

## While the Bombs Fall

July, 2006

While the bombs fall in Lebanon, I'm teaching a two-week course in permaculture: regenerative, ecological design, with a schedule so demanding that I find it hard to check email every day, let alone watch the news. But it comes in, between lesser messages about leaks in the watering system in the garden and flight cancellations: pictures of dead children on the road. I feel horrified, angry, frustrated, powerless...all the things I'm used to feeling about the situation, but more so. I try to write something in the spare moments when my teaching partner Penny is covering rain catchment or graywater systems, but all I keep writing, over and over, is "Killing children is wrong." That seems so self-evident and banal that I can't quite bring myself to send it out. Or rather, it doesn't seem to add much to a discussion in which the decision makers are so convinced that killing our children is very, very wrong, but killing their children is the Path of Righteousness.

While the Congress and Senate are voting their support for Israel's actions, I am teaching systems theory and strategy, including an essay by Donella Meadows, "Nine Ways to Intervene in a System (in increasing order of effectiveness.) The least effective way, she says, is by changing amounts. Please, General, can we drop fewer bombs? Can we keep it proportional? Could we scale down to killing just maybe two of their children for every one of ours, instead of ten?

The situation itself is a perfect example of what she calls a positive feedback loop. I find the term confuses people, as there is often nothing positive about it. I call it a self-reinforcing cycle. Whichever, it means a situation in which the more you have of something the more you get, and the more you need. You kill some of my children so I kill more of yours, so you kill more of mine, so I kill even more of yours.

Self-reinforcing cycles are engines of change, for better or worse. They get more and more extreme, until either some new constraint enters to impose a new equilibrium, or they crash. Hurricanes suck up energy from the heat in the sea, and grow bigger, sucking more energy, which makes them bigger still, until they hit land and blow themselves out. Addicts keep taking more of what they're addicted to, until they hit bottom, whether the addiction is to alcohol or heroin or military intervention.

This quality of systems does not bode well—either for the children of Beirut or those of Haifa. Europe and the UN might make some weak attempts to intervene, but as long as the U.S. is cheering the Israeli government on, no serious constraints will be imposed. And why shouldn't we cheer them on, when Israel's addiction to force as a solution is the mirror of ours? We're the big guy and the small guy, standing each other drinks at

the pub and throwing the chairs at anyone who threatens us, until we smash the place. It is this very self-reinforcing cycle that keeps power in the hands of the neo-cons, whose answer to every fear and insecurity is more force. Force which creates more fear, which generates more violence, which requires more force to keep down. It's an inherent aspect of being caught in this sort of system that as it begins to spiral out of control, and starts to break apart, the only solution you can see is more of the same. An alcoholic gets fired for drinking on the job, and drinks more to forget. Iraq is not working out well for Bush and the neocons, so bring in more troops, or expand the war—Lebanon, Syria, Iran.

You can't change a self-reinforcing system by changing amounts. Recovering alcoholics know this, generals and politicians don't. Try to limit yourself to one drink before dinner, and somehow you still end up behind the wheel of the car that careens into the bus full of schoolchildren on the road. Tell yourself that you are using a measured, limited response for well-thought out political aims, and you still end up with blackened torsos and the severed limbs of infants in smoking piles on the motorway.

Here's some other things we know about these cycles—they are expensive. They consume resources. Drinking up the children's milk money down at the local. Starving every social program to fund our military. And when they crash, they often fall hardest on the undeserving. The drunk behind the wheel rolls out of the crushed car, unharmed, while the family of five lies dead. The policy makers are not cringing in tenements as bombs fall, or crying over the bleeding body of their most beloved child. Nor are most of those who support the policies. Yet.

To change the system, you need to change the paradigm, the way you frame the situation and think about it, the deep assumptions that shape your viewpoint. That's Donella Meadows' most effective way to intervene—changing the world view and the constructs that support the system. It's also, generally, a hard and painful process. A new paradigm, a new construct of self and world, goes against everything we know and believe. If I'm telling myself that I'm a fun-loving, party kind of a gal—how painful to instead admit that I'm an alcoholic! If I'm justifying the deaths of children by telling myself that I'm bringing democracy to the region, or safeguarding my sister's children in Hadera, or fulfilling God's plan, how painful to look at the broken bodies on the pavement and say, "I did that. I have blood on my hands."

I'm thinking about one of the many fruitless arguments I've had about the issue, this one with an ultra-Orthodox rabbi's wife, shortly after I'd returned from doing solidarity work with the nonviolent Palestinian resistance in Gaza and the West Bank. I tried to describe to her what I'd seen in that bullet-riddled, shell-shocked land, the ongoing, everyday horrors and humiliations and frustrations, the houses bulldozed, the farmlands

confiscated, the lives blunted and stunted and blasted into oblivion, and at the end she said to me:

“But we’re good. So if we’re doing it, it must be good.”

That’s one hard paradigm to shift, because there is nowhere to go from that pinnacle but down, no change we can make that doesn’t require us to face the possibility that maybe we are bad, or at the very least, that we are good people doing some bad things. From that vantage point, of course any critique, no matter how measured, seems anti-Semitic, an assault on that basic self-definition of Essential Goodness.

While the killing escalates, I am teaching about soil. How to feed the life of the soil, how to encourage and nurture the worms and the beneficial bacteria and fungi and other soil organisms. How a healthy soil will grow healthy plants, that can resist pests.

Industrial agriculture, in contrast, is based in the same exact paradigm as our Iraq policy, one that was succinctly expressed in a bumper sticker my first husband applied to his van shortly before we broke up: “Force, It Works!”

So, if corn borers are attacking your crop, blast it with insecticides. Kill the bastards! Are there weeds among the fields? Zap them with roundup. Root feeding nematodes, perchance, below ground? Blanket the whole thing in plastic, and gas it with methyl bromide. Force—it works, for a while, perhaps for short term goals. But force is costly. And, whether we’re employing force against bugs or bacteria or human beings, force breeds resistance. And so insects that survive the onslaught of the pesticides breed young that are not affected.

We up the doses, and breed more and more resistant pests, which require more insecticides to kill, in another self-reinforcing cycle. The helpful insects, the predators that might have kept the pests in balance, are wiped out. And the residues of poison remain, in the soil and in the crops themselves. Human beings are not insects or bacteria. The human resistance that force breeds is not in the genes, but in hearts and minds. And so the bombing of Beirut breeds rockets falling on Haifa and airplane bombers in London, and all the assaults on South Lebanon, the bombs and blown-up bridges and armed teenage boys in uniform on the ground will breed more rockets yet, more suicide bombs of the future, more death in retaliation.

And the devotion to force is itself a toxin, poisoning the soil of Israeli society, starving its own social programs, warping the very soul and ethics of the religion it purports to defend.

How do we get out of this mess? What would a regenerative paradigm look like as a policy? If compost, worm castings and plants that feed beneficial bugs are the

gardening alternative to chemical warfare, what would be the political parallel?

From a purely self-interested, Israeli point of view, a policy maker coming from a regenerative paradigm might say:

“We can never stamp out our hatred, but let us not create habitat that favors its growth. Instead, let us nurture health wherever we find it, and create conditions that let flourish those who favor peace.”

So, in the nineties, Israel could have said, “We have a small window here, when the Palestinians have settled for less than they could have demanded. Let us move quickly to establish a Palestinian state, with true areas of self-determination for its people. If the Occupation is a running sore, inflaming rage and hatred throughout the Arab world and undermining our moral credibility, how do we swiftly end it and transform the region into a place of opportunity and hope? Where can we support people’s legitimate dreams and aspirations?”

How do we support the health of the region’s actual soil, the vitality of its crops, the abundance of its markets, the excellence of its Universities? How do we create such flourishing abundance that this region becomes a shining model for the whole Middle East?” Instead, Israel built settlements, began a long-term program of encroachment on the tiny territory allocated to the Palestinians, and maintained an Occupation backed by force. When Abbas was elected, Israel could have said, “How do we give him victories and real gains that will strengthen his own people’s allegiance? And if corruption runs rampant in the Palestinian Authority, then where are there leaders of integrity we can ally with?”

And if Hamas is winning over the people with its social programs, how do we feed a healthy economy so that they become unnecessary?” Instead, Israel continued to build a wall which confiscates huge amounts of Palestinian land without compensation, destroys the very communities which historically have been most friendly to Israel, unilaterally ‘withdrew’ from Gaza while keeping it surrounded, an isolated, open-air prison with its resources destroyed and its factions inflamed—creating a perfect breeding habitat for yet more violence.

There are a hundred other missed opportunities. And there will be more. But the longer the cycle goes on, the more damage is done, and the harder it is to stop.

Am I ‘blaming’ Israel unfairly? Couldn’t Hezbollah just stop shooting rockets, and the Palestinian factions stop bombing?

Yes, certainly they could, and it would be good if they did. Children would live who otherwise would die.

When we're caught in a self-reinforcing cycle, it's a fairly useless exercise to ask, "Who started it?" Or to debate whether one side or the other has the 'right to defend itself' by continuing the cycle. Far better to ask, "Who is in position to stop this cycle?"

And it is Israel, the occupier of the territory, the fourth largest military power in the world, that sets the conditions of the region, that has the power to create a habitat where violence flourishes, or peace is favored.

And I admit that I want Israel to act as the moral agent it claims to be. I'm a Jew who was raised with the dream of Israel, as a safe place after the Holocaust, as a refuge in that visa-denying world which sent boatloads of my people back to their deaths, as a place where we could finally, after two thousand years, be ourselves, in our own home. Among the many casualties of this war is all that was good in that dream.

Because of the pennies I saved as a child to buy trees for the promised land, because of the songs I grew up singing, because of the deep well that was carved in my heart for that dream that now spews anguish and blood, I have the right of an accounting from those who have replaced the God of Justice with the God of Force.

The place has a history of great prophets and lousy kings. There is nothing more Jewish than thundering at the policy makers, saying "Jahweh and Allah and all good-hearted people agree: killing children is wrong. Just plain wrong, and when you do it you have left the Path of Righteousness. The cost of force is too high—it includes your soul." Even as the bombs fall, there are people choosing to come from new assumptions.

They are the Palestinians of the villages where the wall is confiscating their farmland, choosing nonviolent means of struggle, returning day after day to demonstrations in which they get beaten, tear-gassed, arrested. They are the Israelis and internationals who cross borders to stand with them, saying, "We are not 'Palestinians' and 'Israelis', we are people together struggling against injustice. They are the Women in Black, who stand in silent vigil for peace, year after year, fleeing Katusha rockets and returning back to their stand for peace. They are organizers of cross-cultural dialogues, soldiers who refuse to serve in the Occupied Territories or to kill civilians, youth who refuse to don the explosives belt.

That these people still exist, that they somehow grow out of the blasted, toxic soil of the Middle East, gives us some reason to hope. In spite of the million missed opportunities, the oceans of spilled blood, the escalation of stupid policies, the situation is not yet utterly without hope.

But what can we do, we who are not policy makers or generals or Queens of the Middle East, who are simply ordinary people of compassion, wringing our hands in front of the

TV set. Every day, I hear people ask, “What can we do that will be effective?” And for once, I can’t think of a damn thing. Never has political action felt so futile. But I think about the advice the great war journalist Robert Fisk received, for surviving decades in Lebanon and other war zones. “Do something,” he was told. “Don’t do nothing.”

So do something. While we’re waiting for the effective thing, do something even if it seems small and futile. Write your representatives. Go to the demonstration, or organize one. Educate yourself more deeply, then talk to someone who has less information. Stand in vigil with the Women in Black. Some of the founders of the International Solidarity Movement in Palestine are organizing nonviolent civil resistance in Lebanon. Join them, or support them. Pray to those Gods who may secretly resent being cast as child killers.

Do something. We don’t know what the effective thing will be, may never know. But if we do nothing, we will surely have no impact.

And what do we say? How do you stop a vicious cycle? Just stop. Stop now. Don’t wait until the enemy is utterly defeated, because your every effort to defeat them strengthens the forces that created them. Just stop. Not tomorrow, when our position is stronger. Not the day after, when you have neutralized more territory. The longer the cycle continues, the worse the crash will be. Just stop. Stop now.

Come from a new paradigm. Feed the soil of the Holy Land with something other than blood. Cherish all children, ours and theirs.

-- Starhawk

Some other good websites to check out:

International Solidarity Movement:

<http://www.palsolidarity.org>

Women in Black:

<http://www.coalitionofwomen.org>

Jewish Voice For Peace:

<http://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org>

For on the spot reports from Lebanon:

<http://www.leftturn.org/Articles/SpecialCollections/GazaLebanon.aspx>

<http://electronicintifada.net/v2/diaries.shtml>

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