

## **Imagine a World Without War**

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UU Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley

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It is Memorial Day weekend.

Despite what the grocery circulars might seem to indicate, the purpose of this long weekend is not for the first barbecue of the summer, or planting things in the family vegetable garden.

Memorial Day was originally called “Decoration Day,” as it was created as a time to decorate the graves of military members killed during wartime service.

I am sure there are myriad thoughts and opinions in this room about the violence of war and the damage it does to veterans and civilians alike, but I want to ask us to consider today what the world might look like without the specter of war.

Wars are fought for lots of reasons: sometimes they are revolutions against oppressors. Sometimes they are the work of empires seeking to expand.

To engage in war is to commit to the wholesale killing of other groups of people.

In order to make that commitment, a nation, and the soldiers it trains, must come to a determination that those other people are not worthy of the gift of life or freedom. We must convince ourselves that we do not owe them the same kind of kindness and compassion naturally due other breathing human beings.

We must dehumanize the enemy in order to drop bombs on them.

We must dehumanize groups of people in order to kill them.

What is it, then, that allows us to view others as unworthy of life?

What allows us to decide that the only way to prevent injustice (for all our wars are moral and true, remember) is to kill great numbers of a population?

At what point is it appropriate to kill civilians and non-combatants?

Do civilians share the stain of the regimes in power? That hardly seems fair, but then again, what to do when a despot like Hitler, for example, comes into office by popular vote of the people? Do the people of that nation forfeit their right to life for backing a monster? Do they absorb the poison of the monster, making themselves unworthy?

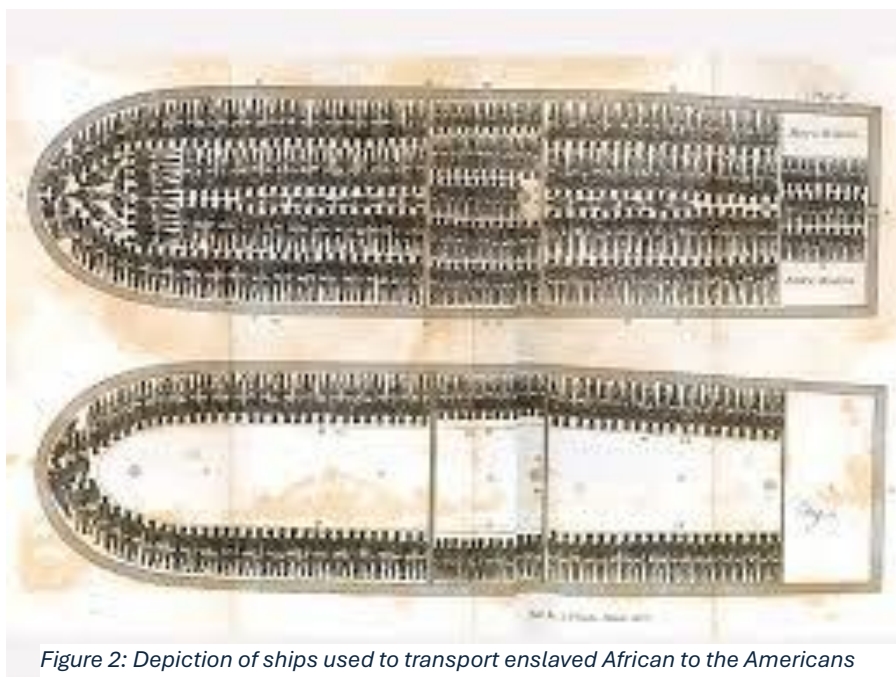
Or are we able to view them as misguided fools, duped by a charlatan into hating others?



*Figure 1 Georg Friedrich Haas, b. 1953, Graz, Austria*

I know a man who was raised in Austria as a child by parents and grandparents who were proud fascists. Georg Friedrich Haas' grandparents were unashamed to recall turning in Jewish neighbors during the rise of the Third Reich. Those people were vermin, they argued, and had no business

living amongst Aryan people, who were superior to all others. His parents held firm to those same ideals, and to this day, his family in Austria remain fascists, in form, if not in official party affiliation.



*Figure 2: Depiction of ships used to transport enslaved African to the Americas*

In a conversation this past week, I spoke with Donte Hilliard, who is a doctoral student and learning fellow at the UU Church of the Larger Fellowship. Hilliard is also a queer black man with a deep understanding of Black culture in the US and the state of oppression around the world.



*Figure 3: Slave quarters at Smiths Plantation, Fort Royal, South Carolina*



*Figure 4: Public housing projects in New York City*

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We were talking about prison abolition, which is one of the topics that can be chosen for denominational study at this year's General Assembly next month in Baltimore.

In order to incarcerate people in the system we currently have, we – those who live in the free world – must dehumanized those who are incarcerated, because if those who are incarcerated were understood to be fully human, we would not be able to treat them the way they are treated in the Prison-Industrial Complex.

Hilliard may a fascinating observation about how black and brown bodies are systematically dehumanized to the point of being “product” instead of “people.”

He asked us to imagine, in our minds, what a slave ship looked like. Imagine how the people were kept, stored, controlled, handled.

Then he asked us to imagine how black and brown bodies were treated during chattel slavery. How they were housed, how they were treated like livestock to be selectively bred for specific



*Figure 5: San Quentin Prison, California, 2007*

characteristics, how they were fed, or not, and worked, or not. Then he asked us to imagine in our mind's eye what urban housing projects look like: how the people were housed, how they were stacked high, with no green space, no fresh air, no place to carve out a life that was unique, communal, enriching, nurturing.



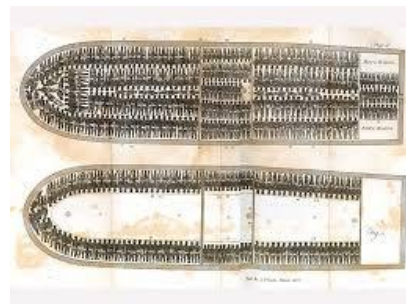
And then he asked us to imagine the current prison-industrial system. How are black and brown bodies housed, moved, fed, cared for, contained.

They are all the same model.

Racism in the United States has not changed – in reality, if not language – since 1619. The system of power and government has always treated black and brown bodies – and lives – as objects, things, product, to be contained, controlled, restricted.

This week, I added to that conversation the realities of military service and the economic and social coercion that cause disproportionate numbers of black and brown bodies to volunteer for military service as a way to get out of those projects, away from the school-to-prison pipeline. And what happens?

They end up in a system that treats servicemembers as nameless, faceless, fodder for the war machine that feeds our national need for empire expansion. Imagine what barracks look like. Imagine how the bunks are stacked. Imagine how the troops are trained and assembled and treated. Conformity is the way to success. To be a good servicemember, they are forced to set aside some portion of their understanding of themselves as human beings. In order to kill others, they must first abandon their own identities as sensitive creatures, as humans with feelings and understandings of what is



right and what is wrong, relinquishing their ability to see the humanity in the enemy they are ordered to eliminate.

Donte Hilliard argues that for our national culture to dehumanize so many people to allow us to treat them so in-humanely, that we must first abandon



*Figure 6: 82nd Airborne Division in a C-17 at Fort Bragg, North Carolina*

the part of our own humanity that recognizes the humanity of others.

The Buddha taught us to greet others by saying “the divine in me recognizes the divine in you.”

In order to kill someone, whether in an act of passion or an act of war, we must abandon that holy part of ourselves that understands that every person is made in the image of the divine.

The issue of prison abolition forces us to consider what has happened to our own selves that allows room in our hearts and minds to treat people like

objects, to torment them, to inflict punishment instead of treatment, to invest in a system that is punitive instead of transformational.

The issue of war is the same thing – it requires us to abandon our understanding that there is a spark of the divine in those we seek to defeat on the battlefield.

How is it possible, after all, to find humanity in proud nazis?

How do we find the holy in people who espouse fascist ideas?

How do we set aside brutal trauma, historical oppression, intentional cruelty wrought at a level of national and international policy?

How do we find the holy in what appears to us to be everything BUT divine?

Universalism teaches us that every person is created in the image of god, and that every person is worthy of that same god's grace and love and redemption.

We must, therefore, make room for the process of transformation.

To imagine that world, we must be able to reclaim what we know to be true as human beings inhabiting a planet with finite resources that must be shared with others.

We must remember that morality is based in relationship, in community, in shared experience.



Figure 7: "Through Poisoned Times: Memoirs of a Nazi Child" -- Georg Friedrich Haas

Let's go back to my friend Georg Friedrich Haas.

Georg Haas is an internationally celebrated composer of contemporary classical music. It is not a genre I understand, but I do understand that people who know about such things find him to be very smart and good at what he does. He composes microtonal music, which is far beyond my simple understanding of classical music to understand.

It was not until he was a young man in his 20s that Haas learned that the stories he was told as a child were not true: That six million Jews killed was a gross exaggeration, and that WWII was instead the fault of the Allied forces acting aggressively toward the peace-loving Nazi regime.<sup>1</sup>

Those were the stories he was told growing up.

He explained in an interview in 2022 that he wanted to bear witness to what he had seen and heard as a child, and to hold himself accountable for the things he believed as a young man.

“Yes, the darkness, sadness and chasms in my music are rooted in the pain and shame of what parents and grandparents did. And in the pain and shame of what I myself thought and said growing up”.<sup>2</sup>

It has taken decades of learning and growth – and no small amount of therapy, I am sure – to bring him to an understanding of the lies he was taught, and a space of mental health where he could write a memoir about it. The memoir is only available in German, but I understand it is a powerful story if you are one who can read German.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://minimalismore.es/index.php/en/2022/11/06/georg-friedrich-haas-publishes-his-autobiography/>

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*





*Figure 8-9: Georg Friedrich Haas and Mollena Williams-Haas, New York City, 2015*

Haas moved to the United States in 2013 to take a job on the Music Faculty at Columbia University. Shortly thereafter, he met my friend Mollena Williams, an educator in sexuality and BDSM, and a native of Harlem.

Their connection was instant and strong, and they were married in 2015, by a woman rabbi in a Jewish Synagogue in New York.



As a team, Mollena serves as his muse and inspiration, as well as the person who tries to make sure he eats when he is composing and that his shirt is tucked in when he is at a fancy event.

This week they are in Tokyo for a performance of his most recent composition. Haas continues to compose and travel the globe for his art.

What is it that transformed that little boy on the cover of his memoir into the man that he is today?

The work he has done to RE-humanize himself cannot be understated. He has had to undo all of the lessons he learned as a child, carefully imparted to him by loving parents and grandparents, who supported his music and his art.



And yet, he managed to do it.

And this gives me hope.

If one man can learn to re-humanize himself so that he is able to see the humanity, the spark of the divine, in those he was taught to hate, then certainly others can as well.

Can we imagine a world without war?

A world where all people are recognized as humans worthy of love? Redemption?

Being able to see the humanity in others does not prevent us from seeing the evil they do and working to stop it. It merely means that we need not lose our souls to hate in our efforts to fight that hate.

If one man can do it, so can I.

If one man can do it, so can you.

If one man can do it, so can we all.

Imagine with me, if you will, what it would be like to create a world where we reclaim our own humanity as we learn to acknowledge once again the humanity of others.



It is not going to happen this afternoon, and probably not before the end of this year, but that does not prevent us from starting today.

The holy humanity in me recognizes and celebrates the holy humanity in you.

Let's start there.

Blessed be.

Amen.