

WARRIOR'S RETURN

RESTORING THE SOUL AFTER WAR

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sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO

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PART I

The War After the War¹

This war is eating my life out.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

CHAPTER 1

The Universal Warrior

Once a warrior always a warrior¹

After half a year in Afghanistan, twenty-year-old Marine rifleman Michael Abattello and his team went on yet another dangerous patrol. They drove several Humvees through a remote village surrounded by stark mountains where US Marines had been attacked before.

The mountains had been shaped over centuries, stones cleared and piled into waist-high walls, slopes flattened and plowed as arable terraces.

A boy about ten years old popped up from behind a wall. He stared and pointed at the Marines, then turned and ran along the lowest terrace.

One Marine yelled, "Shoot him! He's running to tell the enemy." Children might be scouts, lookouts, forced to carry guns, or wired with bombs. Another said, "They've fooled us this way before."

Michael jumped out of his Humvee. "Guns down!" he commanded. "He's only a boy. I'll catch him." He turned to his battle buddy Joe. "Marines don't kill innocent children. C'mon!"

They ran up the long terraces in blistering sunlight, the boy looking back, Michael and Joe straining in full uniform and equipment to catch up. "It'd be easier to shoot," Joe panted. "He's a child," Michael answered.

The Marines reached the summit. No enemies. No shooting. No boy. There stood an old barn, door swinging. "He must be in there with the bad guys," Joe said. "It's a trap. Blow it!"

"We don't know that," Michael said. "Cover me. I'm going in."

Rifle pointed, Michael squeezed into the barn. Only scattered hay and farming tools. “Clear and empty,” he called. Joe entered, eyes darting.

A wooden ladder led to a hayloft. A sprinkling of hay trickled to the floor. “There,” Joe yelled and pointed his rifle.

“Down!” Michael ordered. “I’m going up.”

“Perfect ambush,” Joe argued. “You’re dead.”

Michael climbed the ladder. “C’mon up,” Michael called from the loft. “It’s safe.” Joe climbed and stood beside Michael. Nothing but a pile of pale yellow hay.

“They must be hiding in there.” Joe fixed his bayonet. “I’ll get them before they get us.” He prepared to stab his blade into the hay.

“No!” Michael said. “If it was an ambush, they’d have shot us already.”

Michael shouldered his gun and separated the long, thick, yellow stalks. Deep in a hay cave, he saw small hands and feet, then legs and arms, then little bodies. Huddled inside was the boy. Next to him, clinging tightly together, were two small girls and a teenager dressed in a burka.

Michael laid his gun on the floor and signaled Joe to do the same. He said in Pashto, “Hello, children. Peace be with you. Don’t be scared. We’re your friends.”

Slowly the children stood up. The girls were only five or six years old. The boy was between them, the teenager behind, tall and dignified in her dark robe.

Sunlight poured through cracks in the barn roof. A soft dust cloud rose from the yellow hay. The light from the sun filtered through the dust, filling the loft and surrounding the children in a golden halo.

The burka-robed teenager spread her cloaked arms around the children standing in the halo. Michael blinked and stared. His heart squeezed. Joe shrugged and looked at the floor.

There before him, bathed in golden light, Michael saw Mother Mary, Shekinah, Quan Yin. He saw the Divine Mother of all religions and all peoples caring for, protecting, and showering mercy and kindness on all living beings.

Michael spoke to the children. The boy was the only brother of these three sisters. The enemy had told them that Marines were devils who hurt and tortured children. The boy only ran to protect his sisters.

Michael took off his helmet. “See,” he said with a smile, “I’m not a devil. Marines are your friends. We’re here to help you. We want you to be safe, to have good food and schools and good lives. Come. Let us take you home.”

The Marines and children emerged and descended the terraces. Michael and Joe introduced the children to their smiling squad, who escorted them home.

Worried, robed parents ran out to meet them. The entire family was safe. They served tea and sweets to the Marines and all together shared a joyous reunion.

Michael visited this family often. He played with the children and taught them some English. He helped the family with its farming chores and learned about goat care from them. He became the children’s uncle.

Now back in America, Michael often thinks of his Afghani family. His heart is still drenched in the golden light of that day on the distant mountain when, in the midst of war, he acted rightly and was given the defining vision of his life.

Short months after high school graduation, the day after 9/11, Michael enlisted to defend our nation after attack. He loved the Marine Corps and its warrior tradition. He practiced to be a superior rifleman, trusting that commanders and country would use him for the good. He learned Pashto, and in Afghanistan, he wandered among the people. He tried to save rather than destroy when possible.

Michael is not just a Marine. He is a warrior. In his behavior in Afghanistan and his love of our nation, he exemplifies the warrior tradition.

But war wounded Michael. His body is full of shrapnel. He can no longer dance and cannot bend some fingers. He has constant back and limb pain. He has had nightmares, broken relationships, and sleep disorders, and he felt displaced, threatened, unwanted, and unsuitable for ordinary life in America. He saved those children and others, and in battle he refused medical care and a Purple Heart in order to remain beside his comrades. Yet Michael was never honored, thanked, or recognized, and he fought for years for a disability rating.

Michael had to fight and kill. He witnessed wild dogs devouring dead bodies. He saw the visage of the war god in mangled comrades, civilians, enemy fighters, and the Afghan land. “War is sick,” Michael said. “The

only way to survive it is to become as sick yourself as the situation surrounding you. War makes everyone sick.”

Why did right action not protect Michael from long-term pain? How did he travel from honorable warrior in the combat zone to broken, alienated, and unseen at home? How did he become a throwaway rather than “first among citizens”? And how is it that in Michael and uncountable millions the noble warrior tradition has so devolved? Why do we have broken and wounded warriors scattered throughout the rancorous nations around the globe rather than a world community filled with honorable and wise elder warriors guiding us all toward peace?

UNIVERSALITY OF THE WARRIOR ARCHETYPE

Warrior is a Spiritual Form, a recurring ideal or archetype. It is built into both psyche and society. It has characteristic images, patterns, stories, and values that are given unique shape by its host cultures. It resurfaces in individual lives throughout history and across cultures. We learn this from history, the social sciences, literature, the arts, mythology, and sacred writings. We learn it from our elders, children, and veterans. We learn it from those who serve, no matter what the politics, economics, or motivations behind their deployments.

I stood beside an elderly man named Alberto in a Puerto Rican village. We leaned on a harbor railing and gazed at the sea. I noticed a chain hanging around his neck and disappearing beneath his T-shirt. “You still wear your dog tags?” I asked.

“How do you know?” he retorted, surprised.

“That chain is unmistakable.”

“Only for those who get it,” he answered. Eighty-year-old Alberto is a Korean War combat veteran. He yanked his tags out of his shirt and dangled them between us. “Once a warrior always a warrior.” He grinned.

“*Es verdad,*” I affirmed. “True! The change is forever, and we wish to serve all our lives. You’ve been in the real thing. May I ask what you think of our recent wars?”

“Lies, stupidity, immorality!” Alberto barked. “We never should have gone. But I’m waiting for the president to phone. Even though the wars are wrong, I’d go tomorrow. I should die so our children and young warriors can live.”

Warriors have been a mainstay of civilization for at least the last 5,000 years, since the dominance of the patriarchy, sedentary agricultural societies, and recorded history. They were educated, trained, and initiated by elders, and they experienced life-threatening ordeals. They served their people by protecting them during conflict, by acting aggressively toward competitors, and by playing important roles throughout their life cycles. With rare exceptions, warriors have been a part of almost every culture we know.

Early written evidence of mature and developed warriorhood stretches as far back as one of the first known works of literature, the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Gilgamesh's kingship dates to around 2700 BCE, the inscribed poem to around 2000 BCE. It narrates a warrior-king's battles against cosmic forces and tells of brotherhood found and lost forever in battle. A warrior, mortally wounded by a wild creature, warns his surviving royal comrade, "I have seen things as a man / and a man sees death in things" and "You'll be alone and wander / looking for that life that's gone or some / Eternal life you have to find."² Initiation, inevitable change and loss, awareness of death, the necessity to conquer "the beast," carrying the burden and sorrow alone, the search for meaning and the sacred—these are eternal aspects of the Warrior archetype spoken to us from over 4,000 years ago.

We know of more than 14,600 wars waged in the 5,600 years of recorded history.³ The only cultures that have not had warriors are those that have been isolated from other human societies. Examples are Greenland, which has never known war, and tribes deep in the Amazon jungles that have not had to compete with neighbors for resources. In contrast, many tribal cultures through the ages—including those in "wide-open spaces" like American forests and plains, African savannas, or New Guinea jungles—have lived in competition and developed complex warrior traditions to initiate their young, protect their people, define identities and boundaries, gather resources, nurture children, and aid the elderly. Even in great spaces, the warrior will surface and serve.

THE INNATE WARRIOR ARCHETYPE

Ted began protesting as he came of age during the Vietnam War. Awakening to the hidden dangers and collaborations within our

“military-industrial-government complex,”⁴ he became a lifelong peace activist. Seen at almost every regional protest march, he rarely missed protesting policies he thought unjust.

Ted had two sons. In order to raise them to be noncompetitive and protected from violence, he forbade them to play war games or own anything resembling a weapon. Even water guns were banned.

Ted’s sons and their friends organized their own black-market operation. They smuggled toy plastic guns onto his property, hid them in bushes, under trees, in basement cubbies. The neighborhood boys went out of their way to “play guns” with Ted’s sons, especially at their home when Ted was away.

My wife, Kate, and I made sure that our son, Gabriel, knew many veterans growing up. He heard their stories and respected them. We did not forbid Gabriel’s play with guns but wanted him to be educated about the realities he was playing with.

One day Gabe and his friends were playing “Vietnam War.” I had “played guns” growing up, so I understood. But seeing his little friends and him shooting each other with plastic M16s and AK-47s as pretend GIs and Viet Cong upset me.

“Gabe,” I said one day when he was seven, “the real versions of those weapons killed my friends and the Vietnamese.”

“We like being warriors, Dad,” he explained. “But don’t worry. I know the difference between play and the real thing.”

I was proud that Gabriel knew that difference at an early age. It was in part because he knew veterans and counted some among his closest uncles and elders. Ted, in contrast, so mistrusted the Warrior archetype that he tried to ban its expression in his children. Ted did not recognize that he was as committed, devoted, energized to his own mission of protest as any warrior. He, too, had an inner striving to protect our community against further violence. In essence Ted was a warrior for peace.

These stories illustrate what millions of parents have observed. Take the toy gun away and the child will use a stick or finger instead. The Warrior archetype is natural, innate, and deep. It is a source of extraordinary energies and passions. Its core values are protection and preservation of its community. It offers identity and belonging in a strong brother- and sisterhood. It will awaken and find means of expression whether we recognize it or not,

whether we encourage or inhibit it. When we discourage it, we may unwittingly make it even stronger as it seeks disguised means of expression. Like it or not, almost all societies have warriors and we each have an inner warrior. The archetype, its psychospiritual importance, and its social role need and deserve attention, support, education, training, practice, and expression.

WHAT IS A WARRIOR?

Sgt. Maj. Lou Rothenstein was one of our earliest intelligence officers to serve in Vietnam. As an IO, he was responsible for “winning the hearts and minds” of local people and gathering information about the enemy. He declares, “For me, Warriorhood is living by an ethos—a code of honor—a creed. It is a way of living life.” Warriorhood is a pathway through life with a set of expectations, norms, behaviors, and values that must be fulfilled and guided by a high moral code of conduct. This is what the Native American tradition meant by “warpath,” better understood as the lifelong Warrior’s Path.

Codes must accompany warriorhood, necessitated by the core of violence in the warrior’s life. The code or creed provides the warrior an ethical foundation for conduct based on right relationships to society, the killing arts, and other human beings against whom he or she must fight. Lt. Colonel van Rooyen is the former commanding officer of South Africa’s 1 Parachute Battalion. He was in the war zone for fifteen years. Asked how, after so many years in combat, he managed to sleep at night, he replied, “I never did anything that was not militarily necessary.”⁵ On modern battlefields Colonel van Rooyen echoed various warrior codes, including the Samurai, whose code is never to fight in personal anger. Such codes, military ethics professor Shannon French explains, serve as “moral and psychological armor that protects the warrior from becoming a monster in his own eyes.”⁶

Our ancestors recognized this need. In our Biblical roots we find guidance for limiting destructiveness and healing traumatic losses. Since humanity will tend to act with selfishness, cruelty, or immorality, the Commandments were necessary; the Lawgiver realized this human tendency toward evil and the need to limit and shape it for the good. The Old Testament contains rules for practicing humane warfare, codified

in Deuteronomy 20. It appeared approximately 3,000 years before the Geneva Conventions, yet its tenets have not been honored to this day.

Each branch of the US military has a creed memorized by its recruits, and each branch trains and promotes its version of the warrior culture and ethos. The *Rifleman's Creed*, for example, is the oath memorized by every US Marine since it was first written in World War II. The essence of Marine service is in being on the ground in direct contact with the enemy. The Creed is meant to provide unshakeable guidance through the difficulties of combat. It states in part, "My rifle is human, even as I am human, because it is my life. Thus, I will learn it as a brother. I will learn its weaknesses, its strengths, its parts . . . I will keep my rifle clean and ready, even as I am clean and ready. We will become part of each other." The US Army's *Soldier's Creed* begins, "I am an American soldier . . . a Warrior . . ." The Army's warrior ethos embedded in the Creed is again meant to be a solid foundation of guiding values and actions: "I will always place the mission first. I will never accept defeat. I will never quit. I will never leave a fallen comrade."

Such codes may be universal. *Bushido* was the famous warrior code and ethos of the Samurai that govern every aspect of a warrior's life "from root to branch." The fictional Robin Hood gave his men a code, popularized as "rob from the rich and give to the poor." Even the Nazi S.S. had their code, equating honor with duty and declaring obedience and the willingness to die.

According to Roger Brooke, former South African paratrooper and now professor of psychology, for warriors "the spiritual core of submission and dedication to a moral authority greater than one's self is at the heart of things." Chaplain Kevin Turner, a Special Forces officer for two decades and now one of four generals of the US Army Chaplaincy, focuses on the strength and determination necessary for warriorhood and the protection it offers: "The highest calling of a warrior is when they stand, even unto death, in the defense of one who has been knocked down." Greg Walker retired from Special Forces in 2005 and is himself a Wounded Warrior. Greg found his "new normal" and lives in meaningful recovery, and he now advocates for Operation Iraqi/Enduring Freedom/New Dawn veterans. To express the essence of warriorhood, Greg quotes Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, part 2: "Care I for the limb, the thewes, the

stature, bulk, and big assemblance of a man! Give me his spirit.” A Green Beret who operated in dangerous and secretive circumstances, Greg declares, “It is the sacred Spirit of the man or woman that ultimately creates, sustains, and endures in combat and afterward—whether that combat is physical, moral, spiritual, or mental in experience and effect.”

The Warrior archetype has characteristic traits when active and healthy. Paul Henderson spent twenty-three years in the Army, twelve of those in Special Forces and two more in Special Operations. He was in command for a decade, rose to the rank of Lt. Colonel, and is a crusading lawyer today. He analyzes the warrior’s necessary traits:

To me, there are two aspects to warriorhood. One is a state of mind. There is a transpersonal purpose whether it is to a country, a community, a family, an idea, a squad. Something bigger than the self. Purpose sustains when it is difficult to do so. It requires courage—both physical and moral. And, by “courage” I simply mean the willingness to act in the face of fear. It’s certainly not the absence of fear. It is dedication to service for the sake of that service—not for glory or personal gain. Motives are important here.

The warrior’s state of mind, Col. Henderson declares, is its core asset. But skills—carefully trained and painstakingly perfected—and “martial arts,” are also required.

Second, warriorhood is a set of skills. Warriors know their craft. They are technically and tactically proficient and stay current and honed. The heart of a lion will accomplish little without the training and skills to effect an outcome. Whether it is a soldier, an artist, a healer, a teacher, or even a salesclerk—the spirit of warriorhood can play out in any activity, but you have to know what you are doing. Desire and intention are not enough.

These experienced combatants do not mention killing. Lt. Col. David Grossman suggests, “It may be simply too painful for society to address