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Something Like a Soul

*“Why should we hear about body bags and deaths? It’s not relevant. So why should I waste my beautiful mind on something like that?”
Barbara Bush, 18 March 2003, Good Morning America*

BOARDING THE FLIGHT to Portland I watched a young man and his wife—or sister—head up the ramp. He looked like somebody had unhooked his nervous system from the right side of his body. His left hand and face showed the mottled layers of several surgeries. What happened on the left side of his body had affected the right. I thought, he must be driving, or riding in the left rear seat, because he was wounded in areas that would be exposed to the IED in the window frame on the driver’s side of the truck or humvee. I wondered if the absence of a wheelchair was an indication that he intended to fight, to recover as much as he could. The young woman walked beside him, one arm around his waist, one on his injured arm, steadying him. Once aboard, she settled him slowly in the aisle seat of Row 20, stowed their bags and climbed over him to the center seat.

I found my seat and settled in. A soldier with desert camo and tan passed me on the way to his. I said, “Thank you for your service,” and shook his hand. He looked at me like they all do, as if I’d spoken from some place just outside the reality he was used to. I knew that state of mind. I hated the war. I’d hated the one I was in, too—another ten-year disaster. I thank them for their service, not because of any political sentiment, but because I know what they’ve seen and that they can bear witness. It doesn’t matter much what their politics are because the things they’ll tell us are a kind of precise record that will outlast the politics; but this testimony can only be heard at the personal level. You have to get to know them to know what they really think, and that is more than most people are willing to do.

THERE IS NOTHING new about war. Poor people kill other poor people and those in power become rich. Young men go to war and are perma-

nently changed. So many civilians die that it no longer matters why the war began. Life gets worse for the civilian population of the countries in which we fight our wars under the pretext of freeing them from tyranny. The “freedom” we promise them never comes. We replace one despot with another one more friendly to our national interests. No, there’s nothing new, but seldom has there been a time when war was so utterly disconnected from the daily life of most Americans. Orwell’s perpetual war is now the norm. The idea is no longer revelatory. Soldiers weave through airports daily along with businessmen talking on cell phones. One way or another, the servicemen and women are working for the same corporations as the businessmen. The brief case is related to the desert boot but few people make the connection. After all, isn’t there a war always going on somewhere?

Our condition of perpetual war has resulted in a professional army that operates independently of everyday life in America. In spite of the hundreds of thousands of mercenaries—euphemized as “civilian contractors”—employed by the US in Iraq and Afghanistan, American servicemen and women remain on the sharp end of the fighting. The mercenaries are employed principally as security for American corporations. They are not subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice and are not held accountable to the degree the troops are. In most cases, they aren’t held accountable at all. They do not do reconnaissance or infantry patrols and they incur far fewer casualties than regular army, air force navy, or marines. They also make about \$100,000 a year, whereas an average infantry grunt makes from \$22,000 to \$25,000 per year, including combat pay. A former student of mine, who had been an airborne ranger in Iraq, told me the following story. He was on a bus traveling through the “green zone.” Aboard with him were Iraqi and American civilian employees, soldiers, and a Halliburton contractor who was demonstrating very poor gun safety, waving his rifle around with his finger inside the trigger guard, posturing, and generally acting like an ass. My student said, “I knew if we got into the shit, I was going to shoot him first.” Ostensibly, this was about gun safety; but there was a deeper resentment in play: this guy made too much money and he was accountable to no one.

One of the strategies employed by Bush-Cheney at the beginning of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars was to do an end run around democratic process. Instead of a draft, National Guard and reserve units were called up and the “stop-loss” program was devised whereby a service member’s tour of duty could be extended as much as four or five tours. You can

imagine the personal toll. This is old news for anyone with half a brain and some powers of observation, but it has never entered the thoughts of a large number of the electorate.

There are consequences in a long war that differ greatly from, say, World War II, which, for Americans, was over in four years. It was a horrible and catastrophic war, larger in scale than any wars that have followed, but it was over, and a very real justice had been done. However, decade long wars, like Vietnam, like Afghanistan and Iraq, yield very different consequences. Long wars create a level of depravity among servicemen that is never understood by the public. If you continually expose people to legal murder, it makes them numb and cynical. This depravity is increased if the reasons for the war are murky. Human life becomes worth even less. Bizarre events begin to take place that on their face seem utterly psychotic and for those ignorant of the circumstances, seem to come out of nowhere. Pat Tillman shot dead with a tight group of 5.56 rounds in the center of the forehead. Some of us think it was a hit. In fact, some of us think that it may have had something to do with Tillman, having gone sour on the war, contacting Noam Chomsky. A group of Americans are caught photographing their own acts of sadism inflicted on prisoners at Abu Graib. Otherwise decent young men decide to randomly murder Afghan civilians. These things do not come out of nowhere; they are the product of a war that has gone on too long. In the Vietnam War, the slow rot could be found in many units long before the My Lai massacre. The availability and cheapness of Southeast Asian heroin added a grievous pall to the war and the “fragging” of officers by enlisted men told the story of a war gone bad beyond repair. When I was on my way home from Vietnam in 1968 there was a marine on the plane, leg and wrist shackled, and flanked by two brig chasers. When I arrived at the barracks at Okinawa, I learned that he had killed his commanding officer. He was one of many whose lives were ruined by things he never expected to happen in a war.

THE MORE POLITICIZED the conduct of the war, the more frustrated the men and women on the ground. The longer the war goes on, the more it becomes about surviving and not about its putative patriotic purpose. Reality has a way of rolling right over such sentiments.

My first day in Vietnam in February of 1967, I knew something was wrong. On my first patrol I saw an old man beaten by a squad leader for no other reason than he was Vietnamese. What I saw in my fellow

marines was not the attitude of men who believed they were fighting for a noble cause—protecting the South Vietnamese against communist aggressors. Their behavior was an admission that no one cared what the war was about anymore, and that the civilian population had become the enemy, and the enemy threatened their survival. There was nothing else beyond that, no long view, no strategy. That day was the beginning of my education, and an immense darkness opened under me. What I saw that day in these men was a kind of soul damage.

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WHAT IS A *soul*? The word still enjoys strong metaphorical significance in spite of the smirks it attracts in our snarky times. I sometimes think it is a composting of all the provisional selves we create to manage a life. Paracelsus argued that the soul is not inside us, but surrounds us, goes before and behind us. It must therefore be wiser, see more than the “self,” which is often so busy justifying its own identity that it has lost touch with *what is*. There is nothing ethereal about the soul: it is worldly in a way mind will never be. Perhaps the strongest argument for its existence is that you can damage it, imprison it. Lose it. It is important for us to imagine a soul, even if we are not religious, because its spaciousness allows us for life’s imponderables against which a conscious and unconscious seem so utterly lame. A soul is spacious enough to hold our lives. Some faculty, some *something* must be said to collect meaning, to collect experience, and transform it. It must matter to have lived.

I dread being one of those old men who stand by the road and wave their cane at the cars, hair all white fire. One of the last forms of innocence is lost in old age when you realize that no one cares what you know. You can say, *Look, there, it's happening again*. You can say, *No one will win this war, but it doesn't matter to those in power because they'll grow rich from it*. The patriotic cause is the shuck and jive routine that brings the electorate along. You can say, *You may think you're a badass but there are other things that will test your courage more than the war itself, like those things you have to live with, those things you have done*. When the war is over, few will remember what it was about. Millions will be damaged by the war and no one will remember them.

Williams James called the assumption that things get better simply because time has passed the “meliorative myth.” Like many these days, I am a pessimist. I imagine a future of international corporate feudalism

protected by armies of mercenaries that, like soccer teams, are composed of men from many countries who are loyal to whomever pays them but who have no personal stake in what happens to one country or another. Such things as “nations” will be merely sentimental.

But where does this leave the people who have incurred the damage from war? What do we do about them? Surely something must be done. Empathy is inconvenient because it makes us shift our consciousness away from being expedient. Most people don't want to go there: it's disruptive, what it reveals might lead to making sacrifices; worse, it may lead to the knowledge that the way we live and the things we condone, are wrong. With the ascendancy of the right in this country, we have seen an outright hostility to empathy. In fact, they even admit it. During the Sotomayor confirmation hearings, Republican Senator Jeff Sessions said the following:

Thank you, Chairman. Judge Sotomayor, let's talk about empathy. I find it shocking that President Obama said that judges should have empathy. I hate empathy. My Republican colleagues hate empathy. In fact, I am proud to say that we've reached an all-time low in the 'understands the problems of ordinary people' category.

These “ordinary people”—the same ones who would be impacted by cuts in social programs that the Republicans are continually campaigning for—are the ones who end up fighting wars. We are experiencing a growing sociopathy on the part of power and money that harkens back to pre-Roosevelt breadline days. It is no accident that the profiteers—executives with obscene salaries and bonuses—who are always the most vocal in support of this or that war, resting assured that their children will never have to fight. A cynic might say, *it has always been thus*. I say it is a matter of degree, and that regard the culture is worse than it has ever been.

Let us demand that people who vote for wars should be sharply aware of each individual human being who dies or is maimed in such a war. Let them know their names, see the wounds on their bodies, hear their cries of despair. Let them feel the full weight of each casualty. They should at the very least not try to hide, as did Bush-Cheney, the photos of the coffins coming back.

A soul is not pure luminance; it is rather a bruise light in which we carry all that we have been and all we have seen. When we acknowledge this, we deny nothing, and that way we are whole and responsible.

When we arrived in Chicago, I watched the young man struggle to get up and walk, the young woman taking his arm. People behind them were impatient to get off. The young businessman behind me said to someone on the other end of his cell phone that he would see them in an hour if *he could ever get off this plane*. The irritation in his voice was obvious. This vet struggling to get off the plane was just another irritation. And, of course, the guy behind me will never connect the maimed soldier with the health of his stock portfolio.

The young man and woman shuffled into the terminal, the other passengers swimming around them on the way to baggage claim. Soon, they are the only two walking slowly toward the escalator. The rest have gone.