

A Violent Pacifist, Properly Chastised

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We were walking through the farmer's field behind my property, toward the woods, like we've done for years. It was a glorious warm November Sunday and we were overjoyed to be outside under the bright sky, not freezing. My neighbor Chris and I were jabbering while her children, Nathan and Katrina, trailed behind.

Suddenly I heard a voice from the right. I turned and looked through a leafless fence row. There, about 100 feet away, stood a man wearing camouflage clothes.

"Do you know you're trespassing?" he hollered. He was not smiling.

"We're trespassing?" I hollered back, stupidly.

"Yeah, you're trespassing," he hollered, sounding more angry.

"Are you hunting?" I asked, more stupidly.

"Yes, I am."

"What's the best way back – forward or back?"

"Which way did you come from?"

"That way."

"Then go back that way."

We did.

I'm sure the hunter, my neighbor Bruce, didn't recognize me. He's only met me once. I'm sure he was angry because he might have killed one of us by accident – and also because we were scaring away his prey.

I think the land we were walking doesn't belong to Bruce, but instead to our neighbor Herb. Herb is also a hunter. In fact, Herb hunts on my land. But that's beside the point. No matter whose land it was, we were trespassing.

Bruce was right to be angry. We were wrong to trespass. But I keep wondering two things:

- (1) If some people traipsed on or near my land while I was hunting, far from any road, wouldn't I guess those people were my neighbors?

(2) Might I then say to my neighbor, “Say folks, you’re taking your life in your hands. It’s bowhunting season and I’m hunting. You better go back the way you came.”

After our encounter with Bruce, we walked down the moraine through the deer paths in my little woods. Suddenly, again, we heard a voice. A little ways on, we discovered the source of the voice. It was our new neighbor Steve, out taking fall photographs with his granddaughter Skyler.

We greeted them warmly. I didn’t mention that they were trespassing on my land. We invited them to join us on our walk.

“We’re going rough-riding in the woods across the road,” I told them.

Yes, we live to trespass. I’m sure someone owns the woods across the road, but I don’t know who. I’ve never seen anyone hunting back there. There are no houses, just a tiny branch of the Fox River and assorted abandoned kids’ forts and tire swings. We have a long tradition of “rough riding,” our pedestrian version of off-roading: we walk where there are no paths. This is only possible in fall and spring, when there’s no undergrowth.

Even with no undergrowth, it was rough going Sunday – plenty of tangles to weave our way through, a few giant molding puffballs here and there. That’s what we like. Adventure in a tame world.

We showed Steve and Skyler the “chair”: an old broken tree shaped like a seat and a seat back -- a throne for every child. We showed them the “ladder”: a fallen tree that’s a steep climb.

Finally we got to our main destination: the “castle.”

The castle is a formation of earth and rock and moss, rising out of the forest floor. We’ve found at least three castles so far. We can’t figure out if they’re human-made or nature-made. Either way, they’re great for climbing.

About a year ago when we explored the woods, my nephew Tyler was along. He was nine at the time. Tyler climbed to the top of the castle, stretched out his arms and shouted, “You’re my jungle queen!”

I was flattered.

Shortly after that, Tyler grabbed a long stick and started shooting me as if I were an invader laying siege to his castle.

I grabbed a stick and shot back. It was fun. I had never played war.

So there I was this past Sunday with Steve and Skyler and Chris and her kids, and I had a Tyleresque inspiration. Nathan was at the top of the castle. I was below.

I grabbed a long stick, aimed it at Nathan, and started shooting. “Pyoo! Pyoo! Pyoo!” – I was doing my best to make gun sounds.

Nathan is six. He knew just what to do. He shot back.

Suddenly Steve said, “You’re shooting love at each other.”

I understood right away. Skyler is only four. Steve doesn’t want her exposed to violence.

“I’m sorry, Steve. I’m a pacifist. I don’t know why I did that,” I said.

“Yeah, Nathan, we’re shooting love,” I called loudly to Nathan. I suspected that Chris, who knows me well, heard an edge in my voice. I’m a firstborn who likes to be right and doesn’t like to be corrected. But I agree with Steve’s principle, and I appreciate the gentle way he corrected me -- as opposed to another neighbor’s method about a half-hour earlier.

I didn’t play war with my own kids. I raised them to be peaceniks (failing completely with my Marine son, Brian). Why would I play war with someone else’s kid?

Dang. Chastised twice in one day.

... Which all leads me to ask: can a pacifist play war? Years ago, I went to a Joan Baez concert. The great pacifist who sings like a bird talked about playing shooting games with her son.

I have fond memories of my family shooting each other with finger guns. It was a contest who could have the most dramatic death, like in all the cowboy shows we watched on TV during the 50s. And yet, I turned out to be a peacenik.

Nowadays, I do Nia dancing for exercise and fun. Nia stands for “Now I Am” and includes elements of modern dance, aerobic routines, yoga and martial arts. I have learned something about myself doing martial arts movements in Nia: I love to throw punches!

I had never thrown a punch in my life, until Nia. Now I fling myself into punches. I think I throw stronger punches every time I try. It’s a blast to jab kicks, too.

I asked Mike for a punching bag for Christmas. After all these years being peaceful, I have connected with my inner warrior. If I get a punching bag for Christmas, it'll be great fun... and might even help tighten the "second wave" (my upper arms).

I'll just have to be careful where I share this new warlike self I've discovered. Okay to share violent tendencies on Nia dance floor or with punching bag. Not okay to share violent side with impressionable children. Also advisable to be peacelike with armed neighbor.

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