

Jonah 1: 17 - Now the Lord had prepared for a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was inside the fish for three days and three nights.

Jonah 2: Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from inside the fish. He said, "I cried out to the Lord in my great trouble and he answered me. I called to you from the land of the dead, sheol, and Lord, you heard me! You threw me into the ocean depths, and I sank down to the heart of the sea. The mighty waters engulfed me; I was buried beneath the wild and stormy waves. Then I said, 'O Lord, you have driven me from your presence. Yet I will look once more toward your holy Temple.' "I sank beneath the waves, and the waters closed over me. Seaweed wrapped itself around my head. I went down to the very roots of the mountains. I was imprisoned in the earth, whose gates lock shut forever. But you, O Lord my God, snatched me from the jaws of death! As my life was slipping away, I remembered the Lord. And my earnest prayer went out to you in your holy Temple. Those who worship false gods turn their backs on all God's Mercies. But I will offer sacrifices to you with songs of praise, And I will fulfill all my vows. For my salvation comes from the Lord alone."

Then the Lord ordered the fish to spit Jonah out onto the beach.

The Belly of the Whale

This psalm of Jonah takes me back to:

MARCH 4, 2007. My 24th Birthday.

I was in the Sea of Cortez sailing a reach from Cabo San Lucas to Mazatlan, Mexico. It was a short passage, and we were making it in a 40' Ketch, named the Morning Star. She was a wooden boat constructed of fir and oak, and she was my home.

That night there was a full moon and cloudless sky. A sort of raw and gut wrenching beauty as the winds had increased to a sustained 35-40 knots with gusts up to 60. The NE gale was blowing down from the Bay of California and had kicked up long heavy swells of 20 to 25 feet.

So large that as we rode in the trough of the waves the horizon would disappear, and it seemed like a wall of water hemmed us in, and then the hull would ride to crest the oncoming wave and I could look out over the sea and the horizon and there was the sky and the constellations, and the sea full of foaming white capped waves. They looked like the ridges of the mountains in the night, but they were mountains that had taken to foot and were marching and shifting, bearing down on us.

Then the boat would sink back into the trough and it was all water again. Then another wave would tower over the masts, and just as it seemed that it would break on us and roll us under, the hull would heal over and rise up to the swell. At times she would mount the waves and they would crash against the hull and the spray from the wave would rise and for a moment in the moonlight it seemed as though the spray held itself suspended in the night before caught by the wind and hurled back into the cockpit lashing me with the cold briny sea.

All the while the vessel rode on, rising and falling, and I could feel the tension of her rigging in the hull through my seat, the strain of the rudder through the helm into my hands, and it felt as though the sheets and shrouds and sails were extensions of my nerves, as though I were attached to them by strings, and they pulled at my being as the hull and rig bent to each gust.

It was in this moment when I was a top of a wave and riding back down into the trough that I saw the whale.

It's massive bulk was surfing down the face of the approaching swell, illuminated by the light of the full moon,

the phosphorescents silhouetted its massive body, and left a glowing trail behind it as it sounded down into the deep. And in the next moment I was riding up swell where it had been.

It happened in a moment, like a still frame photo, taken, and catalogued away, so fleeting and surreal that it is hard to know if it ever even existed, or if my mind had conjured the image up.

That night I found myself asking the same question you are most likely asking now. How in the hell did I end up here?

Before we get there, allow me to jump ahead in my story a moment to BEAUFORT, SC 2009.

I believe one of the greatest struggles facing veterans today is in finding ways to tell their stories. Equally as important to finding a way in which to tell one's story, is to find the proper audience.

When it comes to telling the story of war I am taken back to my first college class on Postmodern Literature, taught by my mentor, Dr. Ellen Malphrus. In this particular class we talked a lot about Vietnam. Postmodern Lit cannot be separated from the Vietnam War. Just as one can not separate Southern Culture from the Civil war. Because War defines generations. Or shall I say that each generation is defined by the war that the previous generation sends them into.

It was in this class of Postmodernism that I was introduced to the writings of William Eastlake and Tim O'Brien. For me the literature was uncensored, explicit, raw truth that was totally relatable. It was free from the falsehoods of propaganda that too often used to interject political persuasions into the truths in the stories of veterans, making them unreliable.

When attempting to tell a true war story I refer to Tim O'Brien's novel, *The Things They Carried*, he wrote, "In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way."

Modernist writer Ernest Hemingway once wrote the introduction to an anthology, *Men At War*. He said "A writer's job is to tell the truth. His standard of fidelity to the truth should be so high that his invention, out of his experience, should produce a truer account than anything factual can be, for facts can be observed badly."

As a writer of war, we can not shy from the horrific and remain true. For myself, the truest accounts of war are in Hemingway's Vignettes. They are beautiful and they are obscene. They are poignant in their surrealness, they are snapshots into the humanity of those caught in the inhumanity of war. That is how I remember the war, as a string of snapshots buried so deeply in my subconscious that they seem unreal. They are embarrassing when told, and they are as conflicted as they are conflicting.

And so, here are three of the vignettes that I wrote that semester. They are explicit.

The only real background you need to know is that my first day in training to be a Navy Hospital Corpsman was September the 11th, 2001. I was a medic serving with Golf Company, 2nd battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, and was a part of the invasion into Iraq in 2003, I was still a boy, having only aged 20 years.

AN-NASARIYAH, IRAQ

"The first thing they saw when they entered the country was a man lying prostrate on the desert road beside a burned out truck. His body had been consumed by flame, and left charred black in an eternal silent scream. A child beside him, like father, forever seized in blackened flesh, the last moments of his innocent existence consumed by war, fire, and howling pain. He died, one hand clasped around his father's white boned ankle.

“There was a large open room with long vertical windows. The light of the desert sun was low in the late sky and flooded into the space. There were bodies stretched out along the floors of the room. The bodies were motionless. The eyes in the bodies watched as the American walked amongst them, their heads turned together in unison following him. He stopped, and bent down to look at their burns, their amputations, and the dressings around their wounds. An old woman in black, her skin hanging in folds from her thin bones said nothing, and turned her head away from him when he offered his help, then sighed quietly, and when he turned from her a young man was brought into the room, gasping for air, blood boiling out bits of bone from his sunken chest wound, gasping, his trachea deviated. He went to dress the wound, but the Sergeant put his hand on his shoulder, ‘Come on, Doc,’ he said. ‘Don’t waste your shit on them. We have Americans to unbury.’

“Dawn rose beside the river filling the grove of palms with warm fresh new light, and a solitary birdsong filled the new settled morning quiet. The Marines were laid out sleeping on the dusty ground, the Sergeant warmed his morning rations, kneeling beside his rifle. Then a cattle bell, and the Sergeant stood slowly, taking up his rifle as a herd of goats came along the raised road bed. Bedouin men in flowing gowns with heads wrapped in dull muslin cotton herded them with shepherd’s sticks, walking in slow and determined gates. Behind the herd a caravan of camels, atop one sat a woman in hijab, almond eyes peering out from her speckless shawl, sitting proud upright and tall, and the men woke one by one and she looked down upon their dirty unclean worn faces, strangers all in a strange land.”

Perhaps a Sunday sermon is not the place to dive much deeper, but you see it is hard to stop, once the telling begins. Once we begin our narrative the war plays across our minds like a movie. And if we are not careful, when asked about war, then we may tell you about the war.

And so of course the question now is, what does this have to do with Jonah? I tell you this, it has less to do with Jonah, than it does with the whale.

SAN DIEGO CA, 2006

The story of the Belly of the Whale is not an isolated account specific to the Judeo Christian tradition. The theme of the belly of the whale spans across mythologies so far and universally wide that it is a common theme to what Joseph Campbell came to describe as the Hero’s Journey. The belly of the whale is also synonymous with Sheol, as named by Jonah in the psalm, otherwise known as the land of the dead. Just as when Odysseus traveled across the river Styx and into Hades to confront the ghost’s of his past he gained enlightenment into his calling. Odysseus fulfilled the passage of the threshold to be reborn, as Jonah did. Or it can also be synonymous with the cave. Like in Beowulf, where the hero dives beneath the waves to confront the monster Grendel and his mother, which Freud would tell us is a thinly veiled metaphor for the hero diving into his own subconscious to confront the mother temptress and or the image of his own mutilated self. Because that is just it, the Belly of the Whale is not an external thing, but it is internal. The Belly of the Whale is in all of us.

Campbell writes that this popular Belly of the Whale motif is a symbol of the world wide womb, it is a sphere for rebirth, that the passage of the threshold itself into the belly requires a form of self-annihilation, like the passing of a worshipper into a temple- where the worshiper is quickened by the recollection of who and what he is, namely ashes and dust.

For me, the threshold into the Whale’s Belly can be said to be at the gates of Rock Bottom.

We all know someone who has been there, or who is still there. Most of us have been there ourselves. We veterans have all been in the Belly of the Whale, and too many have been unable to break free of it.

My descent began shortly after I separated from the service.

At the time I was living on my boat in San Diego, I had had a string of failed relationships, unable to give of myself to two good women that I cared about, unable to communicate or commit, and another short and devastating affair that left me in what I can only term as a downward spiral, caught between what seemed like a maelstrom and a gale wind.

What did rock bottom look like for me?

One dark and stormy winter night looking at myself in the mirror of my head, I balled my fist, and punched my image repeatedly. Then I took to the docks, alone and drunk, with a bottle of whiskey, cursing the elements of wind, cursing the moon, cursing existence. I crossed the highway that separated the marina from the ocean, marched out into the surf of the heaving sea, where I challenged God, Neptune, and Davy Jones himself to have it out, then and there, then being swept off my feet by the surf I was raked across the cobbled beach, somehow to wake up still alive on the sole of my boat, soaking wet, bruised and bleeding, and hungover.

In my novel the main character asks a gatekeeper: "How far down is the bottom of the well?" The gatekeeper answers, "That depends upon the depth of a man's soul."

The moral of the descent of Jonah is a fairly simple one. Jonah turned away from God's call and so was punished. But Jonah's rock bottom was not in the Belly of the Whale. It was in the belly of the storm tossed ship, with the winds crashing about the rigging, a vessel sinking, and cursed, he being the cause of the demise of all his ship-mates. But Jonah asks for them to cast him into the sea. You see, only after a moment of self-sacrifice can he willingly pass through the threshold into the belly of the whale.

Yet there are many roads down to the descent, many ways to the bottom of the well.

For me personally, I am reminded of Nietzsche who wrote, "Why did I startle in my dream, so that I awoke? Did not a child come to me, carrying a mirror?"

Standing in the bows of my boat, thousands of miles from family and home, truly, really looking into the mirror for the first time perhaps since the war, what did I see? The innocent child looking back at me, lost and gone forever. Was he taken, did I kill him, or did he fade from me from neglect?

What steals a child's innocence?

In war there is no black or white. The entire experience is thrown at you in some surreal fog of gray, where the situations and conflicts are so infinitely complicated with the stakes being life and death. Decisions that have to be made with only a few seconds to weigh the outcomes, and these are boys fighting these wars, often boys with little to no education, often with traumatic family backgrounds, who have never been truly challenged to discern for themselves the complicated maze of what is right and what is wrong, and what are the consequences. Poorly equipped to manage the trauma that comes to them, and that spirals into a lack of self awareness and lack of self control. And then, when it is all over, we have the rest of our lives to think about the choices we made, the consequences, to reflect on the truth that we were not valiant, or honorable, just kids, just kids trying to survive.

Here is an example:

On one hand a bus pulls up to a checkpoint carrying passengers of women and children. The driver has driven that road for 30 years, and suddenly there is concertina wire and men behind sandbags with machine guns. Confused, he speeds up to get through it.

On the other hand the Marines behind the sandbags are given orders, to stop all traffic and check all vehicles. Beyond the checkpoint is the Battalion headquarters. What if the bus were a suicide bomber come to blow them all up?

They open fire.

The consequence was that that day the aid station treated 12 civilians. 7 died. One was a seven year old girl, another a pregnant mother, shot through the womb.

“You may survive the war,” said Tim O’Brien, “but you will come home dead.”

Many of my veteran friends have never left the war. Most are divorced. Estranged from their children. We have all had problems with drugs or alcohol. One is in jail for rape and attempted murder. Everyday a rock bottom, unable to cross the threshold into the belly.

SEA OF CORTZ, MARCH 4TH, 2007,
My 24th Birthday

I set out on a journey to cross the seas. Sailing from San Diego to Charleston, so that I could enter into college to study the art of writing, and so that I could learn to tell my war story. For me, that journey was my opportunity to make a transition, it was meant to heal. And for six months I struggled against God and Nature, but mostly against myself. That journey was my Belly of the Whale moment to struggle with my own humanity. I saw great wonders in that time, storms at sea and beautiful sunrises, but none were as beautiful as the long awaited sun after the night of the whale.

With my brother there beside me, we watched as the golden sun broke the horizon, and warmed our cold exhausted wet bodies. Within hours of its rise, the wind let up and the swell began to calm. We survived. That night as I had wrestled with what seemed like death, I came to a conclusion.

If I had died that night I could not say with any certainty in what condition my soul would rest for eternity, be there a hereafter or not. But I knew that I did not want to die. I did not want to leave the world from that place without having righted the wrongs within myself. I realized that the sun would rise on a new day regardless of how dark the night, and with a new day was a new birth and new life. Resurrection. I was determined to rise up to be my best self.

I still struggle. Just because we are spit up on the beach does not mean that our trials are over. If you don't believe me keep reading Jonah's story. I have struggled to find my calling as a writer. I have always known my calling was to tell my story, to convey the truths I have learned as I have seen them. I have struggled to write this story for 15 years. I have struggled to find my voice, to find time, to find a routine, to find energy, for creating takes a lot of focused energy. But to be a writer is to commit to a life of poverty, to put your art above all, but I have committed to being a provider instead, and to put my family above my art...and I am ok with that.

So I will leave you with this,

THE PACIFIC OCEAN, the first morning of our journey. Overcast with variable western winds. The sea was calm like gazing into a looking glass when up from the depths rose the black hulk of a gray whale, blowing out and then sounding again. And then another, and another, and again more until the sea was full of them. Rising alongside the easy gliding hull of the Morning Star, rolling to their sides, peering up from their well-like eyes, into whose depths are held the most ancient of the sea's secrets. And then the pod swam on to the south. Forever on to the south, beckoning us to follow into the unknown.

Ananda Coomaraswamy wrote; “No creature can attain a higher grade of nature without ceasing to exist.”

So my charge and benediction is this to you: Do not fear the The Belly of the Whale. But instead when the whale beckons you, may you follow it into that pathless sea. Amen.