progress.

To understand what Pinker is saying, we have to first understand that his subject is real violence. We use the word violence in a lot of metaphorical ways to mean almost anything we don't like, but Pinker is looking at actual violence; as I would define it, intentional acts of killing or serious bodily harm inflicted by one person on another.

Pinker places his findings in the context of the centuries-old debate about the nature of humans and the nature of society. Thomas Hobbes held that if we stripped away civilization, we would be reduced to a war of all against all, and concluded that life in the state of nature was "nasty, brutish, and short." Hobbes said that the rise of the state, which he called Leviathan, civilizes people and pacifies them because the state acquires a monopoly on violence.

The opposite view is represented by Jean Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau was a romantic and put forward the notion of the "noble savage:" if we strip away the veneer of civilization, we will see people who have natural self-restraint, are at peace with each other and with their environment.

Rousseau's idea of the Noble Savage originated with the indigenous peoples encountered by the expanding European colonial powers of the Eighteenth Century, but the idea has been revived by liberal critiques of the Twentieth. We tend to romanticize Native Americans, for example and to assume that they were all living in the peaceable kingdom until the Europeans arrived. A great recent example of the noble savage myth is the movie Avatar, where a peaceable innocent race of blue extraterrestrial hippies is brought down by militaristic humans working for an evil corporation.

Pinker comes down squarely on the side of Hobbes in this debate. Whether we consider violence in warfare or single acts of homicide, people in state societies are much less violent than people in non-state societies. And as the state has grown stronger, its power to suppress

violence has increased. The path to peace is Leviathan.

Pinker amasses an impressive amount of data to back up his claims. He looks at prehistoric archaeological sites of hunter-gatherer peoples, where rates of violent death are estimated by the number of burials with injuries. He looks at the anthropological data on modern hunter-gatherers, modern hunter-horticulturalists and other tribal groups, and then at state societies.

All of the non-state societies had a higher rate of death from violence than any of the state societies. The most violent of the non-state societies was the Crow Creek of South Dakota, an archaeological site dating to 1325 CE, which had an estimated 60% killed in warfare. The average of all the prehistorical sites was 15%. The average for contemporary or recent hunter-gatherers was about 14%. Then come the contemporary tribal societies that engage in some mixture of hunting and horticulture, most from New Guinea or the Amazon rainforest, and one European example, and the average rate of violent death for this group is 24.5%.

Then he considers the state societies. The oldest in the sample, pre-Columbian Mexico, also had the highest rate of violence at 5%, but this is still 1/3 of the lowest non-state society.

We often consider the Twentieth Century to be a most violent period in history, but Pinker cites estimates that 40 million people died in battle during the century, but 6 billion people died overall, so that the rate of battle deaths is around 0.7%, considerably lower than in any of the non-state societies. Even if we add in the deaths from genocides, purges and other man-made disasters, we get the number of 180 million which can be blamed on all these human causes put together, which still pushes the rate up only to 3%.

What happens to this trend in the present century and in our country? Pinker answers this question by pointing out that 2.4 Million Americans died from all causes in 2005. That year we were fighting two wars, and the total American war deaths from Iraq and Afghanistan that year were 945, which amounts to 0.0004 (four one-hundredths of a percent) of all deaths that year. Even if we throw in the 18,124 domestic homicides that year, “the total rate of violent death adds up to 0.008, or 8-tenths of a percentage point.”

Some of the data are spotty and conjectural, but overall I find his thesis, that we are living in the most peaceful era of human history, to be convincing. But Pinker the social scientist is not content to simply prove that this is in fact the case, but he also has to attempt to explain why. And this is where he gets really interesting.

The “why” occupies two-thirds of an 800-page book and I will only have time here to lift up two aspects. First, the title of the book, “The Better Angels of Our Nature,” is a phrase lifted from Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address, when the nation was on the verge of civil war, and it was an appeal to draw back from the precipice.

Pinker appeals to metaphorical angels and demons in explaining why we do violent acts, but he is clear that both reside within our nature. He is concerned at one point with the persistence of the “Noble Savage” myth in public discourse, to the extent that those such as himself who deny it are vilified as ethnocentric or racist.

Pinker argues that this springs from a deep denial of the sources of violence within each of us. This denial masquerades under the banner of the doctrine of pure evil. When you think that an act springs from pure evil, you stop asking why it was done. There is a taboo on scientific inquiry in this area.

But Pinker points out that every actor has a justification for every act. A social scientist named Baumeister had an ingenious experiment. He asked participants to tell about something that had happened which really angered them, and he asked the same people to tell about something they had done which really angered someone else, but he had them do some busy work in between the two questions and it was random which relevant question was asked first.

In other words, the same people were perpetrator in one story and victim in another. He then collected the answers, and looked at the common elements. Pinker says if you weave them together into a composite narrative, they would look something like this:

*“The perpetrator’s narrative:* The story begins with the harmful act. At the time I had good reasons for doing it. Perhaps I was responding to an immediate provocation. Or I was just reacting to the situation in a way that any reasonable person would. I had a perfect right to do what I did, and it’s unfair to blame me for it. The harm was minor, and easily repaired, and I apologized. It’s time to get over it, put it behind us, let bygones be bygones.

*“The Victim’s Narrative:* The story begins long before the harmful act, which was just the latest incident in a long history of mistreatment. The perpetrator’s acts were incoherent, senseless, incomprehensible. Either that or he was an abnormal sadist, motivated only by a desire to see me suffer, though I was completely innocent. The harm he did is grievous and irreparable with effect that will last forever. None of us should ever forget it.”<sup>2</sup>

Pinker’s observation on these two narratives is “they can’t both be right – or more to the point, neither of them can be right all the time, since the same participants provided a story in which they were victim and a story in which they were perpetrator.” This observation echoes the reasoning of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural, that both North and South prayed to the same God

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<sup>2</sup>Pinker p. 489

and the prayers of both could not be answered.

Pinker calls this the Moralization gap. We all have the capacity for self-deception. But the mindset of the perpetrator and the mindset of the victim are very different, even when they are the same person.

And this bears on the social scientist who would explain harmful acts. In asking why someone committed a harmful act, the social scientist is putting on the lens of the perpetrator, for the perspective of the victim is that the perpetrator was driven by pure evil.

Pinker concludes the section with the observation that “the myth of pure evil bedevils our attempts to understand real evil.” If we’re going to ask “why,” we need to put aside the notion of pure evil because it doesn’t explain anything.

In this Pinker is echoing Universalists, who have maintained for centuries that to consider evil as a separate force is to create two Gods instead of one. Pinker attempt to explain violence without reference to supernatural forces is right in line with Universalist thinking.

Now you may be saying, this doesn’t have anything to do with me; I am not about to go out and kill someone. But I submit that you have been angry at someone in the last month and you have probably done something to make someone else angry. We are all both victims and perpetrators. It is important to keep in mind that we can be both and we all have within us the capacity to do harm and the capacity to deceive ourselves about the harm we do. As Pogo said, we have met the enemy and he is us.

But on the world level, it is heartening to think that the arc of the universe is bending towards peace, and let us all work to see that that peace is accompanied by justice. Let us all lay down our swords and shields by the riverside, and enter on a season of peace.

Amen.

Reading: Isaiah 11

- 1 A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
- 2 The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
- 3 His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.  
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,  
or decide by what his ears hear;

- 4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;  
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
- 5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,  
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.
- 6 The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.
- 7 The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
- 8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
- 9 They will not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain;  
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD  
as the waters cover the sea.