

Both of the works that you have seen this evening are part of an ongoing genre of what has been described as *first person cinema*. These are films that attempt to express a deep autobiographical narrative while examining more than just the surface of events. At their best, they are delivered from a place beyond mere aspiration, a locus where the author might inhabit a position of clarity, credibility and strength, if only for a moment. In *Landscape with Shipwreck*, a volume that contains my own essay about *Obsessive Becoming*, Karen Sandlos and Mike Hoolboom write that:

Telling personal stories is dangerous work. Makers, in their conversion of pictures into words, use the secret history of their own naming as compass and guide. Their secret task is to write what cannot be written. To write what must not, must never be written. To uncover a kind of writing that is beside itself and without regret.

Each of these short films we have screened were works that called out to me in an extremely powerful voice over a period of years, asking for light, asking for presence and a chance to become, to be heard at last. What I am alluding to here is not just another delicate poetic rendering of the dialogue between the artist and the muse. That is far too easy, too demure and too simple. I mean that I was directly compelled by my own condition as a witness of traumatic and tragic events to speak out about what could seemingly not be spoken. It appeared at times to be the only way forward. Paul Celan, the great Romanian Poet and death camp survivor has written that “*No one bears witness for the witness*” And he is absolutely correct in noting that the survivor in many ways has no one who will speak for them directly.

What are the stories being told in these two films and what are the histories beneath, above and co-mingled with the narrative streams they embody? *Smothering Dreams* is an attempt to provide another view of what actually happens when we commit ourselves, our bodies, and our hearts and minds to a path of systematic organized violence. No matter what other illusions we might embrace, this is what we do when we dedicate our lives to

war. This is also what is done when we coerce, entice or casually expect others to do it in our name. We should always be mindful of what we allow to happen.

Because of what I had experienced as a young man, I was interested in formulating a perspective that sets itself in direct opposition to the prevailing myths presented to us by popular culture and the accepted dogmas and brittle conceits of our often unexamined history. Although it has been 25 years since it was made I believe it retains an acute relevance today.

Obsessive Becoming, on the other hand, is a film that attempts to come to terms with a family history of abuse, denial and secrecy while at the same time looking deeply into the mirrored universe of parallel dysfunction that exists in what can be considered the historical dimension: the world of substantial appearances and perceived realities. This is the domain of history, which in our time is compiled for consumption from press releases, market analysis, sound bites and the surface noise of hidden covenants. I am referring to the public visage of our society constructed from what is considered normal that often masks another hidden realm of deception and disavowal. We might think of this domain as the display of accumulated artifacts from our dominant cultural history, all the assertions of the status quo offered up daily for our edification. I will have more to say on this later.

Smothering Dreams looks directly at the childhood myths of war that were an important aspect of the casual indoctrination and cultivation of a generation that came of age in the 1960's, those who were born during or just after the Second World War. These myths are comprised from numerous elements; the stories brought back by uncles from Midway and Monte Casino, the comic books where a one-inch word KA-BLAM incased in a star shaped flash of blue meant death for Private Billy Joe who would not listen but not for Sergeant Rock who survives even now, the cinema and television medicine shows where heroics could be pitched on a level of slick fevered perfection undreamed of at Troy or Waterloo, the just so stories and cut out Histories that made Custer look like a knight triumphant as he lay dead and surrounded by his slaughtered troops, the endless games where in play-land parlance scores of

Japs, Krauts, Injuns and other unworthy types could be killed forever, recycled and killed again.

At the same time, *Smothering Dreams* juxtaposes and contrasts these mythologies with the pitifully unmarketable realities of combat faced by young men in Viet Nam who were for the most part, in spite of months of arduous training, not much more than teenagers dressed for a role impossible to understand. In his brilliant and definitive book *Dispatches*, the war correspondent Michael Herr refers to this phenomena when he writes:

I keep thinking about all the kids who got wiped out by seventeen years of war movies before coming to Vietnam to get wiped out for good. They were actually making war movies in their heads, doing little guts-and-glory Leatherneck tap dances under fire, getting their pimples shot off for the television networks. (Herr, Dispatches, p. 169.)

My own rather naïve expectations were completely shattered by my time in combat. On the 20th of January 1968 I somehow survived an ambush of my platoon just south of the DMZ in the opening days of the Tet Offensive in Viet Nam. Thirteen young men out of thirty-one, including our commanding officer; were killed after we were attacked by surprise and fell back to a small area behind an armored vehicle for the longest part of an afternoon. Many sustained horrible wounds and died slowly. To this day I think of it in the terms of the title of Bernard Falls book about the war in Viet Nam entitled *Hell In a Very Small Place*. On this day a regiment of North Vietnamese soldiers, who were able to fire on us from three sides, had set up the perfect ambush in and around the mounds of a rural cemetery. Sitting together on the top of our amtrac we had rolled right into it.

Some of those who died there had arrived in Viet Nam only a few days before. It is only now after nearly 40 years that I have come to know all their names. In fact, a stained glass window at the Chapel on Paris Island now honors these men. I was a young Marine radio operator. I had extended my tour of duty in exchange for 30 days free leave the previous August. After I was medivaced

and during my seven-month stay in a military hospital, I was awarded the Silver Star for gallantry in action, the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry, and the Purple Heart Medal for wounds received in combat. For years these have not been a source of pride for me and it is only recently I have spoken of them publicly. It is not that I am ashamed of them, but my memory of war in those early years was characterized by remorse and despair. The medals only inflamed my sense of perverse guilt at having survived. What I remember most about my year in Viet Nam and the ensuing years of psychological and emotional recovery was a feeling of betrayal, anguish and an overwhelming sense of sorrow for the lives on both sides that were tossed away for such an enormous folly. In a journal entry written while living in Japan twenty-two years after the war I find the following:

For years I have thought about the boys who died in the water along side and around me on the only day I can really remember fully from Vietnam. My feelings are a mixture of anger, anguish and pure astonishment at my own survival. But at some point in my remembering I always think of them as lost children much like those in that weird and paradoxical limbo preached to my brother and I in childhood. Like the unfortunates of limbo, all the boys in bloodied uniforms never had a chance to live, and like these photographs they remain frozen in time. In my deepest understanding I can see that the boys have moved on somehow. I have tried very hard to move on as well, but even in this moment cannot help but think of them like a precious glass shattering at my feet as it tumbles from my frozen hand - so quickly and without warning. I see them with all their time stolen, snatched from their eternally open arms, and I see myself walking out of this arrested moment and going forward into promise, into light - yet there is something I have left behind with them in that crystallized stillness- it comes around as weeping or guilt or the need to be present fully in every moment - what does it mean? nothing to do, nothing to be, nothing to have...

I had signed a waiver in order to leave for Viet Nam at seventeen years of age, and had my eighteenth birthday on a troop ship somewhere in the middle of

the Pacific Ocean. I had actually tried to join the Peace Corps some months previous to my enlistment but was simply not old or educated enough. When I finally arrived on the beaches of Quaing Tri province, I still fervently believed that; not only was our cause just and our goals noble but that we were offering our lives for the good of others.

Imagine for a moment that you personally have offered to put your life completely on the line for a cause - I mean you - not some fleeting image on TV, your neighbors son or daughter, the Eagle Scout from across the street or another name on a lengthening scroll in the newspaper- would you not, at the very least, like to know that the cause is legitimate and the justifications for war are true in every sense of the word? I know now after years of reflection, that very few young people will have the extraordinary insight and intellectual curiosity to know what is not freely available to know. To know what is not evident in artfully crafted press reports, to know what is denied or avoided.

In 1965 I did not know the history and culture of Viet Nam and for the greatest part neither did the policy makers who decided for war. This much is very clear. I did not know who Ho Chi Minh was or that he had admired George Washington and American Democracy all his life and that at the closing days of the Second World War he wrote to President Truman saying:

DEAR MR. PRESIDENT:

Our Vietnamese people, as early as 1941, stood by the Allies' side and fought against the Japanese and their associates, the French colonialists. The French aggression on a peace-loving people is a direct menace to world security. It is with this firm conviction that we request of the United States as guardians and champions of World Justice to take a decisive step in support of our independence. We will do our best to make this independence and cooperation profitable to the whole world. Respectfully Yours, Ho Chi Minh

I didn't know that nine years later Viet Nam under the leadership of this same man would defeat the French colonialists at the battle of Dien Bien Phu handing them a stunning defeat and the surrender of the entire French garrison of 11,000 and the deaths of 7,000 French combatants. I did not know that at one weird and wobbly moment Eisenhower weighed up the option of using nuclear weapons to

bail out the French.

Or that America had been supporting the corrupt, universally detested and autocratic regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem for years until the South Vietnamese Generals murdered Diem in a coup which America then fully supported.

Or that on June 11, 1963, Thich Quang Duc, a Buddhist monk from the Linh-Mu Pagoda in Hue, Vietnam, burned himself to death at a busy intersection in downtown Saigon in protest of the regimes persecution and assassination of Buddhist monks and their supporters by our South Vietnamese allies

Or that when on the night of Aug. 4, 1964 after the Pentagon proclaimed that a second attack by North Vietnamese PT boats had occurred earlier that day in the Tonkin Gulf and President Johnson went on national television to announce punitive air strikes against North Viet Nam we were retaliating for a North Vietnamese torpedo attack that never occurred. Or that one of the Navy pilots flying overhead that night, squadron commander James Stockdale, an eventual POW. Would testify years later that "I had the best seat in the house to watch that event, and our destroyers were just shooting at phantom targets -- there were no PT boats there.... There was nothing there but black water and American fire-power.

In 1965, Lyndon Johnson himself commented on the incident saying: "For all I know, our Navy was shooting at whales out there."

And because I didn't know any of that and much more, I was utterly astonished when we first broke through the surf of coastal Viet Nam on our amphibious vehicles, rolled up on the beach and dropped our ramps that the villagers ran as fast as they could - away from us in every direction. This was not the scene of liberation that I remembered from the Liberation of Paris. What kind of war was this?

It is sad to remember that the Vietnamese were often referred to as gooks, dinks or slope-heads and no one in command would acknowledge that like

ourselves these civilians were as expendable as the empty cartridge shells that littered the sand around us. Sometime before my final day in Viet Nam I was offered a powerful insight. Something my soul noted as much as my cognitive faculties. From the outermost edge of our patrols night defensive perimeter I watched in amazement as three North Vietnamese soldiers struggled along a tree line with what looked to be enormous loads on their backs. They were bent completely over and running under some tremendous weight and yet somehow completely empowered by their sense of mission and purpose. They were running. It was dusk and I remember being in a state of awe as I watched them disappear over a sand ridge. At that very moment, a clear realization struck me like lightning that surely *we would never be able to win this war*. I knew somehow at that very moment that we were already defeated. These men and women were fighting for their country under unimaginably difficult conditions and we did not have a single clue as to what we were fighting for. To this day I find it difficult to believe that the war continued on for seven more horrible years until we fled Saigon in those last pitiful days of April 1975. Today you can go online and listen to telephone conversations recorded in 1963 in the oval office and hear President Johnson admit that most likely we will fail in Viet Nam. Today you can hear Robert McNamara, Johnson's Secretary of Defense admit that as early as 1964 he had grave doubts about the war. There is a part of me that detests all this dishonesty and the far too late confessions by men in power who never have to kill or do the killing.

Looking back on all this immense waste, Michael Herr writes in *Dispatches* his seminal testimony on the Viet Nam war:

All that the mission talked about was control: arms control, information control, resources control, psycho-political control, population control, control of the almost supernatural inflation, control of the strategy of the periphery. But when the talk had passed, the only thing left standing up that looked true was your sense of how out of control things really were. Year after year, season after season, wet and dry, using up options faster than rounds on a machine-gun belt, we called it "right" and "righteous," "viable" and even

almost “won,” and it still only went on the way it went on. There is nothing so embarrassing as when things go wrong in a war. Herr p-48

When I awakened to what we were really doing in Viet Nam and understood how deeply the people of the countryside were suffering and perceived that we were all dying needlessly in a war with little meaning, it was as if my eyes were open for the first time. Yet by then it was also too late. By then the momentum of war had formulated it’s own instinctual logic - *withstand and survive.*

For a number of years after my release from the hospital, I would revisit the slow motion rerun of the ambush in a chronic recurring nightmare. This cyclical return to the same horror kept me running in all the wrong directions for years. After my release from the military I began to make art as if on autopilot. In an attempt to reconstruct my life in solitude, I lived in a small cabin in the woods of Maine without running water and electricity for three years with the sister of my nurse at the military hospital. Her love helped me to move back into my body and soul, that by then had become so displaced that I could not tolerate idle conversation. I deliberately isolated myself from the world. I learned to make things grow from the soil, how to build and carve things from wood, walk on snow shoes, heat our cabin with wood, learned the names of trees, birds, stars and mushrooms and read Thoreau, Faulkner, Camus and The Whole Earth Catalog long into the night. I rejected normal commerce and the trademark *business as usual* approach to American life that for me was the very engine that propelled my country and myself into such savagery and madness. My 30% VA disability payment amounted to \$70. per month and for the most part we lived on that.

From a Poem entitled *Brothers* many years after the war I write:

MY BEAUTIFUL BROTHERS -
A JOSEPHS COAT OF AMBER, JET AND IVORY
FEEDING THE TENDER ROOTS OF JADE BAMBOO
I WALK IN YOUR DIM FOOTPRINTS
AMONG THE MOUNDED GRAVES

IN THE SILENCE BEYOND THE SLEEPING RIVER
IN THE SHATTERED STUMPS
HIGH ON MARBLE MOUNTAIN-
IN THE WRECKAGE LEFT UNTENDED
UNDER THE CLOAK OF TRIPLE CANOPY
WHILE HISTORY SKIPS, SPINS AND FAILS
TO NOBLY MARK YOUR TIME AMONG US.

After finishing college under a disabled veterans rehabilitation program in 1977, I went to see the Hollywood film *The Deer Hunter* the following year. War movies had been off the menu for a decade but it had been touted as a defining cinematic statement on the war in Viet Nam. I remember leaving the cinema half way through the screening when I understood how wrong-headed and ignorant the portrayal of the North Vietnamese soldiers was. It troubled me intensely that popular culture was offering up visions of the other side in war that obscured the potential for insight and reconciliation, and perpetuated tired and burnt out myths of racial and cultural inferiority. This extremely popular film, though replete with cinematic skill, craft and virtuosity of performance, served up the same sensational projection of the otherness and brute nature of an Asian enemy that characterized films about the Japanese in the Pacific that were common fare in theaters when I was a boy. At one point in *The Deer Hunter*, North Vietnamese soldiers are shown forcing prisoners to play a drawn out version of Russian roulette with all the typical arch villain monstrosity depicted in Hollywood films produced during the 1940s. I perceived this as a kind of cultural brainwashing and evidence of a subtle, pervasive and seductive amnesia that sets in when a perverted notion of war surfaces in popular culture. In my dismay, I resolved to try to offer up something from my own experience that would respond directly to these new myths. More importantly for my psychic life was the intention to break through the boundaries of my own despair about Viet Nam.

It was my intention to avoid making the film MY STORY writ large in order to open the work more fully to the viewer. In the immediate years after the war the suicide, addiction and incarceration statistics for Viet Nam combat

veterans had become an unfolding catastrophe of huge dimensions. The media were only interested in the sensational aspects of this terrible hemorrhage for a short time. I was aware of a responsibility to speak for those who had little or no public voice. I considered it equally important to fashion an emotional modality and non-specific identity for this voice, to provide a kind of transparency that would also allow other refrains of memory from another point of view into the mix. A good example of this is the mother who states that she “*felt like she was going blind*” when she was told that her son was dead. The woman’s voice also serves as a kind of surrogate for the universal and personified memory of the abrupt arrival of the most tragic news. In fact none of the voices are identified during the tape, although it is clear that continuity is provided by a certain single voice among the others. By using my own voice from an interview that was generated in a real exchange during the filming of *Soldiers of a Recent and Forgotten War* by Philip Mallory Jones, I achieved my goal. This verisimilitude, in contrast to a prepared narrative text, affords the work a strength of presence characterized by natural tonality, spontaneity and an earnestness which threads sparsely yet clearly through the film.

I also used the voice of Ron Kovic, the author of *Born on the Fourth of July* who was wounded and paralyzed for life during the same engagement along the Cua Viet river. We hear a fragment of his speech in front of the Congress building in Washington overlaid with the sound of weeping taken from an army instructional film used for training those whose job it is to notify the relatives of the dead. At some point well in to the second year of production, after completing a short work entitled *Body Count*, that served as a study for the larger work it became clear to me that I would have to stage a dramatic recreation of the ambush. There simply was no footage available that came close to the intensity that I demanded. Clearly combat cinematographers for the most part just stop filming when things fall apart. In an interview for *AfterImage* magazine with Marita Sturken in 1985 I told her that:

*"I didn't want to have to shoot those scenes, to recreate the afternoon. It was frightening and too close to the real thing. I was very fortunate because what came out of it was so much more compelling. It was shot in a way that allowed-real energy to come through people. Crew and actors were really terrified, actors were crying without reserve, and the final condensed period of filming took place in such a short period of time that everyone came close to reliving that same experience."*⁴

When the combat filming was all over and the smoke drifted along the surface of the swamp water stained red from stage blood, I remember everyone being completely overwhelmed emotionally. There was a visceral charge in the air itself. A kind of terrible yet benevolent fury of grace had descended on our activities. People were holding on to one another and weeping as if what had transpired were utterly real. I was absolutely sure during those final minutes that if I could hold it all together over the next two months of round-the-clock editing, the work would achieve the level of strength that had been my aspiration. On some level it worked. *Smothering Dreams*, at just over twenty-three minutes in length, ended up being a phenomenal success in every respect. After a Labor Day weekend broadcast on WNET-13, the PBS affiliate in the New York Metropolitan region it was lauded by the television critic John J. O'Connor in the New York Times, who wrote: "Where *Apocalypse Now* was bloated and pretentious, *Smothering Dreams* is lean and harrowingly to the point."⁹ That winter I was the recipient of three EMMY awards for directing, camera and editing. The work was then rebroadcast nationally in the US on July 4th 1985 as part of a PBS series entitled *Alive From Off Center* and included a short interview with Susan Stanberg of National Public Radio filmed at the Viet Nam War Memorial in Washington. It was broadcast nationally in Britain, France, Germany and many other countries. It won First Prize for video art at the USA Film & Video Festival and is included in dozens of museum collections including the Museum of Modern Art, New York. More to the point, it was used in post-traumatic stress disorder treatment in hundreds of Veterans Administration outreach centers in the United States, and then again in Russia during their war in Afghanistan. Writing this essay now, so many years later, I am certain that what I know and feel about the business of

false patriotism, xenophobia and war would lead me to make an altogether different work, yet this document served its intention.

In a recent interview, the Vietnamese poet, Zen master and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh offered the image of a candle flame as a metaphor for a soldier's responsibility and conditioning:

“An act of cruelty is born of many conditions coming together. When we hold retreats for war veterans I tell them they are the flame at the tip of the candle, they are the ones who feel the heat, but the whole candle is burning, not only the flame, all of us are responsible. When we kill because we think that the other person is evil, that we are killing for the sake of peace, that we are doing a good thing, this is not right mindfulness. If we are mindful, we will see not only the present situation, but also the root and the consequence of our act in that moment. Mindfulness also helps a soldier to see that he or she may just be an instrument for killing used by his or her government.”¹⁰

In truth, this is insight that reaches to the deep roots of the problem of organized violence and the perpetual reappearance of war in our time. With the events that have risen to make the early years of this new century a time of great fear, uncertainty and suffering I feel a completely renewed commitment to this kind of work. It is clear that when governments misrepresent the truth and lie to the people who they claim to represent it is time for the governed to seek out the truth free from hesitation and fear. I believe that all artists, writers, poets have at least potentially the required tools to reclaim the truth.

In turning to address *Obsessive Becoming* I must first introduce a singularly powerful and insightful book by one of the most gifted writers, and thinkers I have encountered. The volume is entitled *A CHORUS OF STONES / THE PRIVATE LIFE OF WAR*, by Susan Griffin, who is also the author of *Woman and Nature*, *Unremembered Country* and many other fine works. I was very fortunate to discover her book towards the end of the five years of production for *Obsessive Becoming*. Doubly lucky that I found it at the end and not the beginning as it so closely mined and refined the same passionate vein I had

been exploring in that time. I'm certain to have been too influenced by its brilliance, like being blinded when you look too long at the sun.

In the opening pages of *A Chorus of Stones*, Griffin writes:

I am beginning to believe that we know everything, that all history, including the history of each family, is part of us, such that, when we hear any secret revealed, a secret about a grandfather, an uncle, or a secret about the Battle of Dresden in 1945, our lives are made suddenly clearer to us, as the unnatural heaviness of unspoken truth is dispersed. For perhaps we are like stones; our own history and the history of the world embedded in us, we hold a sorrow deep within and cannot weep until that history is sung.

Coming to the end of a five-year effort to make creative sense of a singularly confused and troubled family history, finding these insights articulated so clearly, was a great inspiration and encouragement to me. I had intuited for some time that something hidden in the shadows of the narrative could lead to a larger knowing. Thematically *Obsessive Becoming* is a film that deals with several issues at once: secrecy, denial, abuse, accountability and ultimately reconciliation and at least the possibility of transformation. These are not issues that are addressed often or clearly enough in our society. Mostly we prefer not to talk about it. We like our victims pure and our perpetrators evil. More often than not we continue to spin out old stories in which immense deceptions are conveniently hidden. Of course, in what passes in our time for popular culture, there exists a vast desolate and bizarre circus of humiliation that flourishes on the airwaves. These are the infotainment programs where you can watch the poor, emotionally deprived and desperately confused claw out each other's souls as an excuse to sell more and better detergent or something just that much more effective for restless leg syndrome. This is 21st century entertainment. It is just what we do, and sadly enough, it is perhaps just what we like. But I am talking now about something else; something on the opposing edge of the spectrum. What was important and essential for me in

making *Obsessive Becoming* was constantly striving to examine the world beneath the storyline, to get somehow beyond the rattling narrative of just who did what to whom and when, in an attempt to reveal the myriad hidden factors, influences and deeper truths which led to so much suffering. For example I recall that I was shocked to discover during my 3rd year of production, when my stepfather died, that I was eventually swept away with an intense grief for him as I began to meditate on the abject inadequacies and the sorrowful trajectory of his own life.

I suddenly realized that since I had never known my own step father, Milton had been the only father I would ever know. There would be no other. This was stunning. It brought out a feeling of complete expansiveness and understanding in me for a time. It allowed me to see who he was or who might have been and leave aside for a moment the story of what he had done to me.

So following along with that initial intuition it became important for me to try and visualize the childhood life of both of my parents. I needed to explore the sets of conditions that led to the physical and psychological abuse that was our heritage as children. Susan Griffin writes further on this:

There are those who think a story is told only to reveal what is known in this world. But a good story also reveals the unknown. There are events in our lives that we cannot understand because we keep a part of what we know away from understanding. War is one of those events. And there are other, private events, which mystify us, as if there were no explanations for them except nature itself. That we are mystified becomes a habit passed from one generation to the next. My father suffered from the silence of his father, and I suffered from his.

When my own daughter Adele was born some time later, during the 4th year of production, once again I experienced the overwhelm of some vast enigma holding her in my arms in the first hour of her birth peering into her tiny face and somehow seeing some part of my mothers visage looking up at me. What a boundless mystery. My mother - dead for two years and then again still in this world in some marvelous way - What is it that makes that intimate leap from a

generation separated by time and death? What is it that allows me to find love so present for this new being in my embrace and struggle to find love and understanding for a mother who was so skilled in not being honest or available? I think it is that part which is forever concealed. I have come to believe in my own life that love cannot be found where there is no understanding; just as life is impossible without water.

Susan Griffin writes further:

How much do we know or not know in those we love? Love is, in some way, a kind of seeing through which many intricate facts are embraced. What is hidden, kept secret, cannot be loved. It exists in a place of exile, outside the realm of response.

So my intention in *Obsessive Becoming* was driven by what I experienced as a compelling obligation to look for the truths that had been held back, unrevealed or denied in my own history and the larger history in which our lives are always imbedded. I have found a great resistance at times to the notion that personal history and these wider historical dimensions have any such relationship. For me there never seemed to be any separation at all. I remember seeing the Korean War on Television along with the Army - McCarthy hearings, the launch of the Soviet Sputnik while I was a 9 year old military school boy, the insanity of the Cuban Missile Crisis from ground zero in Washington D.C., a race riot from the back seat of a stranger's car, the Assassination of John F. Kennedy from my desk in a Georgia High School where some students actually cheered, the Civil Rights struggle while living 60 miles from Selma Alabama and the Viet Nam War from the inside out. None of this ever felt like background or backdrop but was at the core of my experience as a child and as an adult. Everything that occurred behind and beyond closed doors was completely connected for me. Developing this dynamic further Susan Griffin writes:

How does our sense of history change when we consider childhood, and perhaps more important, why is that until now we have chosen to ignore

this point of origination, the birthplace and womb of ourselves, in our consideration of public events? Nowhere is there a record of all that has happened in human history, except in living consciousness. And does the truth each of us knows die along with us unless we speak it? This we cannot know. Only we know that the consequences of every act continue and themselves cause other consequences until another generation will accept the circumstances created of these acts as inevitable. Unless instead this generation tries to unravel the mystery. And if they penetrate the secret whose scent persists in all eventualities, will they say, finally, this death, this wound, this suffering, was not necessary?

In examining both of the works we have seen tonight I am brought round to the present that we are living in this great country of ours. I can't help feeling that there is a hugely somnambulant quality to our attention as a people; as if we were asleep and at the same time walking toward the unknown in our concerns for our purpose and courage as a society. Sleepwalking and careless in our understanding and commitment to preserving the world we have to offer our children and the generations beyond us yet unknown. I have only returned here after a long time away and I have pondered over many questions since my return. Chief among them is this:

What does it take to make a country great? For me the only answer is a litany of important aggregate questions. Is greatness what we say we believe in, it what we publicly declaim? Is it simply what we tell ourselves to feel safe or good? Is it only a piece of cherished parchment from another time and place beyond easy recall? Is it notions about being first among nations, favored exclusively by a god or possessing a manifest destiny considered at face value more valuable and correct than all other national aspirations and values the world over? Is it our ability to be proud, offended, afraid, self righteous, aggressive and defiant or is it about our real capacity for reflection, wisdom, sacrifice, courage, honesty and generosity. Are people of color less deserving of our countries protection and justice? If not, then why are our prisons growing faster than schools and colleges and why are the demographics of incarceration

so skewed against minorities? Why has watching police officers manhandle and humiliate the not yet convicted become a shameless public spectacle on TV? Where is the pleasure to be found in that? Can we service a metastasizing population of the ultra rich while education, healthcare and equal justice for the millions who work the day and night jobs are left to drift and founder? How long will this inequity prove sustainable? What is the meaning and benefit of a permanent state of war? Who benefits? Who is actually fighting in our name and what happens to them when they are damaged forever and deemed to be of no more use? Why is there no real sacrifice asked of us and why are we constantly being coached to be afraid instead of courageous? Is placing a two-dollar magnet ribbon on the back of a car all we need to do in support of those who do the fighting? When I first came back to America nearly two years ago it appeared that 3 out of 5 cars sported these stickers. I felt that they were well intentioned but they seemed a far too easy and automatic panacea. It's not as if choosing to display a sticker is not sincere and well meant it is just simply not enough. What truth could they be obscuring?

Such decals are fast disappearing as a larger truth unfolds. In fact the leading manufacturer of these stickers sold over 4,000,000 in 2004 and only 48,000 last year. What is there to learn from this? - that we no longer support our troops? I don't think so. There is some other unspoken truth.

Mahatma Gandhi, the great Indian patriot and spiritual leader, said this: *Truth never damages a cause that is just. Truth stands, even if there be no public support. It is self-sustained.* Why is it then that the pursuit of deep truth in our nations interest considered unnecessary or even unpatriotic at times? Is it the flag we are asking our young women and men to kill and die for? I don't think so, but why are we, a free people not allowed to see the flag draped caskets of our dead as they come home from war? Why is it illegal to photograph them as they stack up in Delaware and then are dispersed to homes across our nation that have filled with the most inconceivable grief? An immeasurable grief that only those truly touched by it can know. Some of you may already know. Is there something in that grief, which in truth belongs to each and every one of

us, which is too shameful to see? I don't think so. Bizarrely enough, the places you can see the largest flags and the most flags, day in and day out, night after night, the whole year round is not a sacred place, a hallowed ground or a memorial for the sacrifice of our dead. Fluttering over the car dealerships and used car lots that, in the words of Garcia Lorca, *blot out the plans of the forest*, you will be able to view, anytime, with absolutely no restrictions whatsoever - 250 foot wide behemoth flags furling in the bright crossed arcs of blazing spotlights floating calmly over regiments of shiny pickups through the endless, if not quite perilous, night - or perhaps 250 tawdry dusty and neglected five foot sun bleached flags in dense perimeters around the emporiums of the previously owned vehicle, inviting you to come on in and put your dollar down on yet another car.

You can make a bikini, a barstool or a toilet seat from the flag motif, almost any conceivable market item can be festooned with the flag front, back and center and no one will say a damn word. What does this say about our public life? What does the flag's relationship to the consumption of cars tell us about this war that we might not want to know? Why is the production and glorification of ever more deadly smart weapons more important to us than an affordable dialysis machine, renewable energy or a cure for cancer?

Have we as a people really made that decision or is it in fact just allowed to happen in the service of the economy? Who really profits from war? What will become of us if the economy is eternally perceived as the ultimate arbiter of significance above all other values and concerns? Can we afford to factor finance and market issues before all else on a line item perched light years above the lives and future well being of our children and the health of their planet? I know we need to think about it.

When I left for Europe in 1985 there were no red or blue states, people did not often slander and insult one another for their political beliefs as if faith and trust in community and commonality were unpatriotic and condemnable notions. And above all, people were not so curiously afraid or too self absorbed to ask questions that might bring their government to task for its errors,

untruths and omissions. We should never be afraid to assume responsibility for what is being done in our names. If we allow ourselves to succumb to fear, rancor and lethargy, then democracy becomes just another word for “*nothing left to loose*”, in the words of Janis Joplin. And if democracy makes us great, then lets have one. A government by the people and for the people is just that. Not just some of the people, or the people we deem worthy, or one party over another, or those who get there first, or the rich and powerful, but all of the people. Can we just afford to leave it to the politicians, who can’t even get near the starting gate without being weighed down with obscene bags of money for the networks? Can we allow the electoral process to be beyond accountability as if some voters and their votes were just not worth counting? Why is our polity so beaten down with ill will, attack and the politics of insult and defamation? Can freedom and liberty be outsourced? I don’t think so. What is a gated community? A fort in the wilderness made of logs, a medium security prison with a population of young drug offenders, a country building a colossal wall toward it’s southern neighbors, or ranks and rows of macmansions for the sleepwalking to feel a momentary security before the storm? These are all questions worth asking.

I love this country with my whole being and I think I know it well. I was born and raised eight blocks from the White House in Washington D.C. I explored and roamed freely through all of the government buildings, monuments, museums and parks during endless weekends and long summers during my youth.

After a time I began to know and love those marvelous, mysterious, spacious halls and strips of nature as a grand and amiable back yard. It was not heaven but I felt safe, free and unafraid. Homeland security was the knowledge that you were home wherever you were. *Hey mister how far is Constitution Avenue? Does the Lafayette Square bus stop here ?* We went to George Washington’s home and Marshall Hall on the steamer, played tag under Lincolns colossal marble knees, raced up Washington’s looming white obelisk and breathless at last rode the elevator back down, took the train to Harpers Ferry on a day precisely 100 years after John Brown launched his momentous raid, rode out to

Bull Run and Antietam and knew the meaning of awe before it became a way of describing the flavor a new smoothie or a pair of sunglasses.

On the 20th of January 1961, I stood in the most bitter cold for hours with my brother Tom waiting for our new president, John F. Kennedy, to pass by in the inaugural motorcade. We were so proud and excited. We got our moment of exaltation and were so very thrilled, inspired and grateful when he waved briefly and with great dignity to the crowd that we were part of. It was an election to remember. I will never forget it. On the afternoon of January 20th 1968 so strangely and exactly seven years later to the day, my life would change forever on the battlefield. I will never forget it. The Marines who I served with, the ones who returned and those who did not, were African Americans, Native Americans, Jews, Italians, Poles, Germans, Japanese, Czechoslovakians like myself and every other imaginable combination of belief, color and ancestry. But most importantly they thought of themselves and were considered by others as Americans. None of them came from a red or a blue state and most of them were too young to vote. Think of it - too young to vote.

I have lived deep in the Maine woods and in the deepest South, in the beautiful Finger Lakes of upstate New York and in the mission district of San Francisco and have spent good times in most of our 50 states. I'm even married to a Texan, now who would have dreamed of that? Truly there is nothing like this land in the entire known world.

America and Americans are capable of the greatest kindness and of unimagined courage and generosity. You might even consider it a national treasure if we knew how or cared enough to measure such things.

I figured out not long ago that at 58 I have also lived a total of 25 years in other countries far and wide across the globe, Southeast Asia, Guatemala, Peru, India, Japan, Britain and France and spent professional time in many others.

No part of my personal education and experience has offered me as much in understanding my own country and the world it coexists with. I have learned deep lessons from this being among others and the casual diplomacy it demands.

I truly believe with all my heart that on some level human nature is the same everywhere. I have seen time and time again that all peoples seek and deserve happiness and that they all aspire to the right to live unharmed, in health and freedom. It is just that simple. That very knowledge is a place to call home and a vantage point to set out from. I believe that this insight is the real hope and promise of democracy, wherever it is allowed to exist.

In summation I would like to offer this from one of the boldest essays of the 20th century entitled *Neither Victims nor Executioners* by the French Philosopher and writer Albert Camus. He brilliantly defines the dilemma of our time in these words:

All I ask is that, in the midst of a murderous world, we agree to reflect on murder and to make a choice. After that, we can distinguish those who accept the consequences of being murderers themselves or the accomplices of murderers, and those who refuse to do so with all their force and being. Since this terrible dividing line does actually exist, it will be a gain if it be clearly marked. Over the expanse of five continents throughout the coming years an endless struggle is going to be pursued between violence and friendly persuasion, a struggle in which, granted, the former has a thousand times the chances of success than that of the latter. But I have always held that, if he who bases his hopes on human nature is a fool, he who gives up in the face of circumstances is a coward. And henceforth, the only honorable course will be to stake everything on a formidable gamble: that words are more powerful than munitions.