



The World in Turmoil

Turning the Ship Around

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If you read the news today, it is hard not to worry. War, rising tension between great powers, a climate changing faster than we act on it... The world feels more turbulent than in decades. About twenty years ago I had a dream that has stayed with me. For many reasons, it feels relevant to share it.

A Dream

In the dream I was high above the earth. Many others were there with me, and together we watched a great river flowing below. Upon the river were many flagships, engaged in fierce battle, firing upon one another. They were so consumed by the conflict that they did not notice where the current was carrying them. But from above, the course of the river was clear: ahead lay a vast and terrible waterfall, like Niagara Falls.

The flagships remained oblivious to the danger. From above we cried out to them: Stop! Can you not see that you are going in the wrong direction? You must turn back. We could see that if the ships reversed course, another current, another channel of the river, would carry them safely onward. But to reach that safer way, the battle had to cease; the ships had to turn back. Yet no matter how loudly we shouted, they could not hear us. Then I woke up.

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What the Dream Means

The symbols are straightforward. The flagships are the nations of the world. Sometimes their battle is an actual war, but mostly it is allegorical – the constant pursuit of greater wealth and power, and the protection of our material way of life. The waterfall is the climate crisis already unfolding around us. The nations can see the danger, yet what we have done so far has not been enough: there is always something that is more urgent, usually the economy, and politicians are unwilling to make decisions that might threaten their careers. So, we keep postponing, and changing course grows harder every year.

But the dream is not only about nations. Nations are made of individuals, and changing our own habits is no easier at that level. A smoker knows the harm, yet the pleasant sensation is here and now while the cost lies safely in the future. We all have similar biases. We mean to be present with those we love yet reach for a phone instead; we mean to deepen our spiritual practice but tell ourselves “Tomorrow.” And so, the years pass. As individuals we are ruled by our habits and conditioning, products of a karmic cycle repeating from lifetime to lifetime. Whatever we do now builds the next moment. If we want to change the course of that stream, in our own lives or in the life of the world, we must act differently, here and now.

And here is the detail I keep returning to: those of us who saw the danger were not down on the ships. We were above them, shouting and they could not hear us. It is not enough to see clearly and call out from a distance. Real help must come from within the situation itself.

Be the Change

Mahatma Gandhi said, “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” I think this is the practical heart of the dream. We must walk among the people; we must step onto those flagships ourselves and accept the worries and dangers that await us there, rather than call down from a safe height. While we are here, our task is to remember who we truly are – sparks of divine fire, of eternal Light – and to remind others of their own light. As Madame Blavatsky writes in *The Key to Theosophy*, “no one can sin, nor suffer the effects of sin, alone... in reality there is no such thing as ‘separateness’.” Nothing we do happens in isolation.

When we do good, we encourage others to do the same; when we do harm, we give others permission to do likewise; and when we do nothing, we strengthen indifference.

This is why lasting peace in the world must begin with peace within. As long as we identify only with our personality, we are pulled about by whatever touches us, and we answer harm with harm. But when someone wounds us, it is only our feelings that are hurt, not our true self, which cannot be wounded. Violence does not, in the end, overcome violence; what changes things is a genuine sense that whichever side of the border we live on, we are fundamentally the same, and that more unites us than divides us. If we want to help others, we must first carry peace within ourselves, for we cannot give what we do not have.

A Peace Mantra

I would like to close, as I did in the original talk, with a peace mantra composed more than a hundred years ago, during the Finnish civil war, by the theosophist Fredrik Heliö. In Finland, many lodges still conclude their meetings with these words, to let a beneficent force radiate outward in all directions.

May light shine into the darkness.

May righteousness prevail over violence, injustice, and selfish gain.

Peace to all beings, in the east, the south, the west, and the north.

Peace among the peoples. Peace to the leaders of nations.

May war and strife cease.

May everyone see a brother in every human being.

Peace, peace, peace.