

From A Distance

MEMORIAL DAY 2009 "FROM A DISTANCE"

Today is Memorial Day, the flags are dusted off and unfurled.

Parades begin, veterans' march, bands play, poetry is recited, and we traditionally remember our victories and defeats during wartime.

We count the dead, trace their names with our fingers on each memorial in remembrance with great respect, we thank them for their ultimate sacrifice so that we may live in freedom.

I have very mixed feelings about the symbolism inherent in the celebration of Memorial Day. I am proud to live in a free country, and gladly partake of its pleasures, but I am also deeply disturbed that the preservation of democracy here and abroad has offered no other alternatives to settling our differences than going to war. My nephew once proposed a chess game among the world leaders, the winner takes all. I said what if they can't play chess, he said, "well everyone knows how to play" Go Fish!"

Some of you may disagree, and believe that to date is no other solution to the preservation of freedom than force, particularly in the eyes of those who have been sent to war and have seen first hand the vast complexities of maintaining a peaceful world.

From my vantage point as one who could afford the luxury of judgment from afar, who never held a draft number or felt obligated to serve and whose Brothers never saw the dynamic of war up close, I could carry my protest banners and candles from a protected distance, in relative safety.

In later years, after the Viet Nam war was over since the aftermath of 911 with the onset of Afghanistan and Iraq, I thought a great deal about what war be like for those who had been yanked out of a content and peaceful society where one's only worry might have been securing the right date for a frat party, or passing physics. I thought about what I might have done had I been drafted, loaded onto a plane with some combat training under my untarnished belt and faced an enemy that I did not know, whose language I could not speak and whose children or fields were often booby trapped with mines, while stationed in a steaming swampy jungle or in a searing desert.

I have a strong suspicion that had I actually been in a war zone I would not have been making peace banners with my free time. I would have had to adapt

somehow, and probably would have replaced what peace philosophies I might have once had, with real weapons of survival. I might have gone AWOL or in my remaining threads of ignorance and humanity tried to offer food to a booby trapped child, or simply, become an unfeeling stoic or completely fallen apart.

We were taught that freedom and democracy are sacred. We pledged in school to preserve those freedoms, vehemently. I learned in church to love thy neighbor, to turn the other cheek that the meek would inherit the earth, that the pen was mightier than the sword, we recited, "thou shalt not kill." We also learned to honor the worth and dignity of all people. We grew up in country which believed these things to be true practiced them at home and taught them to our children.

We then discovered that loving thy neighbor was perceived differently by different countries. We watched those who would not or could not raise arms to another succumb to imprisonment or death. Those who did not retaliate when threatened who did not kill, were killed and we learned that there is no other situation which will reverse ones principles and values, faster than an act of war.

How any American, brought up in a society which allows for an expression of human rights, who pleads for heroes to champion the oppressed, who begs for reasons to suppress bigotry and encourages open dialogue, legally, to ensure those rights we are so militant about, could kill at all?

I think that can be illustrated by the fact that one of the greatest flaws in the structure of the human being, physically and psychologically, is the ability to adapt to a physical or environmental consistency, even if it is wrong or bad for us. For example:

Many of you might remember having your first cigarette as a kid, and the violent reaction of your body when the smoke first settled in your lungs. I remember myself, the fits of coughing, dizziness and general illness that followed the first few puffs. If we kept doing it eventually our bodies got used to all of the carcinogens that our lungs tried so hard to reject. The hardest thing to explain was that we missed them, when we stopped!

Certainly war is not as simple as becoming addicted to cigarettes, nor is our awareness of what can happen to us when an environment which we are unfamiliar, becomes a routine of daily life. The tremendous capability of the human body and mind to embrace influences which are harmful as well as good is frightening. We often know the risks; there is certainly no lack of information about what it can do to us; however our minds and bodies will betray us, as has our teachings about the rules for right and wrong.

What may be right for us may be very wrong for another whose teachings differ and whose experience is far removed from ours. To simplify this a bit; A friend of mine is very active in the humane society. She will get up in the middle of the night to pick up a stray cat or dog, she is a vegetarian and abhors the raising of cattle for beef.

Her latest crusade was on behalf of the African Elephant and the abolition of poachers who hunted the elephant for the ivory and sold the tusks through the black market. One day she said, "I could never kill an animal, no matter what!" A week later I brought her an article about an African elephant in the Sudan. The elephant suddenly went wild and trampled an entire village, killing most of its unsuspecting inhabitants.

From a distance, with no negative experience, only an overwhelming empathy for a defenseless creature being stalked and killed for its parts, she never considered the renegade creature, or the sick or the one exhibiting unprovoked harm to a human. "What would you do I asked if this were your village? Would you shoot the elephant?" Or allow its tirade to continue at great loss of life. "I don't know she said, that is not a fair question."

Being asked to fight, to go into battle, to risk ones life and to kill, is also not a fair question either. Host of us would be appalled at the idea that we could become heartless, unfeeling, avengers. Democracy and religion have never taught us about that. What one may have felt from the security of a peaceful land is only a theory until tested. That is one of the unfortunate factors of engaging in a premise, for which one cannot fully be prepared to challenge until the adverse possibilities actually happen.

We have the wonderful and awful capacity to adapt, to get used to and even to flourish in the throes of some of the most undesirable circumstances.

Even religion has attempted to support this phenomenon." An eye for an eye a tooth for a tooth;" In our patriotic songs, "He died to make men holy, he died to make men free!"

"His truth is marching on ... " Yet, ! "Thou Shalt not kill", rings in our conscience and teachings." These contradictions make raising children to embrace a peaceful society most challenging.

I do know that stopping a war is much more complex than waving banners in a protected setting.

We can survive the pain and the suffering of having to function in the most unacceptable surroundings, and actually get used to it, even miss it when returning to a “normal” environment.

War must have been like that for many. A noble pursuit to serve this country, caught up in the excitement and glamour, having no idea what the consequences would be until those who survived returned home and found themselves emotionally shipwrecked, facing a society which flew the banners and the flags of righteousness and compassion, who still believed that there must have been a better way to settle our differences.

On the wall of my office at home I have a large photo of my two nephews, healthy and happy, well fed and dearly loved playing together on a plush scotch guarded carpet. Next to that is a small clipping from Time Magazine, of an emaciated Sudanese baby, about the same age as my nephews, collapsed on the dessert his head in his hands, in that universal pose of ultimate despair. Several yards away from him is a large vulture, just waiting. I was so upset with that photo that I composed a letter to time magazine to ask if the photographer had rescued the baby from an incomprehensible death. He did not.

My brother, who was a human interest news photographer winced when he saw the clipping and said, "Do you know how many of those starving children there are? Thousands", he said. "After a while, you don't think about the pictures your taking. Training and instinct tells you automatically what is newsworthy. The horror of it doesn't register until you see what you have photographed, in the dark room, away from the actual scene. Then it will hit you." His eyes filled up and he left the room.

I know that those who have survived savage wars, never return home emotionally unscathed or unmarked in some way, when the daily ness of normalcy clashes with the reality of the horrors seen and experienced. I know that freedom of thought and speech and political preference is imperative to human dignity and worth. I don't know how to keep those principles intact without resorting to destructive aggression, in return when threatened.

Had each on of us who had ever smoked a first cigarette, always reacted in the same way each time we lit up...no one would smoke. Had the soldier had the option to leave a battlefield on the first experience of witnessing a bloody, gory death, most would not fight at all.

Today we will remember those who died for their country, who fought and suffered because our democracy was threatened. Always, we plead and conclude that our great loss of life was not in vain, and pray for a time when there shall be no need to kill or maim or starve another ever again. I think we all agree on that.

On Memorial Day we put out the flags and honor the dead and it is fitting that we do so, for their enormous sacrifice has kept us safe. We may never find a solution to war, to the human condition, both physically and mentally that invites us to tolerate the intolerable. We can only hope and pray That the teachings we so cherish can make more sense to our children than they have made to us.

May we always grant those who have served, given their lives or come home, the love and the respect that they deserve.

**So Be it
Amen**

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