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## The Warrior and the Writer

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I'd like to start by reading from my novel, *Sparta*, which is the reason I'm here. This passage is from the beginning of the book, when Conrad Farrell, who is a 26-year old Marine lieutenant, is coming home from his second deployment in Iraq. He is about to make landfall in Bangor, Maine, and we can tell that he's in some sort of trouble.

The airport runways and buildings stretched out below them straight axial lines, like a mechanical drawing. The plane dropped rapidly and the long flat buildings, the dark tarmac, rose up alarmingly to meet it. The engines became louder, the pitch ascending toward some unbearable climax. The plane fell sickeningly toward the earth. There was a pounding inside his skull.

He could feel it coming: the moment in which you heard the sound. It was before anything had hit, when the air was full of ozone, the moment in which you understood that something was happening but not yet what. It was the moment that you knew in your body before you knew in your mind, the moment when you felt the sound, like a great silence taking you over, the shock wave rolling through your body, your heart, your

lungs, time stopping around you. Everything flying apart into fragments. That limitless radiant moment, glittering behind your eyelids, before you knew.

He was frozen and still, his muscles clenched. His palms were sweating. Inside he was huge and cavernous, and his heart was performing something monstrous and unnatural. Tears, horribly, brimmed at his eyelids. Some avalanche was poised, ready to break loose. He couldn't stop it. Something was running riot through him, some cloudburst of panic and confusion, noise and smoke and terror. He was consumed by fear. It was sweeping through him, as though he'd been overtaken by fire, as though he were now rippling and radiant with flames. Somewhere he was screaming. Terror was blowing him apart.

You might be surprised that I wrote a book about a twenty-six year old Marine: I'm the wrong gender, the wrong generation, and the wrong religious genre. But here's why I did it.

There are different ways of being in the world.

Each of us, in this room, has made a choice. We have each chosen to lead a life of purpose, though our goals may be different.

Most of you have chosen the path of the warrior; I've chosen the path of the writer. In many places our paths diverge, but not all. I am here because of a convergence, because we are all part of an enterprise that connects war, literature and the arts.

The path of the warrior is ancient: it's the hero's path. What the warrior does, he does better than anyone else. (I say "he" because, throughout history, the overwhelming majority of warriors have been men. I don't mean to demean or ignore the brave women who are joining the military now, I'm merely acknowledging history.) The warrior uses his body in the service of a certain truth. He pledges himself to its defense. He trains his reflexes and strengthens his muscles. He studies with the masters. He prepares for the moment of conflict between his ideas and those of his enemy. He uses his body to articulate his truth, to translate it into the physical world.

You, cadets, have chosen the path of the warrior. You've committed yourselves to the defense of our country and our ideals. You've pledged yourselves, body, heart and mind. To accomplish this you'll acquire arcane knowledge, you will master the laws of physics and learn the science of flight. You will become masters of the airborne arts. You will become powerful. You will become the thunder and the lightning.

The path of the writer is also ancient. Long before we had writing, or even runes scratched on stones, we had story-tellers. What the writer does, she does better than anyone. (I say “she,” because women have always been story-tellers). She interprets experience, records our history, and reveals the culture to itself. The writer uses her mind in the service of a certain truth. She expands her knowledge, enhances her verbal dexterity, strengthens her imagination. She studies with the masters. She prepares for the moment of conflict between her ideas and those of her reader. She uses the word to articulate her truth, to translate it into the inner world. She will become powerful; she will become the voice inside your head.

All of us live in both of these places, the outer world of the body, and the inner world of the mind.

And both these endeavors, that of the warrior and that of the writer, are fundamental to human nature. They both go back a long way. I’d be willing to bet that, when the first Early Man picked up a club and went after another Early Man, he sat down that night at the campfire and told the others the story of how it happened.

Waging war and telling stories are both ways of living: waging war is living life in the moment; telling stories is making meaning of those moments. All of us do both. They’re both important; in some ways they’re complementary.

To explain what I mean by that, let me talk first about how you and I happen to be here together, because we come from very different places. You are members of the Air Force, an institution dedicated to the art and application of war. I am a member of the Society of Friends, or Quakers, a religious organization dedicated to pacifism and non-violence.

So how do we come to be sharing this moment? In what way do our beliefs coincide? Have we anything in common? I think we do share certain beliefs, and it would be useful to identify them.

The way I wrote this book came about accidentally. It started out with an article on the front page of *The New York Times*, in the early years of the War. It was about our troops, and how they were driving unarmored Humvees over roads studded with IEDs. Our soldiers were being blown up and suffering from Traumatic Brain Injuries. The military medical services were reluctant to diagnose these injuries, because treatment was expensive, and because it meant removing combatants from the field.

I had not voted for George W. Bush in either election, and I was opposed to our invasion of Iraq from the beginning. But I believed that, since we were the greatest military power in the world, if we sent troops in they would have the best

equipment there was, and whatever support they needed. Apparently none of this was true.

It was frustrating to be part of a democracy in which your vote seemed not to count, and to find your country undertaking an initiative—the invasion of another country—that you felt was profoundly wrong. It was even worse to learn that our own soldiers were underequipped and unprotected.

I couldn't get those injured soldiers out of my mind. I began to read more and more about the War. Not abstract political strategy, but details and specifics. I wanted to know what it was like for the troops on the ground. What their lives were like in the moment. What it was like inside a Humvee. What sand felt like in your throat. What MREs tasted like. I read the war reports, which were increasingly troubling: We were killing the civilians we were supposed to be liberating. We were suffering daily fatalities. We were not winning. The troops were demoralized.

I couldn't stop thinking about the soldiers. This became obsessive; it sort of took me over. After a while the information in my head reached a critical mass, and I understood that I was going to write about it. I didn't really have a choice.

The way I comprehend the world is through writing about it. I gather information, I think about it, and then I try to set it down as clearly as I can. I want to impose a certain kind of order, to arrange the facts so they make sense to me. This is my version of the truth. I want to bear witness to a situation, a struggle, a problem. And that's what writers have always done, as far back as we can go. Homer, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Woolf: all of them have created their own eloquent, powerful, enduring versions of the truth.

So I was following in the path of the writer. It was a challenge, because I needed to learn an enormous amount. I knew nothing about the military. So I set out to learn everything I could, from every source I could think of. I read scores of books: journalism and memoirs. I followed military blogs (the war was still going on then.) I watched Youtube videos of firefights, filmed by soldiers who'd attached babycams to their own helmets. I watched videos of homecoming and videos from Quantico. But the most powerful and important source, of course, was the veterans themselves. I listened to their stories.

If you live within a circle of people who all share the same belief, it's easy to accept that collective belief. It's always easier to let the group decide than to figure something out for yourself. I grew up among Quakers. My family was Quaker, and my father was the head of the Quaker school I attended. So I grew up in a culture of pacifism and non-violence. It was easy for me to accept those ideas.

Quakers believe that every human being contains an inner light, a kind of spiritual radiance. This is something you already know, by the way. It's something we all know, we just don't talk about it. If you look another person in the eyes, you can see his living soul. This is a reason it's so difficult to kill at close quarters: if you look into someone's eyes you can see that this person is like you, that he carries his life within him, quick and liquid and full of light, just as you do.

Because of this inner light, Quakers believe that no-one has the right to take someone else's life. It was troubling to think of talking to someone who disagreed on such a fundamental issue, someone who had been trained to kill. On the other hand, if I believe that all people have their own inner light—and I do—then this would include soldiers. So my task was to find the humanity in the veterans I talked to—finding our common ground, instead of the places where our beliefs diverged.

Hearing the warrior's story was an education. You won't be surprised to hear that I liked and admired the veterans I talked to. Many of them had enlisted for reasons of idealism: to defend us from attacks, after 9/11, or to make the world a better place. I admired them for making a commitment that was so absolute as to include the promise of "your one wild and precious life," as the poet Mary Oliver calls it.

Each of the veterans' stories taught me something about their lives and feelings, about what war had been like for them. They told me why they had enlisted, what their parents said, their friends and girlfriends. What had happened to them in country, the worst moments and the best. What made them laugh—most of them laughed a lot—what made them scared, what made them angry. They told me about getting lost in the desert, living in hooches, being in firefight, getting blown up, coming back home. I learned never to make assumptions.

I met a medic who'd been deployed in Iraq, and asked if he'd like to talk about it. He said I was the first civilian who had asked him. And yes, he'd like to talk. I felt pleased to play a small part in this.

He came to my house and talked. He told me what it had been like for him. He was angry. He said often the bombs went off only twenty minutes outside the wire. The wounded were brought back in plenty of time to save them. He stabilized them and sent them off to Landstuhl. Then they'd go back home, without arms or legs or half a face, at twenty-one years old. He said we shouldn't have been sending them home. He didn't look at me as he talked, and I could feel rage coming from him like heat. It was like a furnace.

Later he wrote to me.

I can still feel, how the sun felt on my face when I walked out of the clinic, the sand blowing over my boots, the brown haze of dust in the

air, the tik tik of gunfire from Abu Ghraib, the deep thud of the Abrams in the motor pool firing rockets, and the physical sensation of shock I felt when I saw the bulletin board announcing Bush's victory posted in front of the TOC. ...I must admit that it really is not possible for me to ever look a civilian in the face and not remember that morning, let alone all that came before or after. The bodies buried six deep in dry soil, the smell of burned flesh and blood and pus and urine and feces on screaming young men, the beating hearts of men with bullet holes in their foreheads, the shocking quiet of that 19 year old with his skull open, [the] frantic efforts at CPR on a boy well dead. ..That was the day I knew I would never come home. It was also the day I realized that my family meant nothing to anyone but me, that my own countrymen would sooner ... condemn my own children to suffering than take responsibility for the mistakes they had made in the war.

I had been prepared for anger at Bush, Cheney, Rove and the others who had engineered our invasion. But I was not prepared for his anger at civilians because Bush had been re-elected.

I thought about it. I didn't like it, but I had to admit that he had the right to hold me partly responsible. I was a Quaker, I had voted against Bush, I was opposed to the war and I'd signed petitions to stop it. But whatever I had done had not been enough. I had gone about my days, writing, driving my car, teaching my classes, while he was over there, in hell. He had been betrayed by everyone here. I could see why he was so angry, and I could see why he blamed everyone, including me, for not putting an end to it.

And this realization destroyed something in me: my own private cache of self-righteousness. I had kept a little pocket of smugness, inside my mind, where I told myself that none of this was my fault. But in fact I'd been unwittingly complicit. Whether or not I could have changed the course of the war was another matter, but the medic's rage made it clear that we all bear responsibility for what our country does. We all play a part in it, even if we do nothing.

I also learned the depth of the emotions that this war had generated. He was the only veteran who made me feel physically afraid.

The stories taught me that I could take nothing for granted. I asked another veteran, a Marine officer, if he had felt betrayed when he learned there were no WMD. I asked this question very cautiously and diplomatically, prepared for anger, outrage, resentment. He smiled at me sunnily and said, "Roxana, there comes a

time in a young man's life when he wants to go to war." I had forgotten that young men are drawn to war. Guns, planes, bombs, excitement: of course. Every time I met another vet I was reminded to pay attention, listen closely, bear witness.

In an odd way, talking to vets became my life lived in the moment. These conversations provided me with vivid, illuminating flashes that lit up my landscape. I would never be in combat, in country, but I could enter into that experience by listening. It was incredibly exhilarating for me to venture into a new culture, learn the language, study the customs, get to know the people.

I enjoyed getting to know the vets. Their stories were about people struggling to make good choices and lead honorable lives. They'd offered themselves and they'd done their best and they'd been challenged in ways that most civilians never dream of. All of this was a portal into a world I'd never known, but slowly it became one I could understand. Once I understood it I could tell the story, my own particular version of the truth.

So here's where the paths converge, those of the warrior and the writer.

We tell stories to preserve important events, to record them in our own consciousness, to pass them down to the next generation. But most importantly we tell them in order to make sense of them, to explain them to ourselves. It's through the telling of stories that we come to understand our experience, individual and collective.

History has shown that our last two wars, Vietnam and Iraq, did not do us honor. In many ways they disgraced us: they were unnecessary and based on deception. They were wasteful, on a titanic scale, of human lives, green earth, taxpayers' money and our good name as a nation. These mistakes are something we need to acknowledge, because only then can we hope to avoid repeating them. The way we can acknowledge them is through learning about them, and that's where the writer comes in, the story-teller.

There are three different kinds of war writing: journalism, memoir, and fiction (poetry, too) and each tells a different kind of truth. They follow a strict chronological pattern: first comes journalism, reported at the time, from the field; next comes memoir, after people have come home and transcribed their notes. Poetry may come next, the last is fiction. Fiction is long, and it requires knowing more than the facts. Journalism is meant to be neutral, memoir is meant to render factual experience, but fiction is meant to tell an emotional truth. This truth must work its way through the heart as well as the mind. Emotion takes the longest to write about, because our understanding of it is slow. It was not until ten years after the invasion of Iraq that the first novel about it appeared—another intersection between war and literature.

At the heart of it, literature is a delivery system. I'd argue that it's the most beautiful and powerful delivery system of ideas that has ever been devised. We need it, and we need the ideas that it delivers. We have always needed them. Every culture has had story-tellers, the people who keep track of history, which is made up of human tales.

It's through literature that we can come to understand ideas and how they work in people's lives. Reading about other people's lives allows us to understand their passion and despair and rage and tenderness. In some ways, literature can be more enlightening than our own lives.

Because the most powerful moments in our lives are incomprehensible when they happen. You know the ones I mean, emotional ones: having a terrible fight, being told by your lover it's all over, proposing marriage, having a car accident. While these moments are taking place we only experience them. We can't also think about what they mean. Doing something and understanding it are entirely different.

These vivid moments are like ones in a combat zone. We all have combat zones in our private lives, places where we're ambushed by fear or desolation, joy or rage—all those big dangerous feelings that we can't control or explain, the ones that overwhelm us.

In a real combat zone things take place in a series of brief vivid flashes, like a landscape lit by lightning. They happen too fast for comprehension. Reactions are instinctive: everything is in the moment. There are no ideals on the battlefield, no grand notions. There is no time for thought, there is only the life of the body—grit, reflex, adrenaline. It's afterwards that an action becomes brave. Heroism doesn't happen until later. Then, risk is measured against necessity, valor against fear. But in the moment, heroism is just what must be done.

The *Iliad* renders war in this way, and so does *War and Peace*, and *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and *The Things They Carried*. This is where war and literature intersect, where the man of action and the woman of letters meet. These writers make those moments real, and the way they tell the stories reveals their meaning. So this is how we learn about war—from story-telling, which happens afterward, but which provides meaning.

Great writers tell the real story of war, and those are the ones that are handed down through the centuries. They are more than strategy, more than politics, more than fatalities. Homer talks about arguments, about terrible pain, about the wastes of war, about the excitement of it, about the grieving families at home—all of the human aspects of war, which is what we need the most, we humans.

Literature deepens our understanding, and allows us to become more human and compassionate. It allows us to comprehend not only our own life, but also those of others around us.

Reading Richard Wright or JM Coetzee or Toni Morrison will offer an understanding of what racism feels like. Reading Primo Levi reveals the intimate horrors of Auschwitz. Reading Sophocles and Shakespeare and Virginia Woolf and John Updike shows what it means to be a part of a family.

These writers enter into their characters through a kind of radical empathy. They become those characters, and they allow the reader to become them, too.

Entering this convergence between war and literature has been a powerful experience. In some ways I'm still the same: I still think that conflict should be resolved through non-violent means, and I hope everyone in this room does, too. War should be our last resort, not our first response. Human life should never be sacrificed lightly.

But in other ways I've changed. Listening to people who are outside my own circle of beliefs has changed me. I admire their bravery and intelligence, their humility and humanity. They have expanded my understanding of the world. All that happened because they were able to tell me their stories, and I—struggling for radical empathy—was able to listen.

We all need radical empathy in our lives. You, cadets, will need to know how your mother feels when she's frightened, and why your girlfriend, or boyfriend, is upset or elated, and what makes your father laugh. You will need to be thirsty for knowledge about other people. Knowledge about jet engines and trajectories is essential to your duties as a pilot or an engineer, but knowledge of other people is even more essential. You'll need it in every transaction, for the rest of your life.

The world has expanded rapidly just in the last decade. All Americans, and especially you warriors, now need to have a sense of what Syrians are like, and Libyans. We need to know about Sunnis and Shiites, and Yazidis, and North Koreans and the residents of Ferguson, Missouri.

You cadets will move into the world as officers. You will be powerful; you will also need to be compassionate and understanding. As a nation, we should not use our power wrongly, or end another war in a waste of shame. As you take to the skies you will bear some responsibility for your actions, just as I bear some responsibility for the war in Iraq. You will always need to be a human being as well as a warrior. You will always need to carry with you the understanding of how other human beings feel.

This knowledge will enlarge your soul, and enlarging the soul is a necessary endeavor, whatever path you choose. Read the great books, step outside your circle, and enter into the lives of others.

Become greater than the thunder and the lightning

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**ROXANA ROBINSON** is the author of five novels, including *Cost*; three collections of short stories; and the biography *Georgia O'Keeffe: A Life*. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Bookforum*, and *Tin House*, among other publications. Her latest novel, *Sparta*, received the James Webb Award for Distinguished Fiction from the USMC Heritage Foundation. She was recently elected president of the Authors Guild.