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Preventing omnicide

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mnicide is a word coined by philosopher John Somerville. It is an extension of the concepts of suicide and genocide. It means the death of all, the total negation and destruction of all life. Omnicide is suicide for all. It is the genocide of humanity writ large. It is what Rachel Carson began to imagine in her book, *Silent Spring*.

Can you imagine omnicide? No people. No animals. No trees. No friendships. No one to view the mountains, or the oceans, or the stars. No one to write a poem, or sing a song, or hug a baby, or laugh or cry. With no present, there can be no memory of the past, nor possibility of a future. There is nothing. *Nuclear weapons make possible the end of all, of omnicide.*

From the beginning of the universe some 15 billion years ago, it took 10.5 billion years before our planet was formed, and another 500 million years to produce the first life. From the first life on earth, it took nearly 4 billion years, up until 10,000 years ago, to produce human civilization. It is only in the last 65 years, barely a tick of the cosmic clock, that we have developed, deployed and used weapons capable of omnicide.

It took nearly 15 billion years to create the self-awareness of the universe that we humans represent. This self-awareness could be lost in the blinding flash of a thermonuclear war and the nuclear winter that would follow.

In 1955, ten years into the Nuclear Age and shortly after the creation of thermonuclear weapons, a group of leading scientists, including Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell, issued a Manifesto in which they said: "Here, then, is the problem which we present to you, stark and dreadful and inescapable: Shall we put an end to the human race; or shall mankind renounce war?" Those are our choices, made necessary by the creation and threat of nuclear weapons.

If omnicide is possible, which it is, we must ask ourselves: What are we going to do about it? Can we be complacent in the face of this threat, or will we find a way to confront and eliminate it? This is the responsibility of all of us alive at this time in human history. It is a human responsibility. We created nuclear weapons. It is up to us to end their threat to present and future generations.

The unfortunate truth is that we humans have been far too complacent in the face of the omnicultural potential of nuclear weapons. There are many reasons for this. For some of us, the threat is too painful to face, and we deny it. For others, nuclear weapons are rationalized as a positive force in preventing wars, despite their omnicultural



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potential. For still others, the threat is real, but they feel too insignificant to bring about change.

Those who justify nuclear weapons generally do so on the basis of *nuclear deterrence*, the threat of nuclear retaliation. Deterrence is based upon the belief that all leaders will act rationally at all times and under all conditions, a very shaky proposition at best. One reason that Henry Kissinger and other former leaders are now calling for a world free of nuclear weapons is that they understand that deterrence has no power against terrorists in possession of nuclear arms. There can be zero tolerance of nuclear terrorism; but, if terrorism means the threat to injure or kill innocent people, aren't all countries in possession of nuclear weapons, including our own, actually terrorists?

Carried to its extreme but logical conclusion, deterrence became Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). This is the threat of omnicide in the name of security. It is a very risky form of security. Today MAD may be thought to have a new meaning: Mutual Assured Delusions – delusions that nuclear weapons can provide security for their possessors.

Nuclear weapons do not and cannot provide physical protection for their possessors. The threat of retaliation is not protection. Unfortunately, these weapons, like other human endeavors, are subject to human fallibility. With nuclear weapons in human hands, there are no guarantees that nuclear war will not be initiated by accident or human error.

The starting point for ending the omnicidal threat of nuclear weapons is the recognition that the threat is real and pervasive, and requires action. Each of us is threatened. All we love and hold dear is threatened. The future is threatened. We are called upon to end our complacency and respond to this threat by demanding that our leaders develop a clear pathway to the total elimination of nuclear weapons and to the elimination of war as a means of resolving conflicts.

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