ENOUGH FOR BOTH

A sermon by Galen Guengerich
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“Ohoy, villain! Wretched iron! Cursed bog ore! You flesh-eater, gnawer of bones, you spiller of innocent blood! Scoundrel, how did you get power? Damn you, bastard! Wretched iron!”

Thus begins the 20th-century Estonian composer Veljo Tormis’ powerful choral masterpiece titled (in English) “Curse upon Iron.” Deploying a text by the Estonian poet August Annist, Tormis unleashes a withering critique of industrial civilization and the incalculable damage it has caused to human beings and to planet Earth. The curse gets laid upon iron not mainly because of what iron has done, but because of what the production of iron has led to.

“Iron, you’re still soft and gentle,” the poet says. “How have you yet to be tempered to make steel from harmless iron? Bring the venom from a viper!”

The venomous qualities of steel became lethally apparent when knives and spears replaced rocks and war clubs, and axes and sabers replaced tomahawks and boomerangs. The innovation continued with the development of guns, cannons, tanks, and airplanes. Then came brand-new, intelligent, precise, powerful killers, made of chromium, titanium, uranium, plutonium, and a host of other elements. These, the poet says, are ready to fly in any direction, “hit the target, paralyze, and knock out of action, obliterate, render helpless and defenseless, harm and hurt, cause unknowable loss, and kill, kill.”

What was true in 1972 when Tormis wrote his Curse is even more true today, especially with the development of drones that fly silently, bearing Hellfire missiles. But the evolution of weapons isn’t the only problem posed by industrial civilization. Cinematographer Godfrey Reggio emphasized this point 10 years after “Curse upon Iron” in his groundbreaking 1982 cult classic “Koyaanisqatsi,” which translates as “Life Out Of Balance.” If you haven’t seen Koyaanisqatsi, I commend it to you. It’s 86 minutes of stunning natural beauty set against ironically impressive industrial brawn, wordlessly conveyed with a mesmerizing soundscape by composer Philip Glass.

In diverse ways, and in every corner of the planet, advances in industry and technology have made our world more physically dangerous, more politically unstable, and more ecologically fragile than it has ever been.

But these advances have also had the opposite effect. The fact that scientists have been able to synthesize, test, and produce a vaccine for Covid-19 in less than 12 months is nothing short of astounding. A world where rocks and clubs are state-of-the-art weapons would in some ways be safer than our world today. But a world without
vaccines and antibiotics, not to mention blood tests, scanners, chemotherapy, and other diagnostic and treatment tools, would be far more dangerous.

When craft workers in southern India learned how to use charcoal to smelt iron into steel about 2,300 years ago, average life expectancy around the globe was about 35 years. In other words, I would’ve died about the time I came to All Souls. Truth be told, I actually would’ve been dead at age 13 of a serious thyroid condition. But I was fortunate that surgery took care of the problem. Today, surgery wouldn’t be necessary; drugs would suffice. For my part, I’m grateful for the many benefits of advances in industry and technology, despite the deadly hazards of drones and other forms of immaculate destruction.

It turns out that advances in our external capabilities as human beings, whether industrial or technological, aren’t the essence of the problem. The problem lies within — the motivations that drive us, the desires that compel us, and the compassions that move us. If the so-called state of nature, at least in political terms, pits each of us against all of us in endless wars of aggression and destruction, then the institutions of human civilization expect us to act differently toward each other. We’re to treat each other with dignity instead of disdain, with kindness instead of coercion, with an awareness that we all come from the same source and will ultimately share the same destiny. Civilized behavior requires us to open our hearts to each other.

Dr. Jacques Morcos teaches in the Department of Neurological Surgery at the University of Miami in Florida. In the November 2020 issue of the Journal of Neurosurgery, he published an article titled “Brief encounters that last a lifetime: an immigrant neurosurgeon’s reflection on American exceptionalism, George Floyd, sunlight, and race.”

Morcos grew up in Lebanon and came to the US 30 years ago. He was a fourth-year medical student at the American University of Beirut in 1983, when the US Marine base in Beirut was blown up by a suicide bomber. The explosion killed 220 Marines, 18 Navy soldiers, and three Army soldiers, and injured more than 100 others. The Marines had been deployed as a peacekeeping force during the horrifically destructive Lebanese Civil War, which had begun in 1975 and would not officially end until 1990.

Morcos had never visited the US, he says, nor come face-to-face with its legendary military. He knew of America only through its exported movies, its rock bands, and the handful of brave US professors who taught at the University in Beirut during the war. English was his third language, after Arabic and French.

The casualties of the suicide bombing flooded into the small emergency room at the University Medical Center and spilled out onto the streets around. The surgical chief dispatched Morcos to one of the injured Marines lying on the pavement. Morcos approached, he says, with enormous trepidation. The shirtless Marine was “an impressive amalgam of muscle, grit, and composure.”

Morcos writes, “He was riddled with rocks and shrapnel, and I was riddled with fear. He deserved a real doctor, and all he got was me. I simply could not let him die. I
kneeled next to him, visibly shaken. He was conscious and bleeding actively from his left temple, and probably from other places I could not see. I glanced for advice at my overburdened chief resident, who was working feverishly a few bodies away. He gestured to me to put pressure on the wound. I did, with my ungloved and probably hesitant hand, and held it tight. That’s all I did, out there in the middle of the street; that’s all I knew to do.”

Then something remarkable happened. Morcos says, “Perhaps it was the way I looked or my tremor; perhaps he sensed my sadness, my incompetence. But this man, injured from head to toe, oozing blood, honor, and duty, this man who left his family behind and risked his life to bring peace to a people he never knew, this foreigner in a strange land, who was hated and targeted by others in my own country, just turned slightly to look at me, broke a smile and said, “Don’t worry, doc, you will be fine.”

Morcos goes on to say that one more thing struck him that day. The fallen Marine he had just met in the flesh did not look like the mythic figures representing American culture that were glorified in the movies, whose skin readily reflected the sunlight. The people chosen to represent America in the movies were White, like Morcos.

The first authentic American patriot I ever came across, Morcos says, had skin that happened to be blessed with enough pigment to help it absorb rather than reflect most of the sunlight that shines on it. Yet the light that bounced off the Black wounded Marine as he lay bleeding on Lebanese soil revealed the Marine’s heart and soul — his courage and resilience, his intelligence and sensibility, his generosity and wisdom, his grace under fire and dignity under strife. He was, Morcos says, “the best possible ambassador who could’ve represented the essence and destiny of the US to the rest of the world.”

Thirty-seven years later, Morcos says, he watched as another Black American was also lying down on the street, not by choice either, but under very different circumstances. He says, “George Floyd was forced to lie down in shame on his belly, under the Minneapolis sun, whose rays his skin mostly absorbed. Uninjured by the shrapnel of foreign hatred, he was still victim of an oppressive knee, the symbol of a more evil weapon than suicide bombing: chronic insidious domestic racism. “The man kneeling was White like me, but this is where the similarity ends,” Morcos says. He adds, “Our nation, at its best, a beacon of hope to the rest of the world, simply cannot continue to marginalize, mistreat, vilify, or murder Black men and women.”

Morcos concludes his article by saying he doesn’t know what became of his inspiring Marine, nor did he ever find out his name. Morcos is still looking for him. He imagines a reunion between the two, at which Morcos would read some of the writings of the Lebanese-American philosopher Kahlil Gibran. I will stop at one special quote, Morcos says. “Standing together under American sunlight, one of us reflecting it and the other one absorbing it, we will shout in unison, one loud voice, to all who care to listen: “Do not be merciful, but be just, for mercy is bestowed upon the guilty criminal, while justice is all that the innocent require.”
Seventy-two years ago this coming Thursday, on December 10, 1948, delegates to the United Nations General Assembly in Paris adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the aftermath of two devastating world wars, the UDHR articulated the political consequences our common humanity. Urged on by the indefatigable Eleanor Roosevelt, the delegates declared that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and the security of person. No one should be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Everyone has the right to take part in the government of their country. Everyone has the right to education, to just and favorable working conditions, to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of themselves and their family. And so on.

The idea that we are each other’s keeper, that we bear collective responsibility for each other’s well-being, is morally potent. It insists that all of us collectively are responsible for the dignity and wellbeing of each of us individually. Put differently, the wellbeing of each is a litmus test for the moral integrity of all.

In political terms, this principle links the plight of each individual citizen to the character of the state as a whole. But the inverse of the principle of collective responsibility is also true. If all of us are responsible for the dignity and wellbeing of each of us, it is also true that each of us is responsible for the dignity and wellbeing of all of us. Responsibility is a two-way street: we are to be both cared for and caring.

Our challenge during these medically and politically perilous times is to keep ourselves and each other focused on the values we embrace and the commitments we have made. This is fundamentally a religious challenge. It requires a discipline of gratitude and an ethic of reciprocity. We are all in this together. Either we will flourish together, or we will perish together.

Veljo Tormis ends “Curse Upon Iron” on an ironic note. “Wretched iron! We are kindred, of the same breed, of the same seed we have sprouted. You are earthborn, I am earthborn, in the dark soil we are kindred. For we both live on the same earth and in that earth we too will merge. There will be land enough for both.”