

DAVID MORRIS

Pro Patria

Throughout my youth, my father could always be counted upon for a motivational slogan. In times of crisis, these nuggets of wisdom would sprout from his mouth, forming a kind of pithy patchwork for our years together. Later, these phrases became power words, mantras that I would say to myself at certain moments. Without realizing it I came to believe in them, organize my life around them.

“Early bird gets the worm.”

“Gotta make hay while the sun shines.”

“Sometimes you just need a bigger hammer.”

“Tough times don’t last, tough people do.”

My father was not a reader of books and never claimed to be the second coming of Vince Lombardi, but he’d done well for himself. He’d been raised on a beef cattle ranch in Eastern Oregon and after a tour in the navy in Vietnam, he’d started a successful real estate business in San Diego that allowed him to live in a manner that was the envy of his brothers and sisters who had all remained in Oregon. Despite his comparative affluence, he hated the trappings of American wealth and sneered at the mere mention of golf, never joined a country club, rarely took vacations and put in twelve hour days, six days a week at the office. Sundays were spent at the gym. His major concession to luxury was the brand-new BMW 5-series he purchased every other year, always in gun-

metal. Hard work, free enterprise and the US military were the only things he had any faith in, as evidenced by his three marriages. Grit, perseverance, not being a candy ass. These were the major themes of my childhood.

Wherever I went, people seemed to hammer on these themes. (Did I choose the path, or did the path choose me?) Something in my face seemed to speak to my teachers and coaches, urging them to lean harder into me. I had and still have an excruciatingly readable face and I think my teachers took my expressions as a challenge to their authority: I was a piece of leather begging to be tanned. My father was only one of many leather workers, but naturally it is his hands that I remember best. Later in life, I would remind myself that he'd known only the ranch growing up. There was no beach time or cable television waiting for him at the end of the day—only an early turn-in and early rise for the next work day. His life was a monument to the most basic of pioneer rhythms, the never-ending work cycle, the cattle drive to the railhead, the hunt for deer and elk. To deviate from these immortal habits was to invite chaos.

Like a lot of navy men, my father stayed in San Diego after the war, raising my brother and I with my mom in a tract house in a military suburb called Poway, a name that meant “the end of the valley” in the local Indian dialect. The sea was miles away but during big winter swells, the salty air would drift up the valley and park itself over the stands of oak and eucalyptus trees, making the area feel like a lost neighborhood of San Francisco. The Miramar air station was down the road and most of our neighbors were pilots or retired pilots or Marine officers who'd served in Vietnam. Our next door neighbor, a man named Ernst, served as a technical advisor on *Top Gun* and among the many photographs lining the walls of his den was a picture of him with Tom Cruise.

Every August the family went to the Miramar Air Show and watched the Blue Angels, the Navy's aerobatic squadron perform. Crowds estimated in the hundreds of thousands lined the tarmac to watch the Blue Angels perform stunts with names like the “Delta Break Out,” the “Diamond Half-Cuban Eight” and the “Double Farvel.” Afterward, my brother Dan and I would chat up the pilots and take photographs posing in front of our favorite jets. Mine was the F-15C

Eagle, built by McDonnell Douglas. My brother preferred the Lockheed SR-71 Blackbird, which held a number of speed records and was, by some definitions, technically a spacecraft because it flew so high. We spent entire weeks in the garage during the summer laboring over plastic models of F-15s, SR-71s, F-18s, and F-4 Phantoms, painting their wings with tiny brushes made in Italy. One of our neighbors down the street had recently been accepted to the Air Force Academy and being good Poway kids, we steadfastly maintained the superiority of the Navy and Marine Corps over the Air Force, or as we called it, the “Chair Force.”

My brother and I attended the excellent public schools a couple miles from home and there we played football and wrestled and mostly got good grades, though my brother was a star of the classroom in a way that I never would be. Because he had three inches and twenty pounds on me, he was sought by the football coaching staff, even though I had played Pop Warner ball and he had not. Dan would go on to graduate third in his class, just out of the spotlight, yet retaining a preternatural ability to please adults simply with his presence. By contrast, I was a bit of a fuck-up, good in English, indomitable in History (I once corrected a teacher about the nature of the landings at Omaha Beach), but comically bad at Math. The Science Department viewed me with a sort of sighing disappointment, as if they had been given charge of Newton’s half-wit cousin.

As soon as my brother and I were old enough—twelve in my case—we were taken on month-long backpacking trips to Oregon and the Sierra Nevada led by my father, my uncle Mark and his wife Jane. The goal, my father explained, was to backpack around the base of Denali in Alaska after my senior year of high school. My father had grown up the hard way and he seemed to look upon these expeditions as being central to our upbringing, even though in truth, my brother and I preferred to think of ourselves as ocean people. The idea that these trips—where we averaged ten miles a day at high altitude—would exhaust most adult American males would only occur me years later when I would watch to my delight as one after another of my fellow officer candidates passed out and were snatched up by waiting ambulances on a perfectly level piece of trail in the Quantico woods,

never to be heard from again. By the time I was a junior in high school I had summited Mount Whitney twice by two different routes and hiked the entirety of the John Muir Trail from north to south. Dan and I grew up tough and while he was clearly the better student, I was the better pain sponge, a fact that no doubt played into my decision to join the Marine Corps without really thinking about it too much.

The spell of High Americana seemed to break once my brother graduated from high school and went off to college in Berkeley, leaving me unattended, alone in our too-perfect house with only my Dad, his real estate business that seemed to leave him with more money than he knew how to reasonably spend and his new second wife, a recent émigré from Houston and the daughter of an oil scion. For reasons that remain obscure even to me, my grades plummeted and by the end of my junior year there was talk of me being sent to a boys' academy in Eastern Oregon that doubled as a working cattle ranch. Later, through a convoluted series of events involving a former regent that my stepmother had tended to in his hour of mortal need when she worked as a nurse at the Anderson Medical Center, it was arranged for me to attend Texas A&M as a cadet, provided I attended a local junior college the summer before fall classes began and maintained a "B"-average. Thus the military and eventually the Marine Corps became a kind of reform school for me.

Texas A&M taught me the beauty of repetition, the transcendence of mindlessness. As cadets, we rose every day at the same time and ran the same three miles around campus, chanting the same words to the same war songs. ("One, Two, Three, Four, Every day I Pray For War...") I learned to appreciate the beauty of identical things, until I yearned to become identical myself, to think of myself as a piece of a machine, the working member of a team. For weeks, the hot clear weather was unvarying; I wore the same shade of khaki that cadets had worn a hundred years before, the co-eds wore maroon ribbons in their hair, the cadet band played the same songs in the same order every evening before dinner, ending always with the "Aggie War Hymn." The day ended with taps being played by the A&M bugle corps. More than once these notes, played by four buglers at the far ends of the cadet quad, brought me to tears.

Repetition gave way to discipline and my grades rose. I liked the process, the feeling of control it gave me. Being a cadet had given me a sense of mastery over my life, though I could feel that the Corps of Cadets wasn't enough. The spring of my junior year, my roommate was kicked out of school for smoking pot. Alone in my barracks room, I flipped out and started attending meetings of the campus philosophy club. Discussing existentialism, the ethics of suicide, and the cult of Dionysius while wearing a uniform gave me the feeling of being high in some way. I began to feel like a secret agent. On the outside I was an automaton, a khaki-clad robot, but inside I was a revolutionary who listened to Sonic Youth, read Nietzsche and flirted with vegetarianism. Within me I hoped to contain all human contradiction, the wisdom that existed between opposites. I began to think of human truth as a bird in flight, a shadow that could be glimpsed only by those who kept their eyes pinned to the skies.

In our quarters, we were allotted a single 3X5 card of "personal space" on the cork boards over our desks. Over my desk was an index card with the words my father had spoken years before:

TOUGH TIMES DON'T LAST
TOUGH PEOPLE DO

This truism stood vigil over my studies for three years before I began to see certain conceptual flaws in it. The sentiment had a certain appeal to it, naturally, but the idea that brainless endurance was the key to life was self-destructive, almost self-immolating when you actually thought about it. It began to gnaw at me. In my short time on earth, I'd already met a number of stubborn idiots who seemed to live by the light of this platitude. By the time my junior year arrived, I'd come to accept the essential idiocy of the saying but I left the 3X5 card up on my corkboard as a symbol, a bullshit relic of my youth that had nevertheless kept me in good stead. It was a sinister thing to discover at such an age—that an axiom, a law of your upbringing could be proven bogus once you really looked at it.

I had accomplished a number of things in Texas—I was a solid citizen, I was on my way to a college degree, I had a future—but inside I was going mad. I liked the structure the Corps of Cadets had given me but I had to leave. And yet I had nowhere else to go. It started with

a book—an immense volume on the Occult, assigned reading for a course on the philosophy of religion. Reading it was terrifying. Between its covers was every forbidden idea I'd ever heard of. The problem presented by the book was simple: it was evil and yet I enjoyed it. I liked reading about witchcraft, numerology, tarot, human sacrifice and Kabbalah. I liked dwelling on the black arts that the Catholic Church had spent centuries trying to eradicate. Satanism and Aleister Crowley. Alchemy and paganism. The sacred feminine and yoga. Astrology and human fate. Schizophrenia and the divine. The role that the planet Mercury played in the rise of the United States of America. I read some chapters so many times the pages began to fall out. I became fascinated by words like apophenia, divination, arcana, calcination, gematria, Hesed and Geburah. Walking to class I would repeat these words over and over again, the taps on my polished black oxfords keeping time.

An almost carnal thrill accompanied the reading of this book. What was wrong with me? Was I going mad? How did I reconcile these ideas with the sense of myself as a clean-cut, football-loving American boy? I became seriously depressed. Yet I went to the library and checked out more books on the subject. Many things had been published since the appearance of the original volume. The Sixties and the reaction to the war in Vietnam had unleashed a torrent of interest, new publications and even board games relating to the Occult. New subcultures appeared, whole societies in the Pacific Northwest seemed to have been called into being in this time, all reaching towards some new level of connection with the infinite.

I became more fascinated, more depressed.

Finally, my orders for Officer Candidate School at Quantico appeared. It was a test every neophyte had to undergo. When the secretary in the military sciences building handed them to me, I was stricken. Feeling like a condemned man, I went for a long walk around campus, visiting as many shrines to fallen students as I could take in before evening formation. When I got back to my room in the barracks, I pinned my orders beneath the 3X5 card on my cork board.

I stayed in my room for weeks, leaving only for formations, re-reading my occult books, mixed with histories of the Vietnam War, wondering what it all meant. I got to the point where I could recite the

Kabbalah Tree of Life from Kether to Malkuth, along with every major American operation during the war from Harvest Moon to Rolling Thunder. I flirted with the idea of calling it all off, of transferring to San Diego State. I had two years of college under my belt. There were places I could go. Things I could do. I fantasized about becoming a surfer and wandering the world in search of waves. I imagined myself on a beach in Latin America somewhere, testing myself in a different way, against a different kind of dream, like some of my friends from high school were doing. There was a wave that broke off of Baja California rumored to be the biggest in the world under certain conditions. It seemed like a new kind of big game hunting and I'd kept an old issue of National Geographic with an article about Baja in it stashed in my desk. The fact that I'd stolen it out of the university library only doubled the illicit thrill. Sometimes without thinking, I'd find myself leafing through it, not really looking at the pictures.

Then my airplane tickets for Quantico arrived in the company mailbox. I ignored them for a week, hoping they'd vanish of their own accord and that I'd been relieved of my calling by some clerical error. Finally, some dutiful cadet noticed them collecting dust and shoved them under my barracks door. Seeing the manila folder with my name on it laying diagonally across the floor, my heart began beating like a horse trying to break out of its stall.

Quitting seemed like it was the wiser move, long-term, but I'd given too much to back out now. I could feel the logic of momentum working on me. I could be identical. I knew it. I could fit in. I could be like the others on the outside but a rebel on the inside, an artist in uniform like T.E. Lawrence or J.F.C. Fuller. I was fit. I could run three miles in under seventeen minutes. I could disassemble and re-assemble an M16 blindfolded. I could read a topographic map, use a lensatic compass. I liked the idea of losing myself in the service, having a uniform to hide behind. Dropping out now felt like what bailing to Canada had been to a previous generation. I knew that a part of me would wonder what I had given up by backing out of the dare; the dare that asked, can you take it? Can you make it as a Marine? Can you go to a war? I feared the embarrassment that would ensue if I quit. It was in the nature of my upbringing to stick things out, as I had stuck out

playing football, even though I'd hated it after the first season. More than anything, I feared appearing weak in my father's eyes, and my weeks alone in the barracks with only my histories to keep me company had revealed to me a simple truth—my life was meaningless without the military.

DAVID MORRIS is a former Marine infantry officer and author of *The Evil Hours* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) and *Storm on the Horizon* (Free Press). He worked in Iraq from 2004 to 2007 as a reporter for *Salon* and the *Virginia Quarterly Review*. His writing has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Slate*, *The Daily Beast*, *The Los Angeles Times* and elsewhere. Morris was awarded a creative nonfiction fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts as well as residencies at The MacDowell Colony and the Norman Mailer Writers Colony in Provincetown, Massachusetts. He is a graduate of Texas A&M and UC Irvine.