



August 2021

## A Sisyphean Task

### Contribution to GTI Forum [Can Human Solidarity Globalize?](#)

David Barash

Few developments—if any—would be more desirable than global solidarity: not only among human beings but between our species and the rest of the natural world. (Given what seems the inevitable rise and elaboration of AI, perhaps we should add a benevolent solidarity between *Homo sapiens* and our technological creations as well.) Moreover, there are few if any thinkers whom I have admired more or with whom I have found myself more in personal solidarity than Richard Falk. At the same time, I would like to suggest a perspective that, although not at odds with [Falk's](#), provides another way of metabolizing his inspiring call for a “politics of the impossible.”

I recently revisited Gilbert and Sullivan’s “The Pirates of Penzance” with my grandson, and was especially struck by a rhetorical question posed by those benevolent pirates, namely “For what, we ask, is life without a touch of Poetry in it?” There is indeed poetry in a call for pursuing any impossible dream, all the more so when that dream offers the prospect of achieving change that is not only desirable but also necessary. Such rhetoric is inspiring and is accordingly well represented in much fine poetry, such as Tennyson’s “come my friends, ‘Tis not too late to seek a better world,” and Browning’s “A man’s reach should exceed his grasp, Or what’s a heaven for?” Poetry is indispensable, as are lofty goals, and the former may well be a prerequisite for pursuing the latter, especially if those goals are not only lofty but (let’s face it) verging on the literally impossible.

And so, at the risk of being perceived as a skunk at a garden party, I wish to offer a somewhat different, albeit complementary view. “Realism” has achieved a deservedly negative resonance

among those of us who aspire to a future more akin to idealism, one that goes beyond a “realistic” acceptance of a world awash in social inequity, environmental devastation and the threat of nuclear war.<sup>1</sup>

I therefore hesitate to describe my attitude as realistic. And yet, isn’t there something unrealistic about striving for something that is, well, impossible?

The human species has been around for roughly 250,000 years, during which time nothing even approaching global solidarity has been achieved. Maybe circumstances have changed, however, with the existential threats of current and looming worldwide catastrophes, each of which necessitates a unified species-wide response. Imagine, however, a global convention of dinosaurs, responding to that onrushing Chicxulub impactor 66 million years ago by demanding a Cretaceous–Tertiary politics and praxis of the impossible. It would have been impossible indeed. My point is that the fact that something is necessary does not mean that it is not still really and realistically impossible.

My doubts regarding global solidarity are due, in part, to the fact that solidarity has been notably absent, even with polities much smaller than the planet Earth. Countries, provinces, cities, local districts, and sometimes even neighborhoods have consistently avoided being internally consistent, and not merely because of cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic heterogeneity. Notwithstanding our penchant for tribal identification, people can be stubbornly insistent on having it their own way, even when “it” might well be not only counter-productive but potentially lethal.

Readers may well consider my attitude unacceptably pessimistic compared to Richard Falk’s optimistic manifesto. So let me be clear: Those among us inspired to work toward the impossible are to be applauded and encouraged. But at the same time, those among us who are pessimistic need not, and indeed, should not give up as a result. Thus, for any readers who—like myself—seriously doubt that human solidarity will ever globalize, but who—like myself—also believe that it would be immensely desirable, I would like to offer an existentialist approach, converging with that of Albert Camus. In his brief essay “The Myth of Sisyphus,” Camus argued that Sisyphus is an “absurd hero” because he persists in his task despite fully knowing that it is doomed to failure,

that his rock will always roll back downhill, just as each of us will ultimately die. Moreover, in this view, Sisyphus is happy.

Similarly, Camus concludes his novel *The Plague* with the ruminations of another hero, Dr. Rieux, who knows that any celebration following the apparent end of the eponymous plague is necessarily premature, because one plague or another will always reappear. Rieux nonetheless resolves “to state quite simply what we learn in time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men [and, of course, women] than to despise.” Moreover, as the existentialists have emphasized, it is precisely through struggle—without any necessarily realistic expectation of success—that we achieve the best in our humanity. One need not necessarily believe in achieving the impossible in order to struggle toward it, and doing so—regardless of one’s belief—is assuredly something to admire.

## Endnotes

1. For a discussion of these dangers, with special reference to the problems posed by nuclear deterrence, see David P. Barash, *Threats: Intimidation and its Discontents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

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## About the Author



David Barash is an evolutionary biologist, peace activist, and Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of Washington. His research focuses on understanding the underlying evolutionary factors influencing human behavior. He has written many books, most recently *Through a Glass Brightly: Using Science to See Our Species as We Really Are* and *Strength Through Peace: Happiness and Demilitarization in Costa Rica, and What the World Can Learn from a Tiny Central American Country* (with Judith Lipton). He holds a PhD in zoology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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Cite as David Barash, "A Sisyphean Task," contribution to GTI Forum "Can Human Solidarity Globalize?," *Great Transition Initiative* (August 2021), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/global-solidarity-barash>.

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