



FRANCISCO GOYA, "WITH OR WITHOUT REASON" (1808)
FROM "THE DISASTERS OF WAR" ("LOS DESASTRES DE LA GUERRA")
A COLLECTION OF EIGHTY-THREE PLATES DRAWN AND ETCHED

MY FATHERS' WARS

BY MARGARET R. FRIMOTH

Memorial Day, 1990. My living room is fairly orderly given the variety of the past week's activities. I am relaxing while Beethoven's "Symphony No. 9" plays in the background. The rush of vibrato followed by flowing melodies — power and tranquility — guides my thoughts. My week of triumphs and traumas settles behind me as a serene sun sets behind the Astoria bridge.

It is Memorial Day weekend. I am safe. Protected. At least I feel safe and protected here, surrounded by the environment I call home. I look forward to the long weekend because it allows more time for enjoying home, friends and family. Because I have an extra day to relax. Not because I want to take time to feel remorse or guilt due to wartime repercussions. I check the listing of local weekend activities. Parades. Bugle corps presentations. More parades. And memorial services in the local cemeteries.

Beethoven's abrupt musical punctuation brackets the calm, and the realism of the weekend ellipses my home-bound thoughts.

A Memorial Day holiday represents a ritual of coping with the memories of those who died during our various wars. Grief acted out through holiday. A startling contradiction.

This weekend I want to imagine myself safe and protected. Don't we all? In truth, our nations build vestiges of warfare, pretending that defensive arms will create safety. I do not want to have to stare war in the face. I know it exists, but I don't want to deal with it directly. We trick ourselves into believing the myth of safety because it is simpler to fathom than the complicated truth of the many definitions of war acted out through violence.

Ultimately, war has nothing to do with the amount of defense arms we have. War is a mind-set that transforms the act of protection into the socially acceptable act of power over others. War is the act of protection taken out-of-context and redefined as the right to be violent. Ultimately, we do stare war in the face. Daily. Unconsciously.

The existence of war is a constant force in all our lives. War haunts our land and invades our environment. War slips into our homes disguised as entertainment on television shows and movies. War, in the form of domestic violence, interrupts relationships and destroys families. War attacks children in its forms of neglect and abuse. We, as a nation observe presidents and politicians alike, throwing around rationalizations for defensive actions and decisive attacks like they were volleyballs at a tournament. However, the end result is never a trophy; it hardly seems successful to win at war.

I guess I have been spared personal grief because my family history is not filled with military deaths. Both my Grandfather and Father are veterans. They both survived the

act of war, but its powerful imprint lives and is passed through my family today. My American-born, Danish-raised Grandfather stole away from Denmark to return to America and become a World War I dare-devil air fighter. A hero, who narrowly escaped many plunging, fiery deaths, my Grandfather fought to reclaim a brave heritage with hopes for eventual wealth in the land of the free. He was successful as an air fighter. But success and the all-American dream did not make him wealthy. His neighborhood grocery store/creamery with 30 flavors of ice cream never outgrew Clinton, Iowa, although the idea has since proved plentiful for the likes of Baskin and Robbins. He believed that he deserved a good life because he had fought the good fight. He believed that risking his life while taking the lives of others would somehow equip him with the formula of notable success. My Grandfather passed on his expectations of success and wealth to his youngest child and only son, my Father.

At age eighteen, my Father was drafted. He curtailed his American dream of becoming a successful electrical engineer and went to Europe to fight in the war to end all wars. And to be a hero like his Dad.

The stories my Father tells of World War II delighted much of my childhood. He was a star basketball player on the Army team. He was the responsible money-keeper for his buddies when they went to the European bars. He ate quarts of ice cream while his friends sucked down beer. He was granted a leave and traveled to Denmark to spend Christmas with our distant relatives. But on rarer occasions my Father explained how the war had changed his life. I grew to understand why he never saw heroism in fighting; why he never bought me toy guns (though I begged to be like all the other kids) why he uneventfully passed on his dusty, unused engineering tools to my youngest brother; why my Grandfather cursed him for marrying a small-town minister's daughter; why he was cursed again for choosing a

small-church ministry rather than seeking business wealth. I remember the few occasions when Dad spoke different words about the war. How his face changed to reflect unspeakable pain, a cringe of memory as he quietly told of a postwar march towards a German concentration camp; of smelling it before seeing it; of knowing the undisguised truth of war through the stench of burned bodies. War kills. It kills lives and dreams and hope and unity. What is freedom or safety after such a toll? In simple actions and penetrating stories, my Dad changed the family interpretation of war. He recognized the freedom that lay waiting, in peace.

My family heritage impacts me. I have two models of power to learn from. War teaches about power. Do I believe my Grandfather's truth? My Grandfather who I love because he was strong and tough — a survivor from the old country, an immigrant who dared to build a vision of an American dream. I loved my Grandfather when he was alive, and felt his presence when I stepped on Danish soil.

Or do I look towards my Dad and see his struggle with my beloved Grandfather? My Dad dared to give up. Dared to be ridiculed. Dared to be rejected. The paradox of power is that its strength is in change.

We are neither safe, nor protected. The unfortunate truth is that violence remains the simplest means to acquiring a desired end. I cannot help but believe that this simplicity is the matter that binds us, limits us. We falter in our quest to rise above destruction because we tolerate violence as a means to end war. By practicing war, we fall prey to it.

Until we hold accountable any act of violation — whatever the reason or justification — we will never be able to give up war. And we risk losing the possibility of peace.

The living room is dark now, except for the glow of the computer monitor and the LED lights on the stereo. I've flipped the Beethoven over, musing at my old-fashioned equipment in today's world of tapes and CDs. The "Chorale" softly captures the first notes in the "Ode to Joy." The tesse before the triumph. Blending of delicacy with power. Unity amid unrelentless diversity.

The music sets the tone for the weekend. Mental reflections. Questions and contradictions. Grief is a natural part of life. As is joy. What remains unnatural is the pretense that we are unaffected by violence, and therefore removed from accountability. Commemorating violence will never be acceptable if we truly desire peace.



Café de la Mer

1287 S. Hemlock Cannon Beach, Oregon
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