

Giant Killing and Dragon Slaying Our Unconscious Need for Enemies

By

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Only three weeks ago, Vladimir Putin began his unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, becoming an enemy to much of the world in the process. So, I cannot begin a sermon about our unconscious need for enemies without first admitting there are real villains in the world whom we sometimes encounter and must sometimes confront. The word *enemy* comes from the Latin *inimicus*, which refers to someone who is unfriendly or hostile. Vladimir Putin fits this description and can, therefore, rightly be called an enemy, an enemy of Ukraine, an enemy of NATO, an enemy of the United Nations, an enemy of peace, an enemy of life, and an enemy of human progress and solidarity.

When confronting real enemies, it's important to remember the only thing that separates us from them is our response and ability to continue recognizing their humanity. Blowing people up, destroying their homes, and schools, and hospitals, and neighborhoods, and occupying their countries, reflects a gross failure to recognize their humanity, innate dignity, the value of their lives, and the necessity of freedom for a dignified and happy life. And Russia isn't the only nation to have failed in this during the early years of our belabored century. The United States, the other military superpower in the global-hood, invaded Iraq in 2003—a country that had nothing to do with the 9/11 terrorist attacks—after creating a false pretext that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction that even the U.N. inspectors—our own allies and experts—said was baseless. And our leaders did so under the unprecedented new war doctrine of “preemptive strike,” which was an admission Iraq had done nothing to us and that we were only acting to stop them before they could.

Putin is a mirror who, in his mind, has found ways to remain the hero of his story by concocting unfounded excuses to attack those he fears are his enemies, just as human societies have done for centuries. Ukraine now has little choice but to resist with military force of its own, and we can't blame them. Many think we should be helping them do so. Yet, I believe it is right for the global community to use nonviolent sanctions even if we must also provide Ukraine with some of the weapons that they need to have a fighting chance. As difficult as it is to see their suffering, leaping into World War III can only lead to worse suffering for everyone.

The situation we are in today is real. It is not the stuff of pontification. As I said, sometimes we encounter real enemies, real people who are unfriendly and hostile, whom we must confront. But just as with Russia's pretext for war with Ukraine and the U.S.'s pretext for war with Iraq, sometimes the real violence we encounter or engage in is based on made up enemies to begin with. We hear lots of reasons for Putin's motivations—that he is fearful of NATO getting too close to his borders, that he wants Russia to become a global empire again, that he has grown increasingly paranoid during the pandemic. I do not know his

motivations because I cannot read his mind, but I do suspect he's deceived himself into believing Ukraine is his enemy in order to justify his cruelty against them. Whatever he is telling himself, whatever he really wants from them, to take from them, I'm guessing he is both his story's misunderstood victim and courageous hero, not its antagonist.

This, ultimately, is what we get out of having enemies, the ability to feel good about ourselves while treating others unjustly. Several years ago, I realized this was true of myself at times after a meeting with Spokane's former Mayor David Condon. Several of us with the Spokane Alliance had spoken at a recent City Council meeting against the Mayor's proposed budget. He later invited us to his office to discuss what we thought was the Alliance's agenda, but it turns out he wanted to discuss some of the things we said that he took as personnel attacks against him, things so upsetting that his spouse had been moved to tears.

At the time, all I could see was a fellow human being in pain who felt he had been treated unfairly. I couldn't remember what specifically I had said at the Council meeting but have since wondered if I had said something hurtful and unfair about the mayor. I couldn't stomach the thought and have worked hard not to demonize those I disagree with ever since. To demonize others is to dehumanize them so that we can excuse our own unkind, if not inhumane, treatment of them.

In more recent years I have begun frequently saying that my days of dragon slaying are over, by which I mean I have stepped off the hero's journey. I'm no longer living out the myth that I'm here to fight all the evils of the world, gaining a false sense of self-importance and worthiness in the process, earning a place at the Table Round or glory in Valhalla. For the demons and dragons we fight are all too often just other human beings whom we fear or disagree with. Rilke makes an unforgettable and beautiful statement about it in his *Letters to a Young Poet*:

How should we be able to forget those ancient myths that are at the beginning of all peoples, the myths about dragons that at the last moment turn into princesses; perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us once beautiful and brave. Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something helpless that wants help from us.

I'm no Pollyanna and, believe me, I get pissed off plenty at others because others do plenty to piss me off. But I do not lose sight of their humanity. If the U.S. can look in the mirror after what we did in Iraq and Afghanistan and still see our own human face, then we must recognize it in the face of those who act similarly, including Vladimir Putin. All of us and each one of us capable of being at our worst and at our best, and often live our lives fluctuating between these two poles. Some people who do terrible things also do extraordinarily good things, and vice versa. Dehumanizing our enemies, even those who deserve the term because they are genuinely unfriendly and hostile, excuses us to do as we wish to them and to take what we want from them. Not losing sight of their humanity prevents us from doing so.

Seeing the humanity in the faces of those who oppose us or those we oppose isn't merely a personal matter but is just as much a sociological problem. Societies often pressure their members to join in the collective hatred of those they demonize. Those who don't may themselves become suspect, as was so in the McCarthy era, when many Americans were arrested, tried, convicted, punished, and ostracized for being Communist sympathizers, even if they weren't. When it comes to those who have been officially demonized by the state and culture, there can be no room for sympathy, or empathy, or compassion. These emotions are reserved only for those with human faces, like us, not them. In our society, offering an enemy "aid and comfort" is considered an act of treason. Sympathy is a crime.

So there is tremendous psychological desire for enemies as well as social pressures to have enemies. According to a study published by the University of Kansas, in a paper entitled, *Deriving Solace from a Nemesis*, "70% of Americans report having had, at some point in their lives, a powerful enemy who seeks to sabotage their goals and inflict harm (Holt, 1989)."¹ This percentage is high but may not be surprising given the extreme ideological intolerance in our country these days. But what is surprising is the research's conclusion that, rather than increasing our level of anxiety in the world, having perceived enemies gives us a feeling of comfort in our uncertain world. The papers says, "The more people can feel confident that their cultural worldview prescribes legitimate routes to attain value, and that their immediate social environment has a predictable structure, the more they can view their life as meaningful."² This means drawing clear lines between ourselves and those who differ from us so we don't have to face the thought that other worldviews, other paths, other structures can be as good as or better than our own. Turning those with different ideas and ways into our enemies clears up the confusion and makes us feel less anxious and uncertain about our own decisions.

For the fictional Knight Errant, Don Quixote, it wasn't imaginary dragons but imaginary giants that he needed to defeat.

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."³

Attempting to topple windmills seems more humorous and foolish to us than anything else, but the giants and dragons we create through the dehumanizing process of demonization

isn't about inanimate windmills but living people. "*Take care, sir. For those over there are not giants but human beings.*"

A few years ago, in a sermon entitled *Tilting at Windmills*, I identified the kinds of fictional giants we often attempt to topple at the expense of real people. I called them the windmills of *inferiority, powerlessness, someone to blame, immorality, and doubt*. The *Windmill of Inferiority* is but an inflation of our own sense of weakness or inadequacy. This may be as benign as Bernie Sanders railing against, as he says, "the millionaires and billionaires," the economic giants of our day, or as sinister as what happened in Rwanda in 1994 when, over a period of more than three months, Hutu ethnic extremists murdered nearly a million of their Tutsi neighbors with machetes. This was so because the Belgians, who once occupied the country, considered the Tutsi minority superior to the Hutu majority. Over the years the Hutus came to resent their Tutsi neighbors and blamed them for their many woes.

That's a terrible and extreme example, but there is a tendency in many of us to resent those we may feel are superior to us in some way, the millionaires and billionaires, or anyone in position of authority, be they government officials or our own bosses and employers, or even neighbors and friends who seem a bit better off than ourselves. The *Windmill of Inferiority* is born of resentment rooted in our own sense of weakness and inadequacy in a misguided quest, not to balance the scales, but to feel superior ourselves.

This is closely related to the *Windmill of Powerlessness*, which responds to our feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability by wishing to become dominant. 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 military psychiatrist Douglas Kelley examined him 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 admitted, "Nobody believes that rot," but "it was good political propaganda."⁴ In other words, the Reich exploited the anxieties of the working class by giving them an imaginary enemy to blame for all the wrongs in their lives. This gave rise to the Third Reich, while also making the common *volks* feel powerful, too. Years ago, there was much hostility in our country toward Japanese automakers and toward their American consumers, also because they supposedly threatened jobs, and today politicians like Trump still claim to need a wall at the southern border to protect American jobs, or to ignore global warming because protecting the environment will cost jobs. Making enemies, even of the Earth itself, to exploit the fears of others can help put some people into powerful positions.

The *Windmill of Powerlessness* often leads us to the *Windmill of Someone to Blame*. The Jewish people are among the most notorious scapegoats in modern history. But the U.S. was not without its own internment camps for its Japanese citizens at the same time and, more recently, Iraq took the misdirected blame for what happened on 9/11. It was sometime afterward that the Bush Administration admitted it had succumbed to what it called, "bad

intelligence,” but anyone paying attention knew the claims of weapons of mass destruction were made up to begin with. When the U.N. Investigators continually said there is no evidence of such and urged the U.S. not to invade Iraq, it simply didn’t matter to the Administration, and when other members of NATO refused to get involved, it didn’t matter either. It didn’t matter because the Bush Administration entered office with a documented goal of going after Iraq. September 11th gave them the excuse they needed, and most Americans didn’t care who we went to war with over the matter as long as it was with someone. For many, the invasion of Iraq was reassuring evidence we can still take care of ourselves.

There’s also the *Windmill of Immorality*, which can really make us feel good about ourselves at the expense of others. The *Tao te Ching* says, “When people see some things as good, other things become bad.” Conversely, pointing out the immorality of others can make us feel good about ourselves. I recall shortly after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, for example, televangelist Pat Roberson blamed both the hurricane and 9/11 on our nation’s tolerance of gay people. This is based on a very primitive kind of magical thinking that the mere presence of the evil other in our midst is enough to cause all sorts of calamities. If there are plagues or storms or floods, it must be because God is angry with us, and the anger must be someone else’s fault.

This is particularly troubling today because our nation has strayed so far from its Enlightenment aspirations, especially when it comes to freedom of speech and thought, and we now have social media by which to attack our ideological enemies and their dangerous ideas with ease. Today, we have returned to the medieval notion that words and ideas are magical incantations that by their mere utterance can cause terrible harm. This is the same reason the authorities began the practice of book banning and inquisitions after the printing press came along making it possible for the mass proliferation and expression of ideas. As Jacob McHangama writes in his new book, *Free Speech*, “It is clear that both English and Continental censorship rested on the idea that words and actions are indistinguishable, and that the former can be every bit as harmful and dangerous as the latter.”⁵ Today, most the conflict in our country is over ideological differences. It is this belief that the mere expression of unpopular ideas makes people immoral, and being right is equated with righteousness, that makes the *Windmill of Immorality* among the most powerful of our mass delusions.

Finally, there is the *Windmill of Doubt*, rooted in the unconscious fear that our own ideas might be wrong, making us unrighteous and, more troubling, vulnerable to the uncertainties of life. We would often rather be sure that our ideas and our ways are right, even if they are leading us to our doom, than to face the feeling of uncertainty. As Erich Fromm once said, “*The compulsive quest for certainty is not the expression of genuine faith, but is rooted in the need to conquer the unbearable doubt.*”⁶ As I’ve said often in the past, our brains have evolved to release dopamine into our pleasure centers when we feel sure of ourselves. Being certain feels good. Hence, as the 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."⁷

So, in the end, the Windmill of Doubt may be the biggest imaginary giant of them all, because all of our desire for power, control, and self-righteousness, is rooted in the need to feel certain in an uncertain world. But what is not to be missed here is that we topple these imaginary giants and slay our imaginary dragons at the expense of real people, innocent people, whom we demonize in order for us to feel good about the world and good about ourselves.

"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."

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¹ Landau, Mark J., "Deriving Solace from a Nemesis: Having Scapegoats and Enemies Buffers the Threat of Meaninglessness," [from *Meaning, Mortality, and Choice: The Social Psychology of Existential Concerns*, Chapter: 10, Publisher: APA, pp.183-202] University of Kansas, June 2012, p. 2.

² Ibid., p. 5.

³ — 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.*

⁴ El-Hai, Jack, *The Nazi and the Psychiatrist*, MJF Books, New York, NY, 2013, p. 60.

⁵ McHangama, Jacob, *Free Speech*, Basic Books, New York, NY, 2022. p. 78.

⁶ Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, (Avon Books, Heart Corporation, New York, NY, 1941, 1965). 96.

⁷ Reik, Theodor, *Dogma and Compulsion*, Greenwood Press, Publishers, Westport, Connecticut, 1951, 1975, p. 161.