



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning
A Lent Event Plenary Session by Chris Hedges
March 4, 2006

The vanquished know war. They see through the empty jingoism of those who use the abstract words of glory, honor, and patriotism to mask the cries of the wounded, the senseless killing, war profiteering, and chest-pounding grief. They know the lies the victors often do not acknowledge, the lies covered up in stately war memorials and mythic war narratives, filled with stories of courage and comradeship. They know the lies that permeate the thick, self-important memoirs by amoral statesmen who make wars but do not know war. The vanquished know the essence of war — death. They see that war is a state of almost pure sin with its goals of hatred and destruction. They know how war fosters alienation, leads inevitably to nihilism, and is a turning away from the sanctity and preservation of life. All other narratives about war too easily fall prey to the allure and seductiveness of violence, as well as the attraction of the godlike power that comes with the license to kill with impunity.

But the words of the vanquished come later, sometimes long after the war, when grown men and women unpack the suffering they endured as children, what it was like to see their mother or father killed or taken away, or what it was like to lose their homes, their community, their security, and be discarded as human refuse. But by then few listen. The truth about war comes out, but usually too late. We are assured by the war-makers that these stories have no bearing on the glorious violent enterprise the nation is about to inaugurate. And, lapping up the myth of war and its sense of empowerment, we prefer not to look.

The current coverage of the war in Iraq does not expose the pathology of war. We see the war from the perspective of the troops who fight the war or the equally skewed perspective of the foreign reporters, holed up in hotels, hemmed in by drivers and translators and official minders. There are moments when war's face appears to these voyeurs and professional killers, perhaps from the back seat of a car where a small child, her brains oozing out of her head, lies dying, but mostly it remains hidden. And all our knowledge of the war in Iraq has to be viewed as lacking the sweep and depth that will come one day, perhaps years from now, when a small Iraqi boy or girl reaches adulthood and unfolds for us the sad and tragic story of the invasion and bloody occupation of their nation.

War, for now, is presented primarily through the distorted prism of the occupiers. The embedded reporters, dependent on the military for food and transportation as well as security, have a natural and understandable tendency, one I have myself felt, to protect those who are protecting them. They are not allowed to report outside of the unit and are, in effect, captives. They have no relationships with the victims, essential to all balanced reporting of conflicts, but only with the Marines and soldiers who drive through desolate mud-walled towns and pump grenades and machine-gun bullets into houses, leaving scores of nameless dead and

wounded in their wake. The reporters admire and laud these fighters for their physical courage. They feel protected as well by the jet fighters and heavy artillery and throaty rattle of machine guns. And the reporting, even among those who struggle to keep some distance, usually descends into a shameful cheerleading.

Those who cover war also dine out on the myth about war and the myth about themselves as war correspondents. Yes, they say, it is horrible, and dirty and ugly; for many of them it is also glamorous and exciting and empowering. They look out from the windows of Humvees for a few seconds at Iraqi families, cowering in fear, and only rarely see the effects of the firepower. When they are forced to examine what bullets, grenades, and shells do to human bodies they turn away in disgust or resort to black humor to dehumanize the corpses. They cannot stay long, in any event, since they must leave the depressing scene behind for the next mission. The tragedy is replaced, as it is for us at home who watch it on television screens, by a light moment or another story. It becomes easier to forget that another human life has been ruined beyond repair, that what is unfolding is not only tragic for tens of thousands of Iraqis but for the United States. And as the war sours, as it no longer fits into the mythical narrative of us as liberators and victors, it is fading from view. The very cable news shows that packaged and sold us the war as a heroic battle for freedom and liberation prefer the soap opera sagas of Brad and Jen or Michael Jackson to the carnage gripping the streets of Baghdad. Average monthly coverage of the war in Iraq on the ABC, NBC and CBS newscast combined has been cut in half, falling from 388 minutes in 2003, to 274 in 2004, to 166 in 2005. And major newspapers, the Boston Globe, are shutting down their bureaus.

War, when it is shown to us, is presented as a game, as entertainment. Commentators on the cable news channels revel in the power and might of our weaponry and by extension our own power. We watch neatly packaged video clips fed to the press by the war makers. We are spared the pools of blood, the agony of the dying on the other end. It is clean and neat and tidy and wildly out of context. There is the technological capacity to show us war. We could watch live footage of a young Iraqi soldier with his legs blown off by an anti-tank mine dying in the sand – something I witnessed in the Persian Gulf War -- but such coverage would hardly boost ratings, hardly make us want to wage war. And so we are fed the myth, the myth the press almost always feeds us in wartime, and kept from seeing. And when the myth cannot be sustained, when the lie is palpable, the war is shunted to the sidelines, its daily brutality replaced by trivia and gossip.

There is no more candor in Iraq or Afghanistan than there was in Vietnam, but in the age of live satellite feeds the military has perfected the appearance of candor. For the myth of war, the myth of glory and honor sells newspapers and boosts ratings, real reporting does not. Nearly every embedded war correspondent sees his or her mission as sustaining civilian and army morale. The identification of reporters with the units they cover is insipid and dangerous, but also usual. In war the press is always part of the problem. In wartime, as Senator Hiram Johnson reminded us in 1917, “truth is the first casualty.”

We have blundered into nations we know little about, caught between bitter rivalries between competing ethnic and religious groups. We have embarked on an occupation in Iraq that is as damaging to our souls as it is to our prestige and power and security. We have become tyrants to others weaker than ourselves. And we believe, falsely, that because we

have the capacity to wage war we have the right to wage war.

Once you master a people by force you depend on force for control. Isolation always impairs judgment. And we are very isolated now. In *Antigone* the king imposes his will without listening to those he rules and dooms himself. Thucydides wrote of how Athens expanding empire led it to become a tyrant abroad and then a tyrant at home. The tyranny Athens imposed on others it finally imposed on itself. The lust for war, the desire for profits, saw the Athenians lose sight of the ideas that were their great gift to us, ideals that should be our legacy to others.

We live on images and slogans that perpetuate fantasies about our own invulnerability, our own might, our own goodness. These illusions blind us. We cannot see ourselves as others see us.

“We had fed the heart on fantasies,” William Butler Yeats wrote, “the heart’s grown brutal from the fare.”

It is 1967 in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. We have become Israel. Our empire has expanded. We have become pariahs. We are propelled forward not by logic or compassion or understanding but by fear. We have built an alliance against terror with Israel and Russia, two nations that do not shrink from gratuitous and senseless killing in the Israeli-occupied territories and Chechnya. And those who are not with us - and few are with us now - we ridicule and belittle and condemn.

We have become the company we keep. Much of the world - certainly the Muslim world, one-fifth of the world’s population, most of whom I remind you are not Arab, see us through the prism of Iraq, Palestine and Chechnya. And this prism is one that is igniting the dispossessed and deteriorating by the hour our security and safety.

The attacks on the World Trade Center illustrate that those who oppose us, rather than coming from another moral universe, have been schooled well in modern warfare. The dramatic explosions, the fireballs, the victims plummeting to their deaths, the collapse of the towers in Manhattan, were straight out of Hollywood. Where else, but from the industrialized world, did the suicide bombers learn that huge explosions and death above a city skyline are a peculiar and effective form of communication? They have mastered the language we taught them. They understand that the use of indiscriminate violence against innocents is a way to make a statement. We leave the same calling cards. We delivered such incendiary messages in Vietnam, Serbia, Afghanistan and Iraq. It was Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara who in the summer of 1965 defined the bombing raids that would kill hundreds of thousands of civilians north of Saigon as a means of communication to the Communist regime in Hanoi.

I have spent most of my adult life in war. I began two decades ago covering wars in Central America, where I spent five years, then the Middle East, where I spent seven, and the Balkans where I covered the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo. My life has been marred, let me say deformed, by the organized industrial violence that year after year was an intimate part of my existence. I have watched young men bleed to death on lonely Central American dirt roads and cobblestone squares in Sarajevo. I have looked into the eyes of mothers, kneeling

over the lifeless and mutilated bodies of their children. I have stood in warehouses with rows of corpses, including children, and breathed death into my lungs. I carry within me the ghosts of those I worked with, my comrades, now gone.

After our defeat in Vietnam we became a better nation. We were humbled, even humiliated. We asked questions about ourselves we had not asked before. We were forced to see ourselves as others saw us. The sight was not an attractive one. We were forced to confront our own capacity for atrocity, for evil. In this we understood not only war, but ourselves. But the seduction of war is insidious. It appears to be a way to eradicate our enemies, to banish from the world of the living those who would do us harm. At a time when we are afraid it gives us a false sense of power and security.

The good name of war was carefully resurrected after Vietnam. It began under President Reagan in Grenada and Panama and culminated in the Persian Gulf War. We were led to believe – in the same way the doomed empires of the late 19th century believed – that our technology could make us invulnerable, a lie sadly unmasked as I speak tonight in the streets of Baghdad.

War is the pornography of violence. It has a dark beauty, filled with the monstrous and the grotesque. The Bible calls it “the lust of the eye” and warns believers against it. War gives us a distorted sense of self. It gives us meaning. It creates a feeling of comradeship that obliterates our alienation and makes us feel, for perhaps the first time in our lives that we belong. War allows us to rise above our small stations in life. We find nobility in the cause, feelings of selflessness, even bliss. Once in a conflict the shallowness of much of our lives becomes apparent. The fruitless search to find fulfillment in the acquisition of things and wealth and power is laid bare. The trivia that dominates our airwaves is exposed as empty chatter.

War allows us to engage in lusts and passions we keep hidden in the deepest, most private interiors of our fantasy life. It allows us to destroy not only things but human beings. In that moment of wholesale destruction, we wield the power to the divine, the power to revoke another person’s charter to live on this earth. The frenzy of this destruction – and when unit discipline breaks down or there was no unit discipline to begin with frenzy is the right word – sees armed bands crazed by the poisonous elixir our power to bring about the obliteration of others delivers. All things, including human beings, become objects – objects to either gratify or destroy or both. Almost no one is immune. The contagion of the crowd sees to that.

“Force,” Simone Weil writes, “is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does, as it is to its victims. The second it crushes; the first it intoxicates.”

Those who have the least meaning in their lives – the impoverished Palestinian refugees in Gaza, the disenfranchised North African immigrants in France, even the legions of youth in the splendid indolence and safety of the industrialized world – are all susceptible to war’s appeal. I do not miss war, but I miss what it brought. I could never say I was happy in the fighting in El Salvador or Bosnia or Kosovo, but I had a sense of purpose. This is a quality war shares with love, for we are also able to choose fealty and self-sacrifice over security for those we love. This is why war, at its inception, always looks and feels like love

– the chief emotion war destroys.

We are tempted, maybe even encouraged, to reduce life to a simple search for happiness. Happiness, however, withers if there is no meaning. The other temptation is to disavow the search for happiness in order to be faithful to that which provides meaning. But to live only for meaning, indifferent to all happiness, makes us fanatic, self-righteous and cold. It leaves us cut off from our own humanity and the humanity of others.

The ancient Greeks understood the perverse attraction between love and death in wartime. When Achilles killed Penthesilea, the queen of the Amazons, in the Trojan War, he fell in love with her as she expired on the battlefield. He murdered love. And once he murdered love he was doomed. He courted death. Aphrodite, the goddess of love, had an illicit affair with Ares, the god of war, who was hated by the other gods with the exception of the god of the underworld, to whom he steadily brought new souls.

We feel in wartime comradeship. We confuse this with friendship, with love. There are those who will insist that the comradeship of war is love. The ecstatic glow that makes us in war feel as one people, as one entity, is real. But this is part of war's intoxication. Think back on the days after the attacks on 9/11. Suddenly we no longer felt alone. We connected with strangers, even with people we did not like. We felt we belonged -- that we were somehow wrapped in the embrace of the nation, the community. In short, we no longer felt alienated.

As this feeling dissipated in the weeks after the attack, there was nostalgia for its warm glow. Wartime always brings with it this comradeship, which is the opposite of friendship. Friends, as J. Glenn Gray points out in his book, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*, are predetermined. Friendship takes place between men and women who possess an intellectual and emotional affinity for each other. Many of us will admit that we never really had a friend, and even the most fortunate of us have very few. But comradeship, that ecstatic bliss that comes with belonging to the crowd in wartime, is within our reach. We can all have comrades.

The danger, the external threat that comes when we have an enemy, does not create friendship. It creates comradeship. Those in wartime are deceived about what they are undergoing. This is why, once the war ends these comrades again become strangers to us. This is why, after war, we fall into despair.

In friendship, there is a deepening of our sense of self. We become, through the friend, more aware of who we are and what we are about. We find ourselves in the eyes of the friend. Friends probe and question and challenge us to make each more complete. They draw the secrets out of us and know our inner core of being. For we reach and change others, and we are changed, when we plunge to the depths of our inner life, the depths that expose our insecurities, our incompleteness, those depths that often lie beyond articulation.

In comradeship, the kind that comes to us in patriotic fervor, there is a suppression of self-awareness, self-knowledge, self-possession. Comrades lose their identities in wartime for the collective rush of a common cause, the common purpose. They are like erotic lovers. In comradeship, life is ecstatic and corporate as opposed to friendship, where like is singular

and individual. In comradeship, Gray reminds us, there are no demands on the self. This is part of its appeal and one of the reasons we miss it and seek to recreate it. Comradeship allows us to escape the demands on the self that is part of friendship. This is why, once the war is over these feelings are extinguished.

Sabastian Haffner, who was a lawyer in Nazi Germany, wrote of this comradeship in his book *Defying Hitler*. He noted that comradeship “destroys the sense of responsibility for oneself, be it civilian or, worse still the religious sense.”

“Comradeship always sets the cultural tone at the lowest possible level, accessible to everyone,” he wrote. “It cannot tolerate discussion; in the chemical solution of comradeship discussion immediately takes on the color of whining and grumbling. It becomes a mortal sin. Comradeship admits no thoughts, just mass feelings, of the most primitive sort – these, on the other hand, are inescapable, to try and evade them is to put oneself beyond the pale.”

In wartime, when we feel threatened we no longer face death alone but as a group. This makes death easier to bear.

We ennoble self-sacrifice for the other, for the comrade. In short, we begin to worship death. And this is what the god of war demands from us. Think finally, of what it means to die for a friend. It is deliberate and painful. There is no ecstasy. For friends, dying is hard and bitter. The dialogue they have and cherish will perhaps never be recreated. Friends, do not, the way comrades do, love death and sacrifice. To friends the prospect of death is frightening. This is why friendship, or let me say love, is the most potent enemy of war.

The reports from Iraq gave us war that has a coherency and logic it never has in battle. We taste a bit of war’s exhilaration in the images but were safe. War, from Iraq, is fed to us with manufactured heroes, feel-good stories about our own and an enemy that is always painted as barbaric and uncivilized.

We can thrill in the perversity of war, even as we watch films or read books that are meant to denounce war. It is almost impossible to produce antiwar film or books or documentaries that also present images of battle. It is like trying to condemn pornography while showing erotic love scenes. The prurient fascination with violent death always overpowers the message.

“Vietnam war films are all pro-war,” writes Anthony Swofford in *Jarhead*, his memoir of the Persian Gulf War, “no matter what the supposed message, what Kubrick or Coppola or Stone intended. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson in Omaha or San Francisco or Manhattan will watch the films and weep and decide once and for all that war is inhumane and terrible, they will tell their friends at church and their family this, but Corporal Johnson at Camp Pendleton and Sergeant Johnson at Travis Air Force Base and Seaman Johnson at Coronado Naval Station and Spec 4 Johnson at Fort Bragg and Lance Corporal Swofford at Twentynine Palms Marine Corps Base watch the same films and are excited by them, because the magic brutality of the films celebrate the terrible and despicable beauty of their fighting skills. Fight, rape, war, pillage, burn. Filmic images of death and carnage are pornographic for the military man; with film you are stroking his cock, tickling his balls with the pink feather of history, getting him ready for his real First Fuck. It doesn’t matter how many Mr. and Mrs.

Johnsons are anti-war – the actual killers who know how to use the weapons are not..”

War is part of the modern industrial landscape. Indeed, its tools are often the cutting edges of technology. By World War I we had created ways in which thousands of people, who never saw their attackers, could die in an instant. Weapons that carry out this impersonal mass slaughter are beautiful. They are crafted, sleek and harbor within them awesome power. The machines of war – the planes, the tanks, the heavy machine guns, the huge hulking Howitzers and the helicopters – are pieces of art. I have seen them at work. They are angels of death streaking through the sky.

I was with a unit of guerillas in El Salvador when some Huey helicopters raced in over a lake to hunt us down. We hid in the ruins of an abandoned village, darting from wall to wall and standing with our backs to the shattered bricks so our hunters could not see us as they passed low overhead. As I looked up at these machines that were trying to kill me I found them seductive.

Once in a conflict, once we live in the midst of fighting, we are moved from the abstract to the real, from the mythic to the sensory. No soldier after a few seconds of combat believes in the myth of war any more. This is why wounded Marines jeered John Wayne when he visited them in a hospital in World War II.

When this move takes place, we have nothing to do with a world not at war. The world, when we return to it, is viewed from the end of a very long tunnel. There, they still believe. There, they do not understand. We feel different, wiser, greater. This experience is so overpowering that, if we can control our fear, we can go back to seek it out again. War is addictive. Indeed, it is the most potent narcotic invented by humankind.

The first time I was in an ambush was in the Salvadoran town of Suchitoto. It was a dreary peasant outpost made up of stucco and mud-and-wattle huts off the main road. The town was surrounded by the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front rebels who, when I arrived in El Salvador were winning the war. The government forces kept a small garrison in the town, although its relief columns were frequently ambushed as they ambled down the small strip of asphalt surrounded by high grass. It was one of the most dangerous spots in the country.

The rebels launched an attack to take the town. A convoy of reporters in cars marked with “TV” in masking tape on the windshields hightailed it to the small bridge that led to the lonely stretch of road into Suchitoto. Then we moved slowly down the road, the odd round fired ahead or behind us. We made it to the edge of town where we ran into rebel units, now accustomed to the follies of the press. On foot we moved through the deserted streets. The firing from the garrison became louder as we weaved our way with rebel units to the siege that had been set up. Then, as I rounded a corner, several full bursts of automatic fire rent the air. Bullets hit the mud wall behind me. We dove into the dirt. The rebels I was with began to fire noisy rounds from their M-16 assault rifles. The scent of cordite filled the air. Rebels around me were wounded and crying out in pain. One died yelling out in a sad cadence for his mother.

The firefight seemed to go on for an eternity. I cannot say how long I lay there. It could have been a few minutes. It could have been an hour. Here was war – real war, sensory war, not the war of the movies and novels I had consumed in my youth. It was horrifying, confusing, numbing and nothing like the myth I had been peddled. I realized at once that it controlled me. I would never control it.

In a lull, I made a dash across an empty square to find shelter behind a house. My heart was racing. Adrenaline coursed through my bloodstream. I was safe. I made it back to the capital. Like most war correspondents, I soon considered the experience a great cosmic joke. I drank away the fear in a seedy bar in downtown San Salvador that night.

Most people, after such an experience, would learn to stay away. I was hooked. Drawn into the world of war, it becomes hard to escape. It perverts and destroys you. It pushes you closer and closer to your own annihilation – spiritual, emotional and finally physical. It destroys the continuity of life, tearing apart all systems, economic, social, environmental and political, that make life possible, that sustain us as human beings. This fragile web of interconnectedness gives life. War is about death. I covered the war in El Salvador from 1983 to 1988. By the end, I had a nervous twitch in my face. I was evacuated three times by the US Embassy because of tips that the death squads planned to kill me. Yet each time, I came back. I accepted with a grim fatalism that I would be killed in El Salvador. I could not articulate why I accepted my own destruction and cannot now. There came to be a part of me, maybe it is a part of all of us, which decided I would rather die like this than go back to the dull routine.

During the war in El Salvador, I worked with a photographer who had a slew of close calls and called it quits. He moved to Miami for one of the news weeklies. But life in Florida was flat, dull, uninteresting. He could not adjust and soon came back. From the moment he stepped off the plane, it was clear he had returned to die. Just as there are some soldiers or war correspondents who seem to us immortal and whose loss comes as a sobering reminder that death has no favorites, there are also those in a war who are locked in a grim embrace with death from which they cannot escape. He was frightening to behold, a walking corpse. He was shot through the back in a firefight and died in less than a minute.

Sigmund Freud divided the forces in human nature between the Eros instinct – the impulse within us that propels us to become close to others, to preserve and conserve – and the Thanatos or death instinct – the impulse that works towards the annihilation of all living things including ourselves. For Freud, these forces were in eternal conflict. He was pessimistic about ever eradicating war. All human history, he argued in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, is a tug of war between these two instincts.

Taste enough of war and you come to believe the stoics were right: “We will, in the end, all consume ourselves in a vast conflagration.”

There is a constant search in war to find new perversities, new forms of death when the initial flush fades, a rear guard and finally futile effort to ward off the boredom of routine death. This is why we would drive into towns in Bosnia and find bodies crucified on the sides of barns or decapitated, mutilated. That is why those slain in combat are treated as trophies belonging to the killers, turned into grotesque pieces of performance art. I know

soldiers that to this day carry in their wallets the identity cards of men they know they killed. They take them everywhere. They show them to you with the imploring look of a lost child. They will never understand.

In war, we deform ourselves, our essence. We give up individual conscience – maybe even consciousness – for contagion of the crowd, the rush of patriotism, the belief that we must stand together as a nation in moments of extremity. To make a moral choice, to defy war's enticement, can be self-destructive.

In the rise to power, we always become smaller, power absorbs us and once power is obtained we are its pawn. As in Shakespeare's *Richard III*, the all-powerful prince who molded the world, we fall prey to the forces we thought we had harnessed. 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.

When the mask of war slips away and the rot and corruption is uncovered, when it turns sour and rank, when the myth is exposed as a fraud, we feel soiled and spent. It is then that we sink into despair.

In the Arab-Israeli 1973 war, almost a third of all Israeli casualties were due to psychiatric causes – and the war lasted only a few days. A World War II study determined that, after 60 days of continuous combat, 98 percent of all surviving soldiers will have become psychiatric casualties. A common trait among the 2 percent who were able to endure sustained combat was a predisposition towards “aggressive psychopathic personalities.” Lt. Col David Grossman in his book *On Killing* notes: “It is not too far from the mark to observe that there is something about continuous, inescapable combat which will drive 98 percent of all men insane, and the other 2 percent were crazy when they go there.”

During the war in El Salvador, soldiers could serve in the army for three or four years or longer, virtually until they psychologically or physically collapsed. In garrison towns, commanders banned the sale of sedatives because of the abuse by troops. In this war the emotionally maimed were common. I once interviewed a 19-year old Salvadoran Army sergeant who had spent five years fighting and suddenly lost his vision after his unit walked into a rebel ambush. The rebels killed 11 soldiers in the firefight, including his closest friend. A couple dozen soldiers were wounded. He was unable to see again until he was placed in the army hospital. “I have these horrible headaches,” he told me, sitting on the edge of his bed. “There is shrapnel in my head. I keep telling the doctors to take it out.” But the doctors told me that he had no head wounds.

I saw other soldiers in other conflicts go deaf or stop speaking or simply shake without being able to stop.

War is necrophilia. This necrophilia is central to soldiering just as it is central to the makeup of suicide bombers and terrorists. The necrophilia is hidden under platitudes about duty or comradeship. It waits especially in moments when we seem to have little to live for and no hope, or in moments when the intoxication of war is at its pitch to be unleashed. When we spend long enough in war, it comes to us as a kind of release, a fatal and seductive

embrace that can consummate the long flirtation with our own destruction.

In Milovan Djilas' memoir *Wartime* about the partisan war in Yugoslavia, he wrote of the enticement death held for the combatants. He stood over the body of his comrade, the commander Sava Kovacevic, and found:

"...dying did not seem terrible or unjust. This was the most extraordinary, the most exalted moment of my life. Death did not seem strange or undesirable. That I restrained myself from charging blindly into the fray and death was perhaps due to my sense of obligation to the troops or to some comrade's reminder concerning the tasks at hand. In my memory, I returned to those moments many times with the same feeling of intimacy with death and desire for it while I was in prison, especially during my first incarceration."

War ascendant wipes out Eros. It wipes out delicacy and tenderness. It communal power seeks to render the individual obsolete, to hand all passions, all choice, all voice to the crowd.

"The most important part of the individual life, which cannot be subsumed in communal life, is love," Haffner wrote. "So comradeship has its special weapons against love: smut. Every evening in bed, after the last patrol round, there was the ritual reciting of lewd songs and jokes. That is the hard and fast rule of male comradeship, and nothing is more mistaken than the widely held opinion that this is a safety valve for frustrated erotic or sexual feelings. These songs and jokes do not have an erotic, arousing effect. On the contrary, they make the act of love appear as unappetizing as possible. They treat it like digestion and defecation, and make it an object of ridicule. The men who recited rude songs and used coarse words for female body parts were in effect denying that they ever had tender feelings or had been in love, that they had ever made themselves attractive, behaved gently..."

When we see this, when we see our addiction for what it is, when we understand ourselves and how war has perverted us, life becomes hard to bear. Jon Steele, a cameraman who spent years in war zones, had a nervous breakdown in a crowded Heathrow Airport after returning from Sarajevo. He understood the reality of his work, a reality that stripped away the self-righteous, high-octane gloss. "I came back from Sarajevo," he said. "We were in a place called Sniper's Alley, and I filmed a girl there who had been hit in the neck by a sniper's bullet. I filmed her in the ambulance, and only after she was dead, I suddenly understood that the last thing she had seen was the reflection of the lens of the camera I was holding in front of her. This wiped me out. I grabbed the camera, and started running down Sniper's Alley, filming at knee level the Bosnians running from place to place."

A year after the war in Sarajevo, I sat with Bosnian friends who had suffered horribly. A young woman, Ljiljana, had lost her father, a Serb, who refused to join the besieging Serb forces around the city. She had been forced a few days earlier to identify his corpse. The body was lifted, the water running out of the sides of a rotting coffin, from a small park for reburial in the central cemetery. She was emigrating for Australia soon – where, she told me, "I will marry a man who has never heard of this war and raise children that will be told nothing about it, nothing about the country I am from."

Ljiljana was young. But the war had exacted a toll. Her cheeks were hollow, her hair dry and brittle. Her teeth were decayed and some had broken into jagged bits. She had no money for a dentist. She hoped to fix them in Australia.

Yet all she and her friends did that afternoon was lament the days when they lived in fear and hunger, emaciated, targeted by Serb gunners on the heights above. They did not wish back the suffering. And yet, they admitted, these may have been the fullest days of their lives. They looked at me in despair. I knew them when they were being pounded by hundreds of shells a day, when they had no water to bath in or wash their clothes, when they huddled in unheated flats as sniper bullets hit the walls outside.

But what they expressed was real. It was the disillusionment with a sterile, futile and empty present. Peace had again peeled back the void that the rush of war, of battle, had filled. Once again they were – as perhaps we all are -- alone, no longer bound by a common struggle, no longer given the opportunity to be noble, heroic, no longer sure of what life was about or what it meant. The old comradeship, however false, had vanished with the last shot.

Moreover, they had seen that all the sacrifice had been for naught. They had been, as we all are in war, betrayed. The corrupt old Communist Party bosses, who became nationalists overnight and got them into the mess in the first place, had grown rich off their suffering and were still in power. There was a 70-percent unemployment rate. They depended on handouts from the international community. They understood that their cause, once as fashionable in certain intellectual circles as they were themselves, lay forgotten. No longer did actors, politicians and artists scramble to come and visit during the ceasefires – acts that were almost always ones of gross self-promotion. They knew of lie of war, the mockery of their idealism, and struggled with their shattered illusions. And yet, they wished it all back and I did, too.

A year later, I received a Christmas card. It was signed “Ljiljana from Australia.” It had no return address. I never heard from her again. But many of those I worked with as war correspondents during the past 20 years did not escape. They could not break free from the dance with death. They wandered from conflict to conflict, seeking always one more hit.

By then, I was back in Gaza and found myself pinned down in another ambush. A young Palestinian 15 feet away was shot through the chest and killed. I had been lured back but now felt none of the old rush, just fear. It was time to break free, to let go, to accept that none of this would or could or should return. I knew it was over. I was lucky to get alive.

Kurt Schork – brilliant, courageous and driven – could not let go. He died in an ambush in Sierra Leone along with another friend, Miguel Gil Morano. His entrapment – his embrace of Thanatos, of the death instinct – was never mentioned in the sterile and antiseptic memorial service staged for him in Washington. Everyone tiptoed around it. But for those of us who knew him, we understood that he had been consumed.

I had worked with Kurt for 10 years, starting in northern Iraq. Literate, funny – it seems the brave are often funny. He and I passed books back and forth in our struggle to make sense of the madness around us. His loss is a hole that will never be filled. His ashes were placed in the Lion’s Cemetery in Sarajevo for the victims of the war. I flew to Sarajevo

and met the British filmmaker, Dan Reed. It was an overcast November day. We stood over the grave and downed a pint of whiskey. Dan lit a candle. I recited a poem the Roman lyric poet, Catullus, had written to honor his dead brother.

By strangers' costs and waters, many days at sea,
I come here for the rites of your unworlding,
Bringing for you, the dead, these last gifts of the living
And my words – vain sounds for the man of dust.
Alas, my brother,
You have been taken from me. You have been taken from me,
By cold chance turned a shadow, and my pain.
Here are the foods of the old ceremony, appointed
Long ago for the starvelings under the earth:
Take them: your brother's tears have made them wet: and take
Into eternity my hail and my farewell.

It was there, among four thousand war dead, that Kurt belonged. He died because he could not free himself from war. He was trying to replicate what he had found in Sarajevo, but he could not. War could never be new again. Kurt had been in East Timor and Chechnya. Sierra Lone, I was sure, meant nothing to him. Kurt and Miguel could not let go. They would be the first to admit it. Spend long enough at war, and you cannot fit in anywhere else. It finally kills you. It is not a new story. It starts out like love, but it is death.

War is the beautiful young nymph in the fairy tale that, when kissed, exhales the vapors of the underworld.

The ancient Greeks had a word for such a fate: ekpyrosis.
It means to be consumed by a ball of fire. They used it to describe heroes.