



Towards a Planet-wide Culture of Non-Violence

From times immemorial, humankind, in its brief history on planet Earth, has caused and experienced for itself unimaginable horrors and carnage. Violence is commonly used to settle disputes or to gain advantage over others. This is amply documented and evident even today as I write. Not only have we humans annihilated the lives of hundreds of millions of other humans, but we have eradicated precious creations such as art, architecture, sculptures and monuments representing the finest products of human civilization, remnants of which adorn museums around the world. During this same brief history, humans have also demonstrated unsurpassable acts of love, kindness, mercy, empathy, compassion, forgiveness, sacrifice and benevolence towards others, and such deeds are evident even today. Hence, we confront a dilemma. We have evidence of the best and the worst behaviour that humanity is capable of.

This essay is an attempt to propose a long-term approach to respond to this challenging dilemma: how to minimize—if not eliminate entirely—the use of physical and mental violence among humans. Some will argue that this is impossible because violence is so deeply embedded in the human psyche that it is unchangeable. I disagree because history proves the opposite. I am not a psychologist, neurologist, anthropologist or any other “ist” but a mere observer of human behaviour and a student of history.

I believe that human progress is undeniable and unstoppable in practically all spheres of life. Clearly, in this long evolutionary journey, there are and will always be episodes, eras and epochs of unconscionably large-scale violence, such as that currently seen in Afghanistan, Myanmar, Syria and the Middle East, and other parts of the world, but the direction is always towards reaching the higher plane and the betterment of humankind. This may seem counterintuitive because negative aspects of human behaviour saturate today’s news media, and we tend to obsess over the here and now. We must evaluate human progress from an evolutionary and historical perspective. Melinda Gates of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation made a very astute observation in a recent interview with *Bloomberg Businessweek*: “The future will surprise the pessimists”.¹ I am sure Ms. Gates meant the long-term future and I happen to agree, without assigning a date.

About the author

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Let us stop for a moment and take a look at the Charter of the United Nations—a monumental achievement among disparate nations and cultures on Earth. It is remarkable that 193 nations have signed on to this extraordinary treaty over the course of its brief existence, regardless of the fact that some Member States may not pay it due attention today. These 193 Member States, comprising almost all nation States on the planet, have voluntarily ceded a segment of their sovereignty to the United Nations. To my knowledge, no Member State has voluntarily withdrawn its membership from the Organization; why? Even those Member States that have been castigated repeatedly by one or another instrument of the United Nations have not dared to withdraw. This to me represents human progress and the need for cooperation among nations where necessary and possible. It should be noted, however, that the Charter does not completely prohibit the use of force by Member States. Indeed, it explicitly recognizes the right of self-defence (Articles 39 through 51) under clearly delineated circumstances and conditions. The basic principle of the Charter, however, remains the non-use of force and the peaceful settlement of international disputes.

Let us look at another shining example of human ingenuity and social invention: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). This year we will celebrate the seventieth anniversary of this magnificent accomplishment, even if not everyone on this planet agrees with it wholeheartedly. Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris, France, on 10 December 1948, by 48 of the then 58 United Nations Member States (with eight abstentions and two non-voting participants), this Declaration epitomizes the highest aspirations of humankind. It is composed of 30 articles affirming wide-ranging fundamental rights of individuals. While not legally binding on nation States, it has played a foundational role in developing subsequent treaties and conventions pertaining to human rights, including the International Bill of Human Rights, the Bangkok Declaration and the Convention Against Torture. In 2009, Guinness World Records proclaimed UDHR as the most translated document in the world (370 languages and dialects). To date, the Declaration's impact on humankind has been immeasurable.

This brings me to the central point of this essay: A Long March Towards a Planet-wide Culture of Non-violence.

At the outset, let me clarify that this essay is geared to the concept of the entire range of violence by humans: from, by and among children to that practiced by nation States and in world wars. According to a report released by the United Nations Children's Fund,² about half of the world's teens experience peer violence in and around school; globally, about 720 million school-age children live in countries where they are not fully protected by law against forms of physical punishment and bullying at school.

It is instructive to note how the preamble to the Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization begins: "That since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed". This one simple, declarative sentence sums up the challenge before Homo sapiens: how do we change the minds of humans, wherefrom violence may be instigated to non-violent methods to accomplish human objectives.

It is my view that the long road starts at conception—the environment in which a mother conceives a prospective child and gives birth. Of course, genetics and biological imperatives count, but the mother's state of mind and the general environment in which the baby is grown inside the womb also play a significant role. Similarly, beginning with birth through to adulthood—preschool, kindergarten, middle and high school—the socioeconomic-political environment the child experiences has a long-term impact on their mindset. Much has been speculated and written about this developmental issue. At the individual level, there are so many factors that it is difficult, if not impossible, to isolate the ones that result in violent behaviour or its opposite.

The human brain is a marvelous organ but also one of the most complex. Studies of the human brain are ongoing in various academic and scientific institutions around the world. To the best of my knowledge, nothing about it is set in concrete. Our brain is the central organ of the human nervous system as well as the primary control centre for the peripheral nervous system. It is made up of more than 100 billion nerves that communicate in trillions of connections (synapses). But this essay is not about the human brain. That topic is best left for another essay. However, a reference to the human brain is indispensable if we are to speak about human behaviour and behavioural change, which is what this essay is about. The fundamental point is that human behaviour is changeable depending in part on external stimuli received by the brain.

In the interest of brevity, I refer you to two excellent works by a highly regarded cognitive scientist—Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard professor, Steven Pinker: *Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence has Declined*³ and *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*.⁴ In *The Blank Slate*, Pinker makes a strong case that we have all moved beyond the simplistic dichotomy between heredity and environmental factors to a realization that all behaviour comes out of an interaction between the two. In *Better Angels of our Nature*, Pinker brilliantly shows that in the world of the past, human behaviour was much worse and more violent; he contends that we may be living in the most peaceable era in our species' existence. For example, he cites some amazing data showing that tribal warfare was nine times as deadly as war and genocide in the twentieth century, and that the murder rate in medieval Europe was more than 30 times what was in 2011. Yes, it would seem that we Homo sapiens have come a long way over millennia. So what needs to be done to ensure that this march of civilization continues in the direction that it has taken so far?

My one answer—and not the only answer—is a planet-wide, grass-roots educational campaign using every available and conceivable tool and technology to make the use of violence as an absolutely last resort at every level in human relations—between any two individuals, within families, among small groups and other organized entities such as hamlets, villages, cities, and states (within nations), and among nations on planet Earth. This is obviously a tall order, but I believe it is achievable if we believe in it and if we invest adequate resources over the long term. Let me cite examples of two universally acclaimed twentieth century leaders who had a huge impact on human behaviour and culture: Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King. I don't need to write a treatise on them. We know that Gandhi almost single-handedly brought down the British Empire and delivered independence to India and Pakistan in 1947. He didn't have an army with guns, tanks and bombs. His principle weapon was *Satyagraha* (force of truth) operationalized as non-violence: leading long protest marches, accepting repeated jail sentences, using boycotts and mobilizing millions of people in British India to emulate his non-violent methods, which finally led the British Government to yield to his demands for freedom and independence. In 2019, we will celebrate the 150th anniversary of Gandhi's birthday.

Following in the footsteps of Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King, using every non-violent means known to humans, brought about revolutionary change in the treatment and condition of African Americans in the United States, and by extension all minorities. Dr. King was revered for his work for the poor and powerless throughout the world, which continues today. Sadly, both Gandhi and Dr. King gave their lives to the bullets of extremists. So how do we build on the work of these two great souls?

At the global level I have a proposition to suggest: that the United Nations Secretary-General prepare a resolution for the General Assembly (coincidentally, it is meeting in its 73th session as I am writing this) to establish a small, special mechanism within the United Nations Secretariat solely charged with creating, defining, monitoring, measuring, analysing and publishing metrics on the use of violence or violent behaviour within Member States. This special group would also be charged with providing technical assistance to United Nations Member States in collecting uniform and comparable statistics on violence. This may even lead to setting goals at the national and international levels to measure progress, as we do for many other aspects of life, such as hunger, poverty, climate change and inequality. Human ingenuity is limitless. There must be several other ways to effect gradual change in human attitudes and culture broadly, and violence as a behavioural trait is no exception.

This brings me to the concluding section of this essay. In early human history the use of violence in human relations did not threaten our planet. Violence was localized. Geography limited the spread of wars to unreachable territories. Oceans and mountains served as major barriers to the expansion of conflicts. Today, the situation is different. With so many nuclear powers now in existence, all of human civilization is at stake. Wars by miscalculation, escalation, technological malfunction and other situations are not entirely inconceivable. A small skirmish or battle can spread and grow into a global conflagration. This makes it imperative that we learn to control our tendency to resort to force.

We are living in a very unstable and unpredictable era. With so much access to and availability of weapons of mass destruction, one cannot be too sure that a demented leader will not press the wrong button. Humankind must embrace non-violence. Our planet is unique among 3,700 extrasolar planets discovered by NASA research, which continues. The search for the existence of extraterrestrial "intelligent life" also continues, but so far without success. Shouldn't we do everything possible to preserve our beautiful planet?

1. *Bloomberg Businessweek*, "Q&A: Melinda Gates on the World's Missing Data About Women", 14 February 2017.
2. United Nations Children's Fund, *An Everyday Lesson #ENDviolence in Schools* (New York, 2018). Available from https://www.unicef.org/publications/index_103153.html
3. Steven Pinker, *Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence has Declined* (New York, Viking, 2011).
4. Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York, Viking, 2008).