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# WAR & PEACE

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## I. 'War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning'

"We have to remember our own surges of anger, how we sometimes choose a country or a people and load our hatred on them, how we go to war — and then how later we come to our senses and perceive that ills are not to be so simply projected on an alien group."

—WILLIAM STAFFORD  
(from 'Crossing Unmarked Snow')

The American poet, teacher and literary critic, Randall Jarrell, prepared B-29 combat crews in learning celestial navigation before they were sent on their bombing missions in World War II. He wrote one of the most anthologized poems about one of the war's most atrocious attributes — that of its changing complex human beings into simple, disposable things. In case you haven't run across it for a while, here is the poem:

### The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State  
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.  
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,  
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.  
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.  
(from 'Randall Jarrell: The Complete Poems', 11th printing 2001)

This is what Chris Hedges' book, *War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning*, tells us in prose. He is a ten year veteran of reporting wars in the Balkans, the Middle East and Central America. After observing massacres and of being in the middle of battles and guerrilla engagements where he was nearly killed himself, he discovered that war is a strong pull — that is, essentially addictive. He reminds us that our country's current way of war (technological, distant and abstract) is violent in the extreme and that it is based on lies, those of the government to media, the media to citizens, and finally of generals to troops. Based on lies, war starts a series of moral and social unravelings, starting with the brutal discovery of the addictive nature of violent acts. Hedges writes about it this way:

"And like every recovering addict there is a part of me that remains nostalgic for war's simplicity and high, even as I cope with the scars it has left behind, mourn the deaths of those I worked with, and struggle with the bestiality I would have been better off not witnessing. The chance to exist for an intense and overpowering moment, even if it meant certain oblivion, seemed worth it in the midst of war — and very stupid once the war ended." (p.5).

Why does Hedges say in the title of this book that war's force gives us "meaning"? War has meaning for the State, he says, because it "needs" war to assert power so that it can get whatever it is it wants at any given moment in history. The State asserts a "moral certitude" in wartime that "is a kind of fundamentalism. And this dangerous messianic brand of religion, one where self-doubt is minimal, has come increasingly to color the modern world of Christianity, Judaism and Islam." (p.147). For individuals, Hedges says, war's meaning resides in several

things — comradeship (a variety of false love and friendship), the imposition of common goals one doesn't have to formulate for oneself, escape from personal problems and responsibilities back home, a call to idealism (even for a cause one may not understand or isn't always imparted with honesty). But sometimes, perhaps even often, for individual soldiers war's meaning resides in the power and adrenaline thrill it offers. "However much soldiers regret killing once it is finished...the act itself...is often thrilling...The eyes of the soldiers are crazed. They speak only in guttural shouts. They are high on the power to spare lives or to take them." (p.147).

Hedges' admitted addiction to war, until he became aware of it and managed to rid himself of it, causes him to speak fearfully about its attraction: "It takes little in wartime to turn ordinary men into killers. Most give themselves willingly to the seduction of unlimited power to destroy and all feel the heavy weight of peer pressure. Few, once in battle, can find the strength to resist." (p.87).

If one has escaped addiction to war, though, being involved in or even witnessing violence takes a bone-deep toll on the emotions. Such as that described by a pilot who was asked after one of the first strikes in the war on Iraq if he felt an adrenaline rush. "I don't think it's an adrenaline rush," the 28 year old from Tennessee answered, "I think it's just scared." (Yahoo!News, 3/29/03). The fear is for one's own life, of course, but Hedges expands on this more obvious motive to include the less obvious: the powerful reactions (and fear must be among them, as well as grief) that happen when one is not only the target, but also the killer: "To be sure, soldiers who kill innocents pay a tremendous personal emotional and spiritual price. But within the universe of total war, equipped with weapons that can kill hundreds or thousands of people in seconds, soldiers only have time to reflect later. By then these soldiers often have been discarded, left as broken men in a civilian society that does not understand them and does not want to understand them." (p.86).

## THE END OF THE WAR

All violent like the knife that drove  
the pity-begging life out through the eyes,  
and wilted the choked voice in little cries  
that bubbled and blinked out along the floor.

All hungry like the outlaw stare that tore  
the North and reeled the rivers in along the spool  
that never would unwind them any more  
to wander cool  
but stretched them taut to all that's far away.

All lost by dusty roads, all fled with love,  
all hid along with play:  
all hurt by what we lost who conquered in the war —  
so violent, so lost, so far away.

—WILLIAM STAFFORD (1945)

Killing creates a wide circle of internal suffering added to its physical devastation. Individual people and whole nations enter into what might be considered clinical depression, given the severity and longevity of the symptoms. Associated Press reporter Brian Murphy gives the account of an Iraqi deserter attempting to answer questions of his escape, and breaking down: "It was a deep, sudden sobbing he couldn't control. His shoulders heaved. Tears wet the frayed sleeve of his green Iraqi army sweater." His country's people, he said, "just want an end to all this," and added that they "are afraid for the future." "That's when he started to cry," the article concludes, and "Moments later came the thud of a U.S. bomb hitting the ridge just across the river." (Yahoo!News, 3/31/03).

Hedges, a master of divinity from Harvard University, ends his account in a way which might be expected from this educational background, but which takes on weight given his years on the battlefields:

"To survive as a human being is possible only through love. (p.184)...Love may not always triumph, but it keeps us human. It offers the only chance to escape from the contagion of war. Perhaps it is the only antidote. And there are times when remaining human is the only victory possible." (p.168).

Which mirrors what he has written toward the start of his book:

"The only antidote to ward off self-destruction and the indiscriminate use of force is humility, and, ultimately, compassion. Reinhold Niebuhr aptly reminded us that we must all act and then ask for forgiveness. This book is not a call for inaction. It is a call for repentance." (p.17).

That call for repentance is among the subjects to be found in the next book as well. In his latest book, *Reverence*, Paul Woodruff, professor of Humanities at the University of Texas in Austin, examines our loss of humility, honesty and openness, restraint, timely emotion — our sense and commitment to what the ancient Greeks termed "reverence."

## II. Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue

"Oh you know I could be right...  
oh yes, you know I could be right...  
then again I could be wrong..."

—MISSISSIPPI BLUES LYRIC

"Why write about reverence?" Paul Woodruff asks early in his book, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*.

"Because we have forgotten what it means...because without reverence things fall apart. People do not know how to respect each other and themselves." (p.13).

In this book, the ancient Greek concept of reverence is viewed from many points of reference: what happens in daily lives when it is not honored, how the ancient Greeks put it in a central position in their lives even knowing that it could not be perfectly lived, what it meant to the ancient Chinese, expressed in Confucian ethics in the *Analects*, how it is essential to leaders and teachers and what happens when it is ignored, and the peace and order it engenders and supports as exemplified in the home.

What is reverence? The attributes central to the virtue of reverence are, "the well-developed capacity to have the feelings of awe, respect and shame when these are the right feelings to have." (p.8). Here is a book which pleads, then, for the restoration of our numbed feelings, but not in self-serving, unleashed ways. Instead, to find the proper time and use for the feelings inherent in reverence. To recover and use the emotions of awe, respect and shame that will bring us to the fuller, higher places of our humanity.

We are all aware of the urgency of Woodruff's message. We are loaded down with the litany, now familiar to every one of us, of the lies, covertness, narrow interests and paucity of awe in our current Administration, Congress and Court system (though there are some within each of these who we know are fighting against the current). The desire for quick and often violent action is held in check only briefly and only with intense and prolonged pressure from citizen protests and international disapproval. This apparently "good" leadership quality of decisiveness is rightly questioned as to motive. John Berger, writing for *The Nation* (5/12/03), characterized the Administration's decisiveness as "their invariable device for preventing the asking of questions."

If there are moments of awe, respect and shame in those who now hold power and who govern us, they are hidden as an eclipsed sun. Our country's surge to own everything and to wipe out opposition, at home and around the world, is nothing short of irreverence. As a nation which can get into heated debates over phrases in our "Pledge of Allegiance," one of the first loyalty oaths demanded of our children in the classroom and which contains the promise of "justice for all," we may need Woodruff to remind us that "Anyone who is reverent toward justice will want to stand against beliefs that call for violence or oppression." (p.150).

It is the terrible realization of being lied to by those in power which cuts a citizenry, and its arm of force — its military — off at the knees. A chapter titled "The Reverent Leader" is worth many readings. We know, but need constant reminders, that the greater a leader's power, the more essential it is for that leader "to develop inner restraints against the abuse of power." (p.178). Respect for followers "usually requires two things: the leader does not deceive the followers, and the leader is open to persuasion in return...Openness and honesty are defenses a good leader employs against the danger of bad judgment." (p.176).

The predicament of a military that is led by an ethically impoverished national leader is especially tragic. From top brass to foot soldier, the military arm of a government is trained to be loyal to the hierarchies and disciplined in action. If all this is to enforce goals based on minor interests and lies, the "supreme sacrifice" asked of soldiers, and often given, is then terrible, unjustifiable and irreverent.

The emphasis on ceremony in the training of soldiers (drills, marching, uniforms) is meant to keep violence for personal reasons in check, and to build teamwork and respect for orders. The discipline of it is supposed to be carried out even into the toughest battlefield engagements.

"The ceremony with which we surround ourselves in war is part of what makes warriors warriors and not bandits. It's part of what expresses the attitude that is essential to any orderly military force: that the violence they use is not in their own service, but in the service of something larger than themselves — even in the end, larger than nations." (p.179).

When we ask a portion of our population to use force for our sakes — to kill other people for us — we ask it of them with the added responsibility which reverence requires. That killing force must be used in the service of something larger than even the nation in whose name it is trained and deployed. If the leaders of that nation are dishonest, unrestrained, and refuse