

## **Get Smart**

### **The Myth of Redemptive Violence and the Sanctity of Partnership**

By  
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof  
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There's an ancient Babylonian myth, one of the oldest stories on Earth, that you may never have heard before, but might also seem strangely familiar. It goes like this:

Once upon a time, the gods lived in fear of a monster named Tiamat who slithered unseen beneath the ocean's surface. They never knew when she might rise up from below and devour them, so they always lived in great dread and uncertainty about the future. Finally, a savior was born, a fierce warrior god named Marduk, whom the other gods pleaded might destroy the underwater menace and rid their lives terror once and for all. After a time, Marduk agreed to fight Tiamat, but only if the other gods made him their supreme leader, which, under such duress, they gladly obliged.

So, upon preparing himself for battle, Marduk goes out in search of Tiamat, and when she finally emerges out of the sea and opens her gaping jaws to devour him, the powerful storm god stirs up a great wind that fills her belly and causes her to expand like an enormous balloon. He then takes aim and shoots one of his lightning bolt arrows into her side, causing her to explode. Finally, he takes the remains of the beast that had once brought such chaos, and uses them to fashion the heavens, the Earth, and all living creatures. And that, according to the Babylonians, is how the world was created.

The reason this story might seem familiar to you, even if you've never heard the names Marduk or Tiamat before, is because it's the same story people have been telling for thousands of years. It's the same story many of us have heard in some fashion just about everyday of our lives. It is the myth that violence will save us, and it is the foundational myth of every Dominator culture. Theologian Walter Wink says this "Myth of Redemptive Violence," is "the real myth of the modern world. It, and not Judaism or Christianity or Islam, is the dominant religion in our society today."<sup>1</sup>

The story structure of this most ancient of myths goes like this; civilization, society, law and order, if you will, becomes threatened by some internal or external threat. A hero arises to defend and save the establishment. The story comes to climax as the would-be savior is almost destroyed in battle and all seems lost. But, in the end, through bravery, skill, good fortune, and, sometimes, divine intervention, the savior utterly destroys the evil enemy and reestablishes world order.

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<sup>1</sup> Wink, Walter, *The Powers that Be*, A Galilee Book published by Doubleday, New York, NY, 1998, p. 42.

With many exceptions, this is pretty much the underlying structure in most our stories. Just as Marduk slays the underwater goddess Tiamat among the Babylonians, Yahweh slays Leviathan among the ancient Hebrews, for instance. Even the story of historical Jesus, who began as peaceful social reformer, was transformed by the Roman Dominator culture into the story of his bloody and miraculous victory over sin and death. And in the promos for the story's sequel, Christ will return with a double-edge sword, accompanied by an army of angels to slay Satan and establish a new World order.

But this ancient storyline shows up in the structure of today's most popular novels, films, and TV shows too. Even stories as seemingly as innocuous as children's cartoons repeat this tired theme, "the victory of order over chaos by means of violence."<sup>2</sup> As Walter Wink goes on to explain:

Few cartoons have run longer or been more influential than Popeye and Bluto. In a typical segment, Bluto abducts a screaming and kicking Olive Oyl, Popeye's girlfriend. When Popeye attempts to rescue her, the massive Bluto beats his diminutive opponent to a pulp, while Olive Oyl helplessly wrings her hands. At the last moment, as our hero oozes on the floor, and Bluto is trying, in effect, to rape Olive Oyl, a can of spinach pops from Popeye's pocket and spills into his mouth. Transformed by this gracious infusion of power, he easily demolishes the villain and rescues his beloved.<sup>3</sup>

Wink goes on to point out that none of the characters in this story ever learn their lesson from it, and so the format of every Popeye cartoon is the same. They are doomed to repeat the Myth of Redemptive Violence over and over, just as we continue telling it to ourselves, guised in a variety of mediums, as if trying to convince ourselves that the easy way out, violence, will eventually save us even though it never really does.

Violence tends mostly to only beget more violence. The false notion it will save us, that war is somehow Holy, that we can establish peace through war, has only perpetuated more violence throughout human history. In the 16th Century, 1.6 million people were killed in war. A century later, the number inverted to 6.1 million. In the 1700's it rose still further to 7 million. In the 19th Century the number almost tripled, rising to 19.4 million people. All of these numbers combined, however, cannot compare with the staggering 109 million people killed in war during the 20th Century alone. And, in almost all these periods, nearly half those killed were civilians.<sup>4</sup> Now, little more than a decade into the new century, it appears these tragic statistics are continuing to rise.

But it seldom seems the Dominator culture is as disturbed by the mayhem it

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

takes to keep order, as it is by the mere suggestion that violence doesn't work, that violence is a false god, that our myth is wrong. In the 1960's and 70's, for example, our society not only saw that violence doesn't always work, through the Vietnam War, but it also witnessed the unthinkable, that its opposite, nonviolence can work, through the successes of the Civil Rights movement. You can imagine the confusion and fear many people were experiencing by 1975, as they watched the fall of Saigon to the Communists, even after the loss of nearly 60 thousand U.S. soldiers, and hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese. The televised event was preceded just a year earlier by the resignation of our country's top-man, its modern Marduk, President Richard Nixon.

I believe that if it weren't for a then budding Hollywood director, Steven Spielberg, the national psyche could not have endured the devastating indictment of its most fundamental belief—that violence will save us. How else can we explain the success of his low-budget horror flick, *Jaws*, released just two months after Ho Chi Minh took Saigon? The visual effects for this film, which upon its release became the highest grossing film of all time, were so poor that most the fake shark footage had to be thrown out. Clearly this film wasn't a success because of its innovative storytelling, but, quite the opposite, because it was a modern retelling of the ancient Myth of Redemptive Violence just as its reassuring message was needed most.

The story of *Jaws*, you will recall, is about new police Chief Martin Brody, whose peaceful job in an idyllic New England seaside town is suddenly interrupted by a terrifying shark eating the tourists. Although the shark gets the best of him throughout most the film, Chief Brody comes through in the end by kicking an oxygen tank into the shark's mouth, then shooting it with his pistol and blowing the devouring beast to smithereens, just like Marduk did to Tiamat thousands of years ago.

But my favorite modern version of this ancient myth is, by far, Mel Brooks' iconic TV series, *Get Smart*. The half-hour comedy show, which ran from 1965 to 1970, is about a bumbling secret agent, Maxwell Smart and his partner, agent 99. They work for an organization called CONTROL in an effort to thwart the evil intentions of an organization called, what else, CHAOS. During the show's final episode the head of CHAOS is defeated once and for all after a cigarette blows up in his mouth forcing him off the edge of a cliff. Smart, no doubt, refers to this as "the old exploding cigarette trick," which, as we have seen, is at least as old as Marduk's defeat over Tiamat, and used also to defeat the shark in *Jaws*. Afterward, 99 looks over the edge of the cliff and says, "You know, Max, sometimes I think we're no better than they are, the way we murder and kill and destroy people." Smart responds, "Why, 99, you know we have to murder and kill and destroy in order to preserve everything that's good in the world."<sup>5</sup> What I appreciate most about this version of the myth is that, through laughter, it helps us to gently see our own folly, and the irony of a story that promises peace through violence. And that's what we

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

have to realize if we ever are really going to *get smart*.

So that's the Myth of Redemptive Violence that is the underpinning of every Dominator Culture. Now the term "Dominator Culture" itself stems from the work of historian Riane Eisler, who suggests such a society exists wherever "the power that takes, rather than gives, life,"<sup>6</sup> is most revered. What these cultures share in common, she says, is "a social system in which male dominance, male violence, and a generally hierarchic and authoritarian social structure [is] the norm."<sup>7</sup> Chaos theorist, Ralph Abraham also explained, that "The conquest of chaos... by the forces of law and order... is [also] a basic feature of the dominator society,"<sup>8</sup> which, as we have seen, is indicative of the Myth of Redemptive Violence in all its multifarious forms. Abraham's friend, the late Terrance McKenna, said these dominator cultures also have "a social economy based on rape and plunder."<sup>9</sup> I would say this is also the environmental policy of most Dominator cultures too. And the important contributions of Walter Wink state outright that the, "Domination system'... sustains itself by violence and the myth of redemptive violence."<sup>10</sup>

So, part of the solution to this age old paradigm that keeps us repeating ancient patterns of oppression and violence, reinforced by our reenacting the heroic story of violence at ever turn, is to begin telling ourselves a new story. One version of the old story, for example, is that the world, indeed, the Universe itself, is only as old as humanity, and that it and all other creatures are here for us to "subdue and have dominion over."<sup>11</sup> It is a shortsighted myth that helps us justify our violence against the Earth itself. A non-dominator alternative, and a much truer story at that, is the Universe story itself, which begins nearly 14 billion years ago, making human beings only the latest arrivals in a much larger and ongoing process. Seeing ourselves as part of the Universe, in turn, enables us to realize there is something much larger than our own anthropocentric interests.

I would call it the cosmic story, but *cosmos*, the Greek word for "order," reflect only part of the Universe. The other part includes *chaos*. But in the Myth of Redemptive Violence, Chaos is always the enemy, the monster, that must be feared and destroyed in order to maintain order. "In our current patriarchal paradigm," Ralph Abraham explains, "Order is to Chaos as good is to evil, and this has been the status quo for the past four to six millennia."<sup>12</sup> He goes on to say that, "Our challenge now is to restore goodness to chaos and disorder to a degree, and to reestablish the partnership of Cosmos and Chaos, so necessary to nature, to health, and to

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<sup>6</sup> Eisler, Riane, *The Chalice and the Blade*, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1987, 1995, p. 48.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> Abraham, Ralph, *Chaos, Gaia, Eros*, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1994, p. 65.

<sup>9</sup> McKenna, Terrance, *Food of the Gods*, Bantam Books, New York, NY, 1992, p. 118.

<sup>10</sup> Wink, *ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 1:28.

<sup>12</sup> Abraham, *ibid.*, p. 141.

creation.”<sup>13</sup> Chaos is necessary because it is the origin of all things, just as the womb is the giver of all life, and black holes the mothers of galaxies. In Greek mythology, Chaos is an indescribable deity whose wife is name, Nox, or Night, and their child is Erebus, Darkness. It is only after Darkness and Night come together, as mothers and sons are prone to do in Greek mythology, that Aether, Light, and Hemera, Day, are born. Without Chaos, there is no creativity or transformation. Without Chaos, we are destined to repeat the same patterns over and over like hapless ghosts.

This fear of chaos, or disorder, also helps us understand why Dominator cultures oppress women. Chaos itself is feminine, a mother, who has the power to give life. In order to maintain law and order through the violent power to take life, those with the power to give life must be strictly controlled and suppressed. This is why the Hebrew creation story turns reality on its head with the claim that Woman was born of Man, Eve from Adam’s side, and not the other way around.

On a more practical level, Riane Eisler contrasts the Dominator Culture with the Partnership Way, representing the view that it is actually equality, or, love, if you will, that will truly save us, which was also the original message of Historical Jesus as compared to Conquering Christ. In a Partnership culture we cannot do violence against others because we are in genuine relationship with them. They are our equals and we care about them as we do ourselves. This egalitarian mindset, coupled with the awareness that all beings share in the sacred story of the Universe, transforms our fear of Chaos and uncertainty, into opportunities to create something new, to evolve, to solve problems that have been plaguing us far too long, and to live in harmony with the life giving and life sustaining forces of nature. Ralph Abraham characterizes the Partnership society as “a renewal of creativity in the arts, a striving for the rights of woman and animals, for the preservation of the environment, and for peace between nations and people.”<sup>14</sup>

The good news is that the world seems to be on the verge of transition to a Partnership model of society right now. It may have began a generation ago when we first saw the image of our planet from outer space, as a beautiful whole, with no nations or grids overlaying its continents. It is a powerful image, the most downloaded image on the Internet, and is reminiscent of Black Elk’s famous vision:

Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>14</sup> Abraham, *ibid.*, p. 73.

Now, through the mass communication technology of our age, it is becoming increasingly difficult to deny our similarities with and connections to people in every nation, or to ignore our vital relationship to our planet. We are awakening to the reality of being part of one world, one hoop. As Unitarian Universalists, we are especially poised to help usher our entire species into this new mode of being, because our religion already values every person, promotes pluralism, and has the goal of world community. This is precisely how Riane Eisler characterizes religion in a Partnership society. "Its primary standard," she says, "is the moral imperative of moving through our lives with awareness, empathy, and respect. This standard fosters the sense of oneness that is at the core of partnership spirituality."<sup>15</sup> The very name of our faith contains two words that mean "oneness." Like Black Elk, we see the world as a sacred hoop to which we all belong as equals.

Eisler goes on to say Partnership religions must "challenge religious stories and rules that are inhuman."<sup>16</sup> Today we are doing that by exposing the Myth of Redemptive Violence that is the real religion of the modern world, in favor of a Cosmic story that doesn't fear Chaos, but embraces its mystery and appreciates its creative potential. "I believe the voice of love is the real voice of God," Eisler theologizes, "of that mysterious cosmic energy that brought us the beauty of the stars and sunsets, of caring and creativity, of all that gives joy and meaning in our lives. I believe that we all have this inner voice of love, and that we all can help build a world where love is embodied, nature is respected, and our human need for fairness and caring is honored."<sup>17</sup>

That's the Partnership Way. That's who we are as Unitarian Universalists. And that's the world we are creating.

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<sup>15</sup> Eisler, *ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.