

# Killing

Theodore Nadelson, MD

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A deep calm drenches the male soul when it feels the persona it inhabits being firmly screwed into a socket in some iron hierarchy or other, best of all a hierarchy legitimately about killing.<sup>1</sup>

This is about generalized, massive, sanctioned killing. It is about wartime killing. All soldiers share an equal privilege to kill.<sup>2</sup> The privilege to kill is unlike anything most individuals have ever experienced, and the soldier who kills is permanently changed—fixed to the death he has caused. Preparation for the act of killing puts in motion a complex psychocultural and biologic-social mix of imperatives and prohibitions that involve the soldier, his nation, and our concept of civilization. No matter how the business of war is adorned by parades, uniforms, and literary glorification of the warrior's courage and burdened by administrative logistics, the soldier's real work is killing.

My work for the past 20 years has been with Vietnam combat veterans who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder connected to the psychic trauma of that war. My work with these men is directed toward reducing the effect of the psychological trauma caused by war's terrors. Yet, I find that they have a continuing positive attachment to the very war that sundered their lives. In this short commentary I shall, from time to time, evoke the words of these veterans.

They speak of their bonding with comrades, unrivaled by any relationship before or since, that has severely limited their ability to have relationships with women.

Comradeship does not demand for its sustenance the reciprocity, the pledges of affection, the endless reassurances required by the love of men and women. It is, unlike marriage, a bond that cannot be broken by a word, by boredom, or by anything other than death (Ref. 3, p xvii).

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Dr. Nadelson is Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, Boston University School of Medicine, Boston, MA. Address for correspondence: Theodore Nadelson, MD, 30 Amory Street, Brookline, MA 02446. E-mail: [tnadel@bu.edu](mailto:tnadel@bu.edu)

But even death does not break the connection. Lost friends continue to inhabit the lives of those who are kept alive by imagination, turned to when peacetime pressure is too great:

When the family does something [demeaning] to me, I leave and go to my room. I'm trying not to argue with my family—so I talk to Connors and Singleton and they talk back; we talk shit, we talk about what we did. Like heating soup while there is incoming fins [mortar fire]. . . the closeness, you cannot imagine anything like it. My people would do anything for me, risk their lives to get you water if you needed water. I'm not crazy but, God, there is nothing like that here, that is, back in this world, back in so-called civilization. That's why there is nothing left for me.

There is also little doubt that the attachment men have to battle includes killing. Killing is exciting and arresting and has constant novelty. Our shared drives, which are the essence of life itself often become destructive. Campbell<sup>4</sup> states as Freud<sup>5</sup> before him, that we all possess, in degrees, a tendency to plunder—derived not from a biological drive but rather an impulse coming from the eyes, launched to possess, not to consume. The Hebrew Bible speaks of the “eye not sparing” the enemy; The New Testament places the “evil eye” (avarice) between “lasciviousness” and “blasphemy.” Marines speak of “eye-fucking”—seeing targets in anticipation of taking them. At least for some, to kill something is to possess it totally. Soldiers often carefully examine the face and body of the killed enemy, as do hunters examining a deer. They often feel sadness and sometimes remorse at what they have done. Rage and the internalized strategy of defensive dehumanization of the enemy may work at the intense moment of contact and then break:

Reid once emptied three Lewis gun drums into a German platoon, with fierce satisfaction at doing the “frightful execution” at Morval. Afterward there was some sense of guilt when they saw a dead German soldier holding a crucifix in his sole remaining hand. They had not expected the enemy to die like themselves.<sup>6</sup>

A World War II veteran said, with an aversive tic that started soon after the end of the war:

So we've been up through the islands, lots of contact. We are on Okinawa. I'm 24 getting old. . . a sergeant. . . point man for my platoon with a B.A.R. (automatic rifle). But the war is winding down, we're just mopping up. . . and this Jap, a kid maybe like me, he comes out of the bushes, scares me. I turn and let him have—I just open up. So like some damn hero, I fish the body. Jesus why did I do that? (anguished, he passes hand over face). And he doesn't carry nothing, not even a jackknife on him, just a wallet. There are pictures of his wife and kid and (cries, rapid movement of head to left), and that's the son of a bitch who's still bothering me (continued aversive movement of head).

### Killing, Homicide, Murder

Thou shalt not kill.<sup>7</sup>

Murder is against all laws, and killing is legitimized only by the political state. Murder or homicide is defined by the state as the taking of a life that is valued by society and thus protected by law. Murder implies conscious intent, although intent is always difficult to define or establish.<sup>8</sup> Homicide by accident or in the grip of insanity or in self-defense or lack of premeditation of harm are circumstances mitigating the act of the killer.

"Thou shalt not kill," the Sixth Commandment, is not ordered for primary attention and seems incongruent against the background of bountiful killing for God contained in the Hebrew Bible. The biblical text immediately following the prohibition of Deuteronomy 5:17 ordains abundant killing without mercy. Nations such as the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, and others are ordained to be killed. There is no obvious contradiction; Killing within one's own group is interdicted, and the enemy is set out for slaughter. The commandment is best translated as "Thou shalt not murder" and expanded beyond the gnomic prohibition to a fuller and more accurate version: thou shalt not kill—except when you have the socially sanctioned privilege for the purpose of protecting the society that gives you the privilege, as in war, (or for officers of the law); to do otherwise is to murder—and murder is most heavily interdicted. Also when commanded by your nation, you must kill, even repeatedly, or you may be cast out, you may be killed for failure to discharge your responsibility.

Although all people understand that there is a difference between killing and murder, most would have difficulty with the complexity of a formal ethical or legal distinction. The person judged to be guilty of murder in the first degree has violated the

state's absolute control over use of force. Because the judgment of "murderer" signifies a lack of an essential aspect of humanity, the killer's life is lessened in value because of his own deed and may be taken by the state after due process.

The secular state elevated the Sixth Commandment to the most prominent position when it usurped the monopoly on power from God<sup>9</sup> and substituted secular law for Holy Writ. The laws of nations define who is rightly eligible for slaughter. The state also borrowed some theological power in political and legal definitions of the commandment as to who, how, and when people were indeed to be killed.

Saint Augustine<sup>10</sup> describes as "nonsense," any opposition to killing plants or irrational animals. "Thou shalt not kill" applies to "man alone, oneself." The commandment forbids self-destruction and, by analogy, killing of other men who are like oneself: "One who kills himself kills a man." But God gives general or specific directions for killing, and the state puts criminals to death according to "rational justice." A person sanctioned, a soldier who kills, is, then, "but a sword in hand" and is not responsible for the killing and does not violate the commandment.<sup>10</sup>

The killing of genetically related people was always subject to the most severe proscription. There is early recognition in the Hebrew Bible that "nothing [is] so terrible as spilling kindred blood." Cain's killing of Abel is primordial homicide,<sup>8</sup> a murder that pollutes society. The proscription against murder of kindred is a protection against destroying the shared genes and extends St. Augustine's interpretation.

### Killers: the Joy of Killing

In a striking photograph in a restaurant in Sicily, a hunter gazes languidly into the camera, tenderly cradling the head of the deer he has killed. The small animal is surrounded by a bed of pine branches, perhaps to hide the blood, but the overall effect is a view of a shared bower, quiet, restful, and a bit sad. It is a postcoital tristesse.

Mortal risk heightens sexual arousal; danger survived becomes mortised with the erotic. Such reminiscence is blunted and reshaped and fades with time but still lurks in memory, remarkably available and trenchant, a tracer reawakening hot feelings:

It was in Barcelona. . . . We knew Franco's troops were coming but we were in the bar in a hotel. I thought now we really must

get out and escape but we went to my room and made love! Of all things! He was very good.

I could hear small arms fire, then a machine gun going off at a distance. I can remember it all, every bit. Something was burning in the street, I can [still] smell it. He was very good. (An 81-year-old woman, a cardiac patient, describing a sexual encounter in 1936, during the Spanish Civil War. She subsequently married that man and they soon after divorced. He died some years ago.)

With palpable danger, increased sensory arousal often promotes a generally heightened sexuality. The counter is true also. In midst of high sexual excitement, physical aggression and pain can become charged with the erotic. Sexuality is embraced by war. In the grip of mortal danger there is intoxication, there is wantonness. Aggression often replaces sexual feeling and bends sexuality into its own aim. Killing, itself, becomes sexualized (following quotes are from interviews with combat veterans):

Christ, I got off on it, killing. . .collecting ears. . . . I thought, more than once, back then "I'd rather fight than screw." Is there something the matter?

Sex? There are better things. A kill at a "click" [kilometer]? Oh God, that's better than sex. I can remember it and bring it back. I get off on it, even the memory.

I had been firing, in an ambush [of Vietcong]. I saw them fall. When I put in a new clip I saw that I had a hard-on.

"When the VC chose to fight a set piece battle there is not ordinary excitement but the manic ecstasy of contact [with] minutes of orgiastic violence."<sup>3</sup> One journalist-correspondent made a cassette of the stunning sounds of heavy exchange of fire and used it to seduce women.<sup>11</sup>

For the combatant in control of the encounter, the moment before he squeezes the trigger can be fulsome and erotic. Lust is part of killing in battle, but it is not pretty or romantic. Combat is sexy in the way a weapon is sexy. "Going over the top" was called "sexy" by a British officer in a novel of World War I; not like sex in bed, but far harder, sharper, as in urgent meeting in a most dangerous liaison.<sup>12</sup>

A man so fearful that he soils himself may in the next moment have an erection. Man becomes a weapon. Gun becomes hard-on.

When the gun is a hard-on, the feeling for the target is hardly tender. Rather the overarching feeling is from the excitement generated by sexualized dominance. Looking at the pictures of dead bodies is like looking at porn, trying to see more of what is there,<sup>11</sup> and porn excites in the use of the sexual object through coercive force rather than by wooing. Sub-

ordinating another by force is said to be exciting because there is no anxiety coming from the possibility of rejection.<sup>5</sup>

For some soldiers, such excitement, arousal, and pleasure can later become a source of concern and doubt. In peacetime reflection, it seems abnormal, bizarre. A former Marine combatant confesses: "The first time I killed, I puked and I messed myself, I swear. . . . The fifth man I killed. . .I got off on it, I got hard. . . . Now if that is normal, what kind of animals are we?" In *The Thin Red Line*, a novel about the Pacific war by James Jones,<sup>13</sup> a group of soldiers find a bloody shirt, the first sign they have seen of combat death, touch it, discuss it, look around for more signs of killing and are described as not meeting each other's eyes, "curiously like a gang of boys caught masturbating each other." (Ref. 13, p 48). Soldiers frequently describe such guilty pleasures.

In combat, delight in destroying can assume an "ecstatic character," an appeal to which we are all susceptible to some degree. For the killer soldier "it becomes a consuming lust which swallows up other pleasures. It tends to turn men in on themselves and make them inaccessible to more normal satisfactions."<sup>14</sup>

## Fathers

Women, it is true, create human beings, but only men can make men [Ref. 15, p 103].

Male sexual identity is relatively vulnerable, the certainty of manhood is easily shaken. Many men in our culture seek reinforcement of masculinity, and such rites as school and religious confirmations of adulthood are not as compelling an entry into manhood as the wearing of the uniform. A father looking at his son, changed by his new clothes, looking lean and raw because of training, says, "I guess that you are a man now." My father said that to me.

Fathers aware of their lack of heroism may see their own second chance in their soldier sons. The young soldier's uniform and weapons assert the investment of the power of the state in the boy, a power to which even his father is obedient. Facing danger in a shooting war, the son becomes the central family figure, its pivot and concern, the more active, the most potentially instrumental.

In groups of prestate peoples there still is a direct relationship between the ability to kill other men and reproductive success—the most aggressive warriors

take the greatest number of brides and have the most children.<sup>16</sup> Boys win manhood through trial and endurance. The common thread is that boys are not predetermined to become men, they must be made into men by older men through contest. Womanhood, in contrast, is decided by biology and predestined in its arrival at menarche. Rather than achieved by trial, it is often marked only by some commemorative ritual.<sup>17</sup>

Older men in many societies make boys into men by tests of hardness, aggressiveness, and endurance of severe pain. Such rituals both solidify a beginning sense of manhood for the boy and also provide instructions for the future—the continuing necessity to take “manly risks,” to face mortal danger, to protect family and community. Tewa boys are whipped by their fathers who are dressed and masked as Kachina spirits and who proclaim to them afterward that, “you are now. . . made a man.” The cost of failure is the judgment that they are unformed, childlike (and remain as girls).

In Judges 8:19–20, Gideon captures the Kings of Midian in battle, who admit that they had killed his brothers and are prepared for their death. Gideon instructs his youngest son, Jetha, to kill them. The text says that Jetha does not draw his sword, “. . . for he feared, because he was yet a youth.” It is not his father, Gideon, who encourages him to kill and become a man, but the kings who are to die—they accept their death as warriors and are sympathetic to the necessity of their death and to the growth and development of the boy Jetha. They exhort Jetha to rise and kill them. To be a man he must not flinch from the killing “for as the man is, so is his strength.”

In many societies today, men who do not match a cultural ideal of what is masculine endure in the view of both men and women a degraded status, with the threat that they will be made subordinate to a “real man,” that is, made into a woman. Hispanic men are prompted to subscribe to the idea of *machismo* in a nearly religious way; “real” men are termed *muy macho* or *muy hombre* and can suffer enormous loss of status and self worth if they are judged as *flojo* (empty, flaccid, weak, pathetic, useless, and impotent) when they fail the standards of assertiveness with others.<sup>18</sup> A boy on Truk is challenged with a mortal test for manhood: “Are you a man? [If not] come I will take your life now.”<sup>18</sup> Manhood then, comes of testing. In some societies all boys’ initiation into manhood is brought about as a symbolic birth.

Boys are symbolically born by or through men in a ritual meant to mimic childbirth—the *couvade*. The men do this, they say, with the “magic stolen from women.” By means of this symbolic ritual of birth, men play out the birth of a boy by or through a man, thus making him into a man. Men also forcibly keep women away from observing *couvade*, because they say it might encourage the women to take back the stolen magic. More likely it avoids exposure and ridicule of the men at their lack of real formidable power.

There is severe hazing, whipping, beating, scouring, blood letting, and scarring of skin among the Amhara of Ethiopia, the Masai, Sanburo of East Africa, the natives of New Guinea and Native Americans.

Among the Fox tribe of Iowa, boys must go through what is called by their elders, “the Big Impossible,” severe tests of competence in tribal matters and economic achievement.

Tests to become a man are not limited to prestate peoples or to those ethnic groups that continue arcane rituals. Boys in the United States have sought a sort of manhood of sexual daring and contest. A group of high school boys in Lakewood, New Jersey, in 1993, who were self-designated the “Sperm Posse,” coerced girls for group sex and “scored points” toward respect from other boys by frequency of coitus.<sup>19</sup> Boarding schools for boys in England are known for a “trial by ordeal” suggested as necessary by adults to a “social state of manhood.” These schools have been almost exclusively open to upper-class male children, but more recently, to others as well.<sup>18</sup> Boys have the strongest wish to be accepted by their fathers, to be given manhood by their fathers, and, at best, to have the acknowledgment that it is possible to grow beyond them. Boys want their fathers to allow the struggle toward becoming their “own man,” and that means some struggle must take place. Fathers, particularly in societies in which rituals for achieving manhood are not prescribed, sometimes do not really concede the struggle with their sons. They can stay locked in a zero-sum game as if they wager their own manhood against the son’s taking it. War promises the quickest, and also the riskiest, possibility of grasping manhood, with and without the father’s concession. Fathers lower the barrier to sons who become soldiers.

One marine who was severely wounded in Vietnam and suffering from subsequent emotional after-



math speaks of his father's hardness toward him as he grew up, until he graduated from boot camp with honors:

My father came down to North Carolina all the way from Boston to see me graduate. When I came up to Boston on leave, he took me to his bar! He said to everybody, "This is my son!" (his face glows). Never has been or will be anything like that. I don't care, I'd go through it all again for that feeling—father-son! [weeps].

Such a wish is not pure. There is usually anger mixed with yearning for the father's approval. When the soldier is distant from family in the midst of training or combat, a father who is a problematic figure carries less influence and can be rejected. With decreased fear of punishment for violating societal laws or the power of God or God's lieutenants, one might even kill the father. Not all soldiers kill in war, and only the rarest commit patricide, but the license, ability, and experience of killing energizes such fantasies:

He was never for me. He never gave me any attention except to tell me I wasn't worth shit. . . . What matters to me are my buddies. I don't need that son of a bitch for anything. Jesus, I always wanted him to like me, for something, for any reason, and he never gave it to me. Now he can go fuck himself. I'm free, and he can die.

## Boys Murder

Two boys in Jonesboro, Arkansas, pulled other children out of their school with a false fire alarm and proceeded to shoot and murder classmates with hunting rifles. Boys shot and killed other high school adolescents in Colorado. I asked a 50-year-old Vietnam veteran his thoughts on it. He took insight of his own experience and spoke of the singular satisfaction found in effective counterforce:

They knew what they were doing. Those kids were hurt and wanted to hurt back. They were getting back at those who paid them no attention—put them down. They weren't thinking of killing they just wanted the recognition, and killing was the way. A gun gets you respect but it has to be used. The idea wasn't in those kid's minds to kill, they didn't know what killing is—but to hurt, to get back their attention, and there wasn't any thinking, once I (sic) got into it, the flow of it. I didn't stop. It goes on and on wanting more to hurt, to hurt more.

Pleasure in it? No, like satisfaction, finishing something. Like they (VC [Viet Cong]) could fuck me or us up, like we didn't matter—didn't count for anything—like they could ignore us, just use us as they wanted. No—we could give it back, put them in the dirt. We are all raised that way.

After September 11, 2001, our major problem became terrorism. We are surprised at the fact of suicide

bombers—now on our shores. The rich and educated, particularly from Saudi Arabia—like bin Laden—have joined the terrorists, but the rank and file of ordinary recruits is even more abundant. Recruiting terrorist soldiers for *jihad* is easier than we want to realize. More than 50 percent of the people in the Mid-East Muslim states are less than 25 years of age. For young men of that age, there is the greatest desire to become relevant, to be elevated out of the ordinary and drab, the subordinated position of poverty. They are not going to rise above their lives in any other way. Therefore, to be a soldier is most desirable—boys are given uniforms and above all weapons. They are already primed to identify their unhappiness as coming from the West. Alive, they are heroes; death in a suicide mission elevates them to martyrdom. Their families are given money after their deaths. The cause gathers still more attractive force, because it is made sacred.

Boys are intoxicated by the gun's magic. The gun itself demands use. With a gun in the pocket, anyone looks like a target. Seeing a target arouses the impulse to plunder, to destroy magically and promises to jack some boys out of shame and a sense of defect and ordinariness.<sup>20</sup> For those for whom shame is intolerable, familiarity with rifles and the constant playing of gunfire drama viewed on the television and in movies holds the promise that a gun, easily used with little training, contains a means of erasing shame and anxiety. The video games, which teach violence and quick kills, incite wonder without remorse, ease the anxiety of vulnerability, and are addictive to the susceptible.<sup>21</sup> They stimulate a wish for continuance, and each new edition of such games is ballyhooed as delivering more excitement. Such intoxicants are sold like candy and put some kids on speed.

There will always be ordinary kids—undistinguished in any way—with easy access to stimulants like video games and firearms as a push to the need to be extraordinary at any cost. Yet, strictly limiting the free commerce in guns and ammunition with strong legal consequence (more than the law limits the other intoxicants) must be tried, and the restriction on video games and other savage amusements should be government's and parents' responsibility as well. We risk damaging our privilege guaranteed in the First Amendment by limiting free commerce, but we should also know what we risk by permissiveness.<sup>22</sup> No one measure will work. We must change an en-

tire social attitude about the rearing of boys, and that may take generations and, certainly, persistence.

Killing, despite our objections to its admissibility into the way many of us see our society, has long been a part of it and continues at this moment as a major part of the world consciousness. It is difficult to adjudicate the justness of cause when both sides—the West and the fanatical Islamists claim the moral high ground. The West can insist, with what I feel to be good cause, that the dignity of humankind is vested in options or the liberty to dissent available to us.<sup>23</sup>

Our present worldview must involve the threat to our society and ourselves from the militant Islamists. We must now fight and kill for our portion of civilization and each other and endure future attacks with a morality that comes of loving our civilization and each other. We have a just cause.

We are at war with the seventh century.

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