Let's Change This
by Glenn C. Koenig
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On Thanksgiving, we listened to the original recording of "Alice's Restaurant" by Arlo Guthrie, as many people do. Near the end of the song, he says "If you want to end war and stuff, you got to sing loud!"

Well, singing loud, perhaps at marches and demonstrations, may be useful, but I wonder if there is more we can do to get at the core of the problem? After all, violence comes in many forms, from major wars down to murders in the inner city, mass shootings, and suicides. Sure, the arms industry stands to profit from all of these, but trying to stop them is largely treating the symptoms, rather than the causes.

To be clear, I'm not here to take sides in any conflict. Instead, my question is: How can we turn away from violence as a way to resolve conflict in general. I think of what a professor of international relations told me, back in the late 1960s. He said there were plenty of reasons given for waging war, such as religion, ideology, or government policy. But the real reason underlying most wars is economic. This doesn't just mean money in the bank, it means access to land, water, labor, and other resources.

When it comes to religion or cultural groups, the biggest danger is the idea that "my people" are more deserving or better than "those other people" who are in some way less worthy or deserving. The fear is that the other people will take away my people's fair share of our very means of survival or even might overrun and murder me and my people, just to take all that we have.

A person or a group with nothing left to lose is perhaps the most dangerous. Trying to threaten them with jail or the death penalty or bombing them won't do any good; they see themselves as living in hell already. Their reasoning could easily be, "I might as well fight back, even if I die in the process; I can't see any other choices left."

I see most mass shooters as essentially suicides; the people who carry them out are just so seething mad that they vow to take other people down with them. Their atrocities get all the headlines, of course, but there are actually few of them compared to the thousands who would never think of hurting anyone else and just kill themselves quietly. There are millions more, still alive, but who live in despair because we have forgotten them or discount their pain.

Perhaps the answer is to find a way to give the people who feel completely hopeless at least something to live for. And help provide them with some means to live long enough to attain it. Set things up so that they can trust that they won't be left to starve or suffer or simply be killed by others who threaten them. Give them a fair chance to engage in some kind of productive or even creative work.

This includes everything from the white males who see no future for themselves, left alone sitting in some basement somewhere, to the black gang members in the inner city (who don't expect to live past the age of 30), all the way up to the millions of people in various lands who live with constant fear and oppression.

It may be difficult to find love in our hearts for those who we don't understand or may even fear, but, to me, that is our challenge; to love as many people as possible and act on that love by working to give them something to live for.