

Growing Up in a Violent World: Narrow Escapes and the Call to Peacemaking

Fred Guyette

1955-1960: Popeye the Sailor and Hound Dog Missiles

There was a four-year-old boy who lived in Pensacola, Florida. When he wasn't playing outside under the sunshine and God's big blue sky, he was watching Popeye cartoons on the family's black and white television. While he waited for his father to come home from work, Popeye would fight with Brutus. Brutus had the advantage in the beginning, because he always started the fight. It was often a close call, but Popeye always won. Always.

The boy's father worked at Eglin Field on a giant airplane, the B-52. The B-52 carried a missile, the Hound Dog. What little boy would be afraid of a "hound dog," with its floppy ears and its wagging tail? But later in life he learned that *this* Hound Dog carried a weapon, a nuclear bomb.¹ It was a forerunner of today's Cruise Missile. It was poised to kill millions of people in faraway lands. Not just soldiers, but fathers, mothers, children. The boy couldn't have known this, and if told, he couldn't have understood. But this much he knew and understood very well: Popeye and his father were on the same side.

1960-1965: Combat Theatre and Getting Baptized

As he grew older, there were more movies on TV. On Saturday night it was Combat Theatre. Twelve O'Clock High, The Flying Tigers, From Here to Eternity, On a Wing and a Prayer. "Those dirty Krauts." "Those stupid Japs." Those were familiar lines. When he went to Cub Scouts, too, they wore uniforms and often talked about God and Country. They seemed to be the same big thing — both "high and lifted up." "Onward Christian Soldiers" was

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his favorite hymn at church. He always asked for it when they took requests. It sent shivers of pride and glory up and down his back when they sang it together. “Christ, the Royal Master, leads against the foe. Forward into battle — see his banners go.” When the boy was baptized, no one told him the Messiah, the Prince of Peace, might lead him to choose a different path.²

That same summer he was baptized, his family made a pilgrimage of sorts to the Air Force Museum in Ohio.³ They walked through a B-17 from World War II, looked through the Norden Bomb Site, and sat where the tail gunner sat. There was a P-51, the plane they called the Mustang. The P-47 Thunderbolt was there, and the Lightning, the P-38. He learned them all, their numbers, their names. He knew the stories of the pilots who had flown them and how many enemy planes they had shot down. They had exhibits dedicated to “Fat Man” and “Little Boy,” the atomic bombs they had dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Nagasaki B-29 was there, too, the one named “Bock’s Car.” But where were Sadako and her thousand paper cranes? The Air Force Museum hadn’t heard about her story. The boy only learned about Sadako much later in life.⁴

That Christmas, he memorized the Sears catalog. He made a list of what he wanted, and most of his wishes came true on Christmas morning. A Civil War set, with Lincoln and Grant leading the Union. Lee and Davis led the Rebels. A machine gun. A combat helmet. Toy grenades. GI Joe was there under the tree, too.⁵ He knew in a dim way that GI Joe was protecting someone important, and that was Barbie. Not that they were meant for each other — Barbie had Ken, after all. But more to the point, he couldn’t imagine Joe and Barbie getting along together. Joe’s virtues were meant for battle and he could never have settled down to the life Barbie enjoyed — a world of fashion and dating, where prettiness counted.⁶ Joe probably wouldn’t be any good on a date. He had too many things he had to blow up and too many things he had to shoot down. But somehow the world needed a lot of guys like Joe, so Barbie’s seamless and predictable world would be possible. Joe seemed to understand that, and if it bothered him, he never let it show.

1965-1975: Vietnam, Armageddon, and the Gospel of Matthew

When the boy was thirteen, his father died of cancer. Everyone said how young the boy’s father was. Only 35 years old. At church, he learned to tell

the story of his life — BEFORE, when Dad was there, for fishing and for baseball. AFTER, when their little world collapsed. And LATER, when following Jesus seemed to make life bearable again. He remembered how his heart was pounding when he told the story in church for the first time. They called it “giving testimony” and “letting your light shine before men.” It took some time to make the pieces fit together, but he couldn’t think of anything that could ever be truer about his life.⁷

In Israel, there was fighting and a war that lasted only six days, they said. But then there was more killing and more retaliation — it never seemed to stop. The two sides seemed to hate each other, and there wasn’t anyone who wanted to make peace. Haven’t they read the Sermon on the Mount? That was what the teenager thought. They are living the Old Testament ethic of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth — if they only would listen to Jesus, and turn the other cheek! Don’t they believe what he says about peacemakers being blessed?⁸

At school, there was a prayer group that met before classes started in the morning. There was a preacher who came and talked about Israel and he added a new key to the story: The Battle of Armageddon. It seemed to take the chaos of the news and reshape it so that it had a theme. There was another war in Vietnam that was part of the same big picture. The preacher said there was a lieutenant, William Calley who accidentally killed some people in a village called My Lai. He was being court-martialed for doing his duty over there, and he needed our help. Signatures were needed on a petition to show that patriotic Americans supported him and didn’t want him to go to jail. At the shopping center, the boy asked strangers to sign the petition, and a lot of them did. He gave the list to the preacher, who seemed to know where it should be sent to do the most good. As he grew older, that was something he couldn’t forget. Ever.⁹

There was an ROTC unit at his school. He wore a uniform once a week and saluted the older guys who had rank. He was dreaming about learning to fly and the F-15 was the plane he wanted. It was faster and better than what the Russians had. But he learned that his eyesight wasn’t good enough — he had to wear glasses, and pilots couldn’t wear glasses. That was a roadblock to a promising career. If the recruiters could have seen into his heart, they would know how much he wanted to be a pilot, and they would

have made an exception to get him into the cockpit. But they couldn't see his motives, and they didn't make exceptions — not for anyone.

Meanwhile, at church, there was a lesson on Jesus outsmarting the Pharisees in Matthew, chapter 22. “Bring me a coin,” he said. “Whose picture is on it? Caesar, you say . . . Then, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.” He loved that story. And that, too, was something he never forgot.¹⁰

1975-1985: Liberation Theology and the Kingdom of God

Now I have to confess that this little boy — the one who loved to play war — he and I are the same person. But I was beginning to change and want a different kind of life from the one in the Air Force for which I had been preparing. Was God “calling” me? Those were the words used in our church: God “called” this person or that one to the ministry. I wasn't “hearing” the “call” in the way my church seemed to know about, but I was reading the scriptures on my own and starting to find a different way of life described there.

When I went away to college, we had a wonderful professor of philosophy who encouraged us to read Plato and Aristotle. He taught theology, too, and talked about the Christian Platonism of C.S. Lewis and the struggle between good and evil in the world of Tolkien. Dr. Patteson could weave a spell in class, and you would forget about the outside world for hours. We needed that in 1975. I dated a girl whose brother had volunteered to go to Vietnam; he had died when he jumped on a grenade to save his friends. She seemed to have a sadness that I couldn't reach, in spite of my good intentions. In the news the sailors were pushing helicopters off the decks of the aircraft carriers into the ocean. That seemed bad, too, but we were learning about something more important, something that might even be unnameable. God was there in our classroom conversations. Some scientists and historians had him penned up, they thought, and they were preparing a final assault to get rid of him. But Dr. Patteson seemed to know that God was bigger than that and that the scientists would ultimately fail. God was also judging our way of life and our selfishness, he said. Dr. Patteson admired Martin Luther King Jr., too, and he was the first teacher I knew who said so openly. King was a peacemaker, though some people accused him of being a troublemaker. I couldn't understand why in our church we didn't hear sermons like those that he used to preach.¹¹

In such a place, Dr. Patteson couldn't last, and the college soon got rid of him. Soon I would be leaving, too, with the thought of making a new life for myself once again. For the first time, I was certain that it would not be a military life. Through our new church we "adopted" a Vietnamese family. They had been "boat people" who escaped from Vietnam in 1975.¹² After an uncertain status for several years in Hong Kong, they came to America. As refugees they had been through untold dangers. I tried to see America through their eyes when we had Thanksgiving dinner together. I was also thinking more and more of a baby who was almost killed by a king's soldiers in Israel long ago, and the Flight into Egypt, where the little family found safety. My wife and I had our first child about that time, too, and I was praying for families everywhere who had lost a father or a son or a brother in war. God did not send souls to earth for this.

Next, at a large university I studied "Liberation Theology." Gutierrez and Bonino were writing about "doing" theology. That seemed strange — people "doing" rather than "thinking" theology. But did they mean by this, *killing* people? The question of violence was always coming up in their books — a spiral of violence, as they described it. Violence that on the one hand was already imposed on them in Latin America. Violence again with respect to this question: How could they hope to be free without first killing their oppressors? They loved the story of the Exodus, and I thought they were right to do so. But I was also thinking — the Hebrews didn't do the killing at the Red Sea — God did that. "The horse and the rider He has thrown into the sea . . ." I couldn't see that Christians armed with guns, killing the rich, was anything close to New Testament discipleship. But then, weren't there Christians in our military, too, blessed by chaplains and the prayers of faithful people at home? It seemed to me that Reinhold Niebuhr's view of war and violence were often used to justify America's policies, and that liberation theology had made the mistake of applying his thought to their own situation rather than to North American policies. The North American rejection of Latin American theology seemed hypocritical to me in that light — a way of saying "Our violence is justified — yours is not." Yet my heart wasn't satisfied with one side or the other.¹³

There was a fellow named William Stringfellow who came to our campus. I went to hear him speak. He said that for far too long we had been

“reading the Bible Americanly” rather than “reading America Biblically.”¹⁴ That was for me a thunderbolt and a flash of lightning of a different sort altogether. When I began to take Stringfellow’s words more and more in earnest, it set me apart from old friends. But I remembered what the disciples said in Acts: “We must obey God rather than men.” God was calling me to a life that didn’t involve killing, even for the sake of righting injustice. This was very hard to explain to others, and in the end I didn’t try to explain it anymore. It was hard to understand how Americans could read the same Bible that I was reading and come to such different conclusions. Another teacher quoted from Tertullian’s commentary on Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: “When Jesus told Peter to put away his sword, he disarmed every Christian.”¹⁵ Later, when Pilate asked Jesus in John 18:36 whether he was a king, Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world.” I knew people who used that verse to argue for a strong military, one which *could* rule in this world. But I couldn’t make myself hear it that way any longer.

Three images stand out in my imagination from these years. They were important for confirming these peacemaking convictions in my heart. First, in Kurt Vonnegut’s novel, *Slaughterhouse-five*, Billy Pilgrim has a vision — it is like watching a movie about World War II, but the film is being run backwards. The bullets are magically sucked from broken bodies, the bombs rise up toward the planes, which capture them and fly backwards to England. They land, then turn off their motors, and send the bombs back to be dismantled carefully by women in factories, and sent back to mines, where the metal is put back into the earth and hidden.¹⁶ Secondly, at the end of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Erich Maria Remarque’s soldier is weary of war and is killed when he reaches out from his protected position to touch a butterfly. His longing for beauty cannot exist in that world of hate and destruction.¹⁷ And thirdly, from the television series M*A*S*H*, Radar meets a disoriented bomber pilot who believes he is Jesus. The pilot has killed over and over from a distance, but the enormity of what he has done has finally caught up with him, and his mind can’t take it in.¹⁸ These images helped me see that I was moving in the right direction, and that following Jesus in the way of peace was the best kind of life that a person could live.

1985-2001: John Howard Yoder, the Book of Common Prayer, and Rumors of War

As an adult, my reading of the Bible owes more and more to John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus*.¹⁹ This puts me at odds with many of the people I worship with in the Episcopal Church. In the *Prayer Book*, we have "The Thirty-Nine Articles." Articles 37 and 38 are especially troublesome for a Christian pacifist. Article 37 states: "It is lawful for Christian men, at the commandment of the Magistrate, to wear weapons and serve in the wars." Article 38 is about property: "The Riches and Goods of Christians are not common, as touching the right, title, and possession of the same, as certain Anabaptists do boast."²⁰ This is not what draws me to the Episcopal church, I can promise you that. What keeps me there is the eucharist, which is altogether bigger than Articles 37 and 38. The eucharist is about something so huge that no statement can capture it — the life that God is calling us to with Jesus.

This is what I think President George Bush never understood in the Gulf War of 1991, and what our current President George W. Bush doesn't understand about war in Afghanistan and the Middle East. If they had been thinking of God's call and his claim on their lives, they would have been following Deuteronomy 17:16-19.²¹ Deuteronomy tells any leader to meditate on God's law all the days of his life. No leader has time for war if he's following that command. Nor is he allowed to acquire "horses" which will be used as weapons in war. What does Psalm 146 say? "Put not your trust in princes . . . And Psalm 46? "He breaks the bow, shatters the spear, and burns the shield in the fire."²²

American hearts were broken when terrorists crashed airplanes into the towers in New York City. It was more than any of us could bear, as the mayor of that city said. Every fiber of our souls, it seemed, cried out for vengeance, or at least the kind of military strike that would make us safe again. So many Americans wanted to be like the sniper, Jackson, in *Saving Private Ryan*. Jackson prays from the Psalms continually while aiming his gun at the enemy. "In Thee have I put my trust. Let me never be ashamed" (Psalm 31), he prays as he defends his unit. Many Americans have also prayed Psalm 140 in these last few months, which asks God to "Preserve me from violent men, who devise evil things in their hearts."²³ These are heart-felt prayers — my aim is not to criticize them, but to probe a little more deeply. My own deepest thoughts,

which come to me through these same Psalms, are something more like this: When you start down that path of bloodshed, where will you stop? There's no reason to stop. There's no country big enough to make you stop. There are violent men in every country on earth. Will you go after them all so as "to be done with it," while you've got the momentum and the clear moral advantage? Then, won't there be prayers offered up by your victims in which you are the violent person devising evil plans?

America's military campaigns make perfect sense from an Augustinian point of view. Just war is meant to restrain evil doers, after all, and there are plenty of them out there.²⁴ Only, to do it, you've got to circumvent God's command not to kill. That's what John Book comes up against in director Peter Weir's film *Witness*.²⁵ Is he going to kill these violent men as he's always been taught and trained to do, before they kill him? Or, is he going to try a different way? What saves him in the end and grants him a narrow escape from the shedding of blood? It is a child ringing a bell, one very much like a church bell, summoning the believers to his aid. Part of what's at stake is the future of the boy he's trying to protect. Isn't it that way for us too?

Notes

¹ A photo and brief description of the missile (now obsolete) can be found at <http://www.wpafb.af.mil/museum/annex/an8.htm>

² That this hymn has caused others to search their consciences can be seen in an article by James Wall, "Marching to War with the Hymn Critics: 'Onward Christian Soldiers'" *Christian Century* 103 (July 2, 1986): 603-604.

³ Our family's visit was in 1965. The museum's website is <http://www.wpafb.af.mil/museum/>

⁴ *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* is the name of Sadako's book, which is significant for Peace Studies. An article describing her project is Takayuki Ishi, "The Girl of the Paper Cranes: The Effort of Sadako Sasaki to Overcome Her A-Bomb-caused Leukemia Became a Legend in the Peace Movement" *Christian Social Action* 8 (July-Aug 1995): 25-27.

⁵ For an early protest against war toys see Albert H. Yee, "Toys, Children, and a Crisis in Values: Examining What Military and Other Toys Teach" *International Journal of Religious Education* 43 (Dec. 1966): 4-5,40. More recently see Daphne White, "Violence Is Not Child's Play: Parents Fight an Uphill Battle in Teaching Nonviolence to their Children" *Christian Social Action* 12 (June 1999): 30-32. Also Patrick M. Regan, "War Toys, War Movies, and the Militarization of the United States, 1900-85" *Journal of Peace Research* 31 (Feb. 1994): 45-60.

⁶ Gloria Borger, "Barbie's Newest Values: The Real Problem with the Barbie Doll is Not Her Unrealistic Physical Proportions, But Her Snobby, Materialist Values" *U.S. News & World Report* 123 (Dec. 1, 1997) p. 40.

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutics of Testimony” *Anglican Theological Review* 61 (1979): 435-61, is much closer to my mature view of “giving testimony.”

⁸ An important collection of sermons on peacemaking can be found in *Preaching on Peace*, edited by Ronald J. Sider and Darrel J. Brubaker, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

⁹ A useful source of information on this incident is James Stuart Olson, *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books) 1998. Today I am horrified that I didn’t have enough moral insight to resist the request to participate in this petition drive. Youth leaders will take note, I hope, and not make a similar mistake with their young people.

¹⁰ A good summary of the history of interpretation of these verses is Charles Homer Giblin, “The Things of God” in the Question Concerning Tribute to Caesar: (Lk 20:25; Mk 12:17; Mt 22:21) *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 33 (Oct. 1971): 510-527.

¹¹ Martin Luther King Jr., *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998). Also available online <http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/sermons/contents.htm>

¹² See *Voices of Vietnamese Boat People: Nineteen Narratives of Escape and Survival*, ed. Mary Terrell Cargill and Jade Quang Huynh (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2001).

¹³ Gutierrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Press, 1973), and Jose Miguez-Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974). For an overview of many of these issues see Richard B. Miller, “Christian Pacifism and Just-War Tenets: How Do They Diverge?” *Theological Studies* 47. 3 (Sept. 1986): 448-72.

¹⁴ This theme can be followed in William Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1973).

¹⁵ This quotation is from Tertullian’s *Treatise on Idolatry* 19. It can be read in a widely available edition of the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:73, or online at http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-03/anf03-07.htm#P815_331177

¹⁶ Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-five; or, The Children’s Crusade, a Duty-dance with Death* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1969).

¹⁷ Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1958, c. 1930).

¹⁸ An unofficial episode guide to MASH lists this story as episode 81, from season 4, with the title “Quo Vadis, Captain Chandler?”

¹⁹ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

²⁰ *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979).

²¹ For an excellent Biblical account of the ideal king, see Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 73-79.

²² Robert McAfee Brown, “The God Who Stamps Out War, Psalm 46” in *Preaching on Peace* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 45-51.

²³ Among countless possibilities for understanding the Psalms, see Kathleen Norris, “Why the Psalms Scare Us” *Christianity Today* 40. 8 (1996): 19-24.

²⁴ John Langan “The Elements of St. Augustine’s Just War Theory” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 12. 1 (1984): 19-38.

²⁵ See Kimball, Doug. “Peter Weir and the Theme of Salvation” at <http://www.thefilmforum.addr.com/columns/990626.html>