

Bluebirds over the White Cliffs of Dover

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A month ago, all over the world, men and women paused to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. The observances gave rise to a variety of phenomena. The Prime Minister of Japan issued a public apology for the role his nation had played in that incalculable catastrophe. The government of the United States, on the other hand, did not apologize for using nuclear weapons on two Japanese cities as the war was drawing to a close, and indeed, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington altered its display concerning that epoch making event in response to pressure from a Congress which felt that it was unAmerican to encourage questions concerning the decision to use those weapons. Less dramatic and less public were the private reflections concerning the men and women who fought that war, the husbands, brothers, fathers who died in that war, the terrible suffering and death distributed around the globe in the course of that war. And underlying much of it was a quiet nostalgia for a time when the nation was united in a common cause, when we were mortally certain of the rightness of our course, an often unspoken longing for the days of "the last good war."

It is appropriate that the world should devote some time and thought to the end of the Second World War, because, in many ways, this has been the major shaping event of our century. Just as the First World War was the catastrophe which signaled the abrupt end of an era, the approach to the Second World War, the execution of that global struggle, and the consequences which continue to flow from that war have defined all our subsequent hopes and expectations and dreams whether we lived through those awful and dramatic years, or have inherited them and their consequences.

For me the commemoration of the end of the war involved a great deal of personal reflection. I am of that generation which remembers those years. Indeed, my earliest datable memory is of December 7, 1941, the day of the attack on the military installations at Pearl Harbor. My early years were shadowed by the struggle which consumed the energies and resources of virtually the entire planet. I still think of those years as black and white, rather than Technicolor, because of the persistent images of the news reels shown as part of the Saturday afternoon program at the local motion picture theater--films of ships and planes and tanks and guns and interviews with the men who manned those implements of war and the women who helped build them. I taught myself to read using the daily newspaper; so, my first primer was characterized by fuzzy pictures of the war and maps showing the various front lines. Among my earliest memories are those of our family sitting around the table, a single candle providing the only light, the window blinds and drapes drawn tightly, waiting for the signal ending the air-raid drill.

By a quirk of fate, my Father was not eligible for military service; I had no brothers who

served in the war; but everyone, me included, knew someone who was serving in the military, and there were few who did not know someone who had lost a son or father or brother to the vast killing machine which was that war. It was this which made it acceptable to us that our food was rationed, that gasoline and tires and even shoes were difficult to come by, that appliances and consumer goods and automobiles all but disappeared from the market. It was this which motivated us to collect scrap metal, and tin foil and kitchen grease and milk-weed pods. Someone we loved and cared for was engaged in this dangerous struggle, and we were determined to do our part. But it was more than this. There was also a sense, a palpable sense, that when the struggle was over, when finally the forces of evil had been vanquished, we would find ourselves in a new world, a world of promise and hope, of peace and security, of equity and justice. That was what the struggle was really all about, the fighting and the suffering, the bleeding and the dying--an opportunity--perhaps humanity's last opportunity--to build a new world.

As the commemoration of the end of the Second World War gathered force--as newspapers printed "then and now" pictures of the men who fought the titanic struggle--pictures of young men certain and self assured and old men whose eyes have seen more horror and disappointment than they can relate, as the magazines printed stories of lost ships and downed aircraft and battles lost and won and nearly lost, as cable television broadcast bits and pieces from the film archives of the era, I found myself, over and over again, reflecting upon what we as a culture have done with the opportunity presented us by the end of that war. What has happened, over the past fifty years, to the dream of a world of promise and hope, of peace and security?

Looking back over these past fifty years, I must conclude that much of that promise was abandoned almost at the outset. Before the war had even ended, the struggle for post-war power had doomed the hope for peace and security. In a very real sense, the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were not only among the last casualties of the Second World War, they were among the first casualties of the Cold War which succeeded it. In any case, as you well know, a half century of hostility and insecurity has followed in the wake of the great conflict, a period of near war, erupting from time to time into armed struggle--the Berlin Blockade, the Korean War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, military adventures in Lebanon and the Dominican Republic, and Grenada and Panama, a war in Vietnam and in the Persian Gulf, covert or proxy wars in China and Afghanistan, the Belgian Congo, Angola and Palestine--the list goes on and on. Perhaps the one gift of the Second World War has been that so long as the memory of the terrible suffering and destruction wrought by that great global conflagration has remained strong among us, we have held back from plunging the world into another all-consuming conflict. Thus far, the Balkan war of the 1990's is remarkable for the fact that the major powers, though they jockey for advantage, seem determined not to allow that struggle to draw them into conflict with each other.

This, then, is how we have used the future we dreamed of in the midst of the Second World War, the opportunity that seemed at hand in September of 1945. For half a century we have lived in a twilight land of not quite peace, a world shadowed by the threat of

global war, and yet a world which has managed to sidestep that great threat. The promise of peace has not been realized; the threat of global destruction has been narrowly avoided. It is not what we hoped; neither has it been what we feared. Perhaps that is the best human beings can expect.

And what about that other part of the dream--of a world of hope and prosperity, a world of equity and justice? For a while it looked to me as though, in this nation, at least, we might accomplish that dream. The energies which had been devoted to producing weapons, making the United States the world's great arsenal, were converted to meeting the pent-up needs and expectations of a people at peace. Consumer goods flowed from our factories. Jobs with good salaries were available as we undertook to rebuild a shattered world. Houses were constructed to meet the demands of the families of men returning from war. Roads were built, automobiles produced and even though much of our material wealth soon was diverted again to building weapons for ourselves and others, weapons we could not ever use without destroying ourselves, still it seemed that the dream of a world of plenty might be realized.

To be sure there was still injustice and inequity, but soon after the war ended, the social consequences of that struggle were to make themselves felt on the home front. People of color who had fought and suffered and watched their friends and loved ones die in the war to end racist oppression abroad were not content to settle quietly back into the racist conventions of their homeland. Before long it was clear that one consequence of that war would be a transformed America, one in which the demand for justice and equity would result in an end at least to legal segregation. By the same token, many of the women who had filled responsible positions in factories and offices during the war were not content to return to the kitchen. It would take time for the movement to gather strength, but one consequence of the Second World War was a movement for equality and justice for women. The nation which emerged from the global struggle found itself confronting the contradictions of its own history, found itself prodded into embodying the ideals for which it said it had fought that great war. Civil rights, women's rights, gay and lesbian rights, economic justice--including affirmative action programs and entitlements for the poor--all are a result of the demand that the nation live up to the promises it made in the midst of the global struggle which ended in 1945.

A more subtle legacy of that great war was an enduring sense of being part of a global community. Young men who had never been far from their homes suddenly were fighting and dying in strange places in Africa and Europe and Asia. They were companioned on their perilous passage by people with strange names and customs and features. They came home knowing in their bones that at some level we are all responsible for each other and for the planet which is our home. Though the image was slow to emerge, they had experienced first-hand the interdependent web of existence. This, as much as anything else, provided the foundation for the ecological concern which has demanded that the welfare of the planet be factored into our planning and our dreaming. For the first time in the history of our nation, serious concern for the welfare of the natural world became part of public policy, because equity and justice, hope and promise depended upon a respect and concern for the context in which human life is lived.

After fifty years, it is clear that some progress has been made. It also is clear that the forces of reaction have begun to gather strength. Pharaohs who do not remember Joseph have risen to power. People who do not honor the promises made and the great distance which remains if those promises are to be kept have gained control of the land and much of the progress so painfully made and at such great cost seems about to be lost.

As a child of the Second World War, I grew up in a world which believed that sacrifice in the present was acceptable, even moral if it would mean that the future would be brighter. In that culture what was important was that each generation be able to trust that the world would be better for its children. And for a very long time, that was the dream which defined our national ethos. Life for this generation is better than it was for our parents and even though we do not achieve everything we would like, if we live responsibly, it will be better for our children. The world in which I grew up was a world of incredible pain and suffering and sorrow, a world defined by incomprehensible global death and destruction, but it was a world of stubborn faith in the future. And, even in the midst of a world war, it was justified in its faith. Parents who had not completed high school would see their children graduating from college. Parents who had worked all their lives at menial and marginal jobs would see their children in secure, well-paying positions. People who had expected to work until they died were able to retire and live modestly but well. The future, we believed, would be better than the past because the resources of the planet would be more wisely used and more equitably and more justly distributed.

But now, fifty years after that war ended, the nation seems in headlong retreat from its dream and its promise. For the first time in my memory, parents can no longer reasonably expect the world to be better for their children. Indeed, the income of the middle-class has slipped steadily for the past two decades. It now requires two full-time incomes to sustain most families. The children coming of age in this world of down-sizing and cut backs and corporate irresponsibility find that the welcome mat has been withdrawn. Jobs are difficult to come by, offer little security, and little promise. And at the same time, a nation which once proudly used entitlements--like the GI Bill of Rights--to empower an entire generation, is now withdrawing its support of its own people, refusing to invest in its people, reserving its resources for welfare programs for the wealthy and for business. And in a display of cynicism which is staggering, political leaders pit the poor against the middle class in a struggle for fewer and fewer resources, and accuse anyone who questions such practices of engaging in class warfare. In the name of balancing the budget, wealth and resources are being transferred in massive amounts from the poorest of the poor and from the middle class to the rich. And, of course, in the name of their clients the same political leaders are seeking to destroy the structures which have been erected to protect and defend the environment. The promise which is our legacy from those who struggled and died for a better world half a century ago is being abandoned before our very eyes.

Sometime this past summer, I happened to be driving somewhere, on one of my many unnamed errands, when I tuned into a radio station which was playing songs from the era of the Second World War. Almost all of them were so familiar that I only half listened.

At some point, however, the station began playing the song which provides the title of this sermon and for the first time I really listened to what that song said:

There'll be blue birds over the white cliffs of Dover,
Someday, just you wait and see
There'll be blue birds over the white cliffs of Dover,
Someday, when the world is free.

The song went on to promise,

The shepherd will tend his sheep
And the meadow will bloom again,
And Jimmy will go to sleep
In his own little room again.
There'll be bluebirds over the white cliffs of Dover,
Someday, when the world is free.

There, in that song, that unremarkable bit of doggerel, was captured much of the ethos of the times in which I grew up, the faith which led women and men to attempt the impossible, to risk their very lives. They believed that the world could be better, that their children would inherit from their hands a brighter, more promising future, that justice and truth and right were strong beyond all the forces arrayed against them. And in the midst of terrible inhumanity and suffering and loss, that was the faith which sustained them. And it is that lost faith which is at the root of our national nostalgia, that for which we in this age yearn so insistently.

I listened to the radio, really hearing the words of the old song for the first time, and found myself overwhelmed by a sense of profound betrayal. The truth is that Jimmy does not sleep in his own little room again. At least, not the countless Jimmy's who are homeless, who are the chief victims of the political schemes being pursued in this nation, fifty years after the end of the war. Indeed the legislative and legal supports, the national investment in Jimmy and his future are being transferred to corporations and to the wealthy and it is justified by the promise that this kind of tough love will help little Jimmy stand on his own two feet and be independent. And the meadow, so carefully protected may not bloom again, if the legislative protections are withdrawn and the natural world opened to ruthless exploitation. What is more, the bluebird may disappear as its habitat is destroyed.

The song promised, "There will be joy and laughter and love ever after, someday, just you wait and see." It becomes difficult to believe that promise as the government engages in anti-family economic policies which result in parents working harder and longer hours, having less and less time to spend with each other or with their children, less and less time to give to building and sustaining the structures of community. It becomes difficult to believe that promise, when succeeding generations find that life for them has become not better but increasingly difficult and the hope of a brighter future seems less and less realizable.

I listened as I drove. And I wondered, what, in these days, can be done, by me, an aging liberal, so very out of touch with the ethos of the times. And then it occurred to me that I am what I am, because, in many ways I am the child of a great and terrible war. My religious, political, social liberalism was forged in that cauldron of destruction and despair. In the midst of those awful times, I was taught to believe in the fundamental goodness of people, in the ability of people to care profoundly for each other, in the ability of people in the depths of despair to dream a better world and work to make it reality. It was in that time of death and destruction that I was taught that we have responsibility for each other and a special responsibility to the weak and the helpless and most vulnerable.

While London was being bombed, and the forces of tyranny and repression seemed everywhere triumphant, they sang the promise of a world better than this, and amid all the destruction and dying, people believed and acted on their faith. Can we do less in this time? I refuse to believe that the future belongs to the mean spirited, to the narrow and self-serving interests. I believe that we are called to witness to the ability of human beings to realize the ancient dream of a world in which people are at peace with each other and with the earth, a world in which co-operation and mutual concern define human interactions, in which the strong understand and accept their responsibility for the weak. It is not the world taking shape around us at this moment, but it is the world that must be, and will be, someday, just you wait and see.