Possibility and Peacebuilding for Precarious Lives

The Impact of Art, Culture, and Community

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After Saddam Hussein was removed from power in 2003, opportunity existed to address intergovernmental and international conflicts and cultural and religious divisions within Iraq which might have produced a society more sensitive to human dignity and protective of human rights. Instead, all actors in these events—the Shias, the Sunnis, the George W. Bush administration and later the Obama administration, the military, political advisors on all sides, and the embedded media—missed the opportunity that now has led to a decade of continuing violence and the generation of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). What contributed to this failure, the effects of which deepen in the Middle East and send millions of war refugees into neighboring countries and Europe?

This question and the shadows of Iraq moving across the world lead us to wonder how contemporary civilization, particularly in the Western liberal capitalist form, has come to a blind alley economically, spiritually, and ecologically from which it can extricate itself only by radically altered attitudes and aptitudes. American philosopher, literary, and cultural critic Judith Butler poses similar questions in her concept of precarious life for which evidence abounds: in geopolitical contests in Syria, Israel, Palestine, and the Ukraine; religiously rationalized kidnappings and rapes by Boka Haram in Nigeria; bombings by rebel and international forces; suicide attacks and beheadings by ISIS; the unprecedented flight of war refugees and migrants for economic survival; and intransigent political positions of those with power on all sides of such conflicts, buttressed by vituperative public discourse and inimical modes of cri-

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tique that mirror political conflicts. The complexities and intransigence of such conflicts make any appeal to shared humane values appear useless.

Disappearing centers of stability and disorienting distortions render life precarious for the earth and all human beings, not merely those besieged by violent conflicts. Butler analyzes the sources of precariousness: limited public debate about terrorism, which collapses the space between reflection and revenge; the separation of condemnation for and interrogation of violence; the conflation of critique of foreign policy with lack of patriotism or anti-Semitism; and the exclusion and inclusion of people from our calculus of human value; making state power, buttressed by military protocols, irreducible to law. Drawing on Emmanuel Levinas's conceptions of ethics[1] to engage such conditions of precarious life, Butler asserts the role of the humanities "to return us to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense. . . to reinvigorate the intellectual projects of critique. . . , to understand the difficulties and demands of cultural translation and dissent, and to create a sense of the public in which oppositional voices are not feared, degraded, or dismissed, but valued. . . .[2]

How necessary ethical transformations occur interests civilian and military peacebuilders. This paper argues that the failures in Iraq following the ousting of Saddam Hussein, and in all conflicts, arise from the inability to enlarge the concept of *possibility* and to develop those capacities necessary to engage it, which opens transformational space lying adjacent to or within the conditions that render life precarious. The paper first describes *possibility* as an "adjacent" space and identifies characteristics of such space. Second, using Iraq as an example throughout, I discuss the five capacities useful for accessing the invisible resources of *possibility*. Third, I examine the utility and applicability (teachability) of these five capacities by illustrating their operations in Pat Barker's novel *Regeneration* and Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War.* Finally, the paper concludes with a brief assessment of living on the thresholds of *possibility*, for peace-builders and citizens alike.

Defining the Space of Possibility

Irish philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel scholar, and poet—the late John O'Donohue—describes *possibility* as a world or space adjacent to the visible world to which we are attached and by which we are generally blinded to an invisible world which makes possible, nourishes, and sustains the visible. In his *The Poetics of Possibility,* O'Donohue interprets possibility through the thought of philosophers such as Plato, who did not regard knowledge as a static possession but emphasized the dialogical struggle to know; Aristotle for whom thinking was a kinetic philosophy of becoming; Hegel who considered the dialectic to be "the inner rhythm of experience. . . [which is] a constant unfolding and thematising of possibility. . . where

extremity and opposition become transfigured and unexpected new possibilities emerge to call the journey into deeper creativity,"[3] as well as Immanuel Kant, who by evoking a middle ground [between subject and the world], the transcendent and the actual, places *possibility* at the heart of the philosophy of knowing.[4]

The invisible space of possibility becomes most apparent in life's threshold experiences, in philosophical reflection, or in questions that decenter us and disclose the human desire for something New, as an unformed longing of consciousness. Of such longing, French philosopher Simone Weil wrote in 1943:

> At the bottom of the heart of every human being from earliest infancy until the tomb, there is something that goes on indomitably expecting, in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered, and witnessed, that good and not evil will be done to him. It is this above all that is sacred in every human being.[5]

This longing of consciousness, arising from the invisible, suggests that *possibility* calls forth and engages all the faculties of thought, feeling, and imagination. By disclosing an interplay of the visible and invisible—a creative view of duality rather than duality as divided, static categories—*possibility* encourages an inner conversation with life and thereby invites human wholeness. Without awareness of the invisible world of *possibility* which lies adjacent to or within the visible world of facts, human connections among individual consciousnesses, the Other, and history are weakened. O'Donohue concludes that "the divided mind separates each from the other and can never participate in the challenge and journey of their conversation, conflict, and creativity."[6]

In a world of sharply divided, intractable political conflicts, brutalities and violence perpetrated by individuals and military forces against those regarded as enemies, millions of people displaced from their homes by war, and vitriolic political rhetoric, all human beings live uneasily on thresholds between life and death. Theoretically, the threshold is a fecund place of *possibility* for peacebuilding initiatives. However, opening conversation between the visible world, by which many circumscribe reality, and the invisible world of *possibility* contains enormous challenges. To access and engage the world of *possibility* requires (1) an imaginative capacity to acknowledge a matrix of possibility (that which is "not yet") lying beneath the surface of that which already exists and seems fixed; (2) memory capable of exploring what happens to unselected possibilities and for reconciliation, not merely recollection or vengeful repetitions; (3) the capacity to mourn the Other which makes clearer seeing and growth possible; (4) a commitment to beauty as the harmony of chance (possibility) and the good necessary for participation in the creation, recreation, or restoration of the world; and (5) a shift in intellection from critique and political contest to collaborative investigation of shared concerns.

Developing Capacity for Possibility

Examining the characteristics of each of these capacities and their interplay enlarges our understanding of the invisible world of *possibility*, permitting us to see it as more than a collection of alternatives offered for choice in the contingent or abbreviated world of facts. These capacities provide resources for drawing upon *possibility* not simply in conditions of relative stability and cooperation but even in chaotic and destructive circumstances.

The **capacity to imagine**, to bring to consciousness that which is not present or does not yet exist in the midst of particular time and location reveals the dialectical nature of imagination. Within individual consciousness itself there is a dialectic evident in dreaming, as the unconscious ushers forth images for the waking mind to engage. The imagination becomes a bridge between the unconscious and the conscious as well as between the individual self and the world. John Paul Lederach, a life-long peace builder, concludes that imagination (1) moves from "isolation and attitudes about 'dominating or being dominated' toward a capacity to envision and act on the basis of a web of interdependent relationships;" (2) avoids "the trap of narrowly defined dualisms. . . , [and seeks] ways to nurture an inquisitive capacity that explores and interacts constructively with the complexity of the relationships and realities that face our communities;" (3) trusts "that creativity, divinely embedded in the human spirit, is always within reach;" (4) accepts "vulnerability [and risks] the step into unknown and unpredictable lands [to seek] constructive engagement with those people and things we least understand and most fear."[7]

For O'Donohue, "the imagination is always more loyal to the deeper unity of everything. It has patience with contradiction because there it glimpses new possibilities."[8] Imagination "illuminate[s] the inner landscapes of our lives,"[9] permitting us to see beyond what appears fixed and unchangeable in the outer. Drawn to freedom and impatient with repetition, imagination offers revelation. Imagination appreciates irony, which grants it a degree of humility for acknowledging that what is given might be otherwise. In sum, the imagination integrates the mind and the heart, the spiritual and the material, inviting wonder and reverence. However, when the imagination is wounded, asserts Stephen Levine, sickness and suffering result, and the injured capacity for imagining turns to fantasizing.[10]

If we apply the characteristics of imagination to the conditions in Iraq after the removal of Hussein, failures of imagination stand out. Realistic fear of terrorism by the United States, fear of domination isolated all parties in Iraq from each other and from considering their situation in nondualistic and more dynamic ways. Neither Shias nor Sunnis, both followers of Islam, were able to see an inner landscape of their religious lives which could offer a deeper possibility of Muslim unity. Mistrust contributed to repetitive violence from all sides, not to reverence or wonder. The Iraq war from the outset was rationalized by wounded imaginations consumed by fear of terrorists fantasizing the existence of weapons

of mass destruction in Iraq that left behind a wide swath of civilian and military casualties, suffering, and a political vacuum in which long-standing religious and political animosities continued.

Although an analysis of the distinctions between fantasizing and imagining lies beyond the scope of this essay, Levine's assertion that fantasizing replaces imagination when the imagination is wounded leads to a consideration of **memory's role** in navigating traumatic events in personal or group life and in recognizing latent possibilities which exist in life-serving as well as life-denying circumstances. Miraslov Volf, a theologian and public intellectual who has written extensively on memory and its role in reconciliation processes, points out the ambiguity of memory, for "while memories give us identity and can promote justice, they can also become roots of bitterness and obstacles to reconciliation."[11] Demonstrating from history that "memory is, always and necessarily, an interaction between effacement [forgetfulness or erasure] and conservation," Tzvetan Todorov argues that memory is essentially a selection, distinguishing between "recovery of the past and its subsequent use."[12]

Both Todorov and Volf believe that how we use memory is the decisive question. Todorov describes two ways human beings use memory. The first is what he considers literalization of memory which risks trapping one in the remembered event, unable to go beyond it. In contrast, what he calls the exemplary use of memory "allows one to use the past in light of the present, to make use of lessons of injustice undergone in the past to fight injustices taking their course today. . . ."[13] Perhaps the terms *exclusive* and *inclusive* might be more helpful to describe memory. Exclusive remembering focuses on the uniqueness of one's own suffering thereby keeping a particular grievance or injurious event or group alive, whereas inclusive memory generalizes from a particular past event to other situations in the present. For memory to serve reconciliation rather than bitter resentment or repetition, Volf recommends four rules for remembering: (1) remember truthfully; (2) remember in a way that heals identity; (3) remember so as to learn from the past, and (4) remember in a redeeming way.

Much trauma literature depends on identity-healing remembering. Because identity healing is concerned principally with the injured individual or group, it contains some of the risks of exclusive memory. To learn from the past or to respond in a redemptive way to injustice requires an inclusive memory that does not fan the flames of an original conflict but instead opens pathways to possibility. An individual or group makes such movement from identity-healing or exclusive memory to exemplary or inclusive remembering by marginalizing the personal grievance and generalizing it or opening it to other possibilities, including the restoration of wounded imagination.

The precariousness of life is increased or ameliorated by the ways human beings collectively use memory. Both erasure of memory—whether enforced by totalitarian

political authority, by revisionist histories, or by the superabundance of information in the digital age—and utilizing memory only for identity healing threaten human community by crippling the capacity to empathize with others. In contrast, memory that engages injustices, bears witness, applies learning from past injuries to current injustices, transmutes fear, and may call upon invisible resources available in spiritual traditions diminishes the precariousness of life by opening people to the vulnerable Other.

In Iraq, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein makes visible the power of memory to increase the precariousness of life. Earlier US interventions supportive of Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war, then with United Nations support against Hussein's effort to annex Kuwait in 1990 surely lingered unresolved in the memories of some political leaders. Recollections of President Ronald Reagan's association of Hussein with an axis of evil combined with the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks provided justification for the vengeful toppling of a ruthless dictator. Without a postconflict plan in place following Hussein's removal, a failure of memory and understanding of the centuries-old conflicts between Shia and Sunni Muslims over religious practices left a vacuum into which adversarial hostilities erupted. Isolated in their perceptions of each other—Iraqi and US actors, Shias and Sunnis—and protective of their own righteousness, few remembered truthfully. Identity-healing memory was also difficult because of projected blame. Given such obstacles, learning from the past and moving toward reconciliation continue to elude us.

Butler's purpose to "[reimagine] the possibility of community on the basis of vulnerability and loss" in "Violence, Mourning, Politics," explicates the complicated intersections of politics, injustice, abuses of memory, violence, and the lost **capacity to mourn**.

Her analysis applies exemplary or inclusive memory to look beneath the surfaces of political conflicts, distortions of memory, and justifications for repetitive violence that make life precarious. Her analysis also implies an invisible world of *possibility* where addressing a question such as *what makes for a grievable life* suggests why the capacity to mourn is essential to peacebuilding and community.

Vulnerability and grieving, characteristics shared by all human beings, potentially expand our conceptions of the human, making it possible to see that injured and injurer, oppressor and oppressed, I and the Other, are forever bound to one another. Vulnerability, loss, and mourning, which lie beneath or adjacent to security, abundance, and joy, offer fertile space for transformation and creativity. Embracing the experiences of vulnerability and developing the capacity to mourn subvert both oppressive controls of political power and military force as well as rigidly fixed categories rooted in prejudice. The capacity to mourn personal losses and to see the Other as part of oneself strengthens interpersonal connections, opens space for productive reassessments of who is worthy of living and mourning in death, and realigns human

loyalties. In short, the capacity to mourn encourages the *possibility* of reimagined community.

The numbers of Iraqi lives lost during the Iraq war—estimates as high as a million—and 50,000 more from continuing violence since 2011 staggers the imagination. US casualties add another approximately 4,500 soldiers in Iraq and 2,345 in Afghanistan. For American citizens, distance from the war's daily devastations and the numbing size of casualties, both supported by righteous hatred of the enemy, make mourning others' losses impossible. Even grieving the lost and severely injured lives is difficult when US military forces are comprised of volunteers from lower economic and social classes. The personal stories and the extent of the connections of the dead remain largely untold. Their memories and those of the ones who loved the dead are buried with them. Fear, anger, and hatred kill the capacity to grieve. And without the capacity to mourn, distorted facts justify questionable policies such as prisoner torture or legitimate the use of drones against suspected terrorists. The inability or refusal to mourn lives not considered grievable prevents the growth of understanding of the inescapable connections among human beings, thereby closing off the possibility of reimagined community.

All the foregoing capacities useful for perceiving *possibility* as an invisible world resting next to or within the visible world of facts, conflicts, and violations rest on the ground of **beauty**. Although diminished or banished as being purely subjective (in the eye of the beholder), naïve, romantic, or sentimental, beauty as the perfection of things, O'Donohue asserts, dwells at the heart of life. It beckons us to enter and live in the world in a new way, aligned more closely with transcendent categories more familiar to the medieval than the postmodern mind: Being, Oneness, Goodness, Truth, and Beauty. In the medieval vision, "Every act of thinking, mostly without our realizing it, is secretly grounded in these presences. If the One, the True, Being, the Good, and the Beautiful were to vanish, the thought in the mind would have no pathway out to the world. . . these presences guarantee our sense of meaning and sustain the sense of order, truth, presence, goodness, and beauty in our world." [14]

Given the deconstruction of essential categories such as those associated with the medieval mind combined with gigantic neuroscientific leaps in understanding the human brain and consciousness, evoking beauty in the service of *possibility* seems intellectually questionable. Yet, without markings for order, coherence, and unity on a path to *possibility*, human beings are left in solipsistic isolation; political actors exert power solely and endlessly to defend self-interests; and global crises of war, terrorism, starvation, disease, displacement, environmental toxicity increase precarious life for all. However, if beauty were understood "as a threshold which holds the real and the ideal [the visible and invisible] in connection and conversation with each other;"[1] if beauty were recognized as *possibility* veiled behind the representations of war, then beauty combined with imagination, memory, mourning—all necessary for accessing *possibility*—could bring into view what is occluded by the visual aesthetics of war and

its consequences. Openness to beauty brings into view the incomparability of our own lives through which we can perceive the incomparability of the Other and our shared unicity. ". . . ultimately beauty is a profound illumination of presence, a stirring of the invisible in visible form and in order to receive this, we need to cultivate a new style of approaching the world."[16]

Destruction of beauty is commonplace in war and terrorist rampage. Truth, order, coherence and a sense of unity capable of crossing lines between enemies are the first casualties of war. From the beginning of the Iraq war, the cultural heritage of Iraq has been destroyed by shellings, bombing, burning, and looting. In the rubble of the Iraq War lay the National Library and the National Museum, which housed thousands-of-years old testaments of law and beauty. On its website, Global Policy Forum chronicles the history of the destruction of cultural heritage from 2003–2015. Under a National Geographic photo of a 4,000-year-old ziggurat bearing shrapnel holes in the Iraq city of Ur, GPF states:

> The United States and its allies ignored the warnings of organizations and scholars concerning the protection of Iraq's cultural heritage, including museums, libraries, archaeological sites and other precious repositories. Arsonists badly burned the National Library, and looters pillaged the National Museum. Looters also damaged or destroyed many historic buildings and artifacts. The US constructed a military base on the site of ancient Babylon. Coalition forces destroyed or badly damaged many historic urban areas and buildings, while thieves have ruined thousands of incomparable, unprotected archeological sites.[17]

To reclaim an invisible world of *possibility*, to recognize possibilities as more than contingent options or competing alternatives to secure narrow political interests, and to refine capacities necessary to bring the invisible to bear on the visible world of actuality and fact require major **shifts in intellection**, media and public discourse, political rhetoric, narrative conventions, and academic methods of critique. Observing the ubiquity of critique in the social sciences and humanities that engages in reciprocal debunking of facts, Bruno Latour challenges our intellection and methods of critique by asking "Should we be at war, too, we, the scholars, the intellectuals? Is it really our duty to add fresh ruins to fields of ruins? Is it really the task of the humanities to add deconstruction to destruction? More iconoclasm to iconoclasm?"[18] Latour answers his own question by advocating a form of critique that is "associated with *more,* not *less,* with *multiplication*, not *subtraction.*" [19]

Sandra Gustafson builds on Latour by seeking convergences between the study of language and literature and the work of strategic peacebuilding. Gustafson proposes to "develop a style of literary analysis that takes familiar components of humanistic study and redirects them toward a form of critique anchored in a sense of *more.*" This includes "an interest in the creative possibilities emerging from the space of gathering (the *Ding* or *Thing*, related to civil society and the public sphere); and a shift from matters of fact to matters of concern, which in this instance involves a shift

from the reality of war and militarist styles of thought to the building of a culture of peace."[20]

Latour's and Gustafson's commitment to matters of concern and critical practice guided by *more*, not *less*, and *multiplication,* not *subtraction*, offers a direction for the intellection shifts necessary to engage the space of *possibility.* Both Latour's criticism of deconstructionist distortions of fact and Gustafson's desire to move from militarist styles of thought toward forms of critique focused on concerns that lead toward a culture of peace require close attention to the role selective attention plays in choosing either concerns or facts and how both concerns and facts can be used to support ideological interests. Intellection informed and transformed by all the foregoing capacities necessary for engaging *possibility* will give attention to objective factors in any conflict, distinguish personal interests from shared collective values, discern ideological positions posing as facts or concerns, consider a multiplicity of subjectivities, and foreground questions such as "how else might particular concerns be addressed" or "what that is *not yet* could we consider?" Practiced from the space of *possibility*, critique becomes a form of poiesis, a means for making sense and making meaning.

The decision for the war in Iraq illustrates the problems caused by failing to give discriminating attention to both concerns and facts. The argument that weapons of mass destruction existed in Iraq fit the ideological predilections of President Bush, served to coalesce the concerns about terrorism, and addressed a felt need for vengeance following the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. The United Nations weapons inspectors were still investigating the presence of weapons of mass destruction at the time the president with the support of Congress made the decision for preventive war, a justification that ignored international laws prohibiting such military actions.[21] *When US citizens learned that they had been misled about weapons of mass destruction, the rationale for the war shifted to depose a ruthless dictator and establish democracy. Had government officials waited to secure more factual evidence about the presence of weapons in Iraq, had both elected officials, political analysts, and the public entertained the longer-term possibilities that could emerge from a preventive action on ambiguous evidence, the choice for war might have been different.*

Opening Space for Possibility

Creative cultural critique and peacebuilding, both of which "return us to the human. . . in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense," draw us to the threshold space of *possibility* and the capacities described above necessary for navigating there. The humanities and works of literature in particular—poetry, fiction, drama—make highly visible the relevance and collaborative operation of these capacities in spaces of *possibility.* Also, such works disclose the lingering and haunting

effects of violence and war on individual consciousness and conscience, history, and culture. Pat Barker's first novel *Regeneration* in her trilogy of the First World War and Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* about the American war in Vietnam both perform cultural critique in fictional threshold worlds of *possibility*.

As an imaginative artist, Barker creates a fictional blending of history and fiction. The novel is set in the Craiglockhart War Hospital for Officers, a facility located on the edges of Edinburgh, Scotland, established in 1916 for the treatment of shell-shocked officers. The hospital itself represents a threshold space between the battlefield and society, between creation and destruction, between madness and sanity. Psychiatrist Dr. William Rivers presides in the hospital, assigned to rehabilitate traumatized soldiers so they can return to their military field assignments. The patients in the novel include fictitious characters broken with various physical and mental injuries and the well-known poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. A well-decorated combat officer and brilliant poet, Sassoon has avoided imprisonment for sending a letter disavowing the war by being considered mentally unsound and sent to Craiglockhart.

Amidst beautifully interwoven narratives of psychological crisis between conscience and duty; friendships between the inmates; the parental qualities expressed at the front by officers toward soldiers; conversations between Sassoon and Owens about Christ, pacifism, and war; the therapeutic intimacy of friendship with subtle prohibitions against homosexuality; nerve regeneration experiments; and the psychological and moral evolution of Dr. Rivers called a "male mother" by a former patient, Barker brings into unsettling dialogue the visible world of war and an invisible world of *possibility*, which becomes increasingly visible through the challenges of memory. As a therapist, Rivers' role is to assist the officers in healing their splintered memories. His and his patients' success in healing their personal memories, however, presents the further dilemma, both for them and for him as physician, of returning them to the arena that produced the initial shell-shock and memory disturbances.

By taking readers to the heart of madness in the hospital threshold space of *possibility,* Barker questions what constitutes madness and sanity for individuals and a culture. Also, through the lives and voices of the maimed, mourning what they have seen and done on the battlefield, Barker reveals a darker side of British history exposing how the erasure of people with questions and conscience from public view, collective memory yields a collective amnesia present in much history making. Cut off from the mystery and beauty of *possibility,* unable to learn from the past and to use memory for reconciliation, incapable of appreciating vulnerability and grieving the Other, histories sustained by erasures and amnesia more likely are repeated than transformed.

Bao Ninh's novel of North Vietnam titled *The Sorrow of War* enters the space of *possibility* challenging ideologically shaped history by chronicling war's devastations and questioning the Northern soldiers' heroism as revolutionary liberators. The novel

confronts the official histories of French and American readers as well, taking them to the space of *possibility* governed by a Hanoi soldier's memory, memories of the land and rivers, and invisible but palpably present spirits of the dead. With his soul no longer intact and now working with the Missing in Action (MIA) Body Collecting Team, soldier-narrator-author Kien reflects, ". . . war was a world with no home, no roof, no comforts. A miserable journey of endless drifting. War was a world without real men, without real women, without feeling."[22]

Bao Ninh's convention-shattering novel was on the proscribed list in Vietnam for many years, handed around in mimeographed form as Bao Ninh's final project for graduation from the Nguyen Du Writing School in Hanoi until its publication in 1990. In his novel, Ninh masterfully integrates the capacities of *possibility*. Writing an imaginative aesthetic work of excavation, Ninh unearths the tragedies of war, the sorrows of love, the struggles of human consciousness, and the political rape of family, cultural traditions, and land regarded reverently. Moving from North Vietnamese Army soldier Kien to author Kien, with frequent, disorienting time shifts, soldier-author Kien gathers missing dead bodies following the war. In this role, Kien also collects his missing lover Phuong, the alluring Hanh whom everyone desired, and the mute girl who saves the disorganized pages of Kien's manuscript.

As Kien writes he begins to see life through his father's paintings and returns to them recalling, "In the paintings, the characters wandered aimlessly across unreal landscapes, withered puppets joined to each other like cutout figures. The tail-ender in these processions was the aged artist himself, who cast himself as a tragic figure." Kien's father's last words to Kien before he died were: "Our era is over. From now on you have to be grown up, fight the battle alone. New times are coming, splendid and magnificent and trouble-free times. No more sadness. . . Sorrow is inconsolable. There will still be great sorrow; sorrow passed down to you. I leave you nothing but that sorrow. . . ."[23]

Built on memory, *The Sorrow of War* is presented in the ways memory works in the human mind, particularly in minds consumed by trauma, alcohol, despair, and ghosts. Just as human memory is nonlinear, so time in the novel is nonlinear, as the storyline depends on flashbacks and then jumps forward into the present. Memory here is truth-telling as only the traumatized mind can be. "Kien recalled it all. Everything. Not a single detail was missing. His fighting life was being revived in flashbacks, or in slowly unfolding scenes as heartrending as a funeral march."[24] Through soldier-writer Kien, Bao Ninh writes to heal his personal and collective wounded identity.

Working with the MIA missions becomes the staging place for mourning and the transmutation of memory. During this time Kien comes to believe "at the bottom of his heart [that] he exists on this earth to perform some unnamed heavenly duty. A task that is sacred and noble but secret." [25] His writing was to save the souls of the

dead who were not properly buried or prayed over in Vietnamese tradition. In reflections, linking soldier and author, that conclude the novel, author Kien discloses the importance of mourning that transcends and transmutes violence. "But we [writer and soldier] also shared a common sorrow, the immense sorrow of war. It was a sublime sorrow, more sublime than happiness, and beyond suffering. It was thanks to our sorrow that we were able to escape the war, escape the continual killing and fighting, the terrible conditions of battle and the unhappiness of men in fierce and violent theaters of war."[26]

The beauty to which this novel bears witness rests in the poetic prose which gives voice to the muteness of vulnerability not mourned, to souls lonely forever. Paradoxically, in the palpable absence of coherence, unity, truth, and reverence for the landscape and sacred tradition, beauty haunts the novel. The mystical presence of lost souls, the soul of landscape, and vulnerable people brutalized by Japanese, French, and American violence are compressed midway through the novel in Kien's father's cremation of his paintings. It is as if from those ashes, Kien accepts the force within him to write of sorrow bereft of beauty that with the writing reclaims beauty.

Bao Ninh's unconventional novel offers provocative ways to rethink intellection and intellectual critique. Here the author completely disorients the linear mind and expectations for narrative structure. He establishes a restless dialogue between the past and present; the dead and the living; love, political ideals, soldier loyalty, and war's costs. Through a mute girl who saves the author from burning his manuscript and finds herself with disorganized pages, Ninh maneuvers muteness and the silence and sorrow of war into creative expression. By foregrounding memory and mourning, Ninh complicates assumptions about intellection and intellectual critique. To think truthfully, to see clearly, to accept and protect vulnerability takes us to the threshold space of *possibility*, a space not simply reserved for novelists or poets.

Embodying the Ethics of Possibility

Through finely developed capacities of imagination, memory, mourning, beauty, and amplified processes of intellectual critique, literary works make the visible and invisible worlds present to our imaginations and demonstrate the utility of these intersecting capacities. I have argued that the threshold space of *possibility* offers the potential for ethical transformation. The ways in which we use imagination and memory, experience vulnerability and mourn loss, appreciate beauty and direct our critical faculties constitute aptitudes that contribute to an *ethos or habits of being* necessary for living in the space of *possibility.* Individual and collective moral character derives from the development of the aptitudes, which, by embracing and safeguarding the freedom, dignity, and rights of each person—the self and the Other—give rise to communities of *possibility* that protect precarious lives.

Peace-builders in conflict arenas live themselves in the threshold space of *possibility* working for the transformation of conflict. Into their peacebuilding assignments, they carry their own experiences and perceptions of the visible and invisible influences within the conflicts themselves and in those affected by them. Also, they likely encounter traditions, experiences, and perceptions of those enmeshed in the conflict which may differ from their own. Drawing upon the concept and capacities of *possibility,* peace-builders must discern as clearly as possible the presenting and hidden issues of the conflict. This requires willingness, both the peace-builders and those parties to the conflict, to investigate beneath the conflict surfaces and hackneyed interpretations or justifications by applying the capacities associated with *possibility*. By calling forth and mentoring the capacities of *possibility* in the victims of conflict, peace-builders and victims together can perform the ethical task of excavation, rejuvenation, and transformation of community. At their best, peace-builders understand and extend the invitation to live life poetically by engaging the space of *possibility.*

All humanists committed to justice, peacebuilding, peace research, policy making, teaching, and ethical public discourse can apply the aptitudes and their enlarged critical faculties to economic, political, religious, scientific, and social matters of both concern and fact. The critical equipment needed to assess the extent to which political goals and means for building an inclusive human community deserves at least as much scrutiny as the Pentagon budget, Latour observes.[27] In addition to scrutiny of what is offered in the visible world of political affairs, contested interests, and violence, peacebuilding requires a pedagogy for *possibility*. A pedagogy for *possibility* teaches and refines the capacities of imagination, memory, mourning, beauty, and creative intellection. It is a pedagogy requiring both reflective interiority and continuous, active engagement with the capacities of *possibility* present or latent in the Other and in precarious life itself. By presenting *possibility* as a threshold space for new learning and radical reorientation of values and peacebuilding approaches, I am advocating as an arbiter of political, religious, cultural conflicts abilities more integrated, demanding, life-serving, and reliable than violent force, which renders all lives precarious.

Notes

1. See for example Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," in *Face to Face with Levinas* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986). Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 187–203. Emmanuel Levinas, "Peace and Proximity," in *Basic Philosophical Writings,* ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

2. Judith Butler, "Precarious Life," in *Precarious Life (*New York: Verso, 2004), 151.

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