

Nothing Human is Alien To Me

Toastmaster Speech

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I say I believe in the adage that nothing human is alien to me. But when I watch the news or read about history, do I really see myself in the man who mows down children in an elementary school?... in the torturer? Really?

It's not easy. I like to think that I am nothing like these people, that I could never do what they have done, that they are beyond my comprehension. But I notice that when my heart closes in repugnance and judgment, in that moment I become a little more like them...a little more cut off from a fellow human being, less able to feel what they are feeling, or to care what happens to them.

Still, how do I find the place in me that can identify with someone who has done such a thing, and feel our human connection? This is the question I was asking in the 1970's when I was a graduate student, starting my first internship at a VA Hospital.

I heard about a patient who was telling everyone that he had murdered women and children in Vietnam, as part of a massacre like My Lai. The other interns were horrified and wanted nothing to do with him. But for me, this was a chance to come to know and understand someone who had done something like this, so I quickly volunteered to work with him.

I spent several full days with him, and learned the whole story of his life. So I want to ask you, now, to take this journey with me, just for a few minutes, and see if you can keep your heart open to this man, putting aside the parts of you that are developed in ways that he was not, the parts that hopefully make it seem impossible that you could ever do what he did... But just imagine yourself being born into his world, experiencing what he experienced, and missing what he missed...

You are born into a small Midwestern town, and by the time you're 4 years old, your mother is dead, your father is gone to no one knows where, and you're living with your grandparents who are old, tired, very

cold people, and not happy to be stuck with you. They consider it their duty to use whatever means necessary to make you be a moral human being.

One of their rules is that you are forbidden to play with any kind of gun whatsoever. So when you're 7 years old and they catch you playing cops and robbers with your friend, pretending that a stick you found is a gun, they beat you so you'll never forget it, until your whole body is black and blue.

As you grow into your teens and start to struggle with figuring out your own values and identity in this world, your grandparents locate your father and send you off to live with him in New York City.

This is a totally different world, and it turns your moral universe completely on its head. Your father likes to drink and smoke weed, and sometimes he's gone with some new woman that he's met for days at a time. He has a real gun that he keeps in the apartment.

And you are free to do absolutely anything you want. It is so exhilarating to be free! No rules, no punishments, nobody telling you anything! Your dad is so cool! Your friends can't believe how lucky you are...

No one knows how lonely and confused and scared you feel a lot of the time. You hardly even know it yourself.

But time passes, and you find yourself becoming an adult, feeling kind of desperate for some warmth and connection you can count on. You meet a girl you like, she seems to like you back, and you're barely out of high school before you're married. And then, barely 20, already divorced. She ran off with someone else, and you are devastated...thinking about suicide...barely able to function at all.

So you join the army...Looking for a family, to tell the truth, some kind of structure to support you and give some direction to your life. The army will teach you how to be a man, will show you what is right and wrong, will make you feel like you belong...at last...

You're sent to Vietnam, and almost immediately after you arrive, you watch as one of your superiors shoots a captured enemy soldier in the head, just like in that photograph that later becomes famous, and it makes you so sick that you double over and vomit. What's the matter with you? Can't you take it? You are so ashamed...

Come on soldier! Be a man, suck it up! This is what war is! Get used to it! You desperately want to be what you're supposed to be...

So a few months later, when your unit is told to go into a Vietnamese village and wipe it out, kill everything that moves in this Vietcong sanctuary, you do what you are told. You see a little boy, maybe 4 years old and seriously wounded, so you put him out of his misery.

You go into a hut and see a young woman standing there, holding her infant to her chest and begging you not to shoot. You hesitate, but you have worked hard to become frozen numb inside, so you pull the trigger and watch them fall. You're a real man, a soldier, and this is what war requires.

That night, when your unit is called together to hear something from the higher-ups, you start to worry that maybe this isn't what they wanted after all. Maybe they're going to punish you. But no...They tell your unit what a good job it has done, and issue every one of you new boots. You are proud.

It isn't until much later, back in the States, visiting other Vietnam vets and their wives around a kitchen table and telling war stories, that you see the look of horror in the others' eyes and realize that once again your moral universe has flipped up side down. You are no hero here, no welcome member of a brotherhood. You are a monster.

You shake with rage, feeling betrayed by your country that asked this of you and now condemns you for it. And then you start to replay the images of the dead in their death-throes, over and over and over and over, now that you've thawed out enough to realize what you have done...You end up in a VA hospital, talking to me...

And it is our challenge to make this mountain of manure into fertilizer, out of which something good can grow.

But let me ask you now, to ask yourselves – at some essential level, can you recognize this man in yourself?

What I learned from him is this: Our need for connection, for belonging, for being part of something larger than ourselves is fundamental to our shared human nature. Depending on the balance of forces within us and around us, this need might lead us to become a saint singing praise to God... might lead us to become a Nazi, worshipping the fuhrer. But we grow from the same root. Because I am human, nothing human is alien to me.