

Defeating the Hydra

To end dehumanization, you need the right target and the right tools. If you target the hydra's heads instead of attacking the body, the heads will eventually grow back. Two heads might even grow back in place of one, similar to the hydra from Greek mythology. You need to target the body. The hydra's body is comprised of the human psyche and societal systems. You also need the right tools. Tools of violence cannot destroy the dehumanizing lies that distort people's psyches and sustain dehumanizing systems. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth." Building on King's philosophy that nonviolence is a sword that heals, Peace Literacy conceives of a sword of rehumanization, capable of destroying the lies of dehumanization by targeting the body of the hydra.

The Three Forms of Rehumanization

Our Peace Literacy curriculum teaches many skills that empower people to rehumanize others along with themselves, organized into three categories:

1. **Interaction:** All dehumanization systems rely on some form of segregation, which can be subtle or overt. Peace Literacy skills empower people to interact in ways that foster rehumanization and dispel the distortions of dehumanization.
2. **Stories and Art:** When people's stories are told through the spoken or written word, video, or any artistic medium, this can rehumanize people who were previously viewed as subhuman, disposable objects, or just a number or statistic. Skillfully told stories collapse distance.
3. **Waging Peace:** Waging peace is a vast and complex skill-set built on nonviolence that empowers people to rehumanize others, along with themselves. Peace Literacy shows why waging peace is the most strategically effective way to elevate the human psyche out of dehumanization and transform systems so that people can more fully thrive and flourish.

As dehumanization proliferates, it is increasingly important to equip students with knowledge of the hydra's anatomy and weaknesses, along with skills for using the sword of rehumanization to defeat it.



The Six-Headed Hydra of Dehumanization

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As I document in my book *Will War Ever End*, military history shows us that human beings have a natural aversion to hurting and killing other human beings. To suppress this natural aversion, every war, genocide, and form of slavery has relied on dehumanization to hide our shared humanity. There are six forms of dehumanization, which we can call "distance," that have been used around the world for thousands of years. Peace Literacy depicts these six forms of distance metaphorically as six heads of a hydra. It is more important than ever to understand how to combat dehumanization as it is becoming increasingly common in our society. Peace Literacy teaches effective skills for defeating this ancient and deadly adversary.

Note: This discussion of dehumanization covers difficult ground, but it does not involve explicit details.

The Six Heads of the Hydra

1. **Psychological Distance:** This form of dehumanization views people as subhuman—as less than human in some way. Psychological distance can assume many forms and is always accompanied by derogatory slurs, such as the word "barbaros" (barbarian) in ancient Greek, which depicted non-Greeks as having nonsensical language and being uncivilized and inferior. Psychological distance and derogatory slurs can

be seen in the enslavement of African Americans in the United States. Psychological distance has been used in countless wars and genocides.

2. **Moral Distance:** This form of dehumanization views people as irrevocably evil. This is why civil wars can be so bloody. When people have the same language, culture, and customs, psychological distance doesn't work as well, so civil wars are often about good versus evil. When people believe that killing human beings expels evil from the world, genocide can result. Leading up to the Rwandan genocide, a Hutu extremist radio broadcast invoked moral distance, proclaiming that "the Tutsis have always been evil. They may smile and wink, but they will take your children away. While we, the Hutus, are innocent." 800,000 people were murdered in the attacks that followed.
3. **Mechanical Distance:** This form of dehumanization uses *physical separation* to make it easier to hurt and kill people. It is psychologically easier to drop bombs on people from planes high in the air than to kill people at close range with a knife. The physical separation of mechanical distance is created through technology that increases physical distance or machinery that serves as a barrier of some kind. One of the primary reasons that the Nazis used the gas chamber is because it created mechanical distance, in the form of a barrier, between executioners and their victims. In fact, the Nazis used every dehumanizing head of the hydra. For more contemporary examples, the internet can create forms of mechanical distance that make it easier to dehumanize people, and mechanical distance explains why road rage is much more common than sidewalk rage. When a big machine cuts you off and you cannot see the humanity of the driver, you are more likely to become enraged.

The terms psychological, moral, and mechanical distance are from the book *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, by Lt. Col. Dave Grossman. I show that we can identify three other kinds of dehumanization: Industrial, Numerical, and Bureaucratic Distance.

4. **Industrial Distance:** This form of dehumanization views people as expendable machines, tools, or objects to be used. This type of distance underlies contemporary slavery and other kinds of exploitation, such as child labor abuses and the treatment of people as nothing more than sex objects.
5. **Numerical Distance:** This form of dehumanization views people as numbers. One example is when people are collectively depicted as numbers and statistics, such as news reports of numbers of casualties. This numerical depiction can hide the humanity of all these individual lives. Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann used numbers to avoid recognizing the humanity of the people he sent to concentration camps. Psychologist Erich Fromm argues that for Eichmann, "it makes no particular difference whether he kills, or whether he takes care of, small children. For him, life has completely stopped being something alive. He 'organizes'." Fromm draws a parallel with the numerical distancing used in calculations about nuclear weapons policy, citing American atomic researcher Herman Kahn's 1960 report that 90 million Americans dying during the first three days of a nuclear war would be too many, but 60 million would be "acceptable."
6. **Bureaucratic Distance:** When people are transformed into names on a list or entries on a spreadsheet through bureaucratic processes, this can make much of their humanity invisible. Organizations can learn to counterbalance the distance created by bureaucracies in a variety of humanizing ways. Bureaucratic distance might seem like a modern phenomenon, but it is actually thousands of years old. The Roman Empire, along with many other empires throughout history, had massive bureaucracies. Whereas mechanical distance dehumanizes through the technological and physical, bureaucratic distance dehumanizes through the procedural and administrative. Bureaucratic distance played a significant role in the Holocaust.