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I want you to think about what you know about war. Close your eyes for a minute and picture yourself at war. Imagine the sounds, what you are wearing, what is happening around you. Now open your eyes and ask yourself where you got those images from. Have you ever fought in war? Because if you haven't, every one of those images came from media. What we think we know about war has been sorted, and edited, and written, and packaged for our consumption. It comes somewhat from the news and documentaries, but mostly it comes from Hollywood.

As alien as war is to most of us, and remember that fewer than one percent of us are paying the price for the three wars we have going at the moment, it is a state about which most of us feel we know a little something. As a culture we have devoted an extraordinary amount of film and video and paper and computer programming to the simulation of war—and not just simulation, but in many cases, romanticization. And these reconstructions of war have always fascinated me. As a person who for most of my life would do anything to avoid a conflict—to an almost comical degree—I am fascinated by the people who will themselves into war.

You have to remember what it takes to make, for instance, Saving Private Ryan. You have to imagine not only the beach and the landing craft, the cross fire and the constant boom of the mortar fire. You also have to imagine the sound of a bullet hitting a chest, and
what that chest would look like, and how that chest would pulse and heave as that soldier died. And then, once you’d imagined these things, you’d have to figure out things like, is ketchup on its own enough like blood? Is it too orange? Should I add some corn syrup to it to thicken it up? How do I get that deep garnet color without losing the texture of it is it congeals? Is the sound of a cantaloupe being pierced with a dowel close enough to a bullet tearing through flesh? Or would another fruit be more convincing?

As insane as it sounds, these are things that talented people are paid a great deal of money to figure out. And even with a film like Saving Private Ryan, one of the best war films in memory, and one that isn’t in the celebratory mode of so many others like Rambo and its imitators, I still believe that you have to be a little in love with the violence, a little in love with war itself, to do the job well.

Now let’s take a director who might love the violence with a little less ambivalence. Let’s take, for instance a guy, Michael Bay. I remember watching one of his earlier films and marveling at just how infatuated he was with it all. At one point when his bad guy is getting his final comeuppance he is shot by a high caliber gun—and gets up. He plunges onto enormous shards of broken glass—and gets up. Then somehow manages to find himself standing in front of a missile so we get to enjoy his look of shock as the missile is fired, penetrates his stomach, and shoots through the sky, with the bad guy still attached, screaming and flailing all the way. Now, no matter how bad your bad guy is, isn’t it a teeny bit sociopathic to kill him three times and in three different ways? But more than this, imagine the long meetings about the details. The blood, the sound, the music, the look, the edits, the timing, the thrill. And for what? For an amusement. A film I doubt many of you have seen, much less care to remember.
The culture of a nation is a lot like its dream state. In it, we express aspirations and fears, we dwell on the things that make us feel bonded to each other and that preoccupy our hearts and minds. If a therapist were to analyze the dream state of this country in the last fifty years, the only conclusion he or she could come to is that this is a country in some trouble. The perversity of an 80’s Rambo movie is nothing compared to the madness of Call of Duty: Black Ops, or Death Race 2000, or Mortal Kombat because the tolerance and even thirst for violence in our audiences seems to grow every year.

And yet killing is less of a tolerable activity among humans than our media would lead you to believe. If you read the extraordinary book called On Killing, by the former Army Ranger and West Point psychology professor, Dave Grossman, you will find that this is something the military has already known for quite some time. This book reveals that as many as 80-85% of both American and Japanese soldiers in the Second World War were deliberately firing over the heads of their enemies, or simply not using their weapons at all— even when they risked court martial and humiliation, even in a war that felt justified and righteous, even when their own lives were at risk.

In the early 60’s the problem was so marked that the American psychological association was brought in to figure out how to overcome the fact that in spite of everything, most men still have a hard time conquering their natural resistance to killing one another. This is not true of all men or women, and Grossman acknowledges that any given group of recruits contains 10-15% who are all too eager to do the job. Marines refer to these guys as “knuckle draggers.” But that means that 85% of them have to be fundamentally altered in order to do the job.
This goes a long way toward undermining the commonly held view that war is natural to us. Perhaps the real truth is that it is unnatural to most of us and therefore neither inevitable nor understandable as a means of resolving social problems. Maybe peace is the rule rather than the exception.

But here’s the part that keeps me up at night. What Grossman says our military has experienced in Iraq and Afghanistan is new, is something different. What the military finds is that now they have trouble restraining the men. Whereas kill rates rose a bit after the APA advised the military on how to change men into killers for combat, no one has ever seen kill rates remotely approaching the rates that are coming out of the new war zones. And they theorize something frightening. They believe that every single thing that the APA advised the military to do—the relentless repetition of the act of killing in imaginary form, the turning of the enemy into an irrational “other” whose only desire is to kill you and your loved ones, the transformation of the conflict into a simple them/us construct, the encouragement of the natural desire to form a band of brothers, an inviolable bond of loyalty to one’s fellow soldiers, while simultaneously grinding down the individual’s sense of self—all of these things are being done more and better to our children—younger and for longer periods of time—through the popular culture in which they are immersed.

It is not a new thing to make war look sexy. This has happened in every culture and at every time, probably because war is a bit sexy. War has looked romantic since the day Homer started weaving the tales of the kidnapping of Helen of Troy. It has been frozen in the mind’s eye in splendid impossible beauty since Tennyson evoked that fearless few, plunging to certain death in a moment of spectacular grace and courage. Veterans have come home from war and told a different story over and over and over again. The romantic,
almost irresistible imagery of Rambo’s sneering face, of John Wayne’s rock-ribbed leadership, of the tear streaked men cheering the destruction of the guns of Navarone—these are the images that dominate our idea of war and anyone who’s actually been there will be the first to tell you that they have nothing to do with the boredom, the filth, the terror, the uncertainty, the absolute gut-wrenching anxiety, the smell, the sorrow, the pity that are the bread and butter of anyone who’s ever been handed a gun and sent off to kill for his country.

I spend a lot of time wide-awake at night thinking about this. I want to know as a citizen and as a taxpayer what my complicity is. I marvel, as year upon year passes with us at war, how absolutely nothing has been asked of me. My taxes have never been lower, my malls have never been better stocked, and I have never been asked to donate so much as a pint of blood. How can everything be so normal when we are at war on three fronts? How can we be so good at getting our boys to want to fight and then so thoroughly ignore them once they are there?

As Americans, we have done many fine things. But of all the things we have done in the last hundred years it is this unique export of ours that is perhaps the most lasting. We export mythology; we export romance. We are the master makers and purveyors of aesthetics of violence. We export kindness too, and as American philanthropists we have spent a lot of time exporting what we think of as solutions, helicoptering into places about which we know precious little, and offering our largesse in the service of people who wonder who the heck we are, and that is a wonderful thing about us, but I do wonder if we would do more good to stay home and clean up the messes we have made right here in our
own front yard, messes that have perhaps created more human misery in some of those very same places than disease or poverty or bad governance ever could.

I’ve never felt this more acutely than once in Goma in the DRC, one of the worst, most war ravaged, wrecked places on earth. There I saw a little wooden lean-to that was serving as a barbershop. As a sign to lure in the customers, he had hand-painted the most detailed Rambo I’d ever seen. Mind you, you see Rambo used as a sign in places like this all the time, but this guy really had done an amazing job. The sneer, the rippling muscles, sweat pouring from his chest and brow, two bandoliers of bullets crossing his chest and a pair of guns at hip level, fire pouring out of their barrels. Wow, what was the likelihood that this guy with no electricity, no Internet access, very crude phone service and no movie theaters had ever actually seen this film? Or was it the essence of the film that had made its way to Congo? Like the solids of a soup that has been boiled for too long, the essence of the message was all there and so clear—that aggression is the only currency that matters, that problems are not solved so much as obliterated, and that any man going about the business of constructing a life of meaning had better get himself and gun and get to work.

One of the most important ingredients in this language of violence we’ve exported is a particular view of masculinity. I often show Pray the Devil Back to Hell to all male audiences in high schools and boys clubs. And one of the questions they always ask is, “Where are the good men in this film?” But there are lots of good men in the film. They are carrying out the dead and caring for the wounded. Making sure people are safe and finding food for their families. The question is not where are the good men, the question is, why didn’t we see them? What is it about the project of being a man that he is rendered too insignificant to notice if he is not doing the work of war and aggression?
I’ve never been very good at the makeup and hairdos and high heels that are the uniform of the very girly girl. These things simply do not suit me. And it occurs to me that the double AK-wielding, muscle rippling persona of Rambo is just as ill-fitting on most of the men I know as a pink, frilly dress would be on me.

Masculinity as currently on display in popular culture and political life is a grotesque and restrictive way of understanding the project of making a life with meaning as a man, and yet we hardly ever analyze this definition as the construct that it is. Men are harder on each other about toeing the line than they have ever been on women about being feminine. So maybe the problem of war and aggression isn’t men but masculinity, because there is a slim swath of humanity that tends to use the idea of masculinity as a means of social control, a bludgeon. That narrow, narrow definition of masculinity has a way of reinforcing a status quo that serves not very many people, but those it serves—it does so with abundance.

If my female biology has given me any insight that I wish I could share with men it is that insight a woman has at the moment she is about to give birth. It is seeing with clarity the idea that we cannot live without each other. That in that moment, were I not surrounded by a circle of supportive and loving arms, were I not willing to relax into those arms and let them bear me up in my weakest, most vulnerable moment, I would not be able to survive, much less succeed at the best thing I’ve ever done, which is bring a child into the world. That insight, rather than a moment of weakness, is a gift of enormous significance. It taught me about the interdependent nature of all things, and made me better prepared and more likely to welcome the reality of my own limitations.
So many of us look at a map and see the lines that separate one country from another as fact, not the fiction that they are. Have you ever noticed that the darkest lines, like the line for the equator, the lines of borders between nations, are the lines that exist only in imagination? What if we choose to see those lines as visible stitches instead, the lines that connect rather than divide, the lines that show we are one fabric drawn together, not a collection of separate pieces, falling apart. Any woman who sews can tell you that a seam where two pieces are brought together can be made—with enough care and attention—the strongest part of the cloth. Women, having been left out of the economic and political systems of reward that reinforce the idea of our global separateness, having been left so often to those chores that feel insignificant, but make us universal humans, not just citizens of states, are often more likely to look at an “other” and see herself, and if there is any kind of voice for which we have a crying political need it is the voice that understands the interdependent nature of life.

One of the greatest ironies of war is the way it always starts with aspiration. And when you question the efficacy of war as a way of solving problems, the pushback always comes in the form of aspiration—ending slavery, stopping Hitler. It was, after all, correct to stop Hitler’s aggression and there is moral clarity in that—and isn’t moral clarity comforting? And yet the certainty of a Hitler is the exception rather than the rule in human history. And while in the run-up to a war, language tends to devolve into the utter simplicity of right and wrong, it is important to remember that a Hitler is an anomaly. Rather most wars are begun for reasons far more foggy, more banal, more venal.

Reinhold Niebuhr rightly points out that “nothing in history is inevitable, including the probable. So long as war has not broken out, we still have the possibility of avoiding it.”
The problem with being a little in love with war as an option, the problem with wanting your political choices to be clear and absolute, the problem with a very expensive and well-armed standing army, is that you will all too often tend to confuse the probable with the inevitable.

Believe it or not it was the American Civil War, as distant as it may feel from us, that marks the beginning of the very historical process that makes an intervention in Libya look like the only humane choice from a long list of untenable choices. It was in the civil war that two of America's greatest qualities came together, with disastrous effect: one, our extraordinary and endless inventiveness, and the other our extraordinary and endless ingenuity for monetizing inventions.

The most devastating and longest-surviving legacy of the civil war barely saw combat during that conflict. Richard Gatling invented the machine gun ever so slightly too late for it to be used against the Confederacy for long, but it sparked a flurry of improvements and knock-offs that were brought to bear with hideous consequences by European colonial powers across Asia and Africa as well as by the U.S. against the indigenous people of the American west. Gatling's invention was devilishly simple. All he did was figure out how to harvest the energy wasted when gunpowder explodes in a rifle's barrel and apply it to a mechanism that places a new bullet into the chamber. It is the very same technology used in the AK47 and most other automatic weapons today. And the AK, as well as its knock-offs, clones and derivatives, accounts for about 18% of the small arms in circulation around the world.

It is important to note that until his dying day Gatling never stopped insisting that he had invented the rapid-fire mechanism not in spite but because of his love for his fellow
man. He argued that once leaders could see just how brutally wars could be conducted in the modern age, they would have no choice but to find other means to resolve their disputes. (Does this remind you a little of the logic of mutually assured destruction?)

Within his own lifetime, his technology was being used to mow down thousands of poorly armed indigenous people in defense of their home countries. But Gatling never gave up on this line of argument. There was too much money to be made. He died an extremely wealthy man.

For all our talk about the menace of weapons of mass destruction it has been the profusion of small weapons that have flowed from Gatling’s invention that have done most of the killing since those early days. Roughly 300,000 men, women and children are killed every year by small arms alone, and that doesn’t account for the capacity of these weapons to coerce, bully and force any number of other crimes and violations from theft to rape to ethnic cleansing.

What if despots were not so well and so easily armed? There are 875 million small arms in circulation around the world today with about 8 million new weapons coming on line every year. Compare that with the 1.5 million small arms used by all parties during the entirety of the First World War. There are enough bullets produced annually to shoot everyone on earth twice. Arms may or may not trigger conflicts, but a fistfight is surely something else when a gun makes an appearance. A riot is a skirmish when everyone is packing. And a struggle between towns for a well or a field or access to a road can quickly become a civil war when an AK47 only costs $25.

These weapons have an active life span of more than 40 years, more than the half-life of the cesium that we are so worried about leaking out of the Fukushima nuclear plant.
They constitute a growing mountain of destructive power that no government or international entity has figured out how to manage or regulate. More than 65% of the small arms around the world are in the hands of non-state actors—most of them poorly trained, murkyly motivated men and women well outside the bounds of national or international mechanisms of accountability. The U.S. alone exported more than half of the $1.5 billion total that the G-8 put out into the world. And while the U.S. usually (but not always) sells its new weapons to legitimate armies, those legitimate armies sell their outmoded weapons straight into a burgeoning black market that has raged out of control since the end of the Cold War. Some AK47’s being used today in Africa are on their fifth or sixth or seventh conflict. Since the AK is light and easy to fire, has only 8 moving parts that are as easy to replace as Lego pieces, they are the weapon of choice for armies that prefer child soldiers. One of the fastest growing business opportunities on the African continent is in manufacturing replacement parts for the AK, and there were, at last count, almost 100 manufacturers of these parts that have sprung up in Africa since the fall of the Berlin Wall flooded the area with these weapons.

The historical process that began in the Civil War when a spirit of inventiveness came together with a hunger for profit has led inexorably to this day. The culmination of this process was famously labeled “the military – industrial complex” by Eisenhower, but it was in his earlier “Cross of Iron” speech that he best described our conundrum:

Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. The cost of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in more than 30 cities.... This, I repeat, is the best way of life to be found on the road the world has been taking. This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of
threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.

Leave it to a general to sum it up better than any peace activist ever could. Some of the most articulate voices against that normalized perversity we call war are those that have experienced it themselves.

The question becomes, where do we go from here? Awash in weapons, standing at the ready for the slightest provocation, a little in love with war, a little lost about how to talk about any of the alternatives, and utterly convinced that war is as hard wired into us as any reflex - how do we break out of the spiral we seem to be in?

The truth is, I don't know. But I do know what I learned from my friend Leymah Gbowee and the women of Liberia, that peace is not a moment and it is not a state of being. It is not some far distant impossibility never to be achieved. Peace is a process. Peace is a verb. Peace is to be worked toward. Peace is not a treaty signing or a handshake between two men. Peace is history with a small h. It is built by us day to day in the way we treat each other, in how we raise our children, in whom we choose to support with our decisions about consumption, in whom we choose to not to humor by changing the channel or leaving the theater when they appear.

I don’t know how to address the enormity of what drives the world to war again and again, but that’s not my job. My job is to take on what I can, what is on my own front doorstep as an American voter, citizen and taxpayer. I will do what I can to address my country’s part in the construction of a mythology of violence, and the export for profit of that mythology to a world hungry for our media. I will do what I can to build a constituency for peace here in the U.S. in the knowledge that when my country moves, the world moves with us. I will do what I can to push back on the romance of the weapon, and
to challenge the gun politics that have brought our country to this point of insanity. And I will try to raise children who will in turn push this boulder forward an inch or two in their own lives and in whatever way they can.

When I feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the challenges, I think of Susan B. Anthony. She wasn’t that great of a speaker, or beautiful. She wasn’t the most brilliant woman who ever lived, or the most gifted writer. But she set herself a high bar. She spent a lifetime working toward the proposition that a woman had a right to an equal say in her political destiny. She died long before her vision was ever realized. Would that everyone were willing to spend their lifetime fighting for something they know they won’t live long enough to see. If we set our sights on something that can be accomplished in our own lifetimes we have set our sights too low.

This country needs a vocal and vigorous constituency for peace. Building it will involve unpacking and challenging all the ways in which we have participated in the glamorization of violence in all its forms. It will involve the proposition of an alternative image of heroism and a new sense of the meaning of honor.

It will require an all-out assault on the straightjacket we call masculinity. It will require enough courage and imagination and faith to know that we will probably not live to see much tangible change. But let us at least hand the world over to the children we love in better shape than we got it.