

To: The Executive Net -- C778 Community Conference

From: Walt Roberts

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PROVOCATIONS #17

Weapons and Hope

It is 2:00 PM on August 30th as I start this item. I am sitting on the deck of a log cabin at the east edge of a remote alpine lake in the Colorado Rockies. We are having a week of family vacation. The spot is Woods Lake, on Lime Creek, a tributary that flows southwards into the Frying Pan River from a spot ten miles or so west of the Mount of the Holy Cross. The altitude here is just 9,400 feet above sea level, so the days are warm, the nights cold, the air fragrant and clear. I am in the shade of an Engelmann spruce, and I am looking out across the breeze-rippled surface of the lake to the densely forested hills beyond. The sun is dazzling. The scene is empty of human signs, beyond the near shore where a boat has been tied by my host, who owns the cabin. Now and then even against the wavelets, I can see the splash of rising trout. Yesterday's fishing tells me they are choice rainbows and brookies eager for a #12 ginger quill dry fly, but I have already caught my limit.

Today is mostly for reading, and my choice has been Freeman Dyson's new long essay "Weapons and Hope." It's out as a book, but I am reading it from the four-part series in the New Yorker (starting last February 6th). It seems a bit incongruous to be reading and thinking about nuclear war in this quiet and serene place. But the solitude makes concise and provocative what seemed at other times and in other places a very long and detailed article. Dyson writes, "Why should a scientist, a peaceful theoretician who has never seen a shot fired in anger, write an essay about weapons and war? I write because I live in two worlds--the world of the warriors and the world of the victims--and I am possessed by an immodest hope that I may improve mankind's chances of escaping the horrors of a nuclear holocaust if I can help these two worlds to understand each other."

The world of the warriors is what he sees when he goes to Washington or California to consult military people about technical problems. The world of the victims is what he sees when he listens to his wife's tales of childhood in wartime Germany, or when he sits with strangers in a church and hears the prayers for peace. It is a world dominated by women and children.

The essence of Dyson's first installment is that these two worlds, the warriors and the victims, are inhabited by people who, for the most part, improperly understand each other. He maintains that both groups hold dogmatic views of the other's camp. One side believes that nuclear war is not fundamentally different from other forms of war and that preparedness, endurance and discipline will enable us to survive. The other believes survival of nuclear war is impossible, and that preparations to improve our chances are a dangerous delusion. Both sides regard the other as wrong and morally deficient.

Dyson asserts that nuclear war is in its very nature incalculable, unpredictable and uncontrollable. He considers that the question of survival is undecidable, short of trying it. He hopes that realizing the full implications of this will make it possible to bring the two worlds together, and indeed "help the world to escape the doctrinal rigidities that have frustrated its efforts to negotiate nuclear disarmament."

In the following three parts Dyson develops his detailed argument that non-nuclear defensive weapons are the best way towards a peaceful world. I commend the book to you! I do not see eye to eye with him on all points, but I do share his conviction that there are valid reasons for hope of a world without threat of nuclear war.