

30 choices. Let there be no mistake, the chief purpose of the soldier is to kill. In the end it is what it
31 all boils down to. The actions of this hero, apart from others, is chiefly to end another human life.

32 Nietzsche warned of looking into the abyss. It looks back. Veterans have not only looked at
33 the abyss, they've run patrols into it and set up OPs. Horrified at the depth of that abyss of death
34 within their hearts many have sought to cut off this knowledge with alcohol, risk taking, picking
35 fights, and shutting off all emotions. Yet in doing so they also cut off their knowledge of love. Love
36 is not mere appreciation of something, no mere admiration. Love is a soulful desire to embrace
37 the qualities of something and to let it enter into your soul. We do not truly love ice cream,
38 chocolate, or a favorite color and perhaps even some of our romantic interests. That is a strong
39 desire to acquire more of the object. Love, however, is not merely the acquiring or hoarding of
40 something or someone but instead the opening to and allowance of a fundamental change of your
41 own soul. And in that crucible of the soul one comes to a crossroad to open one's self to the
42 ferocity needed to win at war. Gore-stained Ares with Eris (strife) and Phobos (fear) walk our
43 ranks. It is telling that an ancient sacrifice to fierce and aggressive Ares was the small and
44 innocent symbol of a puppy. This love of death alters who we are. It changes us, fundamentally, in
45 the mortar of our soul.

46 There are many reasons to go to war; economics, religion, politics, a 'just cause', protection
47 against danger, and more. There are unjust wars fought justly, just wars fought without merit, and
48 many shades and combinations of the two. Rarely, in going to war, is there a black and white. Yet
49 down in the mud and the blood things become just so...to live or die, to learn to fight and to learn it
50 well for if we do not, we die, or worse... our buddy. In this stark, bare-teethed reality the soldier
51 learns to follow Homer's declaration in The Iliad "*to meet destruction or to come through: these are*
52 *the terms of war.*" As William Manchester, a marine veteran of the Pacific theater in WW2 wrote,
53 "*no man in battle is really sane. The mind-set of the soldier on the battlefield is a highly disturbed*
54 *mind, and this is an epidemic insanity which afflicts everybody there, and those not afflicted by it die*
55 *very quickly.*" U.S. Marine Pvt Elton Mackin wrote in the WW1 book Suddenly We Didn't Want to
56 Die of the complete realization of being in a life and death struggle of war "*A flush of shame relieved*
57 *the scared whiteness of his face. It robbed him of what little strength remained. At that moment*
58 *boyhood lay behind him forever and, back of a small mound of earth, a disciplined soldier faced the*
59 *long slope ahead, determined to do his part.*" In other words, to live in such a fierce, kill or be killed
60 world, one must foster growth of a deep and primal part of the human soul that kills. This is no

61 easy task for humans are supremely and innately social. The fabric of our way of thinking, of our
62 emotional landscape, of our processing and learning skills is due to the fundamental nature of
63 what it means to be human...

64 ... a community.

65 Richard Gabriel, former intelligence officer in the Pentagon's Directorate of Foreign
66 Intelligence and expert on combat psychiatry, noted "*There is no such thing as getting used to*
67 *combat... studies of World War 2 soldiers revealed that 2 percent did not collapse. But these men*
68 *were already mad, for most of them were aggressive psychopathic personalities before they entered*
69 *battle. It is only the sane who break down.*" It is cruelly ironic that combat veterans know that it is
70 within our human condition to be the most vile, brutish animal on the planet, our species was
71 responsible for Auschwitz, yet many of us forget other human traits such as forgiveness,
72 compassion, and love applies to ourselves. We know all too well the breadth of the human heart
73 and yet we do not allow ourselves forgiveness. We see ourselves as that overly simple definition
74 of what the Self is, *we are what we do...*

75 ... and we are killers.

76 We go off to war with a flurry of noise and celebration. For my sendoff there were 'freedom
77 packages' of toothpaste and letter writing gear, American flags everywhere, and rock-n-roll music
78 blaring over loudspeakers at Ft Hood. For others there is a solemn ceremony with family and
79 friends, proud, nervous and scared, in the wings watching their 'heroes' leave for distant Troy.
80 And at Troy we fight and we fight well. We become very good at patrolling streets where every ¼
81 mile is another roll of the dice for a possible roadside bomb. Every speeding, erratic moving car
82 (and they are all just so) a possible car bomb. One must be on constant guard against an enemy
83 that will use any means necessary to kill you that blends into environment packed with decent
84 families and smiling children. We do so with the fear, the dread, the supremely heart breaking
85 anguish that our actions are, in part or in whole, responsible for the death of a father, a mother, a
86 child. Again, sometimes the only choices open to us are tragic choices reflecting a tragic situation.

87 And we wonder in the private chambers of our heart what hero can do as we have done,
88 and by holding ourselves up tortured judgment we forget that we too are characters within a
89 tragic play. In a military culture that is so fundamentally unselfish, where brother sacrifices for
90 brother, we hold onto our injuries ourselves. The Purple Heart is given out for physical injuries,

91 but life altering injuries of the mind are not considered *real* in our culture. We happy few, we
92 warrior stoics who live by the dictum *do or die* do not know how to classify our own combat stress
93 injuries of the heart and mind.

94 As Jonathan Shay noted in Odysseus in America, it is common for soldiers to consider their
95 own pain unworthy compared to that of others, in placing one's self in a 'hierarchy of suffering' to
96 one's on disadvantage. What are our sufferings compared to those in Vietnam? What are theirs
97 compared to those who slogged through 'The Frozen Chosin' of Korea? What are those compared
98 to the 'Bataan Death March' in WW2? What are those compared to the unending trench warfare
99 of WW1? What are those compared to the slaughter of the Civil War?

100 Who are you to not acknowledge the sacrifice of your own suffering? Think that every
101 soldier before you did not try to live up to the code, the demands, and the mythic ideal of warriors
102 that came before? Think you that those from an earlier war did not look upon their latter brethren
103 with hearts of understanding and compassion? The look in the eyes of vets of wars past as they
104 welcomed me home from Iraq was supremely humbling to me. These men are giants to me and
105 they opened their arms to welcome me home.

106 There is a photograph taken in Iraq that shows some graffiti written on a wall where some
107 marines are bunked. It reads '**America is not at war. The Marine Corps is at war. America is at**
108 **the mall.**' Right now, this moment, some patrol is walking down a dark street on foot. They have
109 no lights turned on. Most are not wearing nightvision because it doesn't work as well with city
110 lights all around you. These soldiers are looking for roadside bombs. They are looking for wires,
111 looking in holes, kicking over piles of rubble. Instructors tell us 'never kick a pile of rocks'. Yet
112 after doing many route clearances like this for hours one tires quickly of being overly cautious and
113 just starts kicking over rocks. In another area a convoy is heading through ambush alley. It is the
114 only route through the area and there are craters along the road the size of Volkswagens, evidence
115 of past ambushes. In a building a team is searching for the enemy and a team member is killed
116 while entering a room. Along a marshy road a bomb explosion hits a humvee, killing two inside.
117 Another patrol, in a tight alley with no maneuver room, is ambushed by RPG teams and automatic
118 fire. To get out of the alley and to live is to shoot back. After yelling and hesitating as much as he
119 can before being killed, the gunner fires back, killing a kid nearby. Unable to bear this grief he is
120 shipped home the following week. In another area a patrol is providing security at the scene of a

121 car bomb that blew up in front of a hospital. The body parts are the size of grapes. Tell me, dear
122 reader, what did you do today?

123 We are coming home to a country that is at the mall. As Odysseus sat in the Phaeacian
124 court and told his tale it was all entertainment to those around him. We find that we do not want
125 to tell our stories to people who are incapable of hearing our stories with their heart. Please, do
126 not ask us if we've killed anybody. This is the number one question posed to us and it reflects the
127 morbid curiosity of those wanting to be entertained. Do our jumpy movements at loud noises, our
128 constant scanning down alleyways as we drive by, our growing and confusing anger when going to
129 a crowded store, and our uncomfortable nature at a 4th of July celebration seem like
130 entertainment? Something to be pitied? For us it is neither. Yet, for lack of the 'red badge of
131 courage' the wounds in our hearts and minds are viewed as not real or not as important as
132 physical wounds and we keep silent.

133 Yet recovery happens only in community and two people (a vet and a therapist) are not a
134 community. The absence of a disorder is not the presence of well-being. It takes a nation to send
135 troops off to war. It takes a nation to bring them back. I came upon an interesting study that
136 noted the very low prevalence of PTSD in Finnish war vets when they fought off a Russian
137 invasion. It is suggested that the community of the country, of all of their citizens, gave a shared
138 meaning to all through their struggles. Our veterans are willing to take the fight away from home,
139 but in the return we are still separated from our families and churches, our towns and businesses,
140 our wives and children who do not share in our war. And, again, we cannot, do not, and will not
141 bring upon others the burdens that we've shouldered. It isn't who we are. And were we to want
142 to bridge that gap with a wife, a mother or father... how could we contaminate the hearts of our
143 loved ones with such as we've known? How can we tell those that love us the things we've done,
144 the choices we've made? And if we do not, how can we ask for simple acceptance if they know not
145 what secrets we keep in our hearts?

146 Do not ask us if we've killed, but ask us our stories and let us tell them truthfully as we
147 would to trusted friends, with honesty. We are not the mythic symbols of heroes or villains. We
148 are humans that have done the both valiant and reprehensible acts and many in between. Instead
149 of being heroes, look at us as your brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, your sons and
150 daughters. Bring us into your communities and welcome us home (all of us, there are still
151 veterans waiting forty-five years for a welcome home). Listen to our stories with your heart.

152 Allow us the right to weep as Achilles wept for Patroclus. Allow us our confusion and anger. Let
153 us feel that we are part of your community... our community. It takes more than a yellow ribbon
154 on a car. Next veteran you see, of any war, go up to him or her and offer a hug or a handshake.

155 And to my comrades in arms, remember that you are both the most terrible thing to walk
156 the earth, spreading death and misery like grain seed, but you are also the most beautiful and
157 noble of souls as well. Know that I love you. What an amazing and heart wrenching burden you
158 volunteer to carry. Yet remember that if you are what you do then you must act in order to obtain
159 peace. You must do the work. You must allow yourself forgiveness. You must allow yourself
160 closeness with others. To have trust in relationships you must trust. You must allow yourself the
161 work and pain it takes to grow and heal wounds. Allow yourself the right to weep, not only for
162 Patroclus, but for yourself. How we will go into any fight yet we are afraid of to display emotion!
163 If you would be a hero, defined as one who acts and never gives in, then do not give yourself to
164 resignation and self medication. Peace isn't the absence of tension, the absence of a disorder, but
165 the presence of justice, a thriving human spirit. Do not turn your back on the needs at hand. Be
166 heroic for yourself, your fellow soldiers and marines, and your loved ones, and tell your story...
167 reach out... get help and deal with your own experiences. And when you begin to recover, find a
168 brother in arms and help him in return.

169 Semper Fi

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173 In 2004 he joined the Oregon National Guard and volunteered as a casualty replacement in
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