



EUGENE MIHAESCO, "THE LONG ROAD TO PEACE" (1973)

WAR & PEACE

A BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAY

BY CAROLYN DUNN

INTRODUCTION

"What you want, above all things, on a raft, is for everybody to be satisfied, and feel right and kind toward the others."

—MARK TWAIN (from 'HUCKLEBERRY FINN')

At one time or another we all want to run away. One of those times is when our country does shameful things. The mind casts about for a better, more praiseworthy place to be. Such was my own condition when we invaded Iraq.

When Huck Finn couldn't stand things anymore, he built a raft, and with the runaway slave, Jim, he followed the river he knew well to the source of an understanding about himself in the world. He came to understand the importance of getting along with whoever is on the raft with you, of feeling "right and kind" toward your neighbor. Huck was far from antisocial — he was fascinated by people both praiseworthy and despicable. He ran from "civilization" and its dehumanizing ways, but he learned about people, one encounter at a time. He found they had to get along on their rafts and islands, and I suppose it could be argued that was simply a pragmatic realization. But Twain was careful to portray Huck as an intelligent and ethical person, one who relentlessly questioned human institutions and behavior. His insight — the advantages in "getting along" — is a very old one, which in ancient Greece might have been called "reverence," and which every major world religion, and a good many minor ones, embrace.

There are antisocial ways to escape, too, and many attempt them. We read accounts of monks, hermits, or contemplatives who have taken themselves out of their communities and away from the heart-wrenching duality of the human world. Human achievements and failures are both rejected, as is their own participation in them. This was the case with the remarkable 12th century Japanese monk, Kamo-no-Chomei, who retreated from the capital city Kyoto in weariness of the world's violence and injustice. He built a 10'x10' hut in the mountains, and made even that spare living space easily moveable with simple planks joined with metal hasps so he could "quickly move if something should displease me." But in the end, he had the honesty to question his renunciation. His writing in *Hojoki* reminds us that the state of the world is chaotic at many points in time— always, perhaps. Just as we might wish to do now, he retreated, but after many years of isolation he had thoughts that fleeing the world constituted a perplexing defeat, and loss of an important part of his humanity. Our contradictory human condition demands to be accepted as we live our lives, and a full life means full participation. We all share in both victimization from violence and the

perpetration of it, in varying degrees. There is no escape from this, only the task of trying to make that part of us which causes suffering as small and ineffective as possible. Kamo-no-Chomei realized that involvement in the material world has positive meaning in terms of the wholeness of one's being.

We are rightfully appalled that our country has seemed to spring the bounds of all humility. Our country's leaders, Matthew Rothschild recently said in *The Progressive*, "ponder which country to attack next with all the insouciance of a wealthy couple deciding which fancy restaurant to go to on Saturday night." Yet here we are. We see that escape is not really possible because we carry our human nature with us wherever we go, and find it waiting for us wherever we go. There is something else going on inside of us as we contemplate flight, expressed clearly by a Mozambican woman as she helped tend victims of yet another massacre in her town: "I want to get away from all this, to run from it... But the even stronger feeling is that I can't stand to leave my country...(I want) to be a part of my country and help even in its worst moments." (*A Different Kind of War Story* by Carolyn Nordstrom, which chronicles Mozambique's 15-year war).

Facing the reality of our time with its escalated living out of the violent side of our nature is a discouraging task. Never (in my own life anyway) have we had such an unremitting onslaught of violence worldwide both as victim and perpetrator. The picture of it has become so screen-filling and the sound of it so deafening, that our senses are almost immune to it, our feelings have dulled, and the menu of possibilities for dealing with conflict seems to have dwindled to a pauper's fare: Things are bad? Shoot somebody, plan a war, haul out the explosives. In *The*

New York Times Book Review (May 25, 1980), Diana Trilling says, in discussing Hemingway's writing, "No character in Hemingway is inaccessible to strong feeling. None sleepwalks... The unhappiness of the modern world is measured, in fact, by its devastating assault upon powerful emotion." But several decades later — and many wars later — that unending assault upon powerful emotion has made us, indeed, a population of sleepwalkers. We cannot change our nature, which is divided, mysterious, and hard to plumb. We sense that the side of us that produces passion, adventurousness, daring and action, is also the side that offers up untrammelled violence, which has come to dominate the world and in its unbelievable weight has very nearly crushed the spirit.

We must, though, keep looking at our propensity for war as an answer to everything — and see if we can dredge up from our anesthetized emotions some proper outrage. For war has distorted who we are. We must look for our "other half," the numbed, lost part of us that wants to get along, change brute force into creativity, and live in peace. One of our tasks at this point in history is to reclaim our wholeness.

I had to get past the desire to leave my country. Like the Mozambican woman, I discovered that I wanted to stay, to face what we as a nation have to endure, and have forced others to endure. I needed to read what others have thought about war, and especially about peace. What follows are comments on three books which formed the basis of my reading — my raft and my 10'x10' hut — so that hopefully I might return a more complete person.

The three books are *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* by Chris Hedges (Public Affairs, 2002, 211 pp., \$23); *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* by Paul Woodruff (Oxford University Press, 2001, 248 pp, \$11.95 paper); *Down in My Heart: Peace Witness in War Time* by William Stafford who was Oregon's poet laureate until his death in 1994 (The Bench Press, 1985, 94 pp, paper).

THE HANDS OF WAR

The hands of war
Hands dripping with blood
Weapons of mass destruction
Still missing

Hands of war
How many people die for power
For nations of the world
How many people die when we
Fight for peace

Hands of war
Hands covered with blood
Whose hands are cleaner
Those that fought the war
Or those of their leaders

—Anna Myers

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