

The Terrible Dance of Power

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The Terrible Dance of Power

A Terrible Dance

There is a dance that takes place with great regularity,
a terrible dance—
a dance of death and destruction,
human beings killing one another –
always for great and noble causes.
We have danced this dance throughout our history.

We have danced the dance in years gone by:
in the great American West
with the crushing of the American Indian,
in Turkey
with the murder of the Armenians,
in Germany
with the destruction of the Jews and Gypsies and homosexuals,
in Cambodia
with the annihilation of millions,
in India
with Hindus and Moslems massacring one another.

We have been dancing it of late
in Mali,
in Iraq,
in Sudan,
in Somalia,
in Israel,
in Indonesia,
in Northern Ireland,

in Rwanda,
in the old Soviet Union,
in South Africa,
in Peru,
in Sri Lanka,
in the Philippines,
in El Salvador.

Death and destruction
for great and noble causes.

*

The Dance Begins

There is a system –
a single nation
or a collection of nations.

and in that system,
there are the High-Power people
and the Low-Power people.

The High-Power people control the system's resources:
Its food, materials, technology, weapons, opportunities.

And there are the Low-Power people.

The High-Power people see themselves as the bearers
of some higher mission:
Manifest Destiny,
The Master Race,

The One True Religion,
The Way.

Standing in the way of this mission
are the Low-Power people;
they are blocking the vision,
defiling it.

The High-Power people see themselves as "We"—
as special,
noble,
righteous,
favored by history
and by God.

And they see the Low-Power people as "Them"—
as insignificant
or dirty
or dangerous
or evil.

Seeing "Them" this way,
the High-Power people can do to "Them"
things they would never do to one another.
They establish rules or laws or customs
that make things better for the "We"
and worse for the "Them."

They may stop the Low-Power people
from practicing their ways,
speaking their language;

they may remove them from their territory
or confiscate their property
or enslave them
or exile them
or annihilate them.

They can do all of this
without guilt or shame,
because the Low-Power people are "Them"—
lesser,
insignificant,
dirty,
dangerous,
evil.

Who wouldn't do this to such people?

If the Low-Power people are eliminated,
the dance is ended.
If not,
the dance goes on.

*

The Low-Power People Respond

The Low-Power people respond—
gently,
fearfully,
rationally,
even apologetically.

("We' don't want to make 'Them' angry.")

They cast ballots,
elect representatives,
debate,
demonstrate.

The High-Power People React

To the High-Power people,
the response of the Low-Power people
is out of line—
a complaint,
a threat,
an insult to the dignity of the "We."
("Who are 'They' to complain?")
And the response of the High-Power people is harsh—
requests are ignored,
promises are made
then broken;
they delay;
they ban demonstrations;
they pass new laws;
they intensify the oppression.

Enter the Radicals

A new force develops among the Low-Power people—
a radical force.
The Radicals call for more drastic action—
not accommodation,

but fundamental change;
overthrow the power structure
or separate from the nation.

The Radicals become a "We,"
and all who are not "We"
are "Them."

The High-Power people are "Them,"
but so are the Moderates.

And you can do to "Them"
things you would never do to one another—
you can hurt "Them,"
maim "Them,"
bomb "Them,"
torture "Them,"
annihilate "Them."

The Radicals can do all of this
without guilt or shame
because they see the High-Power people as "Them,"
and they see the Moderates as "Them"—
as lesser,
insignificant,
dirty,
dangerous,
or evil.

Who wouldn't do this to such people?

Enter the Accommodators and the Extremists

In the High-Power group,
there are the Liberals
who want to accommodate the Low-Power people—
redress their grievances,
right their wrongs.

But,
in response to the Radicals' actions,
a new force emerges among the High-Power people—
an Extremist force.
Angered by the Radicals,
threatened by "Them,"
the Extremists stand against any accommodation.

The Extremists become a "We,"
and all who are not "We"
are "Them."
The Radicals are "Them";
the supporters of Radicals are "Them";
the Accommodators are "Them."
They are all "Them,"
and you can do to "Them"
things you would never do to one another—
you can hurt "Them,"
maim "Them,"
bomb "Them,"
torture "Them,"
annihilate "Them."

The Extremists can do all of this
without guilt or shame
because they see the Radicals
and the moderates
as "Them"—
as lesser,
insignificant,
dirty,
dangerous,
or evil.

Who wouldn't do this to such people?

Enter the Privileged Radicals

Among the High-Power people,
there emerges a Privileged Radical group—
the privileged sons and daughters of the High-Power people,
who align themselves with the Low-Power Radical group.
The Privileged Radical people
also stand for radical change—
fundamental change in the power structure,
redistribution of wealth, power, and privilege,
or separate homelands
or nations
for the Low-Power people.

The Privileged Radicals see themselves
and the Low-Power Radicals as a "We,"

and all who are not part of the "We"
are "Them."

The High-Power Accommodators are "Them";
the Low-Power Moderates are "Them";
the High-Power Extremists are "Them."

They are all "Them,"
and you can do to "Them"
things you would never do to one another—
you can humiliate "Them,"
hurt "Them,"
maim "Them,"
bomb "Them,"
torture "Them,"
annihilate "Them."

The Privileged Radicals can do all of this
without guilt or shame
because they see the others as "Them"—
as lesser,
insignificant,
dirty,
dangerous,
or evil.

Who wouldn't do this to such people?

Change Partners

Sometimes the Low-Power people win;
they overthrow the High-Power people

and they become the new High-Power people,
seeing themselves as the bearers of a new vision—
a higher vision,
The New Society,
Manifest Destiny,
The New Man,
The Master Race,
The One True Religion,
The Way.
And standing in the way of this vision
are the new Low-Power people—
"Them."

And the terrible dance goes on:

"We" humiliate,
"We" hurt,
"We" kill,
"We" maim,
"We" bomb,
"We" hack,
"We" hang,
"We" mine,
"We" strangle,
"We" starve
"Them."

Always justified in what "We" do,
"We" are the right and the righteous.

Who wouldn't do such things to "Them"?

The Dance Goes On

The terrible dance goes on
in Iraq,
in Sudan,
in Nigeria,
in Israel,
in the Congo,
in Rwanda,
in South Africa,
in Peru,
in Guatemala,
in Northern Ireland,
in the Philippines.

**THERE IS NO "WE,"
THERE IS NO "THEM,"
THERE IS ONLY YOU
AND ME
AND ALL OF US.
AND THEN THE DANCE BEGINS.**

*"You blacks are not human...you are like monkeys...
we can do anything we want to you"*
Janjaweed speaking to Dajo tribeswoman in Darfur

"Between fanaticism and barbarism there is only one step."

Diderot

"Imagine asking people who they are and the only thing they can come up with is 'I'm a Croat' or 'I'm a Serb' or whatever. Imagine, these people were born that way and they haven't made any progress since."

Bosnian woman

"Are you sure it was God who gave you permission to kill women and children?"

The Terrible Dance of Power is the basest part of our human nature, to see others so different from ourselves that we are able to subjugate, oppress, and even annihilate them with no remorse.

Please feel free to copy this piece, circulate it, translate it, perform it, put music to it, and even dance to it in public places. Do whatever you can to create a dance we can live with.

Barry Oshry