

Better You Than Me

By David Klein¹

The shelves were emptying fast. Hands shopped with jutting, rapid movements. Reaching. Grabbing. Filling overstuffed carts. They held things closely, relieved to now possess what they had long taken for granted. Serpentine lines full of wide, quiet eyes, waiting. Nerves on edge. Previously silent horns filled the crammed market parking lot, shouting what they refused to say out loud.

Signs of it were everywhere; etiquette and patience frayed first. At times, civility wobbled. No one was sure what was happening or if this might be the last chance to feed their families.

It was mid-March of 2020.

I'd seen fear before but cannot recall being surrounded by it. Everywhere. The herd was nervous, and they were going to get what they needed, even if it meant taking from their neighbor. The woman with the thick Eastern European accent scolded my shock after she aggressively turned into the spot my blinker patiently claimed several minutes before. Perhaps this was not her first time watching human fabric unravel or facing the threat of going without.

The foundation was showing cracks. It shook most of us. But it didn't surprise everyone.

For the last 50 years, my combat veteran patients in the Veterans Administration hospital where I work have been waiting for the other shoe to drop. When it did, it fell on the entire planet. But they weren't about to get caught off guard ever again. General Dwight Eisenhower once stated, "In preparing for battle, I have found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable."

If my patients weren't familiar with this axiom, it didn't show in their actions. They learned long ago that everyone has a plan until you get hit. Better to have and not need than need and not have. In good times, their preparation for impending doom and the many narratives driving it sounded, to the safe and uninitiated, preposterous. But they weren't wrong – only their timing was off.

¹ Psy.D. U.S. Veterans Administration Psychologist.

Yard signs sprang up with the daffodils and early tulips. “We are all in this together.” “Everything is going to be OK.” If that were true, it didn’t match the stoic press briefings regarding pandemic, or what most scared eyes said from behind masked faces.

The veterans knew better. They witnessed what happened to humans overcome with fear. They looked askance at leaders claiming truth and offering confident, fragile assurances. They’ve seen war cut away the veneer of civility that security and good living afforded most Americans. In war, mortal threats unearthed primordial truths in otherwise good people – an introduction that couldn’t be undone.

The veterans knew this animal.

In others.

In themselves.

After working with these veterans for over two decades, I was hardly naive enough to doubt its existence, but never caught a naked glimpse of it on mass display in public.

We are all in this together...

...until we aren’t.

The veterans knew the stark truth. Men who learned how to maximize the odds of living through situations surrounded by threats where death was near. These were no false prophets. They were only those who happened to survive while others exposed to those same lessons did not. Those who continued to debate with their fellow vets whether they were the lucky ones. Some not so sure because of the steep price. Only a fool would not listen to what they had to say about the matter.

The lessons came in the form of the continuing education course on “dark wisdom” provided to me, free of charge; those collective experiences they learned first-hand in the underworld of the jungles of Viet Nam, had risked their young lives for, and now were generous enough to offer in the safety of my office. I paid close attention to my teachers.

Often, this wisdom bubbled up while trying to complete searing trauma narratives and reflecting on what they learned going to war. They were also integrating this knowledge with observations about the current state of society and the planet. They didn’t like what they saw. Though not necessarily predicting the end of the world, they had much to say about human behavior, the collapse of civility, and matters of life and death.

The untested and unscathed among us would likely judge and reject their uncivilized conclusions:

When survival is at stake, nothing previously believed or relied upon can be taken for granted.

Watch your back.

When the chips are down, trust is a precious but perilous commodity.

A man is presumed your enemy until proven otherwise.

Talk is cheap.

Words and actions must match.

Our country is a complex system, and complex systems are susceptible to breaking.

We are only 9 meals away from anarchy.

A man who is starving or watching his family starve will do anything.

If you don't defend yourself and what's yours, a desperate person will take what they need from you.

Movies cannot capture what happens when you shoot and kill a man.

You can never have enough ammo.

When everything is at stake, one cannot afford to get it wrong, or death will follow.

And if things became really bad, well...

Better you than me.

I remembered the first time I heard that aphorism. It sounded callous and cruel, but that wasn't the point. It reflected the stark reality and limited options imposed by the war and shone an uneasy glow upon our Darwinian nature. I was going to need a wise, experienced, and convincing teacher to help me not just see this darkness but understand it. One day, he simply showed up.

* * *

“Mountain Matt” sat in my office. His appearance fit his moniker. Forty years after his discharge from the Army, he kept his closely buzzed hair to military standards. However, that’s where his regulatory compliance ended.

His wiry salt and pepper beard unfurled towards his belt line obscuring the chest pocket of his worn overalls. He was encased in his signature black, oilskin trench coat no matter what the weatherman predicted – he had lost his faith in forecasts decades ago. His sun-bleached jungle boots completed the ensemble.

Matt’s stony blue eyes were at once, penetrating, yet conveyed a spark of kindness that somehow survived his tour in Viet Nam. However, from the start, he was all business and had he experienced the COVID-19 pandemic, he would have cracked a solemn, but self-affirming grin that his ominous predictions for an apocalyptic convulsion of the country had finally arrived. And when it did, he would be ready.

Matt owned scores of off-grid acreage on the crest of an isolated mountain three hours outside of the city. He constructed a compound like those he helped build as a combat engineer in Vietnam. No one ever paid Matt a surprise visit. He designed a multi-layered defensive perimeter, secret egresses, and funneled avenues of approach, all of which were booby trapped. His trailer home was buried up to the sandbagged windows. These openings that once brightened dark interiors now doubled as shooting ports. The interior was bleakly utilitarian, heavily armed and stocked to support a small band of closely trusted defenders for months.

Every available space was efficiently crammed with necessities. A fat Liberty safe full of rifles and piles of ammunition took the lion’s share of available storage. Number 10 tin cans of freeze-dried food were neatly stacked under the bunks. Military surplus combat web gear, dangling on a row of hooks, were outfitted for each defender. These were for the close network of fellow veterans whom he had invited to congregate there upon receiving word that the time had come.

Matt wasn’t scared of death. He lost that fear in 1969. But he was going out on his own steam and would fight like a beast had another man tried to take his life from him before he was ready, or God forced his hand.

While discussing the matter of survival, he was never threatening – just matter of fact. And he wasn’t going to be politely hypothetical about it. He established this understanding in our first session.

“If it ever came down to it between you and me for any reason... Well, let’s just say that I’m always going to be the one who goes home at the end of the day.

“Better you than me.”

He grinned, but his eyes assured it was no joke.

I took that statement in precisely the spirit it was delivered. Though his survival always came first, those concerns quickly gave way to a caring man who had thought deeply about the future. He was worried. Worried about what was coming. Mostly because humans were at the helm of it. And while times changed human nature didn't.

He brought in an impressive command of history. He was correct about many points, if not taking the dark side of human choice where it was a toss-up.

Old times were cruel. Most people didn't enjoy a long life and a quiet death. Our civility, he noted, is a recent luxury; it was also fragile, and history supported this assertion. “It will be the first thing to go, and people won't like what is underneath it.” During one of our sessions, he revealed not his preferred vision of the future, but his confident prediction for what he knew was approaching. He just wasn't sure what event would trigger it.

“It's going to be bad, and very few people are awake enough to see it coming and to prepare. Pillars of our lives that we take for granted will fall apart. Most will be in shock and won't act quickly enough. They will want to believe the government's lies because they will be scared. But in the end, those in power will only care about saving themselves; you'll be on your own. You need to prepare beforehand because when the panic hits, it will be too late. The supply lines will falter and things you need will be hard, if not impossible, to come by. If you're going to panic, panic early. Most will starve to death. If you were smart enough to set back anything worth taking, once people get desperate enough, they will try to take what's yours or even kill you if you don't defend yourself. You must be prepared to take a person's life before they take yours. It's not going to be pretty.”

When he said this, I looked into those blue eyes. The kindness that had been there only moments before, was gone. They had iced over, and I saw before me the soul of a good man disappear into what was necessary. He shared something that I didn't want to believe. But those cold, penetrating eyes demanded my attention. His voice was steady and intentional, but without a hint of pressure demanding my concurrence. I could take it or leave it – my choice.

This dark wisdom sent a chilling shiver through my core. This nightmarish vision sounded more like science fiction than prophecy. More like paranoia than informed prediction.

People have been predicting the end of the world for a long time, and yet here we sat. It would have been easy to assuage this man with polite listening. But somewhere within me, what he shared resonated deeply, as though touching a stranger in me I had never met; a part that stoically nodded in acknowledgement of these truths hiding in shadows of security and abundance.

Only it wasn't science fiction to him. Parts of the lessons were practical. He advised on what necessities to begin stocking at home, an inventory of gear, and what it would require to defend it. It was an overwhelming list, so it was easy to miss the deeper points of his guidance. It was less a prediction about the details of what may come, and more about the animalistic nature of mankind, no matter the conditions that beckon it.

Over the course of the time I spent with Matt, he backed up every lesson with a corresponding personal horror he had endured during the war. And not because he felt the need to cite his references. He didn't want to take what he had learned to the grave without passing it on. I sensed he was also tired of carrying the burden alone until the end. He was passing on this final baton.

My job was to help him, but part of his journey was helping me. He had sacrificed his youth and a life that would never be the same after his war. No amount of wishing brought the "return to normal" after he came home. There were only the stark lessons of war and the hellish ordeal that forever changed him. And not a soul he knew wanted to hear about any of it. So he buried the lessons along with everything else about the war. Now he was facing another ordeal and didn't want to hide anymore.

Matt didn't live to see his forecast roll across the planet. His personal apocalypse came in the form of an aggressive cancer diagnosis. By the time he acquiesced to a doctor's visit for his worsening pain, it was too late. I last saw him only weeks before he succumbed to his end. He came for psychotherapy because he needed to talk about some things before he moved on. We worked fast as time was short.

His illness rapidly progressed and claimed him before I could tell him that I heard what he said and that I appreciated his sharing it with me, even if things didn't go as far South as he predicted. Or perhaps, he was, once again, just early. However, I always remembered him fondly and valued our time together.

I now carried the mantle of his dark wisdom that he retrieved at great cost while passing through the underworld of war. Like many before him.

Those infinitely long lines of warriors confronted by impossible choices with no good outcome, except the one they were left with when the smoke cleared and the screams

fell silent. Those survivors came face to face with the stark reality forced upon them. And for whom there was no road back to what was stolen from them. If one cared to look, their eyes implored what they dared not say out loud – don't forget our lessons... we paid dearly to bring them back to you.

Many of us formed unbreakable bonds.

Tighter than family.

Until hellish deaths severed them.

Many had their hearts broken.

And they didn't want to know the new guys' names.

When they couldn't stand seeing it one more time, their eyes fixated into an infinite stare.

And were blinded to the future they could no longer see.

Some lost ability to feel.

Anything at all.

To help them numb the human brutality.

And do what they had to do to bring themselves home.

Whatever it took to make it back to the lives they missed, but lost somewhere in the jungle.

To do what was necessary.

Anything at all.

Better you than me.