

Parenting in time of war

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I was asked to write a response to a mother's question about parenting in time of war:

"I was wondering if you would try to write about finding peace and calm within us so that we could pass them on to the children, at a time when we are hearing everywhere about the war conflict in our neighbourhood."

Peace and calm within us in time of war, is this at all possible? Of course, if we do not find it within ourselves—we cannot pass it to our children, and we cannot give to others what we do not have ourselves.

Maybe there is no way to be peaceful inside when there is a war outside near you. Maybe this is an essential contradiction, an unrealistic wishful thinking, a desire that the world we are living in would be a different place than it actually is, or that we could be living inside of us a separated reality to the one that we actually living in. Both of these are superhuman and unrealistic. But I respect the question. We want to be good, helpful, supportive parents even while we are deeply troubled.

I will start with a more answerable question: What is *NOT* the right and the healthy parental response in time of war?

We are at war. Not only the Ukrainian people at war, *we* are at war. Maybe we are at war every time any nation is at war, because on some deep level humanity is one family. But when it is far away in Afghanistan or Yemen or Nagorno Karabakh, it is easier to ignore it. This war is taking place on our border, waged on Slavonic people like us, by Slavonic people like us, unleashed aggressively without provocation by an army and a regime which is essentially the same one that conquered and ruled our own country oppressively for 40 years until just 33 years ago. The range of their missiles and aircraft cover the whole of Slovakia. This war is happening next door. It could be here any time.

And this time, the same country that controlled and starved Ukraine in the past is not just oppressing it, they are systematically destroying it, aiming to eliminate it as a country, nation, culture, identity, soul. They are failing to destroy its soul because the Ukrainians people are fighting back courageously, but at a cost of a million refugees, ruined cities, destruction of everything. This is the 2nd World War all over again after 77 years of relative peace in Europe, initiated and waged not by Nazi Germany but by 'brotherly' Russia. This is crazy, and at present paralysing, because there is nothing that we can do about it directly.

How can we stay peaceful and calm in a time like this?

I will start answering the question about parenting in time of war by expressing what I know about what is *not* helpful: **avoidance**, **depression** and **fear**, the three most common responses to a dangerous and distressing bad news which you can do nothing about. All three are the most natural response to a war situation and, at the same time, most unhealthy ones. The original response to danger is to fight back or to run away. But when you cannot fight back and you cannot run away, that is where real sickness can set in.

- Avoidance of awareness of dangerous reality diminishes us to less than ourselves; numbing and degenerating our thinking;
- depression destroys our soul forces, vitality and meaning, and
- living in fear paralyses the will and destroys the body.

All these responses will affect children directly, no matter what artificial facade of confidence and pretence of business as usual we put on the surface. Children can see through it.

A dangerous, destructive, deeply disturbing situation requires the opposite of avoidance, depression and fear: we need more awareness, not less, and a stronger presence of soul, not a soul weakness, and a stronger, more mobilised will, not paralysis. All these become nearly impossible *when there is nothing we can do about the dangerous, disturbing situation!* But we have to do it anyway.

What can we actually *do* about the destruction of Ukraine when our own country is not (yet) involved directly in the fighting?

Comfortable and calm we cannot be about it. Keeping the children away from the awareness of what is going on is progressively impossible the older they are. We all suffer from the awareness of what is going on our eastern border. Even people who are usually completely uninterested in news, politics and international affairs, are deeply affected here.

That suffering cannot be avoided. It has to be endured with more presence of spirit, 'duchapritomnost' not with less of it!

I am afraid I don't have an easier message to give you in response to this parental question. The suffering about this war is here to be experienced, as the suffering is to be experienced when our parents or our children are sick, in danger or dying. Millions of refugees and whole families living in the metro subways, freezing and starving while their homes are senselessly bombarded in Kiev, Kharkov, Mariupol, Lviv and other Ukrainian cities—they cannot avoid it, and neither can we. Our hearts are with them, and *that* is a most healthy response to our brothers and sisters in Ukraine who are dying and suffering. This is happening to our human family, not to strangers. The only healthy response is to be more present, not less.

Avoidance has to be confronted with awareness; depression with compassion; fear with courage and truth. And we *have* to suffer it. I have been involved in war directly, on the front line, in my youth, defending my country in active service when it was attacked. I had to be fully present. But it was easier than now, because my will was fully engaged in action. Now I cannot be fully active. I am very frustrated, like you.

The will of our civilian population now will be mostly frustrated. But if there is *anything* that we *can* do, we should do it. There are about 10,000 Ukrainians living in Eastern Slovakia. All of them, I am sure, are doing *something* about their people across the border. Maybe we can ask them how we can help. There are tens of thousands of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia now, mostly women and children, and more are coming every day. They are homeless and the temperature is freezing. We live here in our warm safe homes. Let us invite them into our homes. That is what my family here is trying to do. Or, at least let us send them material support. Many Slovaks are doing it already. Let us join them. We don't have to wait until we

know them and until we are their personal friends to do it. We will become their friends and we will know them, when we do it. This is the time for active brotherhood and sisterhood.

The children will know everything we know and they will be a part of everything that we experience and do.

That is how we face the present war with more awareness, more courage and more action. *Then*, maybe we may sleep better at night and wake up better in the morning. Our children will be an inseparable part of our experience and our action, no matter what we do. The suffering will be there, that is how it is. The healthy human response is to experience it fully, face it and do something about it.

That is the most honest response I can give to the above question as a human being, as a parent, as a member of the Slovak community, and as the son of Ukrainian immigrants on my mother's side. My family comes from Uman.

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