

MYTHIC PASSAGES
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When Death Finds You...

by Creative Director, [Honora Foah](#)

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When death finds you, let it find you alive. — African proverb

Recently Paul Taylor, a kind-hearted marketing guru who is helping us at Mythic Imagination, asked me to sit down with him and tell him what it was that activated my work for MII, what I cared about and was trying to do.

In it's simplest form, I answered that my main concern in life was to be alive and to help others be alive, too. What that means to me is that a person feels like herself, feels the sense of purpose, love, and passion that makes him feel alive and in tune. The unfolding of the individual soul is the most beautiful thing on earth. Even when the expression is violent or ugly, the presence of burning life has a power beyond appearances. Life.

So the taking of life is very serious. The 20th of September, we are presenting a program in conjunction with the [Alliance for a New Humanity](#) and [Emory University](#) called [War and, Peace the American Imagination](#).

Within MII itself, we have been having a raucous discussion of this topic, the war in Iraq, the war against terrorism, war in general, and it has been raging over the internet, phone calls, conversations. It is absolutely fascinating. The foundation of our work here is myth and story. Respect for wisdom stories, sacred stories, folktales, literature, and art is something that miraculously transcends or stands under politics and our definitions of ourselves as Democrats, Republicans, Whigs, Tories, or Gold Standardites. It is a fact, that most people who call themselves "Democrat" or "Republican" may vote that way, but they do not actually agree with

the whole shebang of planks and platforms and whatever 'the party' says it stands for. 'Right' and 'left' have ceased to be truly useful designations. So at MII, when our philosophical, mythological, psychological discussion of war turns political, it's pretty damn interesting how the common work with mythology does not translate into a common vision of how to act in the world — which is one of the strongest arguments for the importance of a mythological understanding of the world. Anything that encourages the strengthening of the soul's individual effort to come into being as the eccentric individuated being it is meant to be, is for me a sign of being on the right track.

One of the main things we are trying to encourage is the capacity for and understanding of metaphor. Literalism is a terminal disease. This disease is one of the major elements in our current predicaments of war. For example:

One of the pillars of the current state of violence surrounding Islam is the word, "war": "jihad". This word has gathered a terrible literalist following. I have many Muslim friends. Since they are my friends, you might imagine, and you would be right, that they are not fundamentalists, but rather Muslims of a more mystical and metaphorical bent. Well before all of the present brouhaha, we would talk about 'jihad'. It is a word that I consider part of my personal spiritual vocabulary. It was explained to me many years ago that what this meant was a realization and an acceptance that a sincere life of the spirit, a life of devotion to God, would inevitably involve struggle.

Jihad means *struggle*. It means that many, many days in the life of someone attempting to do right, would be distinguished by conflict between elements within my own self that would not want to do so, whether from laziness, bitterness, maliciousness, envy, what have you. And, I was instructed, this war is good. Because although it is full of pain, the effort to do what is right, the effort to try to understand what is right is what will eventually create the capacity. My Islamic instruction essentially said to be at peace with war because it is in the nature of things for there to be conflict. Have courage, struggle through, struggle at the highest level, struggle for the purification of your soul and your actions.

This is a tenet of most practices. Though Buddhists express it in almost the opposite terminology, a terminology of peace, anyone who has ever attempted to sit in meditation for hours and hours, or even 20 minutes knows that there is an incredible level of effort to just sit there and watch the mind blather on and on and on. Just as 'islam' means 'submission', in Buddhist practice, the art of non-resistance is often the way toward a successful outcome. Peace in meditation is guarded by effort, struggle, war. If you don't force your little fanny onto the cushion, nothing else will follow. When the change happens, then struggle ceases, but because this is life, not death, the struggle will resume. Be at peace with this, the teachers say. There is nothing wrong with this struggle.

This understanding is central to my life, so I have done my best to be at peace with war. It seems inevitable that this struggle, which each human being must inwardly undertake, will spill out into external conflict. Usually it will be a projection of an inner struggle that we/they have found too difficult and we have cast the conflict onto the enemy. It is so much easier to hate the Great Satan than to clean your own room, or heart. Which is not to say even for a moment that there

are not real injustices, travesties, victims. I am just noting how much more pleasant it is to blame someone else.

Blame is so weird. Even when one really has been wronged by something outside ourselves, we often blame the wrong thing or person for our hurt. I've seen this over and over with marital infidelity. The husband steps out on his wife. The wife is, among other things, very angry. She is angry at her husband, but will reserve her truly murderous rage for the other woman. This can be the case even when the other woman did not know the man was married. We know deep down that when we are in a murderous rage there are some targets that are safer than others, and it may not have much to do with who is responsible for what.

This may have something to do with our confused response to 9/11.

What I'm wondering is if the difference between fundamentalist approaches and metaphorical approaches is where you locate the war. The thing about fundamentalism is the sense that you have the truth. Therefore inwardly in the mind, there is peace. One doesn't need to struggle with difficult questions. They are ipso facto answered. When struggle is necessary, it gets projected outward to the disagreement with the other who is in error.

If one does not insist on knowing the truth, or that the truth is a singular thing, not a radiant being with many levels of meaning, then the struggle has to be located in your own heart, your own mind. Peace is then something to be offered as best we can outwardly.

There are very real sins, crimes and agonies that we inflict and suffer. The desire to strike back, beyond a simple need to protect yourself, is universal. To pretend when greatly wronged that one does not somewhere harbor a desire for vengeance, for me, strains credulity. But the funny thing is, vengeance is rarely satisfying. Why is that?

I've always been intrigued with watching cats fight. When cats are stalking and killing prey, they are the epitome of grace and efficiency. They are so smooth. But when they fight, they hiss and jump sideways and twitch. This is because they are ambivalent. The adrenalin is pumping through their bodies, just as it is when they hunt. But another thing is happening, too. There are severe inhibitions about killing their own kind, so it becomes a twitch-fest. Yes and...no. In fact animals kill their own kind very rarely. There are alpha monkey/dog/etc. fights to the death, but even there, the loser often dies later as a result of the injuries. Once an animal is vanquished, the fight usually ends.

When I speak with someone about what they might do at the Mythic Journeys conference, I look for the moment when their eyes light up. That is my strongest editing tool. In fact, I look for that moment all the time. I'm looking for a locus of that life. When you have seen that light (and God help us, you can sometimes see it in the face of the warrior), it is unthinkable to want to put it out. There is something utterly holy about that light. It is the sign of the purpose of that person, of that life. That is why madmen are sometimes described as having an unholy light in their eyes. The madness has co-opted the life force, the meaning. It is very terrible.

To put out the light in someone else's eyes is a decision that must be struggled with on the level of importance that it deserves. There is within us a desire for vengeance and a desire to kill, there is a desire to get the others out of our way. This is holy war.