

REFLECTIONS ON WAR AND KILLING

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I fought in combat in Vietnam in 1969 and helped kill dozens of people. A third of a century later, I am still haunted by that experience. My efforts to understand war and killing led me years ago to the work of conflict resolution. I have learned that, for former soldiers and for mediators, “Only when we have removed the harm in ourselves do we become truly useful to others.”¹

Kenneth Cloke has written that “Everyone in conflict lies in the sense of failing to tell the whole truth, and leaving out the disagreeable parts. Everyone rationalizes, justifies, fabricates, diverts attention, changes the subject, becomes defensive, counterattacks, minimizes, and grandstands in order to gain advantage.”² This happens in war, where truth is an early casualty. We invent reasons to kill others—reasons that necessitate and justify the unthinkable (e.g., we must change regimes, destroy weapons of mass destruction, fight terrorism, and liberate the oppressed).

Killing is an unnatural act. According to an important study on killing in war, there is, within most soldiers, an intense resistance to killing. This resistance is so strong that many soldiers on the battlefield will die before they can overcome it. The majority of soldiers will *not* attempt to kill the enemy, even to save their own lives.³ One way, in combat, to distinguish the act of killing from the act of murder is to objectify those we kill.⁴ We tell ourselves the enemy deserves to die because (in alphabetical order) they are brutal, despicable, evil, inhuman, murderous, ruthless, and vicious. They simply are not ordinary people. Therefore, they can be killed without hesitation or regret.

War like other forms of conflict can be a kind of madness: “Conflict possesses a dark, hypnotic, destructive power . . . It speaks to a deep,

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¹ Sogyal Rinpoche, *THE TIBETAN BOOK OF THE DEAD* 61 (New York: Harper Collins, 1994).

² Kenneth Cloke, *MEDIATING DANGEROUSLY: THE FRONTIERS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION* 69 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2001).

³ Dave Grossman, *ON KILLING: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL COST OF LEARNING TO KILL IN WAR AND SOCIETY* 4 (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1995).

⁴ J. Glenn Gray, *THE WARRIORS: REFLECTIONS ON MEN IN BATTLE* (New York: Harper & Row Torchbook, 1970).

ancient part of our soul that thirsts for power and delights in revenge.”⁵ We commit young men and women to death in battle without knowing the cost-benefit calculus of sacrifice. Each soldier who dies—friend and foe alike—is a child, sibling, cousin, spouse, or parent whose death will devastate scores of others, now and for generations. Even those who kill struggle to survive the enormity of their acts.⁶ We rationalize the unintended consequences of our good intentions: museums looted, lives ruined, innocents killed, families destroyed. And we ignore the fact our crusade against the “evil ones” will create hundreds of new terrorists committed to protracted, non-negotiable war against us.

Kenneth Cloke could be talking about war when he says that “Conflict arises wherever there is a failure of connection, collaboration, or community, an inability to understand our essential interconnectedness and the universal beauty of the human spirit.”⁷ By contrast, the incomparable genius of mediation “lies in its potential not only to find solutions to people’s problems but to change people themselves for the better, in the very midst of conflict.”⁸ This potential exists, because “there is within each person a force that understands at some gut level that all humanity is inextricably interdependent and that to harm any part is to harm the whole.”⁹ As a mediator, I am comforted that this spiritual truth is not something esoteric, but rather is profound common sense.¹⁰

⁵ Kenneth Cloke & Joan Goldsmith, *RESOLVING CONFLICTS AT WORK 3* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000).

⁶ “In the first five years after the official end of the war, more than fifty-eight thousand Vietnam veterans committed suicide; there were more veterans who took their own lives than there were soldiers killed in combat.” Kristin Ann Hass, *CARRIED TO THE WALL: AMERICAN MEMORY AND THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL 88-89* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

⁷ Cloke, *supra* note 2, at 6.

⁸ Robert A. Baruch Bush & Joseph P. Folger, *THE PROMISE OF MEDIATION: RESPONDING TO CONFLICT THROUGH EMPOWERMENT AND RECOGNITION xv* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994).

⁹ Grossman, *supra* note 3, at 37-38.

¹⁰ Rinpoche, *supra* note 1, at 53.