

Larry Kent Graham, Iliff School of Theology



Larry Kent Graham is Professor of Pastoral Theology and Care at Iliff School of Theology in Denver. He is a Diplomate in the American Association of Pastoral Counselors and ordained in the United Church of Christ. He is author of *Care of Persons, Care of Worlds: A Psychosystems Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Abingdon, 1992), and *Discovering Images of God: Narratives of Care with Lesbians and Gays* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997).

Teaching about war is inherently difficult because everyone has a history with war, and everyone has an agenda about war. When participants in “The Impact of War on the Pastoral Care of Families” confront difficult matters about the subject of war and the painful needs of those affected by war, their own histories and agendas frequently surface in compelling and unexpected ways, often occasioning interpersonal conflict among the students as well as deeper personal knowledge and soul-searching. Almost always, students discover some previously unknown and troubling dimensions of their own family’s history in relation to war. In learning to provide care to those affected by war, they have to come to terms with entrenched, complicated, and sometimes offensive narrative structures of meaning used by care-seekers to cope with war’s massive impact. Strong feelings of anxiety, shame, guilt, fear, anger, horror, helplessness, disbelief, shock and recovery may be elicited by confronting the realities of war. Part of my teaching strategy is to provide conceptual tools for interpreting war. I deploy a spectrum of academic, professional, and other reading, guest discussions, the construction of a family genogram and history, case consultation, and discussion. I also seek to establish a climate of care in the classroom, by which I mean listening carefully to one another and our class guests, communicating personal respect for each participant, and sharing a commitment to honest engagement of strongly held differences.

Conceptually, this course positions students on the interface between “mythic war” and “sensory war” (Hedges 2002, quoting Lawrence LeShan’s *The Psychology of War*). Mythic war refers to

the narrative of meanings and structures of interpretation used in public discourse, including religious teaching, to justify war and to develop codes and ethical norms by which war is promoted, endured, or opposed. Pastoral caregivers are often required to help persons affected by war to address “mythic” issues such as self-sacrifice, patriotism, the moral dimensions of violence, and the spiritual consequences of taking or losing life. Sensory war refers to the visceral responses generated by being in the direct presence of torn and destroyed human bodies and habitats, and the feeling of the suffering and despair generated by hostile acts of violence against fellow human beings. Religious leaders, and especially pastors, are often asked to be directly or indirectly present to the sensory horrors of war and to provide some form of mythic or narrative engagement of meaning in the context of immediate and ongoing loss. Since there are contending myths by which to interpret and respond to the dynamics of war, encountering sensory war can be extremely traumatic and destabilizing for students who are still developing their orienting systems and capacities for care-giving. The classroom provides a setting and context by which to confront and understand various approaches, to reach one’s own conclusions, and to fashion a personal mode of care-giving in relation to war issues.

The course begins with the class reading *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the classic novel by Erich Maria Remarque. The 1956 novel inducts the class into a direct engagement with both the mythic and sensory dimensions of war. The myths of human grandeur and national destiny are belied by descriptions of shattered bodies and the reduction to survival instincts forced on soldiers. War severs the structure of meanings and memories that tie soldiers to their families and communities. *All*

Quiet on the Western Front

sets the student into a world of shattered myths, random losses, and unexpected deliverance, the gritty humanity of the soldier, and the hopeful longing for reunion with a world that can never again exist for the soldier and their loved ones.

The novel introduces the mythic and sensory structures of war at the personal, social, cultural, and familial level, yet at a distance removed from their own histories and contemporary experience, thus constructing a kind of safety net in the course. The novel provides a means to learn to listen to one another in the class context, to begin sharing one’s own family history and pastoral situations, to normalize strong feelings as a part of the class discourse, and to name conflicting values and orientations to war among class members. Once students engage and discuss this book, there is no turning back; it disallows superficialities and uncovers personal and family histories and agendas, even as it provides a standpoint from which to address extremely uncomfortable realities.

In addition to reflection upon readings, the students meet guests who expand and deepen the conversation by providing their own mythic and sensory narratives of war. A graduate of the Air Force Academy and his spouse, for example, share their experiences in relation to his serving

in Vietnam as a fighter pilot and the impact his service had on their marriage and family during and after the war. They share their struggles to address their growing sense of the “insanity” of the war and perceived betrayal of our country and its military by our leaders and populace. They talk about the moral silence of the chaplains during the war and their subsequent turning to antiwar activities and participation in rebuilding Vietnam.

An army chaplain who served in Iraq also interacts with the class. Sometimes this conversation is difficult, especially when students hear the chaplain supporting militaristic solutions to political issues in a manner that runs counter to their own political and religious commitments. This conversation helps students wrestle with what it means to address mythic and sensory war from a professional standpoint as a military chaplain.

An African-American civil rights leader has shared the factors in his life that led him to choose to leave the army after fulfilling the terms of the draft, and subsequently become a peace activist. He stated, “I was pretty good at shooting targets. And I recognized that I enjoyed it. But I remembered the childhood teaching of my church, ‘Thou shall not kill,’ and I realized that the army was not teaching me to shoot because I loved shooting, but to kill people that Jesus loved.” His opposition to war became active protest a few years later when he came to believe that the war in Vietnam was forcing poor people to kill poor people, and that African Americans were supposedly fighting for freedoms in Vietnam that were denied to them in the United States (King 1966). In conversations with this civil rights leader, the commitment to nonviolence and absolute pacifism clashed with theories of just war and strategic violence to protect the vulnerable and insure survival. This participant helped students address war from a larger social-justice and cultural vantage point, raising serious questions of settled norms about military heroism and patriotism as defining one’s relationship to fellow human beings.

Ethnic, cultural, and historical complexity emerges through conversation with a Native-American speaker who challenges the dominant Euro-American and colonialist myths about Indian culture, especially as it relates to war. He describes precolonial Native-American views of warriors as defenders of people and land, and the limited role of killing in intertribal conflict. He also discloses the ambiguity of the United States toward Indians and war: on the one hand, Indians are regarded by the dominant culture as cruel savages, yet on the other hand, Indians have been called upon in disproportionate numbers to serve the U.S. military in this country’s various wars. He describes rituals Indian communities use to restore persons to the community and to themselves after combat and how community leaders stand by Indians who chose to defend their land (not the United States government) against further outside threat through participation in military service (French 2003; Holm 1990).

This array of conversations and presentations, coupled with other reading assignments (Hedges 2002; Henderson 2006), elicit a plethora of responses. Currently, one of the students in the course has a brother-in-law in Iraq, and the readings of the course are excruciating for her. Sometimes the course has reawakened memories of past trauma, for which students have sought additional counseling. Some students become very upset that other members of the class are not more critical of war and actively opposed to it. Some students report painful conversations with family members from whom they seek information for their family history and genogram. Compounding the situation, students are barraged by a continuous stream of media portrayals of various elements of the Iraq war and they experience growing tensions between contending public myths in our country about the Iraq war and the more personal and familial narratives that support or oppose the public debate.

This class confronts necessarily painful materials. However, the difficulty can be moderated and rendered educationally productive by helping students build a climate of respect and care, by engaging rather than avoiding strong differences of values, and by exposing students to a variety of resources to empower them to engage positively with the complex interplay of mythical and sensory war in the concrete lives of real human beings.

Bibliography

French, Shannon E. *The Code of the Warrior: Exploring Warrior Values Past and Present*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.

Hedges, Chris. *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. New York: Random House, 2002.

Hedges, Chris. *What Every Person Should Know about War*. New York: Free Press, 2003.

Henderson, Kristen. *While They're at War: The True Story of American Families on the Home Front*. Houghton Mifflin, 2006.

Holm, Tom. "Patriots and Pawns: State Use of American Indians in the Military and the Process of Nativization in the United States." In *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance*, edited by M. Annette Jaimes. Boston: Race and Resistance Series, South End Press, 1990.

King, Martin Luther Jr. "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence." Presented at a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned at Riverside Church, New York City, April 4, 1967.

Remarque, Erich Maria. *All Quiet on the Western Front*. New York: Fawcett Books, 1956.