Building Blocks and Killing Machines

By Molly Bennett

Mira Loma High School, Sacramento, California

Anyone who has ever played with building blocks may recall the slightly sickening feeling that engulfs the stomach at the moment when the structure begins to topple. One too many blocks, and the whole tower succumbs to gravity. No matter how long it took to build the tower, it always falls in just the same way: from order to chaos, in just a few seconds. Like most toys, building blocks have a lesson to teach children. This lesson isn't just on gravity, but also on the way violence and destruction work in our world. With a bomb, a bullet, or any other killing machine, a structure, a person, or a society that took so long to build can be razed in an instant.

In 2001, the Taliban destroyed Afghanistan's two giant, 2000 year old statues of Buddha. The statues, each of them more than one hundred feet tall, were demolished with gunfire and mortar explosions. Despite appeals from the international community, the Taliban obliterated those feats of human art and engineering, those gargantuan and sacred artifacts. Though the destruction of the statues was deplorable, it was perhaps somewhat fitting as well. After all, one of the teachings of Buddhism is impermanence. Don't get attached to things.

People aren't things, though. People are more complex, more vulnerable, and more capable than rocks. The same sorts of weapons that took down the Buddha statues are used to take life from people every day. The cycle of war and violence continues today much as it has for the last 200,000 years of human history. Now we have bigger, stronger, faster (I dare not say "better") killing machines, but we still engage in the same sort of violence with the same results. We kill people and destroy lives out of pride, revenge, jealousy hatred, and misunderstanding. Now and throughout history, violence, however "justified", only begets more violence.

Human beings pride themselves in their ability to learn from mistakes of the past in order to create a better future. On the subject of war, though, there is no truth in this sentiment. As 200,000 years of fighting should have taught us, violence does not solve problems in any lasting, meaningful way. There is no such thing as a pre-emptive strike that precludes future violence. There is no "War to End All Wars". There's no such thing as bombing for peace. Or, as the lyrics to Michael Franti's song go, "We can bomb the world to pieces, but we can't bomb it into peace."

After the tragic loss of human life on September 11, 2001, the United States government and people made an equally tragic decision to perpetuate the cycle of violence. With vengeful anger that would land a two-year old in timeout, we invoked an Us versus Them mentality. It is that same mentality, coupled with that sense of deserved revenge, which lies at the heart of all violence. The blocks fall, and someone must pay. A usual, that someone is the whole human race.