

CHARLIE ALICE RAYA

Planet 1: The roots of war

The
end
of
all
wars

Views from around the universe

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The end of all wars, planet one, the roots of war
extract: The beginning

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There is no sense
in destruction.

There is no sense
in dominance.

Dominance
is a form of destruction.

The end of all wars

Planet one: The roots of war, extract

The past of my planet is painful one, but maybe our story will be of use to those who are still entangled in wars.

Thirty-four years have passed since we ended all wars, but when I close my eyes, I can still see the devastations our nations inflicted upon each other.

I lived in a progressive city, a haven in a small neutral country — until the night when my country declared war, too.

Apparently the declaration had been expected. My city got bombed within a few hours and much of it was turned to rubble. This is how advanced we had become in warfare.

I lost twelve friends in the first days of the assaults, and I was trapped in the city, hiding in something that used to be a cellar but was little more than a hole by then.

For days, or maybe weeks, I felt like I was dead: unable to move, unable to think, unable to weep.

The bombing and shooting— always present, sometimes closer, sometimes farther away. The sleepless nights. The dreadful days. The hunger. The thirst. The rats. The smells— the reeking smells of blood, decay, urine— penetrating everything.

I was found by two people who brought me to an underground factory, which served as an open plain emergency hospital.

As I recovered some strength and sense, I watched the nurses and patients, and a resolution took shape in my mind: *These wars have to end, and I need to do my bit to accomplish this goal.*

There were whispers about thinkers who researched how to end all wars. These thinkers were said to have roots in different countries, but no one knew where they were.

One of the few known statements by this group was that all wars are the result of a failure. A failure to communicate, a failure to cooperate, a failure to be rational, a failure to create, a failure

to explore, a failure to empower. But the initial failure had been that we had never tried to end all wars — even though it is obvious that the only way to end one war is to end them all.

The thinkers added: Curiosity is a key to end all wars because curiosity will allow us to explore instead of walling ourselves in, to open to the other instead of killing them, to evolve as a species instead of destroying ourselves.

It was well known that anyone who was so much as suspected of searching for the famous thinkers would be killed. Tenthousands were already dead.

But I didn't care. I knew I had a good mind. I knew I could be useful in a group of thinkers. I had to try and find them.

While the wars raged on across the planet, I used the following two years to secretly learn three languages and seven crafts. I acquired forged papers for various countries, sewed some of them into my clothes, others into my packs.

A crucial preparation was to build two robust pairs of walking boots. Travelling by car was too expensive and with many roadblocks in place, too dangerous. Trains and planes were mostly used by the military, and also expensive. Bicycles were often stopped and horses unavailable. In short, the safest way to travel was on foot, and robust but old looking boots were indispensable.

A wounded ally left me their tools so I could pose as a repair person during my search. By then, I knew that it would be near impossible to find the famed group of thinkers. But I was certain that there were others like me and if we found each other, we could set up a group of thinkers ourselves.

A sick friend helped me to choose what to pack so that nothing I carried would give me away, and I could travel the planet inconspicuously. This also meant that I couldn't risk carrying any

notebooks, pens, books or digital devices because those were regarded as the possessions of deserters and traitors.

Then I died.

It was necessary to fake my own death to ensure that no authority would come looking for me. No friend would either, but that couldn't be helped.

After my death, I hid in a cave.

Death bothered me more than I had expected, and for some weeks I was prone to panic attacks and paranoia.

It was the unlikely friendship with a mountain bluebird which began to sooth and strengthen me.

As I unburdened myself in the presence of the bird, I realised how important it is to be listened to, and I wondered whether we resort to war because we feel ignored and see no other way to make ourselves heard.

After three months I left the cave.

On my second day of travelling, I reached a small town and only just avoided a group of military recruiting officers. That night, I inflicted an injury to my shoulder which would take a year or two to heal and which would exempt me from military service, should anyone ask.

The next evening, a grim-looking barkeeper grabbed me by my shirt, pulled me aside and whispered: 'Don't ever return to my bar but take my advice: You're too obvious. You need a story. Do you have children?'

Fighting to keep my trembling in check, I shook my head.

'Invent two of them. Make it a touching story and claim that your children were abducted by the enemy. Be careful always to choose the right enemy, depending on who wants to know.'

Then the barkeeper punched me in the stomach, dragged me to the door and kicked me out.

Without looking back, I scrambled to my feet and hastily walked away, clutching my belly. Some minutes later, keeping my steady pace, I checked my provisions. I had enough for three days. No need to take any chances. I could leave this town now. And I would have time to come up with a story before my next encounter with military officers — or with barkeepers.

When I reached another town, I was almost eager to tell the story of my non-existent children. Three, aged five to nine, my love and pride, and so courageous they must still be alive.

It worked. The barkeeper had been right. The story of my abducted children made me appear harmless and even trustworthy in the eyes of those I met.

There was no shortage of work for repair people, and I could often earn myself a bed, food or money, but as soon as the war was mentioned, most people froze, and it was difficult to find out who might be a thinker, too.

Over the years, I got lucky a few times. Once, we were four people, and so happy to have found each other that we separated to search for more people. The plan was to reunite in a larger group.

I never saw them again.

In the summer of the tenth year of war, I suddenly found myself on a newly opened frontline and hardship brought me to the limits of my strength. When I managed to escape the proximity of battle, I came to a city where people were starving daily. Half starved myself, I stumbled on and found work on a farm — until fighter jets swarmed the air and bombed the farmhouse, barns and fields. Again, I pushed myself to get moving, but in the dawn of the eleventh year of the war, I nearly gave up. All my efforts had only led to more loss.

In my desperation, I decided to follow up on one last rumour.

There was a country in the north whose people had been erased, early on in this war, and whose settlements and lands had been destroyed, leaving nothing more than a ghost country behind. The rumour said that those who wanted to end all wars would meet in a ghost town south/east of that country, some hundred and twenty miles away from the mountainous stretch of land which connected that country to the rest of the world.

For all I knew it was a trap.

Today, it makes me chuckle to remember the days when we first encountered each other.

After hiding for the day, I slipped into the town under cover of dark — only to be discovered by shadows, some moving in the distance, others squatting on heaps of rubble, all on and around the town's central square. There were periods when we would circle each other like suspicious cats, never close enough to exchange words or bullets.

Three days after my arrival, two of us stumbled into each other, got into a fistfight, and eventually discovered that they had come to this town for the same reason.

After this discovery, the two fighters called to us, stating that they were thinkers and ready to fight anyone who stood in their way. But if we were thinkers, too, they would talk to us at the centre of the town square, provided we kept our hands above our heads.

Like the others, left and right of me, I raised my hands without thinking. I just did it. We just did it — and approached the two ragged figures, eyeing them and each other with suspicion written all over our faces.

I remember thinking: *Do they really look like thinkers?* As if the shape of their faces could confirm or disprove their claim. It was such an odd thought that I can only attribute it to some kind of

shock — shock about potentially being shot any second now, and shock about potentially having found other thinkers and not being in danger at all. It was such a surreal situation.

When one of the approaching people stopped, we all stopped, still some eighteen feet away from the summoners. And then, half-shouting, and in a jumble of languages, we began to grill each other, demanding proof that the others were indeed thinkers — until one of us shouted: ‘STOP!’

We all looked up from our heated exchanges, and the speaker said: ‘We are fools! If one of us was an enemy, we would be dead already. Have you ever heard of a soldier or an agent who would ask for a demonstration of thinking skills?’

Blushing, we took a moment to get our bearing and our breath back.

‘I don’t even have a firearm,’ the speaker added.

‘Bloody abyss! We should have searched each other for weapons!’ one of the earlier fighters cursed, and we all joined in, enraged at our carelessness.

‘We must be bloody thinkers!’ one of us mumbled. ‘Who else would be this stupid?’

It turned out that none of us had a firearm. Among us the most lethal weapons were my tools which included an axe. We all had small cutting knives. But that was it.

Some half an hour later, still embarrassed, we began our first conversation and discovered that we had all arrived in this ghost town within the last two weeks and that our stories were pretty similar: We had been travelling in disguise for years, found and lost allies, and as a last resort, we had come to this town.

Once we decided to trust each other, a strange joy spread through our bodies and minds — which was quickly replaced by a rush of panic. What if we weren’t safe here?

‘There are rumours that the north wars will turn this way again,’ one of us said. ‘We are only eight, but for me this is the largest and most representative group I have ever seen. We are from eight different countries. We are trained in more than eight different professions. And we represent many ages, all genders and backgrounds. I think we have a chance to do the work. But we need to find a safer place.’

Another one of us asked: ‘Why would the wars turn this way again? I thought no one lives in this country any more.’

‘True,’ the previous speaker returned. ‘But you know how the warmongers are. They prefer to fight on the soil of someone else’s country rather than on their own. There is also a rumour that this country is rich in minerals no one has claimed, yet.’

I nodded and said: ‘I saw plans for mineral extractions in the south of this country — when I did repair works in the house of a mineralogist. I didn’t make the connection then, but, of course, this means another war.’

Some of us nodded and one of us said: ‘When I studied the maps of this country, I noticed a small island far north, off a remote coastline. Even if the war comes to this country again, we might be safe there.’

It was in the first breaths of dusk that we began our weeks-long journey to the north/west coast of this country, tracking across scorched lands and passing more ghost towns and other abandoned settlements.

A week into our journey, we could no longer ignore that our nations were enemies and that we had all suffered the consequences of the other nations’ actions. Even my small but rich nation had used some of the deadliest weapons against the others’ nations.

That this hadn't come up before must have been some kind of denial. But whatever had kept a lid on our enmity for a week didn't hold any longer. It was a trifling argument about whether we should take a break or keep moving that pushed us over the edge, and we found ourselves on a roller coaster, one minute accusing each other fiercely, the next desperately searching for common ground, afraid that we were destroying this precious chance of working together.

After hours of this, we flopped down on the ground, exhausted — and wept. More than anything, we wanted peace. And yes, none of us would have chosen to team up with people from six of the nine most brutal nations. Only my small country hadn't been in the war from the beginning, and the country of another one of us only ever defended itself.

'And yet, here we are,' one of us said, their voice coarse, their tears welling up again. 'I want to find a way to end all wars. I can't do it on my own. But we can.'

What followed was a quiet conversation, offering our pains, our apologies, and reassuring each other that we had the same goal, and that we wanted to work together.

That night, we slept deeply, our bodies and minds in great need of recharging.

In the following days, we often walked in silence, giving room to the full spectrum of our thoughts and emotions, and attempting to cool and even heal ourselves a little.

Occasionally the journey demanded our full attention: a swamp blocking our way, the choice between walking along a poisoned field or through a forest where we might lose our way, a wild river, we eventually crossed by clinging to thick branches, a stony valley, so ragged that we often held on to each other to keep our balance.

But in between those challenges, we found some inner calm, and eventually we began to talk with each other more frequently again.

We all spoke some Gra, and as we began to connect, we decided to improve our Gra skills so that we could all communicate in one main language. Out of curiosity, and feeling a new openness in our hearts, we also learned phrases of each others' languages.

Because we rarely rested and often travelled by night, when the land was barren, we reached our destination sooner than expected, and on the twelfth day of the fifth month in the eleventh year of the war, we saw the island for the first time, off the coastline.

That night we crossed the sea in two small fishing boats and two kayaks we had found in an abandoned fishing village.

We were eight when we first set foot on the island, and twelve when we finally left it, nearly three years later.

I will not attempt to find the words to describe our first hours and days on the island. I will only say this: after years in the deadly fumes of war and after all the destructions we had seen, this island seemed like paradise to us, and we could hardly believe our luck.

For weeks, we were in a daze, often weeping or just staring at the flowers, feasting on the abundance of fruits or just dozing in the lush grass, breathing deeply on the beach or just floating in the lake.

Eventually, we remembered what had brought us here, and we explored the island with more focus.

It was possible to walk around the island in six hours. The coastline featured narrow beaches, cliffs and forests. Some two

hours inland from our landing spot, we discovered nine bombed and partly overgrown houses and three barns, all plundered.

This settlement was surrounded by a forest and nestled between a lake and a river, and it was close to a beach in the west, facing the open sea, not the mainland. It was a beautiful beach, flanked by two cliffs and covered in fine sand.

One of us took a kayak around the island and confirmed that the west beach was safe to approach from the water, and a day or two later, we brought all boats to this side of the island.

Apart from a diverse insect population, we only discovered some birds, mice, bats and snakes but no other animals. Maybe the plunderers had abandoned the island after hunting down all larger mammals. Fish and crabs, on the other hand, thrived in the shallow waters of the sea.

We had already discovered some gardens and on further exploration, we found a total of two crop fields, two cabbages and potatoes fields, a herb garden with nut trees, three vegetable gardens and three orchards, all overgrown but still providing some yield.

We each chose a house, all of which had one or two intact rooms, though little else. In the warm summer air, we cut and dried grass in large quantities and used the hay to make beds and seats for us. We also prepared the largest barn as a meeting space. This barn was undamaged, its walls partly bricks and clay, partly timber. Along two of the walls were lofts with some leftover straw.

When our bodies and minds showed the first signs of strength, we made it our habit to meet for two hours in the mornings, two in the afternoons and two in the evenings — and we began with our task: to discover how to end all wars.

We knew that we were all traumatised and that there would be no use in pushing ourselves. Our minds needed the freedom to roam, to zigzag, to randomly wander. To facilitate this, we whitewashed one of the walls in the barn, burned charcoal, and eventually began to fill the wall with our thoughts.

As our minds came fully alive again, it soon became apparent that we needed to be able to make personal notes during our discussions but also on our walks and while working in our gardens, and we began to experiment with making paper.

When we finally held the first notebooks in our hands, we decided to put our daily meetings on hold so that we could contemplate our collection of thoughts on our own.

Even though we hardly spoke in this time, we noticed how the island, the quiet, the safety, the abundance of food, the leisure, the long walks, and the fact that we had something to work on and for transformed us: our eyes alive, our cheeks flushed, our voices stronger, our bodies straighter, our minds clearer than they had been in many years.

On the seventh day of the eighth month, nearly three months after our arrival on the island, we came together again in our barn, sat down in a circle, each of us on a little heap of hay, and continued with our work.

We all agreed that we needed to understand what war is and what its root causes are before we could attempt to end all wars.

‘What is war?’ one of us asked.

‘A way to address conflict.’

‘War is an expression of self-righteousness.’

‘An outburst of aggression.’

‘War is the pursuit of self-interest.’

‘Revenge.’

‘It’s a cowards way to show-off so-called strength.’

‘Delusion.’

‘Destruction. War is always destruction.’

‘War is utter stupidity.’

‘War is a way to assert dominance.’

‘I’ve always wondered about those who seek world domination. No thinking person could possibly want to take responsibility for a whole planet.’

‘I doubt that a person who has world domination on their mind does a lot of thinking or cares about responsibilities.’

‘True. Such a person is blinded by a superiority complex and by a need to be in control.’

One of us frowned. ‘Superiority complex. That’s a root cause of war.’

‘Yes. It’s the believe that one group is superior to all others and should be the leader of nations because only they have the right answers, the right attitudes and even the right morals.’

‘Don’t forget the right weapons.’

‘Or the right economic views, economic views which justify the exploitation of foreign lands. And why do nations with a superiority complex exploit? Because the so-called civilised world has an insatiable appetite for fossil fuel, gold, beef and, for some reason I never quite understood, palm oil.’

We exchanged a few thoughtful glances, sharing unspoken thoughts which mingled frustration and a kind of stubborn fighting spirit that egged us on.

‘I wonder where the superiority complex comes from. It’s not natural. Animals don’t seem to feel superior only because they have particularly shiny fur, or for any other reason. Animals don’t exploit, build empires or wage war.’

One of us twitched the corner of their mouth. ‘Maybe that’s who we are: a vicious, self-important, small-minded species of

destructors with a superiority complex, derailed by self-harming greed — a species where no individual can help being cleverer and more right than everyone else.’

Several of us shook their heads in protest, and all of us began to talk at once until one of us said loudly: ‘We obviously have the potential to be terrible, and maybe that is our curse, but we also have the potential to address whatever it is that makes us fight, exploit or develop a superiority complex.’

For a while we went in and out of condemning and reassuring ourselves — our species — until we agreed to search for more promising thoughts, thoughts which could aid us in our task.

After some contemplation, one of us said: ‘We normalised war. We made it into something that naturally occurs.’

‘True. We observe our actions, and then we enshrine the observed as truth instead of realising that we can shape the way we act.’

‘What exactly do you mean?’

‘We know that nations have waged wars for centuries and so we assume that war is something we naturally do. There have been calls for peace—’

‘—a long time ago,’ one of us mumbled.

‘True. But despite of these calls, we never truly questioned war. We said we don’t want wars, but we didn’t explore how to make sure that wars could never happen again.’

‘We normalised war,’ one of us repeated thoughtfully. ‘But not just that. We normalised injustice, inequality, exploitation, hunger. In fact, we never challenged the way we deal with each other, the way we settle, the way we live, the way we do business. We didn’t dig deeper. Mostly we let things happen. And many of us simply accepted the systems around us as something that is, not as something we invented.’

‘Like our economic system?’

The previous speaker snorted. ‘Exactly. Everything in our economies is invented: trade, money, profits, exploitation, property, brands, numbers, shares, trends, work, competition, factories and all the rest of it.’

‘You’re right. That we exploit, compete and maximise profits doesn’t follow a law of nature, it’s our choice—’

‘—and we can choose to shape our economies in a way that doesn’t make us and our planet sick—’

‘—and that doesn’t lead to more wars.’

‘All we have to do is realise that the way we act is something we can shape, adjust, rethink and even replace.’

‘It seems we don’t have to be vicious, self-important, small-minded destructors, after all,’ one of us mumbled, ‘if we do a bit of shaping.’

‘How did we get here?’ one of us sighed, and most of us echoed the sigh: ‘How did we get here?’

One of us grimaced. ‘I fear we got here from many different directions, and the more root causes of war we can identify the better are our chances to achieve our goal.’

‘Where can we start?’ one of us asked.

‘With the human, the single person, the small creature who experiences its first heartbeats in the womb of another person.’

This was the day when we learned that one of us was pregnant.

In awe, and apprehensive of the fact that we had neither a doctor nor a nurse among us, we nodded and focused on an imagined small being which would grow into a mature being.

What would induce this being to wage war? Or more importantly: what would induce this being never to wage war?

We stumbled around these questions for quite a while, agreeing that, yes, an upbringing in a loving, respecting, secure social environment would strengthen a child. In all likelihood such a child would not resort to violence.

As we extended the list of positive and negative childhood experiences, a related issue caught our attention repeatedly: the relationship between two people who come together as partners. And here it struck us: the relationship between two people is the smallest and most intimate entity where conflict and war can happen.

‘What causes the tensions between partners?’

‘Divisions,’ one of us said. ‘Take the divide created by the idea of women and men. Each gender is assigned a fixed role, each is under pressure to perform in a certain way, each is encouraged to find their superiority and taunt the other about it, each is suspicious that the other might belittle or betray them. All of this creates tensions between partners. But I’m also thinking, if the notions of otherness, mistrust and taunting are part of a person’s private and daily experience, why would such a person take a completely different attitude towards other people — or towards other nations? Isn’t it more likely that such a person sees other people — and other nations — as just another manifestation of something that can only be mistrusted, corrected, patronised, defended against, controlled, taunted, kept in check, surpassed, belittled, exploited, dominated, threatened?’

‘Are you saying that the tensions between two partners inform their public thoughts, choices and actions?’

‘Exactly.’

‘That would mean that war starts in the mind.’

‘And that the seeds of war are rooted in many minds, not just in some.’

‘Maybe in every single mind.’

We fell silent, overcome by the depressing thought that we might have to reach the minds of every person on our planet if we wanted to deal with the root causes of war.

Up to this point, we had pictured ourselves negotiating with governments and maybe with some business leaders. But not this.

Unexpectedly one of us smiled a little and said: ‘If a war starts in the mind, then it can be ended in the mind, too.’

‘But how?’

‘Anyone can identify the seeds of war in their mind. And maybe, once a person is aware of these destructive seeds, they are willing to choose a different path.’

We liked the idea. It rang true in our minds.

But none of us dared to ask how we could convince our fellow humans to step out of the swamps of hatred, self-importance and self-righteousness that festered in many minds.

Thoughtful, we resorted to our solitary walks.