

ROXANA ROBINSON

Peace

What do we mean by “Peace?” Maybe the word conjures up the image of a broad landscape, tall grasses, shady trees, a distant horizon. Animals or humans somewhere, grazing or working quietly. My own vision would contain living beings. Outer space would be absent of strife, but it would be empty. For me, peace requires living presence.

But just to be alive means struggle. We’re in a state of constant struggle just within our own bodies, lungs going in and out, hearts thudding, brains and nerves doing their mysterious work. We’re fighting off bacteria and infections, creating new cells. We struggle for survival through competition with other living organisms: we rip carrots from the ground, catch fish from the sea, cause animals to be slaughtered. We struggle in other ways: we disagree with others. We argue with our neighbors and our family. We try to make the world different.

We create conflict. We’ve all felt warlike impulses. We feel a rushing surge of anger, the will to supersede, compete, challenge, obliterate. To attack. Maybe to kill. The impulse is visceral and emotional rather than cerebral. It’s driven by adrenaline and some mad interior logic: *Just do it!*

These feelings have consequences. If we do attack someone, afterwards, when the adrenaline drains away, it leaves us feeling isolated. We’ve separated ourselves from the community we’ve attacked. We’ve drawn a line between us and them. But these warlike impulses are human, we all feel them to some degree.

We’ve all felt peaceful impulses, too. We know the wish to forgive, understand, embrace. Cherish and protect and empathise. These are also driven by something

visceral and interior, not by the rational brain. And they have consequences, too. After we act on those impulses we feel connected to the community, to the rest of humanity.

Neither is permanent. The state of war can't be sustained indefinitely; the human soul wears out. And after a time of peace the horror of war fades in the collective memory, and warlike urges recur, often from a new generation.

Peace must exist in the midst of these opposing forces. It's not the absence of conflict, but an active, constructive response.

My favorite image of peace comes from a book I read, years ago, about an African tribe of bushmen called the !Kung. (As I remember it, the "!" represents a click sound). The !Kung lived in the Kalahari Desert, and during the 1950s a pair of American anthropologists lived with them and studied them. They became very close to the tribe. (I should acknowledge that today this arrangement seems condescending and colonialist. I'm not condoning it.) The book was written by their daughter.

The !Kung were small in stature, but great in skill and effectiveness. They were impressive for many reasons, but one was that they were essentially nonviolent. When a member of the tribe broke their rules, they shunned him until he recanted. They made him leave the tribe, and in the Kalahari Desert, isolation meant death. The only way to survive was through cooperation, sharing energy and resources. So it was interesting that in such a wild and challenging landscape, their own survival strategy was a peaceful one.

But the best part of the story was not about the way the tribe got along with their members, but about the way they got along with their rivals.

The Kalahari Desert was a harsh landscape, mostly arid and nearly barren. Survival there took place within narrow margins. The inhabitants had highly evolved survival strategies.

The !Kung were omnivores, which meant they were carnivores. This put them into direct competition with another apex predator: *Panthera leo*, the great African lion.

In the natural world, creatures have survival strategies. A cougar will target the smallest and weakest deer in a herd. Not because of cowardice but practicality: he can't risk attack by a big powerful animal who could gore him or break a rib with his kick. A wounded animal can die quickly, from infection, or slowly, from starvation, if he's too weak to hunt. So a predator chooses animals weaker than he.

Predators who share the same territory and hunt the same prey are competitors, and so exist in a constant state of tension.

The bushmen and the lions had shared the same territory for hundreds of years, maybe thousands. They hunted the same prey – grazing animals, gazelles, giraffes and their friends. But they left each other alone.

Instead, they had a system. The !Kung were bowhunters, and when they shot a giraffe they might wound but not kill him. The long-legged animal would set off through the brush, moving faster than the hunters, who followed by tracking his bloody trail. It might take several days for the giraffe to die. When he finally came down, collapsing into a huge heap among the desert foliage, the hunters might be hours away. The carcass would wait for the scavengers. Sometimes the first of these to arrive, drawn by the smell, was a lion. Sometimes more than one lion.

I remember the description of one these encounters. The giraffe's huge corpse is on the desert floor. Two lions, male and female, lie stretched out beside it, faces pressed against the body. They're gnawing on the flesh. The lions hear the bushmen coming through the bush, and the male turns slightly, watching, but he keeps eating. The bushmen come closer and the lions begin to growl. When the hunters appear in the clearing the lions flatten their ears and begin to growl. They go on eating, snapping and gulping, but their eyes follow the bushmen. The hunters walk upright, carrying their bows at their sides. They greet the lions and begin to talk, walking up and down in the clearing. They tell the lions that they are eating a giraffe that belongs to the !Kung. We shot him, they say, You know that. We tracked him for three days, and now he is dead. He is ours. You must leave him alone.

The bushmen walk back and forth, dignified, respectful, insistent. They are not angry. They shake their heads and wag their fingers at the lion, talking in clear, certain tones. The lions growl, lashing their tails back and forth, watching from the corners of their eyes. They bite the carcass, bolting mouthfuls of meat. No, say the bushman, you must stop. It is our giraffe. They come closer, walking slowly and confidently, sure of their moral rights. They shake their heads, admonishing the lions. The male lion, his great tail thumping the earth, his ears flat with displeasure, his lips drawn back, tears into the giraffe's flesh. But he's listening. Finally he raises his head, tossing his dark mane and snarling. The hunters do not stop. They wag their fingers at him, shaking their heads. It is ours, they said. You know that. Leave him.

First the male, then the female, crawl backward, snarling, moving away from the giraffe. Then they spring to their feet, crouching low. They watch the hunters, growling, as they slide toward the edge of the clearing. There they turn; they vanish into the brush. The hunters wait for a moment, out of courtesy and also out of prudence, then they settle in to cut up the carcass. They know the lions are there in

the bush, watching. When the hunters have finished cutting up the meat they leave something for the lions.

Essential to this outcome is respect: for each other, and for the rule of law. The hunters didn't interfere with the lion's prey when he brought it down himself, which meant they had the moral authority to demand that he leave them their prey when they had brought it down. They both obeyed a rule of law. For thousands of years, lions and !Kung, both apex predators, survived in a state of peaceful coexistence.

The reason I raise this is that I think peace is an active state, not a passive one. It's not merely the absence of dispute, it's an active commitment to a non-violent resolution.

Humans aren't limited now to finger-wagging admonitions, in order to persuade others of our ideas. We have more tools of every sort. We have better methods of communication, more ways of predicting responses and understanding them.

And we have more powerful weapons: now we could kill that giraffe within seconds of seeing it, as well as any lion that approached it. Would that double kill mean the cessation of conflict? Would that be peace? Is that what peace means, a state in which everyone is frightened of the one who carries the biggest weapon?

What kind of peace would that be? How would we feel if we were the ones who didn't have the biggest weapon? If we were the ones moving quietly from tree to tree, staying in the shadows and hoping that the person with the rifle doesn't see us, or doesn't dislike us, or doesn't see us as a threat? Would that feel like peace?

What is it that creates peace? Can peace be one-sided, or would that be conquest? Does an occupied country feel at peace? Who is in charge of peace? What does peace have to do with power?

It seems to me that real peace, like the peace between the !Kung and their leonine neighbors, is one which power and responsibility are shared, and in which all the members of the community are respected. There is no peace without rule of law; without it you will never know when your peace will be violated. The lions knew that the !Kung would not steal their prey; the !Kung knew that the lions would not ambush them when they left. The !Kung and the lions were not friends, but they were members of the same community and they obeyed the same laws. They respected each other. Through respect they established trust, and trust is what makes peace possible.

These things don't occur in a vacuum, they require constant action. Peace is not a passive state. We must respect our neighbors and we must obey our laws. We must contribute to a state of trust. It's trust that produces the politics of peace across the globe. Peace requires more than simply feeling empathy and brotherhood, it

requires a means of resolving conflict. We are human; we will disagree. We must find a resolution. Peace requires commitment, engagement, struggle. Struggle, of course, is how we live, so we may as well struggle toward peace.

Think of those hunters, walking up and down, stating the law, and the lions listening. Everyone paying attention.

No war. Peace.



ROXANA ROBINSON is the author of five novels, including *Cost*; three collections of short stories; and the biography *Georgia O'Keeffe: A Life*. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Bookforum*, and *Tin House*, among other publications. Her latest novel, *Sparta*, received the James Webb Award for Distinguished Fiction from the USMC Heritage Foundation. She was recently elected president of the Authors Guild.