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Stealing Hubcaps

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STEALING HUBCAPS: KEYNOTE SPEECH DELIVERED AT THE CONFERENCE ON YOUTH, MILITARISM AND ALTERNATIVES, CHICAGO, 3 JUNE 1988

W.D. EHRHART

Only a few weeks ago, a student where I teach approached me to ask if I would talk to him about the Marine Corps. Seventeen years old, he is just finishing his junior year of high school. He's already made up his mind that he doesn't want to be an enlisted man; he's going to college first, and then he'll become an officer. His dilemma is whether to join the Reserve Officers Training Corps during college, or wait and go through Officer Candidate School after graduation. He wanted to know what I thought.

I asked him why he wants to go into the military at all. He had several answers: to make his resume seem more attractive when he finally goes looking for a job in the fields of law enforcement or communications; to challenge himself and to gain experience and discipline; to learn hand-to-hand self-defense and to become an expert in the use of firearms. I asked him why he wants to join the Marines. "Because they're the best," he replied, "That's what I want: the best."

I tried to give him a brief history lesson on the uses of U.S. armed forces in the post-World War Two era, touching upon such things as the stalemate of Korea, the quagmire of Vietnam, the invasion of the Dominican Republic, the invasion of Grenada, the fiasco in Lebanon, and the attack on the *U.S.S. Stark*. "Can you give me a good reason why those 265 Marines died in Beirut?" I asked, "Can you give me a good reason for the deaths of those 37 sailors in the Persian Gulf?"

He couldn't. I doubt that he'd ever thought about such questions before. I doubt that he'll ever think about them again. Instead he replied that if he joined ROTC, his college education would be paid for; he could invest the money he would have spent on college and be able to buy his own home a decade sooner than most of his peers.

"What if you don't live that long?" I asked. But the question was meaningless. I've seldom met a teenager who could imagine himself or herself dead, who could conceive of a world without him or her in it. And it is next to impossible to expect a teenager to understand the connections

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between obscure and distant foreign policy decisions and his or her immediate wants and needs. And taking aim on another human being in combat, let alone killing unarmed middle-aged women or burning some peasant's entire worldly goods, are unfathomable abstractions to those for whom death and misery are confined to newspaper headlines and television adventure shows.

Even as we spoke, our conversation reminded me of a similar conversation I had had with an ex-Marine English teacher of mine fully 22 years ago. I didn't pay any attention to that man, and it was clear early on that this boy wasn't going to pay any attention to me. It was all very frustrating and depressing, but I can't say that I was surprised. Frustration and depression have become chronic conditions of my life.

I could tell you all sorts of horror stories. There was the entire class of first- and second-year college students I had in 1977, none of whom had ever heard of Dean Rusk, much less who he was or what he had been a part of. There was the girl I taught in 1979 who, when confronted with five Vietnam poems in a high school English class, blurted out, "Do we have to read these, Bill? It's so depressing." There was the boy who, in the midst of my 1982 history course on the Vietnam war, asked me when I was going to tell them "the other side," oblivious to the fact that "the other side" is all he's been hearing since the day he was born. But I'm sure all of you have enough horror stories of your own.

I don't know how you deal with your horror stories, but I deal with mine rather poorly. I can't tell you the number of times in the past twenty years that I've wanted to drink myself to death or get a good-paying job in a public relations firm or just crawl under a rock and let the world pass me by. I'm so tired of paddling against the torrent that most days I wake up not knowing how I can possibly pick up the paddle even one more time.

If I could feel like I were getting somewhere, it wouldn't be so bad. But I look around the world we live in today, and I can't make myself believe that it's any better than the world around me when I was a 17-year-old kid passionately intent upon enlisting in the Marines and utterly oblivious to the irreversible consequences of my decision.

It took a brutal war and a brutal homecoming and a brutal self-examination coupled with a brutal study of history to force me to see the world as I do now. I don't know why I kept at it. I don't know why I didn't end up dead of drugs or suicide, or locked away somewhere deep in the wilderness of the Pacific Northwest, or wrapped in the American flag, parading down Wall Street, crying in my beer and imagining my days in Vietnam as the noblest and most fulfilling experience of my life. A lot of Vietnam veterans did. I don't know why, but I didn't.

Instead, I came to the messianic and naive conviction that the Vietnam war might end up being worth something good after all, that out of the debacle could grow the seeds of a new understanding, not just for me, but for my country. I believed it because I wanted to believe it, because I didn't know what else to believe.

But the war dragged on and on and on. Most of the once-vast antiwar movement dried up and blew away like dead leaves in November long before the war finally ground to an end nearly a decade after I had fought there. Gerald Ford pardoned Richard Nixon, but he wouldn't pardon those who'd resisted what had long since become Richard Nixon's war. Jimmy Carter offered resisters a deal that wasn't much better, and no deal at all for military deserters and veterans with "bad paper discharges." Ronald Reagan declared the Vietnam war a noble cause, and the vast momentum of our collective national mythology has worked hard and with great success to fix that assessment as the final verdict of history.

It's really much worse than that. Nuclear stockpiles are geometrically larger than they were even 15 years ago. Our government has replaced the blood-price of American lives in Vietnam with the far less politically costly dollar-price of low-intensity conflict all over Central America. We are daily confronted with such absurdities as U.S.-backed guerrillas attacking U.S.-owned oil refineries in Angola, U.S.-sponsored rebels who think the Ayatollah Khomeini is the best invention since ice cream, and U.S. recognition of the genocidal Pol Pot regime as the legitimate government of Cambodia. We've got the same bunch of cloak-and-dagger men who once equipped an army of Lao mercenaries by selling heroin to American GIs in Saigon equipping an army of Nicaraguan mercenaries by selling cocaine in the streets of our own cities.

Most disturbing of all is that the American people, most of them at least, just sit there day after day and year after year and let it all happen. How in the world are we going to get teenagers to understand the world they live in when we can't even get grown people to learn enough or care enough or think enough to do it? And what really scares me is that I find myself more and more forgiving of my fellow citizens. Fifteen years ago, I couldn't even talk to such people without shouting. Ten years ago I couldn't understand why everyone wasn't busily reading *WIN Magazine* and *The Nation* and *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*.

But if the world hasn't changed much in 20 years, I surely have. The past eight years, in particular, have brought a personal "revolution" about which I have deeply ambivalent feelings. In 1981, I got married. In 1985, after two decades of living in barracks and dormitories, out of the backs of cars and on other people's living room sofas, or in rented apartments, I bought a house. In 1986, my wife and I had a child. More and more, my life has taken on the shapes and rhythms of so many Americans for whom I once harbored nothing but contempt.

I've got responsibilities now. My wife and child deserve something better than sleeping bags and canned sardines. I've got bills to pay, a rotting back stair that needs to be fixed, a hamper perpetually full of dirty clothes, and a widowed mother who'll break her neck if she tries to change her own storm windows. I've got a classroom full of 15-year-olds who'll eat me alive the first day I come into school unprepared. I can't

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even find the time to keep up with my own writing, let alone to go out and change the world.

And I *care*. I've given most of my adult life to the struggle that brings us here tonight. I know what it means to be cannon fodder. But you tell me where I'm supposed to get the time or the energy to read the latest issue of *NACLA Report*, or attend the next meeting of Pledge of Resistance, or leaflet the reservists at Willow Grove Naval Air Station.

It isn't anger that I feel so much anymore, though I am certainly angry, but rather a marrow-deep sadness heavy as cast iron. Henry Kissinger gets \$15,000 every time he opens his mouth. G. Gordon Liddy stars on *Miami Vice*. Sylvester Stallone earns multi-millions refighting a war in Hollywood that he desperately avoided in real life. And I end up feeling guilty about the \$200 I've been paid to come here and talk to people who already think pretty much like me. Each year I move more slowly, read less avidly, turn down more unpaid work, and believe less passionately that anything I have ever done or ever will do will make one damned bit of difference.

Even as I write this, my daughter has been crying inconsolably for nearly an hour. Do I stop writing and try to comfort her, or do I let my wife bear all the burden of coping with a teething 18-month-old. At least my wife understands what I'm doing. How do I explain to my daughter that I don't have time for her because I have to inspire a group of people intent upon tilting at windmills? All she will know of this day is that her father wasn't there when she needed him. And each time I choose to spend what little spare time I have in trying to make a better world for my daughter, I am putting that much more distance between myself and my child, losing that much more of the precious little time I have to give to her and to receive the blessing of her tears. And I want more than ever just to put the world aside and live my life in peace.

But of course, there's the catch: whatever peace I might find by ignoring the world around me is and always will be no more than an illusion, a luxury of place and time and circumstance, a buy-now-pay-later sort of proposition that may one day come back at me with a vengeance too terrible to contemplate. How long before all those thousands of nuclear weapons are finally triggered? What happens when the rain forests are finally gone? What will I say to my students when they come back and ask me, "Why didn't anyone tell us?" What will I say to my daughter when she explains to me that she can get a college education and learn valuable life skills if she enlists in the army?

That's the trouble with knowledge: once you've learned something, it's hard to unlearn it. Once you've seen the misery of others, it's hard to believe that such misery will never be yours, or your children's or your grandchildren's. Once you've seen the world for what it is, it's hard to ignore it. And once you've seen the world for what it could be, it's hard to accept it for what it is.

This is what is known as being stuck between a rock and a hard place. Nothing I do will make any difference, but to do nothing requires

a kind of amnesia I have yet to discover a means of inducing. The dilemma leaves me much of the time feeling like a failure at everything I do. Certainly it requires only the most rudimentary powers of observation to notice that I haven't had much success at changing the world. Meanwhile, I don't spend enough time on my teaching, I don't spend enough time on my writing, I don't spend enough time with my wife, and I don't spend enough time with my daughter. Jack of all trades; master of none.

But what else can I do? A rock and a hard place. So I bumble along like a punchdrunk boxer too broken to win and too proud to go down for the count. Some days are better than others. On my bad days, I am somewhat less sociable than a Kodiak bear with a toothache. On my bad days, those horror stories of mine hide in the shadows quietly laughing at me, and there are shadows everywhere I look.

But I do have good days, too. And on those good days, I draw strength and inspiration from people like Lou Ann Merkle, who conceived and brought into being what has got to be the most remarkable comic book in history, *Real War Stories*. People like Brian Willson, who lost his legs but not his heart. People like Jan Barry, who single-handedly created the first county-level peace commission in the United States. People like Rick and Laura Quiggle, who are raising five children on a blue-collar salary while refusing to accept the collective complacency of the entire city of Erie. People like Martin Sheen, who donated the entire proceeds from his part in the movie *Ghandi* to Sister Mother Teresa. People like my own students, who recently collected an entire truckload of clothing and school supplies for the children of Nicaragua. People like, well, all of you. Ordinary people, just as tired and harried and over-extended as I am, who somehow find the courage and the will to do the extraordinary. And to keep doing it in the face of certain failure.

That young student of mine will probably end up joining the Marines, and I'm sorry I couldn't figure out a way to be a bit more persuasive with him. Maybe next time I'll get it right. Or the time after that. Every once in a while, I actually do get it right. There was the former student of mine in 1983 who was all set to join ROTC in college, but didn't. "I kept thinking about things you'd said in class," he told me, "I just couldn't make myself sign the papers." There was the phone call I got in 1985 from a 22-year-old unemployed bricklayer from Brooklyn who was just about to enlist in the Air Force when he read my book *Vietnam-Perkasie*. He'd just called to say that he'd changed his mind about enlisting. There was the woman from Texas who told me after reading my book *Marking Time* in 1986, "I feel as if I've made a friend, someone on this earth who has touched my soul and said what I've been feeling for a long time." And there was the letter I received in 1987 from a 16-year-old high school boy in Seattle who said, "I guess you could say I'm really trying to understand what went on during Vietnam and why. I've been watching the Iran-Contra hearings, and it seems like one big

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mess. Anyway, Bill, you have sure changed my perspective on a lot of things and I'm really glad I've read your books."

Things like that don't happen as often as I would like them to happen, but they do happen. And I'm sharing them with you not because you need to hear them, but because I need to hear them. Too often, I am too caught up in my own weariness and frustration and self-pity to take the time to consider the people for whom I *have* made a difference.

I no longer believe that I can change the world. I no longer believe that even all of us together are going to change the world. But I do believe that we have to keep trying because if our voices fall silent, the only voices left will be those of people like Elliot Abrams and Oliver North. *I* have to keep trying because it is the only way I can live with myself, knowing what I know. It is the only way I can live with my wife, who believes in me more than I believe in myself. It is the only way I can live with my daughter, who will inherit the world I give her.

I'll tell you my darkest fantasy: when they drop the big bomb on the oil refineries of South Philadelphia, I want to have time to take my daughter in my arms and hold her tight and whisper into her ear, "Kid, I'm sorry about this. I did the best I could." That's it. That's all I ask for. Looking around at the world through rational eyes, that's all I reasonably *can* ask for: the time to say it, and the knowledge that what I am saying is true, that I did the best I could.

And who knows? Maybe I'm wrong. It wouldn't be the first time. Maybe it isn't as bad as I think. Maybe we really can change the world. I know one thing for sure: I certainly can't do it without you. If you're willing to keep trying, so am I. What else are we going to do with ourselves, anyway? Steal hubcaps?