

Tilting at Windmills
Why We Invent Make Believe Enemies
By
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22 years ago one of the most ruthless genocides in human history took place in Rwanda when Hutu militants began slaughtering their Tutsi neighbors. That's when government backed militants erected checkpoints and barricades where they used machetes, clubs, stones and other homemade weapons to kill a million Tutsi men, women, and children in less than a hundred days. The Hutu and Tutsi had come to consider themselves different races after World War I when their Belgian colonizers began distinguishing between them by measuring their noses and considering their eye color, giving preferential status to the Tutsi, whom they considered superior. They even issued ID cards to help easily distinguish between the superior and inferior races they had invented. Prior to the ID cards, the Hutu and Tutsi had considered themselves one people, with one language and one ruler, but decades of institutional racism, favoring the minority Tutsi, fostered hatred and anger among the marginalized Hutu, which finally erupted in 1994.

At the end of World War II, Reichsmarschall, Herman Göring, Hitler's top man, was arrested and eventually sent to a prison in Nuremberg, where he was examined by military psychiatrist, Douglas Kelley, to determine if the Nazi leader was fit to stand trial for his war crimes. When Kelley asked Göring if he agreed with the Nazi position that non-Aryans are racially inferior, he responded, "Nobody believes that rot." When Kelley pointed out the idea had nonetheless led to the extermination of 6 million people, Göring responded, "Well, it was good political propaganda."¹

On March 19, 2003, less than two years after the terrorist attacks on 9/11, the United States launched an unprecedented "preemptive strike," against Iraq, which ended up being one of the longest, costliest, and deadliest wars in history. Although the American media only reported on the death of US soldiers, nearly 4500, hundreds of thousands, perhaps more than a million innocent Iraqi civilians were also killed in the violence. The national media, which had beat the drums of war before it ever began, and allowed their propaganda machine to prop up the unsubstantiated and unquestioned lies used as reasons for going to war, didn't seem to care about the innocent people they helped murder, nor did a majority of Americans seem to care that Iraq had nothing whatsoever to do with the destruction of the World Trade Center or the attacks at the Pentagon on that terrible day.

Just a few days after 9/11, however, fundamentalist preachers, Jerry Falwel and Pat Robertson weren't even blaming the attacks on terrorists, let alone innocent Iraqis. Falwel said, "I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative

¹ El-Hai, Jack, *The Nazi and the Psychiatrist*, MJF Books, New York, NY, 2013, p. 60.

lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America, I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen.'" Robertson responded, "I totally concur."² This is not unlike what mega-church minister, John Hagee said a few years later in response to Hurricane Katrina, one of the deadliest and costliest natural disasters in US history. "Hurricane Katrina," he claimed, "was, in fact, the judgment of God against the City of New Orleans," because there was going to be what he called, "a homosexual parade there on the Monday that Katrina came."³

By the mid 16th century there were as many as two million French Protestants known as Huguenots in the world. Even so, they were greatly outnumbered by French Catholics, who hated them. Despite the passage of French laws demanding tolerance, many violent conflicts, known as the Wars of Religion, occurred amongst them for nearly 40 years between 1562 and 1598. A period of relative peace followed for about 20 years, until King Louie XIV came to power, abolished the Huguenots' hard earned rights and protections, ending in the massacre of 1.5 million of them, with the rest fleeing to and dispersing among more Protestant friendly European countries.

Between 1838 and 1839, the US Government, under the leadership of President Andrew Jackson, forced the people of the Cherokee, Seminole, Choctaw, Muscogee, and Chickasaw nations to leave their ancestral lands east of the Mississippi River and to migrate to Oklahoma. 10,000 of them died from disease, starvation, and exposure along the perilous death march the Cherokee named, "Trail of Tears."

Just then they came in sight of thirty or forty windmills that rise from that plain. And no sooner did Don Quixote see them that he said to his squire, "Fortune is guiding our affairs better than we ourselves could have wished. Do you see over yonder, friend Sancho, thirty or forty hulking giants? I intend to do battle with them and slay them. With their spoils we shall begin to be rich for this is a righteous war and the removal of so foul a brood from off the face of the earth is a service God will bless."

"What giants?" asked Sancho Panza.

"Those you see over there," replied his master, "with their long arms. Some of them have arms well nigh two leagues in length."

"Take care, sir," cried Sancho. "Those over there are not giants but windmills."⁴

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/19/september11.usa9>

³ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/warren-j-blumenfeld/god-and-natural-disasters-its-the-gays-fault_b_2068817.html

⁴ — Part 1, Chapter VIII. *Of the valourous Don Quixote's success in the dreadful and never before imagined Adventure of the Windmills, with other events worthy of happy record.*

This excerpt from Miguel de Cervantes' popular work of fiction has given rise to famous idiom, "Tilting at Windmills," to describe the human tendency to invent and attack imaginary enemies. Unfortunately, all the other tragic stories I've mentioned are not fiction, but real life examples of the horrors that can result from this unconscious need to create make-believe foes. They are all historical examples of times some have tilted their lances toward made up enemies, but I've intentionally chosen these particular instances because each exposes a different motivation for succumbing to such devastating delusions.

The first example, of the terrible massacre of a million, so called, Tutsi by their, so called, Hutu neighbors, tilts at the *windmill of inferiority*. I could just as easily call it the windmill of *superiority* because these twin giants are mirrors of each other. You see, once the Belgians fabricated the make believe differences between Hutus and Tutsis, claiming one was superior to the other, it actually became real in the imaginations of these two groups. The minority Tutsi were given positions of authority and wealth, and many came to believe they deserved such privilege because of the size of their noses and the colors of their eyes. Meanwhile, the majority Hutu began feeling inferior and mistreated, and harbored years of boiling resentment. When they finally came into power, their angry, militant leaders seized the opportunity to retaliate by killing anyone with the wrong ID card. So it was a case of those made to feel inferior for make believe reasons desiring to finally feel superior, just as many Tutsis had come to actually believe they were superior for make believe reasons. So we tilt at these twin turbines according to our own inferiority complexes. It's hard to say which is which because they are two sides of one coin, because we need to create an inferior class to feel superior. Yet these feelings of superiority only hide our own unconscious inferiority complex. So we tilt at the windmill of inferiority in order to feel superior.

The second example, of Herman Göring admitting anti-Semitic propaganda of was nothing more than a political ploy to put the Nazi Party in power, tilts at the *windmill of powerlessness*, which also is a mirror of the windmill called *powerful*. All of these windmills are really mirrors, so each can be called by its opposite. The Nazi Party, which came into power by exploiting the anxieties of the working class, played upon their sense of powerlessness by giving them an imaginary enemy to blame—the Jews—a projection of prejudice and hate that was happening simultaneously in many places around the world. We see the same thing happening today as many people feeling powerless to do anything about their increasingly impoverished states are turning to a figure promising to make them feel "great again" by erecting a wall between them and their imaginary Mexican and Muslim enemies. So we tilt at the windmill of powerlessness because we're afraid of losing control.

This segues easily into our next example, tilting at the windmill of *needing someone to blame*, demonstrated by those Americans, including the national news media, who were all too ready to go along with the Bush Administration's longstanding goal of invading Iraq, all in the name of getting back at somebody, anybody, for what

happened on 9/11. The facts didn't matter and whom we retaliated against didn't matter so long as we retaliated against someone. It didn't matter that Iraq didn't have anything to do with those mindless attacks, or that the "weapons of mass destruction" our government was so obviously lying about were also make believe. None of it mattered because many among us needed an enemy to blame and were happy to let our government make one up for us. We tilted toward the windmill of needing someone to blame so we didn't have to feel so vulnerable on the one hand, and in order to justify a greed driven political agenda on the other.

The windmill of needing someone to blame is closely akin to the *windmill of needing someone else to blame*. In other words, we invent imaginary enemies so we don't have to face our own demons. Some of you may recall, for example, that after 9/11 Barak Obama's controversial minister, Jeremiah Wright gave a sermon stating that, "America's chickens are coming home to roost." It may not have been fair to blame the attacks on stealing Native lands, or bombing Cambodia, or Libya, or Panama, or Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as Wright alluded, but it made no less sense than Bush's claim that 9/11 happened because "they hate our freedom." We tilt toward the windmill of needing someone *else* to blame so we don't have to take responsibility for the injustices we create.

This example is similar again to that of evangelical ministers blaming 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina on gay people. Only they don't merely want someone to blame, they want someone else to demonize so they can feel good about themselves. They're tilting at the *windmill of immorality*. They have, what I consider, a severe Father-complex, through which they obsessively seek their own fathers' approval through an imaginary surrogate, the Great Silverback in the Sky, Heavenly Father, Father God, or some human hierophant. Like those obscene protestors at yesterday's Pride Parade spewing all kinds of hatred and insults condemning everyone who passed by, they need to draw a line between themselves, erecting walls and imaginary borders, to separate themselves from evildoers in order to please the maniacal, macho, punitive, authoritarian, imaginary God they claim to revere. Just as the *Tao te Ching* says, "When people see some things as good, other things become bad," tilting at the windmill of immorality requires us to see others as bad so we can see ourselves as good.

The extermination of 1.5 million Huguenots in the 16th century is similar but differs a little in that it isn't obsessed so much with being righteous, but with simply being right. It is tilting at the *windmill of doubt*. As Erich Fromm once wrote, "*The compulsive quest for certainty is not the expression of genuine faith, but is rooted in the need to conquer the unbearable doubt.*"⁵ So religious wars, like those in the 16th century, based purely upon ideological grounds, erupt and often end in the complete suppression or extermination of one marginalized group just to squelch a threatening idea. We've seen this same thing throughout history, the outlawing of

⁵ Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, (Avon Books, Heart Corporation, New York, NY, 1941, 1965). 96.

ideas through Holy Crusades, Inquisitions, witch burnings, the disenfranchisement of women and minorities, McCarthyism, voter suppression, mass incarceration, Fox News, and any other method of silencing the ideas of others.

They do so, not only because they are afraid of the unknown, but also because certainty feels really good. As I've stated previously, neurologists now understand the feeling of knowing is accompanied by a release of dopamine into our system that causes us to feel pleasure. Evolution has not yet given us the same ability to feel good when we are uncertain, so many of us don't like coming down from our certainty high by having others cast doubt upon our beliefs. As psychologist Theodor Reik once lamented, "The capacity to doubt, and in particular the ability to endure doubt for a long time, is one of the rarest things on this planet."⁶ Doubt, for most, is miserable, not pleasurable, so we tilt at the windmill of doubt because we are, essentially, afraid of the dark, afraid mystery, afraid of not knowing.

Our final example of the Trail of Tears is, perhaps, the most diabolical and misguided delusion of them all. I call it the *windmill of sinister others*, through which we imagine others are so vile that they deserve whatever harm comes to them. The First Nations of this land were not uncivilized, ungodly, mindless, savage, heathens as those who committed mass genocide against them pretended. They were, rather, simply people who stood in the way. When the colonizers first came here they tried to pretend the First Nations didn't even exist by calling this a New World, an undiscovered, pristine world ready for the taking. The only problem was reality!

"Look at those giants," they said, "with their long arms. Some of them have arms well nigh two leagues in length." So, instead of admitting their own sinister motivations to take the lands and homes of others away from them, they imagined them to be monsters that deserved whatever they got. We tilt toward the windmill of sinister others when we want to trick ourselves into feeling justified in exploiting them, be they the people of the First Nations, or people dragged here to work as slaves from other nations, or people locked away in prison at disproportionate rates so they aren't allowed to vote, or ordinary members of the working class who can no longer make a living so 1 percent of 1 percent can be rich beyond any rational or legitimate need, or anyone else who is demonized to appease the consciences of a few.

So these are the reasons some of us feel we need enemies, tilting at the windmills of *inferiority, powerlessness, needing someone to blame and someone else to blame, or of immorality, doubt, and sinister others*. Like Don Quixote, we too easily project all our weakness, hopelessness, shame, greed, and fear outward into the world, mistaking fields of tattered windmills for monstrous giants. Yet our wild imaginations, our delusional states of mind, can have grisly impacts upon the world that are all too real. Still, in the aftermath of all these injustices, of genocides, and holocausts, and wars, and murder, and rape, and exploitation, we promise ourselves we've learned

⁶ Reik, Theodor, *Dogma and Compulsion*, Greenwood Press, Publishers, Westport, Connecticut, 1951, 1975, p. 161.

our lesson and will never allow these horrors to happen again. But “never again” often turns into “again and again.”

Today, as we contemplate all of this in relation to Pride Weekend, we can feel good about all the progress we’ve made in recent years toward LGBTQ equality. But, even as we celebrate our victories, we must not become too relaxed and think crazy Don Quixote might not ride up the ridge on his saggy mount and take a swipe at us with his broken lance. This past year, same sex marriage became legal round the nation, and Bruce Jenner revealed her true identity as Caitlyn Jenner, bringing much greater awareness and acceptance of our transgender neighbors, family members, and selves; and it all feels really good.

But I will remind you that only 20 years after the Huguenots had obtained freedom and power in France, extremists took power and they were all but wiped out. Today, there are still many who are seething over the legitimization and acceptance of those they have long demonized, including LGBTQ folks, as well as people of color, Latinos and Mexicans, Muslims, women, and many others who have been oppressed and exploited in years past. You would think, for instance, after recalling those horrible “whites only” signs over public restrooms during segregation, we’d have learned our lesson. But today “never again” has once again become “again and again,” as several states are attempting to follow the example of North Carolina by adopting laws preventing people from using restrooms that don’t correspond with the gender on their birth certificates. There’s even a proposed Initiative, number 1515, in our own State, that if passed would put Washington in the same category as North Carolina.

Discrimination, hatred, fear, and inequality—these are the real giants our society faces, and we cannot overcome them for good until we free ourselves from all the delusions that cause us to mistake windmills for monsters. Jesus’ command to “love your enemies,” may seem impossible, which may be why too few of his followers have ever even tried it. But maybe it is possible if we can learn to let go of our fear of others, because that’s what all these windmills are really based on, our projected fears onto real people. Perhaps this is what one his followers understood when writing, “Perfect love casts out all fear.” Or, as the poet Ranier Maria Rilke more eloquently said, “Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are really princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest being, something helpless that wants our love.”