



Remembering the Dead at Arlington West

by Dennis Patrick Slattery, PhD

We do not have to search for war's causes in an id erupting against a superego, in male castration anxieties, in splitting, paranoid projections....The unconscious grounds of war are more likely the neglect of grasping the full extent of our animal natures, that our animality is not sheerly nasty and brutish but in tune harmoniously with war because we are each a politikon zoon.

—James Hillman, *A Terrible Love of War*, p40

Almost 3 months ago, in December 2006, I drove downtown to De la Guerra Plaza in Santa Barbara, California to heed a call to demonstrate against the Iraq war. Angry and frustrated for more than three and a half years over our involvement in Iraq and hearing the *Iraq Report* highlights on the news, I was driven to attend; the impulse to show up was too powerful to deflect. Perhaps not quite in the pedigree of “The Hero’s Journey,” yet the call, the summons to be there to voice opposition to a dissolving policy in Iraq was formidable and persistent.

I arrived as the wind was gathering momentum and rain seemed inevitable. With about 200-225 others present—even though the radio announcement sought over 2900 people so that one person represented by each cross could be remembered—nonetheless, the crowd was enthusiastic and powerful in their responses. We listened to talks by family members who had lost one of their own; talks by family members of imprisoned soldiers who became objectors to the war while in the military; talks by American vets against the war; talks by peace activists.

Dennis Patrick Slattery, PhD, teaches in the Mythological Studies Program at Pacifica Graduate Institute in Carpinteria, California. He is the author or co-editor of 10 books, including *A Limbo of Shards: Essays on Memory, Myth and Metaphor*.
Website: www.online.pacifica.edu/slattery

Each group or person in his or her own way increased the level of inspiration of all of us.

As authentic and heart-wrenching as each of their stories was, it was not why I was here. I was present because of a sentence contained in the radio announcement: “Each person will honor the dead by standing in front of a cross in silence to remember one American killed in the war.” The dead had passed and in the transition had entered the realm of the ancestors of the living. I wanted to stand by one of them, to grieve, and to find solace in their presence. One writer has gone so far as to suggest that “only the dead can grant us legitimacy.” I felt deeply inspired by the dead and sought out others who were willing to spend part of a cold and rainy Sunday afternoon marching towards those white crosses at Arlington West on the beach of the Pacifica Ocean at the base of State Street, where the dead were symbolically buried.

At a little past 2 p.m. we began marching and chanting our way down State Street to the Wharf. People walking along the route stopped to stare at us: just a look. Others smiled and flashed back the V-peace sign; others spontaneously joined us in our chants. Cars along State Street burst into song, with horns blowing and passengers yelling and waving. Many waved with one hand; some waved with one finger. We smiled and returned one finger with two: the V-peace sign. We sang, we chanted, we carried signs; some wore caricature heads of GW and Condi Rice. At times these large heads hugged. What a sight! I looked forward and aft at our numbers: so full of youth, of middle-aged folks, of folks a bit riper on the vine of time. A wonderful cross section of the culture and of our local world, all united now for a brief few hours under the banner of a common purpose. One felt the energy of something so much bigger than any of us could ever hope to be. I don’t like to use this term too casually, but I will here. It was a ritual worthy of any myth, and what stronger mythos grips us today than the myth of war itself.

But at the beach site we all grew quiet as we were invited

to walk onto the sand and to stand by one cross. We spread out through such an ordered and enormous number of little wooden, white painted markers that my breath stopped at the sheer number. A woman who had led the march walked among the crosses and gave each of us a carnation. Some affixed the flower to the cross with a rubber-band. Others planted the stem into the sand in front of the white wooden marker. We were then asked to stand in silence for 15 minutes and to remember the soul that our cross represented. I was four rows back so I had a good view of a tent pitched in front of all the crosses. In the silence we could hear the rain hitting plastic rain coats, rubber parkas, and nylon umbrellas.

It was a memorial, a waterproof mausoleum of sorts, created by a family to honor a young 20 year old man, whose last name is Arredondo. On the outside of this small tent was a photo of his happy young face as well as an enlargement of a letter he had sent to his family in 2003. In it, in neat block printed form, he expressed his pride in helping America to preserve its freedom. One read in the words a young heart, full of passion, inspired to serve, proud of his achievement and now deceased.

Along the Wharf people passing by stopped to gaze at us, spread out through the field of white crosses. C-Span and KEYT filmed and later interviewed several participants. Standing there, in front of a cross, my anger settled into the memory of the families who were absent their irreplaceable family member this holiday—some for the first time, others yet again. I think it safe to observe that we all standing there in silence were inspired by the dead, by the nature of their sacrifices, by the inspiration of those who served with an unconditional and unshakeable belief that they were protect-

ing freedom's existence in our lives. The silence was the highest tribute we could return to them this Sunday.

Not since 1967 at Kent State University when I protested the Viet Nam war on campus, had I demonstrated against the foolishness of war, its lost promises, its squandered gifts, its end-stopped lives, and its camouflaged motives, yet always with its sincere and loyal victims. The memories were fresh and old at once.

After, many of us dispersed in the rain. Some stayed in silence at their cross, for these memorials with no names each contained every name of the war dead and they were now part of each of our families. I walked back to my truck parked in a lot off State Street. I felt strangely satisfied—full even—having heeded the call to show up.

Heeding, not refusing the call, then making oneself available to the dead, carries its own small shards, its own heroic remnants. Joseph Campbell defined the hero as one who heeds the call and then yields to it, as each of those souls represented by the sea of crosses had done. I carried in me the horrific and serene scene of all those white crosses in wet sand under a gray dank sky. I was filled with admiration at what those heroes had achieved and felt it too towards all those, young and old, with whom I'd had the honor to march, chant and then to stand with, and to remember in silence, the voices and deeds of the dead.

I wish now for a second demonstration, one in which over 3000 people show up, each to stand and to remember in silence the sacrifice made, and the commitment needed to cease its dying numbers ■