

A Moral Equivalent of War

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Over one hundred years ago, William James delivered a lecture at Stanford University where he was a visiting professor. Not exactly a fish out of water he did not have a high opinion of his peers. This is what he says in a letter to a friend:

The drawback is, of course, the great surrounding human vacuum—the historic silence fairly rings in your ears when you listen—and the social insipidity.¹

Stanford was not the Harvard of the West as far as he was concerned. The lecture *should* have been given at Harvard as it was one of the most famous James ever gave. The lecture came to be known as “The Moral Equivalent of War” when it was published in 1910. In 1906, the title was: “The Psychology of the War Spirit.” An earlier version was given at the Thirteenth Universal Peace Congress in 1904.² An accompanying talk was entitled: “The Energies of Man.”

What is remarkable about the talks and the texts is their defining one of the central themes for the century and not only a theme, but a task and a challenge. It is not surprising that the address was delivered around the time of an earthquake, the famous San Francisco earthquake, to underline the point that ideas have consequences. The earthquake hit Stanford, as well, and almost shook James out of bed. He is thought to have said: “Let ‘er rip!” That’s how I first heard it, but, according to his letters, he said, “Now, *go* it!”³

It was a very idiosyncratic Yankee response, reminiscent of his appraisal of the Grand Canyon: “equal to the brag.” I especially like that one.

Ah, William James! He looms so large over the American intellectual landscape. Harvard, of course. Our leading philosopher and psychologist. The founder of Pragmatism, the quintessential American philosopher and the author of the immensely popular: *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, again uniquely American, in the tradition of Protestant sectarianism, or what is known as the Left Wing of the Reformation, beginning with the Anabaptists, where the

¹ A letter to his brother, Henry James: *The Letters of William James*, Vol I, p. 241.

² The talk has been generally referred to as “The Moral Equivalent of War.” The provenance is cleared up in: *Genuine Reality*, by Linda Simon, p.335

³ *Letters of William James*, Vol. I, p 248.

operative theme is the free spontaneous behavior of the redeemed, a very deep spiritual impulse in the American character.

James called this free spontaneous behavior “civic virtue”. He imputed it to the breast of every American as a spark to be blown on and it would ignite into the flame of voluntary work service, the great American ‘can do’, the envy of Europeans. It is Pragmatism put to the test as a secular expression of sanctification; it is Spirit-driven. Will you permit me that association? I want to take the impulse to civic virtue back to the Radical Reformation as its original source when people spontaneously affirmed themselves in the power of the Spirit without any external authority or sanction.

I would like to think that James thought of this Spiritual inspiration as the basis for the moral equivalent of war, that salubrious phrase that defined a century and more as the Holy Grail of political aspirations. Notice it is not pacifism, in which case it would be the moral equivalent *to* war, where ‘moral equivalent’ doesn’t make much sense. No, the ‘of ’ is important, although moral equivalent still takes some explaining; it at least means the application of wartime energy to peace time means, even though we still stumble on the notion of the morality of war and then wonder what a moral equivalent might mean.

James appreciated the virtues of war as though he had the Erich von Stroheim of *The Grand Illusion* in mind. He wanted to transpose the virtues of the warrior to peacetime—hardihood, courage, the willingness to sacrifice oneself, loyalty, devotion to a cause, the unreflective striving for what is noble, *etc.*, what Plato meant by *thymos*, that vital center of spirited courage that represented the warrior class.⁴ James summed it up in the idea of voluntary work service. He wanted the youth of America to summon this spirit of the patriotic soldier to take on and share the shit-work of society, work that the underclass is saddled with for a lifetime, and pitch in and help. Get the childishness knocked out of them. That’s the idea. Put some mettle into their spine and make them proud and mature and adult and ready to face the responsibilities before them. American youth on the march. I can hear the stomp and tread of their feet in unison accompanied by Nelson Eddy singing: “give me some men [and women] who are stout hearted men [and women] and I’ll soon give you ten thousand more....” Everyone a Canadian

⁴ Paul Tillich gives the authoritative account of *thymos* in his *Courage To Be*.

Mounty riding proudly into the fray, albeit without the uniform, and without the horse, but with tools for the job, like rakes and hoes, turning weapons into plowshares.

I once visited a park in Pittsburgh and at a central fountain area I was stunned to see the very epitome of this notion of American Youth in full scale bronze, a young man standing vigil over the place, looking like the Eternal Boy Scout. I still have the picture I took of this youth, hoping to use it sometime for an essay such as this. Some years ago I found a poster showing an Uncle Sam Pied Piper leading a Children's Garden Army to dig and to plant and to hoe, their garden implements over their shoulders, as though they were the first recruits to respond to William James' summons. The Uncle Sam figure reminded me of Alan Chadwick with whom I developed the famous organic—biodynamic/French Intensive—garden at the University of California, Santa Cruz. In fact, the Uncle Sam/ Pied Piper figure looks like Chadwick but for the goatee. He had just that effect on the students at the university in the late '60's, Pied Piper and Johnny Appleseed combined, inducting them into a vision of an organic life-style, the very embodiment of "flower power."

I was introduced to the theme of a moral equivalent of war by my colleague, Page Smith, the American historian. He had been a student of Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, at Dartmouth. Eugen was an admirer of William James and the theme of voluntary service. Eugen had been involved in the youth movement and camps devoted to voluntary service in Germany, along with Helmuth von Moltke, the great German martyr of the Second World War, who was executed for *thinking about the future* of Germany after the defeat of Hitler, having organized the Kreisau Circle at his family estate where such discussions were held.

Earlier in the century, at the same time as William James, another figure, in Austria, Joseph Popper-Lynkeus, was deeply involved in thinking along the same lines as James, in an uncanny example of synchronicity.⁵ Popper-Lynkeus, who took the name of the seer of the Argonaut expedition in ancient Greece, Lynkeus, the man who piloted the Argo, in search of the Golden Fleece, adding it to his own name, was an inspiring figure of the time, even though he worked as

⁵ cf. Josef Popper-Lynkeus: *The Individual and the Value of Human Life*, 1995. William James is mentioned on p. 70. The best article on Popper-Lynkeus is by Paul Edwards, in his *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

a boiler engineer.⁶ Freud wrote an appreciative essay about him but never wanted to meet him in the fear that the man would not match his expectations. Einstein and others revered him, maybe for the following reason: he postulated a youth army, a *Nahrpflicht*, in opposition to the *Wehrpflicht*; a nourishment army instead of a conscription war army. It was his version of a moral equivalent of war. He calculated how many youth it would take, and how long, to provide the fundamental essentials of social life for everyone in the state—clothing, housing and food.

Popper-Lynkeus formulated a fundamental principle of moral/social behavior, a formulation that has had a great influence on me and one I have taken to heart, making it an inspiration for my work with the homeless in Santa Cruz.⁷ So it is a unique confluence of comparable forces that inspired a Viennese social reformer and a German professor—Rosenstock-Huessy-- inspired by William James, to further the cause of voluntary work service.

It is a remarkable story how Page Smith and Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, while at Dartmouth, teamed up, one an undergraduate who was to become one of the great educators and historians and one a professor of philosophy, sociology of knowledge, theology, etc., who was without peer in his unique stature as an intellectual. It is very difficult to define Eugen, a polymath, whose knowledge and spirited teaching held a generation of Dartmouth students in thrall. Page never got over the encounter and carried a lifelong devotion to Eugen; in fact, he would get tears in his eyes on the mention of his name so sentimental was the bond.

It all started when another young admirer of Eugen's—Frank Davidson—a Harvard student, who got it into his head to propose a leadership training camp for the Civilian Conservation Corps. He presented his idea to Eugen. They could secure a farm near Dartmouth and bring the vision of William James into a corps that was an excellent expression of the theme but for a few extenuating circumstances. Corps recruits were often delinquents who were given the chance to join the Corps as an alternative to going to jail. The Corps demanded a 'means test', which meant you had to be poor in order to gain entrance. The Corps, run by the army, had become a welfare holding tank for indigent youth. Frank Davidson thought the Corps could be well served

⁶ I asked Eugen if he knew of Popper-Lynkeus and of course he did and he mentioned their mutual interest in the Argonauts, Argo being the name of Eugen's publishing company.

⁷ cf. my *Quality of Mercy, Homelessness in Santa Cruz, 1985—1993*. On line at www.ecotopia.org

by middle class college youth imbued with the spirit of William James' vision of a moral equivalent of war if given the chance to prove their point.

Listening to his proposal, Eugen sized him up and asked him if he had ever worked. The son of wealthy parents, his father a noted New York lawyer and friend of the Roosevelts, Frank said no. Well, go and work then, Eugen demanded. And come back and see me in a year. Typical Eugen. And Frank did just that.

He managed to sneak into the corps, circumventing the means test, proving you were poor, and became something of a spy, observing what went on at the camps, noticing that on weekends the corpsmen would conduct raiding operations on nearby towns where they would steal what they could and commit other forms of mischief.

He reported back to Eugen and eventually the decision was made to open Camp William James, in Tunbridge, Vermont, as a leadership training camp for the Civilian Conservation Corps. They had the blessing of Elenore Roosevelt and Dorothy Thompson (the most famous woman journalist at the time and the wife of Sinclair Lewis). The sons of William James were present at the dedication. It was the most idealistic application of James' theme: middle-class college students willing and eager to identify with the underclass and share the arduous work of the society; idealistic in the best sense of the word.

And then the war began and after being named the first camp director, Page Smith, and others, were drafted. It was short-lived, maybe six months, but the camaraderie and devotion to a shared cause never left them as one of the great unfulfilled experiences of their lives.

Eugen prophetically foresaw the impact this experience had on his students and how some day it would bring about in a new configuration what the war had aborted.

The next step in this furthering of the story, the next episode, is for Page, while a professor of history at UCLA, to write to Hubert Humphrey and propose something like the Peace Corps.⁸ Humphrey relays the idea to J. F. Kennedy and the rest is history. The Peace Corps was first proposed, almost off-handedly, by Kennedy, at a campaign appearance at the University of Michigan, where it lit a fire among the students in the audience and they fanned it into a flame

⁸ I have tried to run down the letter and have called the Humphrey Archive in Minnesota, to no avail. I heard Humphrey speak when I was a college student at St. Olaf and thought he was the most inspiring, charismatic, figure, I had encountered. He exuded civic virtue.

that refused to be put out. Harris Wofford tells the story in his book: *The Kennedys and the Kings*. Sargent Shriver was nice enough to mention the historic precedent of Camp William James in his *Colliers Encyclopedia* article on the founding of the Peace Corps.⁹

So we had a legacy forming around the idea and especially Page Smith's involvement with it when we teamed up and started the William James Association in Santa Cruz to bring about the re-establishment of the Civilian Conservation Corps. The year was 1973. We had both left the university, I for want of tenure and Page in protest over my being denied.

We had had a run at the theme while we were at the university. It is a story I tell elsewhere but the rudiments are this: when Page invited his old professor, Rosenstock-Huessy, to teach at Santa Cruz, he brought with him his companion, Freya von Moltke, the widow of Helmuth von Moltke. She heard I had proposed a student garden project and she had a friend coming to visit her who was a professional gardener—Alan Chadwick.¹⁰ He would eventually be called “the world's greatest gardener” by E. F. Schumacher, the new age guru and author of a popular book: *Small Is Beautiful*. He ought to know about gardeners. He was the head of the Soil Association of England and an expert on gardening procedures. Chadwick impressed him as the icon of the New Age spirit and it turned out that our little experiment in organic gardening at the university was in tune with one of the most famous biodynamic gardens of the time in Scotland—Findhorn.

Chadwick worked in the same tradition of food and flower production--biodynamics, developed by Rudolf Steiner, as an organic alternative to industrial agriculture and gardening. I think our garden was the first organic garden at a university in the country introducing through Chadwick the French Intensive and Biodynamic systems of flower growing and food production. It was a sign of the times—“Flower Power”—was in the air, wafting down from the Haight Ashbury in San Francisco on a cloud of you know what—we all got a whiff of it-- and the students took to the effort with an unalloyed passion. We developed something like a garden army in association with the students at Santa Cruz and the experience of the Garden Project prepared me for what was to come.

⁹ Another line of influence I have found out about thanks to my friend Anne Flaten Pixley is the work her father did with volunteer students building a Lutheran church at Hovland in Northern Minnesota. As a result of the experience, her father, Professor of Art at St. Olaf College, Arne Flaten, wrote to Humphrey and proposed something like a Peace Corps.

¹⁰ Cf. Paul Lee: *There Is A Garden In the Mind. Alan Chadwick and the Origins of the Organic Movement in California*, 2010.

It was as if we were carrying through the spirit of Camp William James, and Page Smith, the Provost of Cowell College, was one of our most enthusiastic supporters. The Chadwick Garden was the background for our eventual collaboration. I still remember the day, after we had left the university, when Page came into our kitchen and sat down and proposed that we start the William James Association as a nonprofit corporation with the task of re-establishing the Civilian Conservation Corps. With anyone else I would have gulped, but not with Page. He had a commanding air about him that gave one the impression that anything was possible. He had been a major in the army and he looked like a cross between George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, at six feet two and a handsome Roman nose.

I had had some experience with a nonprofit, having started one in anticipation of the termination of my teaching career, thinking it would give me something to do. I called it USA, University Services Agency, and I organized it with two friends at the university who were campus chaplains, one Lutheran and one Roman Catholic, Herb Schmidt and Jerry Lasko.

I had had two professors at Harvard Divinity School who had given me a line on voluntary associations and nonprofit corporations and especially their religious roots: James Luther Adams and George Hunston Williams. Adams, who had introduced my teacher, Paul Tillich, to American students, taught social ethics and was an enthusiastic proponent of voluntary associations and their legal form—nonprofit corporations. Williams, a Unitarian colleague of Adams, taught church history, and had written the major work on the so-called left wing of the Protestant Reformation, which he called the Radical Reformation, the sectarian wing, in distinction to the orthodox churches.

He dated its origins in 1525 on a night when a Roman Catholic priest was re-baptized, whose name was George Blaurock, the first Anabaptist. Thus was established, so I came to appreciate, the principle of voluntary association for purposes of freedom of worship. This prepared the way for the significant contribution to American religious institutions under the banner of the free spontaneous behavior of the redeemed, a phrase I coined to characterize the dynamic of the sectarian movement in this country that so powerfully informed the spirit of voluntary work service William James called upon for his moral equivalent of war.

We went to Washington, D. C., Mr. Smith and me. We made the rounds of Senatorial Offices. We met with old colleagues from Camp William James, Frank Davidson and Jack Preiss, who had written a book documenting the experience.¹¹ We met with Don Eberley, who had devoted his life to promoting voluntary service. Frank took us to lunch at the Cosmos Club. That was a treat. We didn't get anywhere, but we weren't discouraged. The time was not especially right what with a Republican administration that identified the theme as Democrat.

And then a strange set of circumstances occurred upon our return. Eloise Smith, Page's wife, knew I was a friend of Richard Baker-roshi, the Abbot of Zen Center, in San Francisco, who was a close friend of then governor—Jerry Brown. She told me to tell Baker to tell Brown to appoint her as Chair of the newly formed State Art Council. So I did and he did and he did. The day Eloise's appointment was to be announced and the Smiths were waiting in Brown's office for him to finish his State of the State Address, they hear him mention the formation of a California Conservation Corps. "Did you say C.C.C.?" Page asked Brown, when he entered the office from his address. After hearing Page detail our involvement in the effort and our center in Santa Cruz, Brown said, "O.K., go ahead and organize it."

Page came back beaming with his "guess what?" So we set about with the work of organizing the Corps. We planned an encampment at an old former C.C.C. Camp in Mendocino County and invited Chadwick to come and give the main talk to inspire the troops. He didn't disappoint, although Page and I raised an eyebrow over the response of some of the state bureaucrats in attendance who didn't know what this force of nature called Chadwick was about or what it meant and I was reluctant to offer the explanation-- that Chadwick was ordained from on high to replant the vital root of existence in the late stage of the self-destruction of industrial society.

We designed the uniform. We thought about this and that and then the new Director of the Corps appeared in our office in Santa Cruz to introduce himself and express his appreciation for what we had done to get things started. Now this turned out to be another one of those moments that life dishes up and you don't know what to make of it. What? Heidegger on the "uncanny"? *Unheimlich*.

¹¹ Jack Preiss: *Camp William James*.

A little too close to home? The serendipity of Eloise's appointment and the announcement of the three C's was enough to hold us for a long time but here came another on the wings of the first. He introduced himself as Boyd Horner. I asked him what he had done before he took on his current appointment. He said he worked for the blind in Washington D. C. I refrained from making a smart alec remark about Washington politicians. I asked what he had done before that. He said he had studied for the Rudolf Steiner Priesthood in England. The what? I didn't know there was a Rudolf Steiner Priesthood? I was flabbergasted. I thought the Corps would be a vehicle for Chadwick's organic gardening and farming effort, but I was the only one who thought it might be an appropriate vehicle for extending Chadwick's organic vision, although Page certainly concurred. We had kept the Steiner connection a kind of open secret at the university. It was bad enough being organic, which the scientists on the campus thought was another hippy plot to further embarrass them. We were going to have a California Conservation Corps with an occult Steiner priest at the head? Are you kidding? Was this going to be the famous moonbeam in the governor's office?

They sent me to England to recruit. To Emerson College, the center for Steiner Studies in Great Britain, in Tunbridge, outside London. I thought that was amazing. That was the name of the town where Camp William James took place, in Vermont. I wasn't sure where to start. Steiner gymnastics? Steiner cuisine? Steiner geometry? Steiner dance called eurhythmics? The principal, Francis Edmunds, had visited our Chadwick Garden a number of times so we knew one another. That helped. But it was a pretty weird place. Any resemblance between Steiner and Dracula was completely coincidental. I went into a local pub and had a beer and after they identified me as a Yank and from California, they asked me what I was doing there and I told them I was a visiting recruiter at Emerson and they ducked as if a bat had flown in the window.

I was asked to give a talk to the school and the faculty. I had one all worked out that described the force-fit the Chadwick Garden had been at the university, what with the triumph of physicalism over vitalism, which I detailed, and how Steiner's hero, the vitalist Goethe, had pretty much set the theme of the conflict in his opposition to Newton and his physicalist mechanics, over a theory of color. It was a good sketch and they sat there in stunned silence which took me by surprise. For a moment I thought I had put them to sleep. I had to sit down and wait out their stunned response.

Well, needless to say, even without disclosing the occult stream lurking in the nether regions, this format for the Corps was not going to work even with the support of the moonbeam governor. As they say in the South, that dog don't hunt. Horner was replaced. And so were we as far as any further influence or input. But it was fun while it lasted and we turned to other pursuits. I organized a Land Reform Conference, the first of its kind, at least in Santa Cruz. By then I had worked out the sketch for the theme of the century as I thought about the application of the vision of James.

We're getting a little ahead of the story, so first let me outline the themes as I saw them emerge in its historic context under the inspiration of a moral equivalent of war.

The Children's Garden Army is the first volunteer organization that exemplifies James' vision. An account of it is available on google: United States School Garden Army. The slogan was "Follow the Pied Piper."

The next ideological step from William James is one I would not have thought of but for a quote I read in a picture book on Gandhi. I was at Harvard when Erik Erikson was working on his Gandhi book. We became friends when I had to work on Freud as a condition for passing my PhD orals. He had just come to Harvard and somehow I found my way to him to help me on my Freud studies. He was wonderful. Very kind. Very receptive and somehow particularly interested in me because I was Paul Tillich's Teaching Assistant and Tillich was one of the leading intellectuals in the land. I decided that I would introduce him to Tillich, and so we arranged a dinner party at our house for the Tillichs and the Eriksons. They fell into one another's arms as though fate had brought them together. They quoted Heine to one another in front of the fireplace. I can't remember what we had for dinner but I had somehow obtained a case of Lafite Rothschild wine. I think it was a 1959 vintage. We drank that and it was sublime and gave the evening its particularly ecstatic cast, making it the most memorable dinner party in our experience.

I never got to discuss Gandhi with Erikson to any extent but when I read the quote where Gandhi states that *satyagraha* is the moral equivalent of war, I thought, of course. It was an insight I cherish. Militant nonviolence, in the name of an ultimate concern, where one is willing to accept the price, the penalty to be paid, for noncompliance with evil. That's the meaning of *satyagraha* in a nutshell, which, literally, means to be grasped by the force of truth and the truth

is the moral equivalent of war. I remember Erikson making an emphatic point about the misunderstanding of Gandhi as a pacifist. Gandhi was not a pacifist. He was a militant nonviolent advocate, where violence was turned on its head, against itself. It was a version of militancy that disarmed and took one by surprise as Gandhi did the British and as a consequence overthrew the British yoke: this little spindly man in a cloth wrap, sandals, and a pair of glasses. I remember seeing a photo of Gandhi's remains, after he died, not his ashes, but what he left behind, just the above and maybe a notebook and pencil. He was a mahatma, a great soul and he inspired generations after him.

Whether he read William James or not, I was never able to find out. He must have or someone told him about the theme: the moral equivalent of war, as though James anticipated him and gave him the formulation: the principle that revolutionized India.

He went into seclusion as I remember the story and waited for the revelation. He somehow knew it would be revealed to him-- what steps to take to overthrow the British domination. And the message came. Walk to the sea and pick up some salt. And in that moment and from then on no Indian would pay the salt tax and the British would be overthrown. And not a shot fired.

Gandhi saved some of the salt he picked up. When he had tea with the British Viceroy, as though to celebrate India's independence, he reached over and poured a bit of the salt from that day into the cup of the British Viceroy and into his own. Then he said he would like to offer a toast: To the Boston Tea Party! The British Viceroy lifted his cup and laughed.

When I received a copy of Erik Erikson's *Gandhi's Truth*, from W. W. Norton, Erik's publisher, I was asked to comment on the book. This is what I wrote: "Freud's letter to Einstein on human aggression is the background for this study of a visionary solution, a moral equivalent of war, held out as grounds for hope, in the message of aggressive nonviolence; it is Erikson's letter to Konrad Lorenz in the name of the friendly beast."¹²

What Gandhi did, by his example and his teaching, but more than that, by virtue of his person, was to transmit a spiritual substance into the historical process which we have identified as the moral equivalent of war and an exemplar of William James' vision, although he did not

¹² There is a large literature on what has come to be called "reciprocal altruism", a term coined by Robert Trivers, the sociobiologist. A notable development is the center at Stanford devoted to compassion and altruism directed by my friend and neighbor, Joel Finkelstein.

have a nearly naked little Indian man in sandals in mind. We are astonished at the sequence of figures who are inspired by Gandhi's spirit and who have received the transmission of his legacy.

The first to express this was the man to whom Gandhi picked as his successor and to whom he transmitted his spirit in a direct and personal way: Vinoba Bhave. It is a pity that he is so little known in the West and that his work in succeeding Gandhi did not become as famous and familiar as his mentor. But it is important for us and our tracing of the theme of a moral equivalent of war. Bhave applied the theme to land reform, whereas Gandhi had applied the theme to civil rights and political revolution.

Bhave began the Land Gift movement (Bhoodan) in India when he began his famous walk throughout India calling upon wealthy landowners to give a portion of their land to the landless. It is because of Gandhi and Bhave that we have identified two successive movements, civil rights and land reform, to add to the theme of voluntary work service as the 20th century expressions of a moral equivalent of war.

So I had two Indians practicing the theme to relate to two Americans who took their lead from them in the same spirit: Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez.

The explicit theme of voluntary work service and the trajectory to Camp William James, the Peace Corps, Americorps and now the national service corps effort of the Obama administration gave rise to two attendant themes: civil rights and land reform, as exemplified in the work of King and Chavez. It was a simple step to add Chadwick and his organic gardening as a type of land reform to complement Chavez, bringing it back to where we started—a three acre plot on a slope at the entrance to the University of California, Santa Cruz.

It was a great moment for me when Eugen and Freya came for lunch and a set of circumstances were set into play that has occupied much of my life. I am grateful to have been included in the process that started at Camp William James and directed us to a ray of hope in a very dark century. I would like to think that what began then has come to fruition here and renders prophetic Eugen's words in his essay included in *I Am An Impure Thinker*, "Teaching Too Late, Learning Too Early":

"But let me also hope that some years from now, the word spoken out of season tonight may ripen into the maturity of timeliness."