

**The Grim Reaper In Uniform:  
Chasing Death ... and Meaning ... On the Battlefield**

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September 6, 2009

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Bethesda, MD

Thank all of you for coming this morning; I'm honored by your presence. There's a scene early in the movie "Apocalypse Now" where some officers are having lunch as they give a captain his next assignment. One of the items on the menu is Vietnamese spiny lobsters, a sort of preternaturally repellent creature with about a dozen feelers, claws, a scaly back, and eyes on stalks. The camera lingers on this lobster as the general passes the plate to the captain and says. "Captain, if you eat this you will never have to prove your courage in any other way."

Well, my view is that since you came today -- even after reading the title of my remarks and seeing the ghoulish representation of the Grim Reaper on the announcement -- you, too, will never have to prove your courage in any other way.

The subject of our conversation is a difficult one -- a conversation about death, about war, and about the relationship between death and war. Like many, perhaps most, returning veterans from all wars, when I got back from my tour in Vietnam I felt seared by the friction between two conflicting propositions -- equally compelling, and entirely contradictory: first, that I would have to find a way to understand not only the Vietnam War but all wars; second, that it is, in the end, impossible to understand any war.

In the decades since then I have not resolved that contradiction, so I speak today from a place simultaneously of urgency and uncertainty ... of questions rather than answers ... of hypotheses rather than conclusions.

From my experience there is no better place for this kind of difficult discussion than the Unitarian Universalist Church. I grew up in South Texas in a fairly conservative Southern Methodist church, where neither theological questioning nor dissent was much welcomed. As a teenager I chafed under that regimen. One day a friend of mine told me that there was a young, cool minister newly arrived to take over the Unitarian Church. So I went to visit this new minister at his office, and it happened to be at a time when South Texas was experiencing one of its periodic droughts.

In fact, the mayor had declared the upcoming Sunday to be a pray-for-rain day, and called all the local ministers to secure their cooperation. The mayor's phone call came into the Unitarian minister's office while I was there. He took the mayor's call, heard him out, and after winking at me told the mayor that he would be glad to cooperate, but he knew that a few members of his congregation had been heavily watering their lawns and were worried that flooding might occur with a heavy downpour. So would it be o.k., the minister asked, if he sent the addresses of those homes to the mayor and part of the prayer could include sparing those lawns from any downpour.

Well, I don't remember whether rain did arrive and, if it did, whether it spared a half dozen well-tended lawns. But I do remember that I felt fully at home at that church and I still do ... enough so to begin a conversation about war and death.

My overarching thesis can be stated simply: Whatever else war is about, at its core it's about death. Our views of death determine how we fight. And a prolonged exposure to battle changes one's view of death.

But if war, at its core, is about death, death in war is about many different things. It has many different meanings. The Grim Reaper shows up on the battlefield in a variety of guises, and in a lot of different emotional colors.

A moment ago you heard Nicole read part of a poem by the British poet Rupert Brooke celebrating the outbreak of World War I and its opportunity for nobility and heroism and escape from the humdrum routines of daily life. In a few minutes Vanessa will read from a famous poem by another British poet, Wilfred Owen – a poem about the same war but with a very different message. Of course, they were different men with different experiences, but perhaps the crucial difference in tone derives from the fact that Rupert Brooke died before the war had dragged on and on with all the horror of the trenches and the gas attacks. And entirely shattered the optimism that had been the mood throughout most of Europe.

For example, it was exactly 100 years ago today – September 6, 1909 – that the explorer Francis Peary and his team reported that they had discovered the North Pole.

This was a stunning achievement, both scientifically and socially -- Peary's partner on that venture was an African American. Their accomplishment seemed a fitting capstone on several decades of increasing optimism. The Encyclopedia Britannica published around the turn of the century had this to say under the topic of torture: "Of only historical interest."

And then the guns of August sounded, ending that optimism, introducing not only World War I but also the bloodiest century in human history. I once did the math, and throughout the 100 years from 1900 to the year 2000 one person died in war every 38 seconds. That's not counting the six million killed in the camps, or the millions that died in the Armenian, Cambodian, Rwandan, and other civilian genocides.

In our time, of course, we cannot share the optimism of 100 years ago that war is unthinkable. We know better. And we know war's horror.

But I think it's not enough simply to deplore war, to point to its brutality, its dehumanization. Plato said that only the dead have seen the end of war, and that seems almost self-evident. And to understand that reality we have to push beyond just the horrors of war and try to understand war's attractions. William James understood this point in his famous essay "The Moral Equivalent of War" -- those attractions include excitement and adventure, of course, but also the sense of comradeship, the deep satisfaction of attaching oneself to a larger purpose, a chance to show bravery, and so on.

And part of that attraction also revolves around death in war. We need to look closely. Because, again, war is, ultimately, about death. It's about risking death. It's about dispensing death. It's

about trudging through death-saturated environments, day after day, month after month, body after body.

This is not, of course, how war is described from the offices where wars are decided and planned. It's not how war is pictured in the media, at least at the beginning.

Instead, the official talk consists of soaring rhetoric setting out transcendent goals: Making the world safe for democracy, as Woodrow Wilson described World War I. Expanding the four freedoms that FDR talked about in World War II. Winning hearts and minds and stopping falling dominoes, in Vietnam, or bringing democracy to the Middle East more recently.

I am not suggesting that these high-sounding slogans are all cynical lies or verbal trickery to stir up emotions on the home front and among the military.

What I am suggesting is that over time and on the ground, those abstractions inevitably begin to yield pride of place to grimmer realities. The Vietnam War, which started as a high minded effort to prevent falling dominoes and saving South Vietnam soon became a bloody struggle measured in body counts. It followed a trajectory from fidelity to abstract concepts to fixation on actual corpses, but it was not unique in that regard.

I expect we would all probably agree that if there were ever a necessary and just war it was the war that the United States and our Allies waged to defeat Hitler and to advance what FDR called the "Four Freedoms." One of the greatest journalists and supporters of the war and American ground troops in World War II was Ernie Pyle. In one of his last dispatches before he was killed Pyle wrote, "Battles differ one from another only in their physical environment – the emotions of fear and exhaustion and exaltation and hatred are about the same in all of them ... I have come to despise and be revolted by war, and its promiscuous profusion of bodies. I couldn't find the Four Freedoms among the dead men."

War is all about death. Risking death. Dispensing death. Trudging through death-saturated environments.

But that reality is tough to face head on. As you know, it's only recently that we in the American public have been able to witness even the most antiseptic representation of death in battle -- the flag-draped coffins that arrive in Dover airport. And even that was a controversial move. No doubt a lot of Americans agreed with Barbara Bush when she said, "Why should we hear about body bags and death? I mean it's not relevant. So why should I waste my beautiful mind on something like that?"

And that's not just a sentiment among civilians. It has probably always been true that former soldiers are loath to talk about the wars they have fought. As my former colleague and mentor, J. Glenn Gray, a philosopher and World War II veteran, put it, the god of war, Ares, returns soldiers to their homes only after first submerging them in the river Lethe, the river of forgetfulness and oblivion.

Small wonder. As the hero of the World War I novel All Quiet on the Western Front, asks after his return from the trenches, "Whatever would happen to us if we were to remember all that happened back there?"

I doubt there's a veteran from any war across any century or any country or any culture who hasn't asked that same question, in fear and in dread.

And yet ... And yet isn't it the case that to resist the effort to look steadily at war, to look at death in war, however disturbing, is to concede too much, to give too much power to its horror. It's to suggest that if we were to look too closely, if we were to fly too close to the hot core of these questions we would, like Icarus, plunge into oblivion.

It's worth remembering that the author of All Quiet On the Western Front, Erich Maria Remarque, *did* remember all that happened back there, and wrote about it in a way that enlarged and enlightened our understanding. And we need all the understanding we can get, however difficult.

And part of that understanding, I think, has to confront the fact that while in many ways death stalks the battlefield as a deeply unwelcome presence, there are also times – in every war, if not in every warrior's heart – when the right kind of death is a welcome presence. Even a goal to be pursued.

And, no surprise, that is where things get really complicated. We are all familiar with the recent and entirely unwelcome advent of the new phenomenon of suicide bombers, who seek to gain immortality by killing enemies even at the price of their own lives.

They are hardly unique. The letters written by kamikaze pilots in World War II as they looked forward to their suicide missions paint a remarkable picture of serenity, as these young pilots talk about their joy in achieving individual glory by serving the emperor and the eternal Japanese nation.

And while so-called suicide bombers and kamikaze pilots may seem foreign to our Western tradition, even a cursory examination shows otherwise.

For example, there's a famous passage in Homer when the warrior Sarpedon says to Glaucon, who hesitates about plunging into the cauldron of battle, "Ah, my friend, if when we are through this fight we could go on, getting no older forever, I would never fight myself nor send you into battle. But death in a thousand shapes hangs over us always. So let us go forward to win glory..." And that glory, for the Greeks, translated into a kind of immortality as the heroic deeds would be celebrated down through the ages.

So one of the attractions of war is that it seems to offer an antechamber to immortality if the situation is right and the actions meet the moment. There is a fascinating example of this in the story of one kamikaze pilot I read about. Like his colleagues he looked forward to his flight with an enormous equanimity and serenity as he prepared for a suicidal attack on an American ship. He got his target information, took off and got altitude when a warning light came on in the cockpit. His frantic radio calls resulted in the conclusion that his plane would not be able to reach his target, but the plane would very likely be able to make it back to its home airport.

So this kamikaze pilot turned the plane around and headed back. But he later reported that he was so frightened on the return flight that he could barely fly the plane. A certain death on

behalf of the eternal glory of the emperor meant a mood of calm exaltation for this pilot as he contemplated a passage into immortality, while a small danger that he might just crash into the sea scared him to a near panic state.

We Americans are not immune to seeking to identify ourselves with a larger cause that has a legitimate claim on immortality. Lincoln made that explicit in the final line of his address at the cemetery at Gettysburg, proposing that those who had died there had ensured that a “Government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from this earth.”

Or think about the deeply symbolic ways in which we bury our soldiers at Arlington and elsewhere. First, from the very beginning the casket is tightly wrapped – just about completely covered -- in the American flag. The identification of the soldier and the state could not be more clearly symbolized. The flag remains on the casket until the very last moment, when the casket is lowered into the ground and the flag is removed – neither the flag nor the country it symbolizes are ever interred. Instead the flag is given to the grieving family, who continue to carry forward the nation that shall not perish from this earth. The soldier whose identity was merged with the country and flag lives on in that same immortality.

There is profound comfort in those celebrations that sanctify sacrifice. And there is profound value and meaning in those practices that induce us to actualize a higher version of ourselves than just a sort of economic machine that narrowly defines and selfishly pursues short-term self-interest. As William James said in his essay, these are noble characteristics that we need to tap in non-warlike ways.

But having said that, I think we also have to recognize some clear dangers in the idea that war – and sacrifice in war – is, or always must be, sanctified by the clear pursuit and attainment of some overarching meaning, some immortalizing principle or goal. That commitment can make it much harder to end questionable enterprises. It can tempt us to continue in mistaken wars in order to try retroactively to sanctify the deaths that have already occurred by risking more.

Moreover, it’s a painful irony that when we engage in those after the fact searches for meaning to sanctify earlier sacrifice we are forgetting what every soldier, veteran, and serious student of warfare has always known: soldiers don’t fight for those transcendent principles -- they don’t fight to make the world safe for democracy or to stop falling dominoes or to clear the way for a Thomas Jefferson of Arabia: soldiers fight for their buddies to the left and the right of them. They fight in order not to betray either their buddies or their best images of themselves. Shouldn’t we say that’s meaning enough?

In the last Presidential campaign Senator McCain was critical of Obama’s plan to draw down our commitment in Iraq because that would mean the casualties in that war had died in vain. Obama’s response was, in my view, right on: he said simply that no American soldier who sacrifices his or her life dies in vain.

The larger point is that there is always a potential downside to the search for heroic, ennobling, and immortalizing projects that send us into combat.

And I find it haunting to remember Saint Augustine's observation that men try to gain their immortality with their own hands, and in the process often end up losing the only real immortality that's possible, which is in God's hands.

Well, this much, I think, is clear – that when we start to look closely at these issues they become more and more complicated. Our reflections twist and turn so that it feels like we're on a spiral staircase inside our own heads.

I will conclude with a story that might turn our reflections one more time. We've talked about how death in war can, at times, provide meaning beyond the grave. This story suggests a variation on that theme: the fact that one's sense of meaning and obligation also shapes actions in battle.

This true story was reported by Daniel Lang in a book called Casualties of War. In it Lang interviews a young Vietnam veteran in the U.S. who had been on a long-range reconnaissance patrol mission with some other soldiers when the leader of that patrol not only sanctioned, but also led his team to kidnap, rape, and kill a young Vietnamese girl from the local village. The veteran Lang interviews not only didn't participate but also made it clear that he would report these crimes. At that point, the leader of the team made it clear that this truth teller would never survive the mission, never get back to the base camp. But through an unforeseeable series of circumstances, the truth teller survives and after a lot of hassle does ensure that the guilty are prosecuted.

At the end of his interview with this truth-telling soldier Lang asks one last question: Why, he asks, do you think you chose your action and why do you think the others chose as they did?

The veteran thought for a long while and said, "You know, the one thing we had in common was that we had been in so much combat and danger that we all figured that we were going to die over there. And that we were going to die pretty soon – the Grim Reaper was looking over our shoulders. These other guys figured that meant it didn't matter much what they did. I figured it meant that it mattered all the more what I did."

These are difficult and dark topics, I know, and I thank you again for your presence and I hope we can continue the conversation in the coffee hour and beyond. Because it does seem to me that however difficult and dark these questions might be, they need our attention and our reflection.

And so let's give the last line to the poet Theodor Roethke, when he said: "In a dark time the eye begins to see."

Thank you.

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