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# WAR:

## A VIETNAM MEMOIR

Larry Dossey, MD

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Time is running short. Other Vietnams are lurking.<sup>1</sup>

– HARRY A. WILMER

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### A PERSONAL NOTE

“The goal of the military in war is simple,” says a friend of mine who has worked at the Pentagon, “– killing people and breaking things.” In addition to being killed, people are among the things in war that get broken. This explains in a nutshell why war is and always has been a health issue, and why I believe it is an appropriate concern for a journal devoted to health.

Many of the events that follow are exquisitely personal. They happened to me thirty years ago and I have never before published anything about them. Eight years ago I tried doing so in a book, but my publisher rejected the material because it was “too graphic.”

One reason I have decided to write about these events in *Alternative Therapies* is the support I feel from the readers of this journal. For this I am grateful.

– L.D.

## I.

In the alchemy of men's souls, almost all the noble attributes, courage, honor, love, hope, faith, duty and loyalty – can be transmuted into ruthlessness. Compassion alone stands apart from the continuous traffic between good and evil proceeding within us. Thus the survival of the species may depend on the ability to foster a boundless capacity for compassion.<sup>2</sup>

– ERIC HOFFER

I volunteered for Vietnam in 1969, fresh out of my internship. There was nothing noble in my decision. All young physicians were being drafted at the time, and I figured I had a better shot at a decent assignment if joined up. My strategy didn't work.

In the six-week period of officer training prior to leaving for Vietnam, my cynical attitude toward the military hardened as I was exposed to a series of career officers assigned to indoctrinate us in our new roles as Army physicians. I was appalled by their cheerful enthusiasm. I considered myself wiser than they, because I could see the insanity of war and they could not. I made a solemn vow that I would never, under any circumstance, take undue risks should I find myself in a hazardous situation in Vietnam. I considered the risk of danger unlikely, however, because my chances of being assigned to a medical facility in a safe zone were quite good.

Again my calculations failed. I was assigned as a battalion surgeon – an inflated title – to a mechanized infantry battalion attached to an airborne brigade of paratroopers. I was shocked to discover that positions like this actually existed for physicians. I was issued an M-16 rifle, a .45 pistol, a bandolier for extra ammunition clips, a combat knife, and a flak jacket, which was a Kevlar vest that repelled bullets and shrapnel – all of which, in addition to a small medical aid bag I put together, would become my constant companions for the following year.

Again the unexpected happened. After only a few days on the front lines I began renouncing all my previous resolutions and started actually to court danger. I began volunteering for combat patrols and assault missions, and for paratrooper "jump" school. As I increasingly identified with my new role, I seriously considered asking for reassignment to the Army's Officer Candidate School back in the States, so I could return to Vietnam with my own infantry company to command. When, after six months of hazardous duty, it came time for me to rotate to a safe assignment at a rear hospital, I declined the opportunity and elected to stay in the field with the casualties and carnage for an additional six months – in spite of the fact that by then I knew the war was insane. But, in a way, so was I.

Vietnam, II Corp, Landing Zone English, 1969. I reach the remote outpost in time to see the crew of the disabled armored personnel carrier (APC) walking away from it. They are sullen and splattered with blood. I notice that the tank-like vehicle has a hole in its side, made by an RPG, a rocket-propelled grenade. Where did all the blood come from? I climb atop the APC, drop down through the open hatch into the claustrophobic chamber, and find myself sitting next to a young soldier. He has no head. I peer into the base of his skull – an empty, bone-white bowl that

previously contained a brain. Looking around, I see the man's missing brain tissue stuck on every wall of the APC. His head suffered a direct hit from the rocket, and they both exploded.

His insignia tells me he is a sergeant. His hands are folded limply in his lap, as if he is meditating. I notice a bulge in the breast pocket of his uniform. I unbutton it and remove his wallet, which is stuffed with photographs of his pretty wife and two beaming children. The oldest child is a little girl in pigtails and braces. In the picture she towers over her brother and holds his hand.

I respectfully replace the sergeant's wallet. Then I lean against my headless comrade, shoulder to shoulder, and begin to cry. It's been almost a year since I arrived in Vietnam, and I am tired of the carnage – physically, emotionally, spiritually. The countless, blood-soaked soldiers I have patched up and resuscitated before sending them back to the MASH-type hospitals; the days spent in Vietnamese hamlets treating malaria, tuberculosis, and exotic diseases I could only guess at; the lucky misses during mortar bombardments; 200+ hours spent in helicopters, and the near-crashes – the surreal chaos replays itself as tears flow.

"Doc! What the hell is taking you so long?" One of my medics is concerned about what is going on inside the APC. I am needed elsewhere. I stifle my emotions and stuff them into some part of my mind I've learned to keep handy for occasions like this. I'm responsible for a thousand men; emotional control is everything.

With an inversion of rank I salute my dead comrade and say goodbye. I make sure his pocket is fastened securely, so his wallet won't be lost on his way to the body bag.

I look back in amazement at those months in Vietnam. I still find it difficult to believe that I not only participated in the war, but did so with enthusiasm. I considered myself immune to being caught up in soldiering, but before long I was taking pride in the behaviors I had repudiated earlier. I became part of a group of men trying to survive while they did their duty, and I would have given my life and taken any risk whatever, as I did many times, to help them succeed. They knew there were no limits to my devotion to them, and they responded to me in the same way. This unconditional mutual support explained why, for example, during a combat assault mission an 18-year-old soldier once ran across a rice paddy, braving enemy fire, *to hand me a Coke*.

Along with the dangers came the wildest sensations and most paradoxical satisfactions I have ever known. There are simply no comparisons to the emotions of war. Warriors know this, and this realization accounts in no small measure for the silent understandings that bind them.

I've long since ceased looking for rational explanations for these experiences, because there are none. The brute fact is this: The tug of war is one of the most irresistible forces humans ever encounter, a power capable of shredding any process of

reasoning thrown up against it. To complicate matters, war, for all its horrors, is always studded with a profusion of virtues – not just sacrifice and heroism, which are predictable, but also love and compassion, which are not. If war brings out the worst in humans, it also elicits the best. War is the preeminent human activity in which the beastly and the divine reveal themselves side by side, in the same person.

As a result of my experiences in Vietnam, I believe that no one is safe from the seductions of war. If I, against the backdrop of antipathy and disgust for war, can embrace it, hunger for it, *love* it, then perhaps no one is immune to its attractions. I wish my experience were unique, but unfortunately it is all too common and is part of the reason why wars endure.

### **WAR AND THE SHADOW**

I fell under the spell of war as a consequence of unconscious forces I did not comprehend and therefore could not control. The psychological forces compelling people to go to war constitute a universal psychological pattern that appears across cultures and through time – what psychologist C. G. Jung called an *archetype*. These unacknowledged factors are part of what Jung called the shadow, the part of the psyche that contains all the unlovely, unacceptable traits we reject at a conscious level.

The most significant event in modern history forcing us to confront our individual and collective shadow was probably the Vietnam War. Harry A. Wilmer, president of the Institute for the Humanities in Salado, Texas, is a psychiatrist and researcher who is an expert in treating Vietnam veterans suffering from psychological trauma. He states,

Until Vietnam, Americans were content to see the shadow and evil only in their enemies. But with the Vietnam experience, the media – and the living-room video-war. . . changed that. Suddenly technology not only let us see the close-up horror of war but also let us see it as it was happening. That has never happened before in the history of the world. [Wilmer, 101]

### **WAR AND PROJECTION: BLAMING THE WARRIORS**

The psyche is ingenious and will go to any length to avoid confronting its dark side. This frequently involves attributing to someone else the sordid traits we sense in ourselves – a psychological defense mechanism called projection. Following Vietnam, the most dramatic case of projection involved Lieutenant William Calley, who was court-martialed and found guilty of perpetrating the atrocities at My Lai. Calley's conviction made it possible for us to say that *we* didn't murder Vietnamese women and children, *he* did, and soldiers like him. We essentially accused thousands of US soldiers of Calley's crimes – warriors like Tom, who was one of the returning veterans treated by Wilmer.

Tom prided himself on being a grunt (foot soldier) who managed to survive twenty-six months in Vietnam. He had survived the thick of battle, including the Tet Offensive at Hue, which was captured by Vietcong and North Vietnamese troops. Tom told Wilmer that, when he landed at National Airport in Washington, D.C., "a lady came up to me and called me 'a murderer,' and hit me in the face with her purse. I said, 'Shit! This is what I came home to?' I went and got a drink. I didn't want to come home if this was how it was gonna be." [Wilmer, 97]

Another of Wilmer's patients was Cervando:

Cervando was a tough, ex-Marine who came back with a drawer full of medals. In an interview he said to Wilmer, "Look around you. There are still people who are ashamed to say, 'I'm a Vietnam veteran because I'm scared that people won't talk to me.' " I've been insulted. "Sir, were you one of [those] butchers over there? Did you enjoy killing babies and people?" [Wilmer, 97]

Mike, another of Wilmer's patients, arrived in the United States wounded, frightened, and feeling guilty for having survived when his buddies had been killed, but happy nonetheless to be home. He said,

I arrived at the San Francisco airport and went to a bar. The people at the bar said, "Well, what are you doing here? You're crazy. Why don't you get the hell out of here?" It seemed to me that the media had depicted us as being crazy and when I left the service I considered myself normal. I just wanted to get out. I did my thing, and now leave me alone. [Wilmer, 96-7]

Eric, a returning veteran who lost his foot in an explosion, experienced shame so oppressive that he lied about his wounds:

When they used to say to me, "Hey were you in Vietnam?" or "What happened to your leg?" I'd say I had a car accident so I didn't have to bring it up. [Wilmer, 97]

### **THE UNIFORM AND THE GARBAGE CAN**

My return flight from Vietnam landed in Seattle in the early morning hours. As my buddies and I exited the plane, there was no joy among us. Neither were there any welcoming committees or yellow ribbons that would festoon every town in America when the Gulf War veterans returned a generation later. As I set foot on American soil, I actually felt as if I were entering hostile territory, a feeling I knew well enough after a year in the bush. I had calculated my return for weeks. Before leaving Vietnam, I had managed to acquire some civilian clothes. My first act in the Seattle airport was to duck into a restroom, strip off my jungle fatigues and combat boots, stuff them in a garbage can, and don the cheap civilian clothes before catching the connecting flight home. I knew that a peace march was scheduled to convene in Washington, DC in a few days, and that anti-war sentiment was at a fever pitch. I simply could not tolerate the prospect of being ridiculed, and I was not confident that I could control my rage if someone made a cynical remark to me. Maybe ditching the combat garb would help. I remember feeling numb as I walked out of the men's room with my new identity. Like Tom, Cervando, and Mike, I wanted to hide away somewhere.

Wilmer, summarizing how Americans projected their guilt onto returning Vietnam veterans, spoke for how I felt. He stated, "I need not repeat the endless shameful ways in which many veterans were 'welcomed' by being spit on and humiliated, stereotyped as losers, baby killers, dope fiends, and walking time bombs." [Wilmer, 96-7]

Americans don't have a monopoly on the shabby treatment of returning soldiers. The Russians also treated their Afghanistan war veterans with disrespect. On May 9, 1990, they were left out of the parade in Moscow celebrating the forty-fifth anniversary

of the World War II victory over Germany. While the festivities were in progress, the Afghanistan veterans gathered in Gorky Park to celebrate "nothing more than survival." <sup>3</sup>

## NIGHTMARES OF WAR

The integration of good and evil is the only way to heal the nightmare. That is what the transpersonal psyche is trying to do in dreams of Vietnam. [Wilmer, 101]

– HARRY A. WILMER

On returning from Vietnam, I reentered medical training and completed a residency in internal medicine. But at night the war was always close at hand. It dogged me in the form of a horrifying a nightmare that recurred for almost twenty years.

An emergency radio call: A patrol has just been ambushed and has taken casualties. I run for the med-evac chopper and scramble inside as it lifts off in a cloud of red dust. In minutes we are over the ambush site and the helicopter lands in the jungle clearing. The smell of gunfire is still in the air. On the ground are three young men who are not moving. I quickly examine them and discover that two are dead. The third soldier is alive but is ashen, clammy, and barely conscious. I can find only a single wound – a tiny dot of red over his heart, the signature of shrapnel. Has it punctured his pleura, lung, pericardium, or heart? Wasting no time, we load the young man onto the helicopter. He loses consciousness. I have no blood, intravenous fluids, or chest tubes, and I begin manual resuscitation to keep him alive. As we skim the jungle canopy en route to the evacuation hospital, I am furious that this stalwart young soldier is dying from such an insignificant-appearing wound.

We land on the helipad and two waiting medics load the young soldier onto a stretcher and dash for the receiving area. I follow but am stopped at the entry by a fellow captain who also is a physician. His pristine, starched uniform is a dramatic contrast to mine. He is gesticulating in uncontrolled anger. "You cannot come inside this hospital!" he fumes. I don't understand; I'm a doctor and the soldier is my patient. I have kept him alive. "Look at you!" he sneers, pointing to my uniform, which is covered with blood and the red dirt of Vietnam. My rifle and medical aid are slung over my shoulder and a .45 is at my waist. "You're armed! This is a hospital! We don't allow weapons and filth here!" Suddenly a group of medics surrounds me and tries to hustle me away, as if I am a criminal. I resist but am overcome. After they strip me of my rifle, pistol, and aid bag, they hurl me into the dirt. I look beyond them and see the young soldier, my patient, disappearing on a gurney down a hallway. I must get to him and help him! I try to rise but the burly medics overpower me again. "You don't belong here!" the arrogant physician screams. "Get

out!" Now I see that the entry to the hospital is barred. My weapons are locked inside and I cannot reach them.

Realizing I have nothing with which to defend myself, I feel helpless and begin to panic. The helicopter is waiting, its motor still running, and I climb inside. I am enraged at the physician who has just insisted that the war be aseptic and tidy. I realize he is typical of many of the hospital-based physicians I have met, who, in spite of their safe assignments and comfortable quarters, spend their time complaining about their careers being interrupted and the indignities they are enduring. They have no idea what things are like for the "grunts," the real warriors, or for the medics and battalion surgeons who try to keep them alive. As we head back into the jungle, I have a morbid sense of dread.

Up to this point in the dream, the events were factual; the patient was real and I had, in fact, been barred and disarmed at a MASH-type evacuation hospital on transferring wounded soldiers there by helicopter. But then the dream took a monstrous turn.

On the way back to the fire base where my aid station is located, my helicopter is shot down. The crew is wounded but I am unhurt. They are crying out for help, but I have no supplies. The Vietcong are closing in on the downed chopper; I can hear them moving closer through the jungle. I realize we will be captured, tortured, killed, and mutilated. Instinctively I reach for my weapons, not remembering I have none. The worst possible thing has happened: I have become totally defenseless. Waiting for the end, I awaken in terror.

Year after year the nightmare continued. In an attempt to shut it out, I avoided anything that reminded me of Vietnam. I refused to see movies about the war, I shunned books written about it, and I would never talk about my experiences to anyone, including my wife. Vietnam was a closed subject that belonged to the past. Besides, I considered my demons my own, and I could not see the point in unleashing them on anyone else. My approach did not work. Trying to keep the lid on my psyche was like trying to hold back the sea. The nightmare would always recur, each time as terrifying as before. A resolution occurred in a quite unexpected way.

Eighteen years after my return from Vietnam, I was traveling with Barbie, my wife, in New Mexico. We were visiting Santa Fe, staying in La Fonda, a beautiful, historic hotel on the plaza. It was late at night and I was exhausted. Wanting some mindless diversion, I turned on the television and sank into bed. A made-for-TV drama about Vietnam was on. Before I could change the channel, which was my habitual way of dealing with anything related to the war, I realized that the events being portrayed on television were a reenactment of my nightmare – a downed helicopter, wounded soldiers, and the approaching enemy. I was mesmerized. The television drama became as real as the dream, and I found myself entering it fully. But instead of feeling panic and terror as

in the nightmare, I began to weep. Soon I found myself sobbing uncontrollably – rivers of tears, sobs that shook the bed. Some of the television soldiers actually resembled some of my previous comrades. The thing that impressed me most was their innocence. They seemed so *young - children*, almost – and the compassion I felt for them is beyond description. When the program ended my sobbing continued. I simply could not stop. I was now in Vietnam, and for the first time in nearly twenty years I allowed my imagination to reengage the buried memories. The lid was completely off my psyche, and the repressed, painful events came spilling out unopposed. I made no attempt to monitor or censor anything. Hours later, after soaking every towel in the bathroom, my tears finally ceased.

Exhausted yet immensely peaceful, I left the hotel room and went for a walk. It was early morning and the stars were fading. In the east, blood-red streaks announced the dawn, a symbol of an ending and a new beginning. The nightmare has never returned.

## II.

### DO WE “CATCH” WAR?

Forget about great white sharks and killer bees. We have most to fear from our own species....<sup>4</sup> The recorded history of eleven European countries during the last 1,025 years shows that they were engaged on average in some kind of military action forty-seven percent of the time, or about one year in every two. The lowest scorer has been Germany with twenty-eight percent, and the highest Spain with a massive sixty-seven percent, waging war in two out of every three years throughout the last millennium. One study covering just the twentieth century shows that an average of three high-fatality struggles have been in action somewhere in the world at any moment since 1900, leading that researcher to conclude that such conflict is “a routine, typical, and thus in fact normal, human activity.” [Watson,160]...Conflict is easy to understand. It is peace that needs explaining. [Watson, 164]

– LYALL WATSON

War behaves like an infection. Some societies seem to be relatively immune to being infected by the “microbe” of war, while others have little resistance and are always falling prey. Biologist and author Barbara Ehrenreich, in her brilliant book *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War*,<sup>5</sup> suggests that following an outbreak war is “capable of encysting itself for generations, if necessary, within the human soul,” breaking out unpredictably at a later time. Unlike a disease such as measles or chicken pox, infection by war does not result in permanent immunity. If anything, war seems to destroy a society’s immune system against armed conflict – for, after a nation goes to war, it tends to go to war repeatedly. Has there ever been a nation that has engaged in only *one* war?

If the inoculum is great enough, war can infect any state. The infection may begin as an insult to national pride, economic oppression, or actual invasion. Once the



initial provocation has occurred, war can spread from country to country, not unlike the self-replication and propagation of a living organism.

The microbe of war is apparently becoming more virulent. As evidence, the twentieth century has produced 75 percent of all the war deaths inflicted since the rise of Rome.<sup>6</sup> As in infectious diseases, the greatest number of casualties include the weakest and most vulnerable: 90% of the deaths in modern conflicts are noncombatants including the aged, women, and children.<sup>7</sup> Like many infections, war increases one's susceptibility to other diseases. In Rwanda, cholera killed up to 45,000 people in only a few weeks in 1994, one of the most intense, lethal epidemics ever recorded. [Epstein, review of *War and Public Health*, 1479]

A variety of opportunistic "infections" accompany war, as they do many infectious diseases. Consider, for example, the 100 million land mines that currently lie in wait in 64 nations; the 2.2 billion hectares of forest and farms that were denuded in Vietnam from land-clearing, napalm, and defoliation with 72 million liters of herbicides; the toxic wastes that result from weapons production and testing, including fuels, paints, solvents, phenols, acids, alkalines, propellants and explosives; the high rates of cancer around Hanford Reservation, Wash, Rocky Flats, Colo, and Oak Ridge, Tenn; the 4,500 contaminated Department of Energy sites in the United States; and the long-term cognitive and developmental deficits and malnutrition that affect the 17 million children who have currently lost their homes as a result of war. [Epstein, review of *War and Public Health*, 1479]

## ORIGINS OF WAR: THE TWO DOMINANT THEORIES

There is a capacity of virtue in us, and there is a capacity of vice to make your blood creep.<sup>8</sup>  
 – RALPH WALDO EMERSON

There are two major theories about why we go to war – (1) that war is a method by which humans seek to advance their collective political and economic interests and improve their lives; and (2) that war stems from subrational drives similar to those that lead individuals to commit violent crimes, drives that may be biological. [Ehrenreich, 8]. The first reason is virtually uncontested. "There is no doubt..." Ehrenreich states, "that wars are designed, at least ostensibly, to secure necessities like land or oil or 'geopolitical advantage.'" [Ehrenreich, 8]

Is war "biological"? Anyone who is willing unobtrusively to observe nature might think so. Naturalist John Nichols, author of *The Milagro Beanfield War*,<sup>9</sup> describes his observations at a stock pond on a high-desert mesa in northern New Mexico following a summer thunderstorm:<sup>10</sup>

Hours after the water is impounded, mosquitoes and other bugs are running rampant. I begin to see the splash rings of insects being born. It isn't long before green darning needles zip over the muddy pond, chased by aggressive blue and gray dragonflies. Tiny things grab each other, kick and fuss, chew and dismember, eat, digest, and defecate, and then look around hungrily to see if there's anybody they missed: life, elucidated by unending holocaust; the natural world as total war!

It seems as if the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814) may have been correct when he said,<sup>11</sup>

Who else but Nature whispers to us of personal hatreds, vengeance, wars, in fact all the everlasting motives for murder? ...it is impossible for murder ever to outrage Nature.

Is this our inheritance? Are we driven to war by thought processes dictated ultimately by our DNA? “[T]here is no straightforward biological calculation that could lead a man to kill himself in war,” Ehrenreich asserts. The “rational” argument for sacrificing oneself in combat is that doing so promotes the survival of one’s kin and therefore genetic material similar to one’s own – selfishness disguised as altruism. Perhaps this might apply to situations in which warriors died fighting for their immediate family or clan, but it is a stretch to suppose this sort of reasoning applies to the huge, “genetically polyglot” armies of both ancient and modern states.” [Ehrenreich, 19] Even so, the theory that human violence has biological roots is immensely influential, with a great deal of evidence in its favor. The question, it seems, is not *whether* we have biological inclinations to harm others, but how deep these roots go. (Note 2)

If our genes compel us toward war, we might expect forms of violence that accompany war to be embedded in nature. An example is rape.

Copulation by force is so common in nature one wonders whether it is the norm. The male scorpion-fly is a master rapist. He will lie in wait for an unwary female and, as she passes, lash out with his flexible abdomen and grasp her leg or wing. Although she escapes most of the time, she is not always successful and is forced to yield to copulation (Lyll Watson, *Dark Nature*, p. 177). Aggravated sexual assault and gang rape is common among mallard ducks; occasionally the female is attacked so persistently she drowns in the process.<sup>12</sup> Man-eating male blue sharks make injurious attacks on their own females and seem unable to mate without doing so.<sup>13</sup> Rape is a commonplace pattern of behavior in many insects, frogs and turtles, and homosexual rape is seen in some parasitic worms.<sup>14</sup>

In spite of the fact that rape is unquestionably ubiquitous in nature, it seems animalistic, beastly, "other." On the human level, rape and pillage are something the evil enemy does. When Japanese forces captured the Chinese city of Nanking in 1937, more than 20,000 women were sexually tortured and murdered in a month -- the "Rape of Nanking."<sup>15</sup> In 1943 Moroccan mercenaries fighting with the French were allowed to rape their way through tens of thousands of Italian women.<sup>16</sup> "Our boys" never do such things, of course. But in the spring of 1945 when Berlin was liberated, "Allied troops took leave of the war and of their senses, raping hundreds of thousands of German women, included among whom were victims of Nazi concentration camps."<sup>17</sup>

## **THE FRISSON OF WAR**

As people are being sucked into the black hole of war, they often become excited. In the days preceding World War I, hardly anyone could resist the attractions of the approaching conflict. Rainer Maria Rilke, Germany’s great poet, wrote a series of poems extolling war; Anatole France, although 70 years old, offered to volunteer; Isadora Duncan described being “all flame and fire” about the war. Feminists such as England’s Isabella Pankhurst set aside the struggle for suffrage in order to support the war effort.

Even the young Gandhi recruited Indians to join the British army. Arnold J. Toynbee, the British historian, was caught up in the frenzy and produced several volumes of “atrocious propaganda” as his contribution to the war effort. [Ehrenreich, 13-15]

The case of Sigmund Freud is particularly interesting. Like most, he was swept up in the excitement of the war and for a while gave “all his libido to Austria-Hungary....[U]nable for weeks to work or think of anything else, Freud was eventually led to conclude that there is some dark flaw in the human psyche, a perverse desire to destroy, countering Eros and the will to live.” [Ehrenreich, 8] But if Freud really comprehended the power of the unconscious, why was he so powerless before his own? Ehrenreich concludes that in his analysis of war, Freud had a blind spot. He “failed to reflect on his own enthusiasm; otherwise he would never have hypothesized that men are driven to war by some cruel and murderous instinct.” [Ehrenreich, 14]

By the time war in Europe ended in 1918, it had cost approximately 12,000,000 military lives and 20,000,000 civilian casualties. But in 1914, no one could comprehend the magnitude of the coming slaughter. In England, “the imperial war image was thrust on the young through cigarette cards, jigsaws, music-hall songs, board games, biscuit tins, lantern slides and picture postcards: ‘Women of Britain Say Go.’ “ Although a few groups such as the Peacettes dissented, few listened to the message in their tracts that “the good soldier is a heartless soul-less, murderous machine.”<sup>18</sup> Amid the frenzy, no one could believe that their enchantment with the approaching conflict could possibly be due to a raw instinct to kill their fellow human beings. They preferred, rather, to describe their justifications in terms of the noblest feelings humans can experience – heroism, commitment to a worthy cause, comradeship, patriotism, selflessness and sacrifice – the same reasons we give today.

No one seems immune from being drawn into war. Consider the Senoi Semai people of the rainforest of the Malay peninsula, one of the most peaceful tribes known. There are approximately 13,000 of them, and they appear never to kill each other. “We never get angry,” they say -- meaning, rather, that they have found ways of channeling anger into nonviolent forms of behavior. Violence horrifies them, is unthinkable, and apparently never happens. They have no need of a court system or police force. No single instance of murder, attempted murder, or even injury by a Semai has ever come to the attention of the Malaysian authorities. Yet, when the Semai were conscripted into the British Army to deal with Communist insurgents during uprisings in the early 1950s, the Semai were overcome by a kind of insanity they called “blood drunkenness.” “We killed, killed, killed,” they explained later. “...truly we were drunk with blood.” One Semai even told how he drank the blood of a man he had just killed. And when the peninsular uprisings were over, the Semai returned to their communities as gentle and nonaggressive as before, as if nothing had happened.<sup>19, 20</sup>

## WAR AS SACRAMENT

I can affirm from personal experience that the thrill of war is like no other. This peculiar state of awareness has been described as “ecstasy,” an “altered state of consciousness,” “one of humankind’s great natural ‘highs,’ “ “social intoxication, the feeling on the part of the individual of being a part of a [greater] body,” “the sense of self-loss,...of merger into some greater whole,” the satisfaction of the same psychological

needs met by “love, religion, intoxication, art,” and “a sense of transcendent purposefulness.” [Ehrenreich, 15]

Why do we experience war in this way? Ehrenreich offers a fascinating hypotheses. A key to her thesis is that war, over the course of human history, has become invested with a deep sense of religious significance. To associate war with religion is to regard it as a *sacrament* – a holy ritual – and to experience the “spiritual high” that accompanies the sacred. Uniting war and religion also makes possible a justification for killing and for abandoning ethical and moral norms. “It is the religiosity of war, above all, that makes it so impervious to moral rebuke,” Ehrenreich states. [Ehrenreich, 19]

What actually constituted the connection between war and religion? Ehrenreich finds the link in the ancient ritual of *blood sacrifice*. Throughout history, even in times of peace, the religions of traditional cultures were often knee-deep in the bloody business of killing both animals and humans dedicated to their gods. Over time, murder and the shedding of blood came to lie at the very core what humans considered religious and sacred.

Conventional explanations say otherwise. Human violence is best explained, it is claimed, as a result of our long history as hunters and killers of animals for food. As a result, we became “natural born killers.” Unable to shed our old drives, we carried these habits over into the era of herding and farming. As the hunting of wild beasts for food became less necessary, a new form of “hunting” arose – preying on other peoples’ herds or the grain in their village fortresses. The name for this new form of hunting was war. Because the old type of hunting had been considered a sacred endeavor, war came to be sacralized as well.

But why did humans find the practice of blood sacrifice attractive in the first place? Ehrenreich believes the ritual was rooted in the 2.5 million years during which early humans lived in small hunting bands. Evidence suggests that during this period humans were not skilled predators, they were mercilessly preyed upon. Only in the “last thousand or so generations” did we gain the skill and cunning required to make the transition from prey to that of a self-confident predator. This transition as a species, Ehrenreich maintains, has been almost entirely repressed, because it is much more flattering to believe that we have always been atop the food chain. But we have only “recently” learned “not to cower at every sound in the night.” The gradual transformation from prey to predator was of unimaginable importance, and it required rituals to honor it:

Rituals of blood sacrifice both celebrate and terrifyingly reenact the human transition from prey to predator, and so, I... argue, does war. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the case of wars that are undertaken for the stated purpose of initiating young men into the male warrior-predator role – a not uncommon occurrence in traditional cultures. But more important, the anxiety and ultimate thrill of the prey-to-predator transition color the feelings we bring to *all* wars, and infuse them, at least for some of the participants, some of the time, with feelings powerful and uplifting enough to be experienced as “religious.” [Ehrenreich, 22]

War, then, in this view, is the response to the ancestral urge of blood sacrifice, which developed as a means of celebrating the greatest transition our species has perhaps ever known – the movement from the status of prey to predator. This thumbnail sketch

does not do justice to Ehrenreich's sweeping, carefully argued thesis; those interested in her arguments should consult her book *Blood Rites*. [Ehrenreich, *Blood Rites* ]

Pausanias, the Greek historian, tells of the dismemberment and communal eating of a child sacrificed to Zeus on Mount Lykaion. Throughout Europe, Asia, and the Pacific there is evidence of human sacrifices at bridges, temples, houses, and forts to ensure that these structures contained the proper spirit. The penchant of the ancient Aztecs, Mayans, and Incas for sacrificing humans to their gods is well known. These grim customs persist. Following a tidal wave in southern Chile in 1960, Mapuche Indians threw a five-year-old boy into the sea to appease the ocean spirit. In 1986 in Peru an Aymara man was beheaded by cocaine traders to "pay the earth" in an attempt to bring blessings on a new venture.

Human sacrifice is right at home in our Judeo-Christian traditions. It was enshrined with the sacrifice of Abel by his brother Cain, the aborted sacrifice by Abraham of his son Isaac, and the death of the son of God himself at Golgotha. Christian sacrifice still has its appeal. In 1986 evangelical Christians in an Andean village drove a stake through the heart of a nine-year-old boy in an attempt to save the life of a sick man. (Lyll Watson, *Dark Nature*, 165-166).

Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, called Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his own son a "monstrous paradox" and could find no logical justification for it. He concluded something else must be going on, "which no thought can grasp."<sup>21</sup>

As animal sacrifice has become an unacceptable method of shedding blood, we have taken to sacrificing each other on our altars of social violence. The principal tool in this carnage is the handgun. Twenty of them are manufactured each second in the United States, and they find their way into 71 million homes. In 1992 there were 13,220 handgun murders in the United States, of which only 262 were ruled as justifiable homicides in cases of self-defense. (Lyll Watson, *Dark Nature*, pp. 185 and 189). Our capacity for murder led classics scholar Walter Burkert to suggest renaming our species *Homo necans* -- "man the killer."<sup>22</sup> (W. Burkert, *Homo Necans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). Publisher/date not given as cited in Lyll Watson, *Dark Nature*, op. cit., p. 165.

As if they are finally taking revenge for being used in ritual sacrifices for millennia, animals have begun shooting us. "Hundreds of people are killed each year by firearms accidentally discharged by domestic pets," Watson's research reveals. (Lyll Watson, *Dark Nature*, p. 189) In October 1998, John Hwika, a thirty-seven-year-old former marine, died after being shot in the heart when Benji, a frisky French poodle, jumped into his lap as he was demonstrating the safety catch of a handgun to his mother, who was anxious about a recent spate of burglaries (*The Guardian* [London], 13 September, 1998). Wild animals also get into the act. In June 1996, a hunter named Li, near Li Bian village in Shanxi province, China, was returning from a hunting trip when he came across a snake. He placed the butt of his gun on the snake's head but it coiled around the gun and its tail lashed the trigger. The gun discharged and shot Li, who died en route to the hospital. (*Hong Kong Standard*, 25 June 1996).

## GENDER AND WAR

Women encourage killers. They do it by falling in love with warriors and heroes. Men know it and respond with enthusiasm. The Crusaders marched off to war with ladies' favors in their helmets. They were not setting out on some mission of gallant gentleness. On their way through Asia Minor, the Crusaders literally roasted Christian babies in cases of mistaken identity. Because the local folk did not speak a language they understood, the chivalrous knights assumed the panicky babblers were heathens. Heathens, of course, deserved no mercy. So the heroes sliced up the adults and baked the infants on spits, all the while thinking of how the damsels back home would admire their bravery.<sup>23</sup>

– HOWARD BLOOM

When males *go* to war, somebody *sends* them. This means that the masculine warrior function has evolved hand-in-hand with the role of those who stay behind to tend the hearth – wives, lovers, parents.

Hearth tending is generally considered a *passive* female role – waiting and worrying until “the boys come home.” But female roles during war are often quite active. As C. E. Montague put it, “War hath no fury like a noncombatant.”<sup>24</sup> In modern times women have adopted vigorous pursuits such as encouraging popular support, selling war bonds, working in industry, growing crops, and nursing the wounded. Women have become the weapons makers for soldiers away at war, the most famous symbol of whom was Rosie the Riveter of World War II.

Although heavily gendered, war has never totally been a male endeavor. Early European explorers of western Africa encountered the female regiment maintained by the kings of Dahomey, a living equivalent of the mythical Amazons. Deborah Sampson enlisted in the American Revolutionary War and served with valor, but only after “becoming a man” and transforming herself into “Robert Shirtluff,” and concealing her sex (until a wound to her shoulder gave her away). Ehrenreich notes,<sup>25</sup>

The female disadvantage in the realm of muscular strength was mitigated long ago with the invention of the bow and arrow, not to mention that great leveler of our own era, the gun. Nor...do women have any innate inhibition against fighting and shedding blood. Revolutions and insurrections have again and again utilized women in combat roles, if only because revolutionary forces are generally less formal and tradition-bound than the armies of nation-states. Even as “noncombatants,” women have played lethal roles in men’s wars. ...Polynesian women had the job of selecting and cooking defeated enemies for postbattle feasts....[T]here is no compelling biological or “natural” reason why men have so exclusively starred in the drama of war. [Ehrenreich, 128-9]

Margaret Thatcher, the former prime minister of Britain, won the Falklands War, supplied the British military with nuclear submarines, and stocked them with nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles. Indira Gandhi led a military campaign against Pakistan and jailed her opponents. The assassination squads of Peru’s Shining Path guerrillas were comprised almost entirely of women. [Bloom, 30]

Only a generation ago it was virtually unthinkable that we would send women into combat. In fact, this prospect was used to mobilize votes against the Equal Rights Amendment to the US Constitution.<sup>26</sup> Since then, however, women have served in a

variety of combat-related roles from directing artillery to piloting helicopters, and a few have been trained as fighter pilots and have found assignments on combat ships. When 11 women were killed and 2 were captured in the Gulf War, there was no special outcry. From many women's perspective, this was not an entirely negative development. [Ehrenreich, 229-30]

### IS WAR MEN'S FAULT?

People often say that war results from some incurable defect in the masculine character. Women are wiser and more compassionate, and they know better than to make war. If only they could ascend to positions as heads of states, peace might prevail and war become obsolete. However, in view of the ferocity with which women currently are clamoring for roles in combat, this claim has a hollow ring. As Ehrenreich puts it, "To anyone who had believed that war could be abolished by severing its links to male privilege... the end of the twentieth century can only bring gloom." [Ehrenreich, 231] Biologist Howard Bloom agrees. In his acclaimed book *The Lucifer Principle*, he states,

It is useless for women to blame violence on men, and it would be futile for men to blame violence on women. Violence is built into both of us. When Margaret Thatcher constructed a nuclear navy, she was not behaving in a manner distinctly male, nor was she behaving in a manner distinctly female. She wasn't even obeying a set of impulses that are uniquely human. Thatcher, like Rome's Livia, was in the grip of passions we share with gorillas and baboons, passions implanted in the primordial layers of the triune brain. [Bloom, 35]

### IS A WORLD WITHOUT WAR POSSIBLE?

The world cannot be ruled by love, it is an incommensurable principle. If that were possible, it would have been ruled by love long before Christ. For instance, if the teaching of old Pythagoras could have been applied, the world would have been in a marvelously peaceful, wise, and perfect state. We would all be wearing white linen clothes, and we wouldn't eat or drink too much, we would be mild in every respect. But the world would have remained as it was in 600 B.C. That teaching cannot be applied and never was applied. Even when God's son came to earth they crucified him. And what has Christianity produced? Constant fighting. It started with bloody fighting at the very beginning, it is a long string of wars and revolutions. That is the history of Christianity and it is full of devils.<sup>27</sup>

– C. G. JUNG

Taking the path of the warrior was for me one of the most enlightening events of my life, because it was an opportunity to dredge unexamined areas of my unconscious mind into the light of awareness. Jung called this process "making consciousness." I am not proud of a lot of the things I found scattered in my psychic basement, and I consider it a great misfortune that I did not find a less violent path toward self-understanding. Nonetheless the experience was healing, and freed me in large measure from being unconsciously and endlessly enslaved by my impulse for violence.

These are some of the reasons I am not a pacifist. To obstruct totally deep-seated psychic drives such as the urge to warriorship seems to me sheer folly, because in the end this obstruction leads to the very violence it seeks to avoid. Yet it is clear we cannot

afford any longer the kind of warriorship that takes place on modern battlefields. Our world is too small and fragile, too precious, and the weapons too destructive. How, then, are we to deal with the old drives? The answer is not to abolish warriorship (as if we could) but to find less violent ways of being warriors – possibly becoming warriors for the Earth and the environment, or warriors against poverty, illiteracy, overpopulation, and human suffering in all its forms – to practice, in other words, the *compassion* mentioned above by Hoffer. These endeavors hold the prospect of adventure, exposure to exotic cultures and foreign lands, and even the risk of personal harm or even death, which are salient features of rites of passage and participation in war.

Yet, even as I write these words I am leary of them. To suggest that the drive toward war can be sublimated in socially valuable ways is to sell war short and risk being victimized by it in the future. We do not choose war, it chooses us; and if we forget this maxim we are in grave danger. Even when we describe war as a rite of passage we intellectualize it. We simply cannot *think* our way out of war. As the Israeli military theorist, Martin van Creveld said, “So elemental is the human need to endow the shedding of blood with some great and even sublime significance that it renders the intellect entirely helpless.”<sup>28</sup>

## WAR AND RELIGION

How many gods can there be in one sky?<sup>29</sup>

– CHRISTOPHER DIFFORD AND GLENN TILBROOK

It is useless to argue that we can escape war’s grasp by becoming more religious. War has always been used as an instrument of the world’s great religions, with the blessed exception of Buddhism.

Injunctions for killing rape are biblical. After Moses' troops defeated the Midianites, he commanded them, "Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known man by lying with thim. But all the women children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves" (Numbers 31:17-18, KJV).

The extent to which Christianity has employed war is often denied in the West. But the imperatives of Christianity have always been militaristic: “Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war.” As Saint Bernard (whose name is derived from words that literally mean “bold as a bear”) said in the 12th century, when the Crusades were in progress, “The soldier of Christ kills safely; he dies the more safely. He serves his own interests in dying, and Christ’s interests in killing! Not without cause does he bear the sword!”<sup>30</sup>

British author Oliver Thomson states in his book *A History of Sin* that during the period of crusading activity between 1091 to 1291, the battlefield was believed to be a clear path to heaven, and the duty of war was preached from every pulpit. [Thomson, 135-6]

Of the 9,000,000 people killed during this 200-year span, approximately half were Christians. The other half?

...in the panoptic holocaust of the crusader’s imagination,...the killing of Jews, the nation of Judas, was certainly not seen as inhumane....[But,] the Jews were not the only people to suffer from the violence of the crusades. There was much



gratuitous killing of Moslems also: in the siege of Nicaea in 1097, human heads were used for catapult ammunition; and Richard I (1157-99), Coeur de Lion and a man of limited moral imagination, slaughtered 2,700 prisoners of war at Acre when their ransom was delayed. He was also the first ruler to make general use of the new “immoral weapon” of its time, the crossbow, which was condemned as such by the Lateran Council of 1397 and barred for use against other Christians. [So much for arms control.] Ironically, Richard died a lingering death from a crossbow wound. [Thomson, 135]

Killing for Christ achieved great momentum when the Cathars, who were among the last European adherents of nonviolence, were targeted as heretics by Pope Innocent III in the thirteenth century. They held that “the soldier obeying his captains and the judge pronouncing sentence of death were both nothing but murderers.”<sup>31</sup> In retaliation for this doctrinal error, the Cathars were exterminated. Northern French knights, in return for indulgences, “flayed Provence [where the Cathars lived], hanging, beheading, and burning ‘with unspeakable joy.’ “ When the city of Béziers was taken and the papal legate was asked how to tell the Cathars from the regular Catholics, he replied, “Kill them all; God will know which are His.”<sup>32</sup> The knights complied by slaughtering 20,000. The main villain at Béziers was the crusader Simon de Montfort (1160-1218), who enjoyed gouging out the eyes and slitting the noses of his victims.

The Church was on a roll. In the fourteenth century, notes Thomson, “Catholicism produced a morality which encouraged the slow burning of non-orthodox members of its own faith.” The microbe of torture leapt the Atlantic to appear in Protestant New England. Thus Thomson adds, “The otherwise punctilious Puritans regarded it as moral to drown muddled old women whom they suspected of witchcraft.” [Thomson, 29-30]

It is difficult to argue that the major religions are becoming less warlike. In recent years we have seen religious struggles erupt in Northern Ireland, the Middle East, Bosnia, and elsewhere. In all these examples, the adversaries have offered the same prayer to the same god: Let us be victorious over our enemies.

It is also difficult really to believe that the goal of the major religions is peace. Although Jesus appeared on Earth “to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:79, KJV) and advocated his followers to “have peace one with another” (Mark 9:50, KJV), he also warned, “Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34, KJV) and, “Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division” (Luke 12:51, KJV). In the Old Testament we find similar statements from Jehovah – e.g., Isaiah 45:7, “I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things” (KJV).

This is not meant to single out Christianity and Judaism. Where war is concerned, there is plenty of blood to go around, including for Islam. In the Koran,<sup>33</sup> in the chapter titled “Repentance,” we find that, although Allah is forgiving and merciful, he nonetheless wishes the faithful to “slay the idolators wherever you find them. Arrest them, besiege them, and lie in ambush everywhere for them....Make war on them.” This includes, in particular, their original neighbors. “The Jews say Ezra is the son of Allah, while the Christians say the Messiah is the son of Allah. Such are their assertions, by which they imitate the infidels of old. Allah confound them! How perverse they are!”

### III.

All we have left, it appears, is ourselves. Our divided selves, fighting individual battles on a very wide front, using what in the end may be our best weapons. Reviving neglected aspects of our own biological inheritance, reanimating the world and rediscovering long-dormant faculties, using ourselves as the ultimate instruments of knowing.

This is something that comes naturally to us, and we can be very good at it indeed. Perhaps even good enough to hold the genetic tide, and our own dark nature, at bay long enough to give evolution the nudge it needs in the right direction.

The choice is ours. It is the capacity to choose that makes us special, giving us the ability to select a course for nature, instead of just submitting to the course of natural selection. [Watson, 291-2]

– LYALL WATSON

Shortly before the Gulf War broke out in 1991, a six-year-old boy wanted to know, "What channel is the war going to be on?" The answer, it turned out, was all of them. There was no escaping the excitement. Across America streets filled with demonstrators both for and against our involvement in the war. Everywhere people were wondering, What is this war really about? American economic and political interests? Freedom for the Kuwaitis? Soldiers in desert camouflage uniforms were frequently interviewed on TV. They want to "kick Saddam's ass," the sooner the better. Opposing these soldiers were protesters screaming, "No blood for oil!" Then the scene would change to spouses and parents of soldiers who spoke through tears about American values and democracy. Mothers and fathers said they were proud their sons and daughters were "serving." The President said we were stopping "naked aggression" and implied this war is a bargain: a limited "engagement" now would prevent a bigger one in the future.

People said this war was going to be different. Unlike during Vietnam, America was now united, and we were smarter, too; this time we would not tie our soldiers' hands but would allow them to fight with all their resources from the outset. Another major difference from Vietnam was that drugs and alcohol were banned in this Islamic theater of operations. As a result of all these factors, it was predicted that the psychological problems of returning soldiers would be virtually eliminated.

It didn't turn out that way. World War I had its "shell shock," World War II its "battle fatigue," and Vietnam its "post-traumatic stress disorder." Other terms applied to previous wars have been "war excitement," "exposure," "overexertion," "sunstroke," "homesickness," and "nostalgia," the last based on the French diagnostic term *nostalgie*, which has been in the medical lexicon since the 17th century. A Civil War veteran from Indiana lent one of the most graphic expressions when he described his experiences as being "shook over hell."<sup>34</sup> All wars produce scarred minds and ravaged spirits; the conflict in the Persian Gulf was no exception.

#### **SEVEN PRINCIPLES FOR RETURNING WARRIORS**

For those who suffer the consequences of war, what advice can be given to rebuild a life with meaning on return? I am hardly an authority on this question; I

required nearly two decades to resolve my own difficulties, then only through pure accident. Still, I venture a few recommendations:

*First Principle* : The grim and terrible reminders of war, whether they occur in nightmares, memories, or feelings of guilt or remorse, will never go away until we face them; they become stronger if we lock them away in the darkness of the unconscious.

You have had many and great sadnesses . . . . Only those sadnesses are dangerous and bad which one carries about among people in order to drown them out; like sicknesses that are superficially and foolishly treated they simply withdraw and after a little pause break out again the more dreadfully..of which one may die.<sup>35</sup> (Note 2)

*Second Principle* : Facing these "sadnesses" is one of the most difficult and lonely battles returning warriors will ever fight. Although one can engage the help of others – support groups, encounter groups, men's groups, veterans' groups, psychiatrists or other professionals – in the end the journey must be taken alone, and the problem must be faced by the individual self.

We are solitary. We may delude ourselves and act as though this were not so. ...But how much better to realize that we are so . . . . [Rilke, 66] [T]here is but one solitude, and that is great, and not easy to bear . . . . Going-into-oneself and for hours meeting no one -- this one must be able to attain. To be solitary, the way one was solitary as a child, when the grownups went around involved with things that seemed important and big because they themselves looked so busy and because one comprehended nothing of their doings. (Rilke, 45-6).

*Third Principle* : Healing may come suddenly, unexpectedly, and radically – in the truest sense a breakthrough.

. . . for him who becomes solitary all distances, all measures change; of these changes many take place suddenly, and then, as with the man on the mountaintop, extraordinary imaginings and singular sensations arise that seem to grow out beyond all bearing. [Rilke, 67]

*Fourth Principle* : Healing the wounds of war frequently involves a process of radical transformation, the nature of which cannot be fully predicted ahead of time. This healing invariably involves the turning of weakness into strength and ignorance into wisdom.

[T]hat which . . . seems to us the most alien will become what we most trust and find most faithful. How should we be able to forget those ancient myths about dragons that at the last moment turn into princesses . . . . So you must not be frightened . . . if a sadness rises up before you larger than any you have ever seen . . . . [Rilke, 69]

*Fifth Principle* : Staying stuck in the "Why me?" syndrome – hostility toward "the system," indignation about having had to serve, resentment over an interrupted career, or anger about the unfairness of life – guarantees failure. If one is to progress, the anger must be given up.

You must think that . . . life has not forgotten you, that it holds you in its hand; it will not let you fall. . . .Why do you want to persecute yourself with the question whence all this may be coming and whither it is bound? [Rilke, 70]

*Sixth Principle* : Be patient.

[Y]ou must be patient as a sick man and confident as a convalescent; for perhaps you are both. And more: you are the doctor too, who has to watch over himself. But there are in every illness many days when the doctor can do nothing but wait. [Rilke, 70]. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer. [Rilke,35]

*Seventh Principle* : After your own healing, extend compassion to those fellow warriors who remain in conflict, whose understanding is not yet complete. Give something back by trying to help them -- for this also is part of your healing.

[R]ejoice in your growth, in which you naturally can take no one with you, and be kind to those who remain behind, and be sure and calm before them and do not torment them with your doubts and do not frighten them with your confidence or joy, which they could not understand. Seek yourself some sort of simple and loyal community with them . . . . [Rilke, 39]

## A WAY OUT?

Perhaps war is becoming more and more violent and terrible today because it wants to be seen as what it really is, to be seen quite clearly as the terrible thing it really is, and not as a mere part of the noise of the radio.<sup>36</sup>

– MAX PICARD

It is estimated that at this moment there are more wars in more places on the earth than at any other time in human history. What is to be done?

“[I]n at least in one way, we have gotten tougher and better prepared to face the enemy that is war,” Ehrenreich believes. “If the twentieth century brought the steady advance of war and war-related enterprises, it also brought the beginnings of organized human resistance to war.” We have the opportunity as never before, she suggests, to fight against war itself by directing “our incestuous fixation on combat” into new types of battles – fighting, as we’ve mentioned, “the possibility of drastic climate changes, the depletion of natural resources, the relentless predations of the microbial world...[the challenges of] sanitation, nutrition, medical care, and environmental reclamation....” [Ehrenreich, 239]

Some of the most morbid predictions of our future come from biologists who believe we are programmed by our genes to engage forever in warlike behavior. Biologist Howard Bloom is an exception. In his highly acclaimed book *The Lucifer Principle*, which is his name for our innate predispositions for evil behavior, he suggests that we can defy nature’s dictates: [Bloom, 331]

But there is hope that we may someday free ourselves of savagery. To our species, evolution has given something new – the imagination. With that gift, we have dreamed of peace. Our task – perhaps the only one that will save us –

is to turn what we have dreamed into reality. to fashion a world where violence ceases to be. If we can accomplish this goal, we may yet escape our fate as highly precocious offspring, as fitting inheritors of nature's highest gift and foulest curse, as the ultimate children of the Lucifer Principle.

## POSTSCRIPT

Is it possible to transmit the experience of those who have suffered to those who have yet to suffer? Can one part of humanity learn from the bitter experience of another? Is it possible to warn someone of danger?<sup>37</sup>

– ALEXANDER SOLZHENITSYN

Our first task in resisting war is to acknowledge its grip on us. In order to do so, it will help to listen to the warnings of the warriors among us who have known war's horrors. I do not mean listening to common sense – even a fool can tell us that war is horrible – but hearkening to the *dreams* of those who have been to war. This is the approach recommended in 1835 by de Toqueville in *Democracy in America*:

In times when the passions are beginning to take charge of the conduct of human affairs, one should pay less attention to what men of experience and common sense are thinking than to what is preoccupying the imagination of dreamers.<sup>38</sup>

If I were allowed to pick of a dream worthy of our collective attention, I'd choose that of a Vietnam comrade about the city where I spent my doctor days:

I am trying to warn people that another war is coming, and people are laughing at me. I am in Dallas and we are going in a chopper to secure a position. I am trying to warn people: "Hey! There's a war fixing to happen! You'd better take cover and get off the street!" But they were laughing and scoffing and they wouldn't listen to me. I was trying to reason with the people when the helicopters flew off and left me there. I...couldn't get the people to understand what was really happening. [Wilmer, 104]



## NOTES

1. My favorite books that deal with the biological roots of violence are biologist Lyall Watson's *Dark Nature: A Natural History of Evil* and biologist Howard Bloom's *The Lucifer Principal: A Scientific Exploration into the Forces of History* (see references below). For a more mainstream view from the field of evolutionary biology, see *Demonic Males: Apes and the Origins of Human Violence*, by Richard Wrangham and Dale Peterson (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Co.; 1996).

2. Rilke (1875-1926) knew about military experience. His father was an army officer, and Rilke spent time in his youth in a military school. Although he wrote a series of poems extolling war in the oncoming days of World War I, perhaps the following passages may help balance the scale.<sup>39</sup>

Editorial-War

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