

## LIFE AND DEATH

### “A New Meaning of Courage”

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In Tim O'Brien's book *The Things They Carried* we learn that, to him, the most cowardly thing to do is go off to fight in a war one does not believe in. This seems contradictory when we take into account the fact that O'Brien did indeed go off to war. However, O'Brien tells us that his reasons for going to war “had nothing to do with morality. Embarrassment, that's all it was” (O'Brien 59). Upon reading this passage for the first time, I didn't understand why O'Brien would “go to the war – (he) would kill and maybe die because (he) was embarrassed not to” (59). But after a closer examination and self-reflection, I wondered if I am not unlike O'Brien. Would I allow myself to be drafted into a war I didn't understand or agree with? Questions like these are always difficult to answer. Many times in life we get caught up in the what-ifs, but when your life is on the line, would you sacrifice it for the sake of saving face and not being labeled, “Traitor,” “turncoat,” or “pussy“(59)? O'Brien did.

The key to understanding why it was so hard for O'Brien to let himself go off to war is knowing his opposition to it. O'Brien tells us that he didn't burn his draft card, or really do anything radical, but he did knock on doors for Gene McCarthy

and show open defiance against the war in Vietnam via editorials in the campus newspaper (41). We know that it isn't all wars he is opposed to. It is the uncertainty of reasons that threw him off the pro-Nam bandwagon. And, for those of us too young to have witnessed the Vietnam era, O'Brien paints a picture that it was not only merely impressionable youth that were swept up into confusion, it was the entire country, it was "smart men in pinstripes" and ordinary people (40). The matter of Vietnam had "spilled out across the floor of the United States Senate and into the streets" (40). O'Brien even goes so far as to say that "the only certainty that summer was moral confusion" (40). So in a country doused in moral turmoil, it is no wonder O'Brien had qualms about fighting in Vietnam. Among the things going through O'Brien's head the summer before he left for war were; "was Ho Chi Minh a Communist stooge, or a nationalist savior, or both, or neither?" (40). Whom would he be fighting when we went off to war? A decorated hero of his people, or a communist puppet that threatened to topple democracy if he was not stamped out and his followers forced into the light of American Government? To me, questions of this nature seem imperative to understanding a war.

I can appreciate what O'Brien is telling us when he says "you don't make war without knowing why...you can't fix your mistakes. Once people are dead, you can't make them undead" (40-41). Was America making mistakes by killing people in

Vietnam? Is that what America is doing now with the war in Iraq? I guess then, as now, it is a matter of personal opinion. One thing that we can know for sure is that blind Patriotism is about as safe as a three year old with a butcher knife. When you leave either one alone for any extended period of time, there are sure to be bloodshed and dire consequences. I suppose if I were put in O'Brien's shoes and forced to make a decision about what to do with my life, I would need time, like he did, to gather my thoughts and have time to weigh the outcomes. I do not think, however, that I would be as concerned for other's as O'Brien was. I wouldn't take into account that my parents would have to forever live with the shame of having a draft-dodging child somewhere in Canada.

I suppose if anything, I too, would think I was "too *good* for this war. Too smart, too compassionate, too everything...above it" (41). Even now I see myself as somehow above war. I am above the violence; above fighting for something I don't understand. What if someone I cared for was drafted? Would I try to find meaning in a war that a loved one might be dying in, if only to convince myself that their possible death would not be in vain? What if I were to be drafted, would I still feel the same way? Thinking about it now, the easy answer is to say that I would run away. I would have the courage that O'Brien claims he did not and flee to a foreign country and start a new life. However, unlike O'Brien, I know that years down the

road, O'Brien would be pardoned and allowed to come home to the States. But would that be home? Or would my new life have become home for me? Would I see a need to come back to the States and visit my family? It's always easier to make decisions when retrospect is involved. So I supposed that instead, I will put myself in his shoes, thirty years later with no hindsight. I'm being drafted into the Iraqi war. What am I going to do?

While in mid-story about his decision to go to war and his boat ride out into the Rainy River, O'Brien confronts readers with several important questions to consider when trying to empathize with his situation:

"I want you to feel it – the wind coming off the river, the waves, the silence, the wooded frontier...you're twenty-one years old, you're scared, and there's a hard squeezing pressure in your chest. What would you do? Would you jump? Would you feel pity for yourself? Would you think about your family and your childhood and your dreams and all you're leaving behind? Would it hurt? Would it feel like dying? Would you cry as I did?" (56).

So here I am, on a boat, a swim away from absolute freedom and away from the inevitable pain of war. I know I would cry. I know that I would contemplate childhood. I don't know that I would think about family. I think I would be too absorbed in self-pity. I might think about dreams that I would never see

fulfilled because of going off to war or starting a new life in another place. The raging internal debates always hurt; maybe it would feel like part of me was dying, or was going to die. Either choice I made would lose a part of me forever. Would I jump? I'm not a strong swimmer. I don't think I would have jumped off the boat. But what would I have done? Would I have found another way? I don't think I would have gone to the war, if only because I would never want to look back and write something like O'Brien did when he said:

"I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I'm left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief" (180).

I would never want to kill and I would never want to be shot. I wouldn't want to die at war. And maybe if I went, I wouldn't want to come home and live. I wouldn't want to live with the kind of grief O'Brien speaks of. I would flee. It wouldn't be the brave thing that O'Brien would have us to believe, it would be exactly the opposite. I would choose the cowardly way out. I would leave rather than face war. I would be too cowardly to go to war and come back a hollow shell of a self, filled with "faceless grief" and nowhere to put it. I would be too scared of war stories coming back to haunt me. I would never want this passage to apply to me:

"Twenty years later, in your sleep, you wake up your

wife and start telling the story to her, except when you get to the end you've forgotten the point again. And then for a long time you lie there watching the story happen in your head. You listen to your wife's breathing. The war's over. You close your eyes. You smile and think, Christ, what's the *point?*" (82).

I'm too cowardly to face something today that I would have to live with haunting me in my sleep twenty years after the fact. I would flee because I was too afraid to fight. I am taking the cowardly way out; I am leaving because I can't stand to face the harsh realities of death and dying anywhere. I, too, would survive, but it isn't a happy ending. I was a coward. I couldn't face the war. (61).

#### Works Cited

O'Brien, Tim. The Things They Carried. New York: Broadway Books, 1998.

Questions for discussion: Is courage something that we store up, waiting for the day in which we'll need it, or can it only be given away, in daily moments? What kind of skill does it take to write about a writer who makes no qualms about being ambiguous?