

In Search of the **WARRIOR SPIRIT**



"One of the boldest and most imaginative experiments ever attempted in the training of military forces."

—George Leonard

Richard Strozzi Heckler

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Richard Strozzi Heckler

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of *Everything We Had: An Oral History of the Vietnam War* and *To Bear Any Burden*

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In Search of the
**WARRIOR
SPIRIT**

Richard
Strozzi
Heckler

North Atlantic Books
Berkeley, California

Author's Note

The names of the soldiers, the team designations, as well as the Army post have been changed.

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anthropological text, and whose
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computer advice.

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tify with the retaliative mentality of the modern military if they begin to blend with conflictive situations instead of fighting against them? Isn't increased aggression (firepower) the only sanctioned strategy for winning a fight? If we blend with an aggressor won't that make us subordinate to them? I don't pretend that there are simple answers to these questions, or that aikido is an antidote for the habituated violence and aggression that infects our military and its policymakers. I do know that it is having an astonishing impact on these men, both in their bodies and in their way of thinking. As their rigid musculature responds to the emphasis on relaxation, they're becoming more flexible and are able to feel more, both from within themselves and from other people. Additionally, the emphasis on being centered makes them more aware when they're off center, and consequently more responsible for their own acts of aggression. More importantly they are experiencing an alternative way of dealing with conflict. They're recognizing, on the most fundamental level, that blending with a conflictive situation is usually the most efficient, graceful, and least damaging way to resolve it. This radical alternative is a language they use in their daily activities. Whether we're in the dojo, the classroom, on a military exercise, or having dinner in their homes I see the language and spirit of aikido subtly being revealed through their words and actions. They're sustaining and tolerating more feeling and more real power—a power that comes from within.

November 18

Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk, spent the last two and half days with us. Unassuming in appearance, Brother David radiates a powerful and contagious inner calm. After recounting his military experience from being drafted into the German army as an Austrian teenager to being saved at the last minute from a firing squad, he was asked why he chose to be a monk. "A friend loaned me *The Rule of St. Benedict*," he began in his Austro-German accent, "and when I read it I thought 'this is the form of life I had been looking for.' But where was there a monastery putting this into practice? St. Benedict lived fifteen hundred years ago. Someone suggested I should visit Mt. Saviour Monastery. Well, I said, I'll take whichever comes first, the right monastery or the right girl. After a few hours at Mt. Saviour I

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knew that this was it! That was in 1953, and I'm still a member of the community." He now spends over six months of each year in the monastery and the remaining time teaching and lecturing.

"I take the time to feel grateful for all that I have," he said. "And there's so much to be grateful for—what we're given to eat, loving friends, the health of our children." He laughed and added, "I could spend my entire day being grateful." He surprised the men by pointing out that there was a strong similarity between being a monk and being a soldier, at least in the areas of service, discipline, and dedication.

At one point he took an inventory of religious inclinations. Most of the hands were raised in the Christian category, with a smattering of agnostics and atheists. Johnson, indicating that he was an agnostic, and leading with his jaw, as usual, challenged, "What do you mean by God anyway? How do you know you're leading a spiritual life?"

Unfazed, Brother David defined spirituality as a sense of belonging or connectedness—with a person, with nature, with a community, with an inner feeling.

"Do you feel any of these things?" he asked Johnson.

Johnson's jaw softened. "I feel very connected to my newborn son and, of course, I have a deep bond with my teammates." The room grew quiet. "This feeling of being part of something," he continued, "increased tremendously with the birth of my child. It was one of the most fulfilling and powerful motivations in my life."

"Then," Brother David said simply, "from my point of view this is a spiritual life. In fact it sounds as if you have a wealth of spirituality in your life."

"Yeah, since you put it that way I guess I do feel there's spirituality in my life." He relaxed back, radiating a warm glow.

In closing, Brother David said that he saw that the lifestyle that these men had chosen was ultimately their way to relate to something greater than themselves. He went on to say that he considered this urge to go beyond oneself always a spiritual urge. "In your drive to go beyond yourself," he said softly, "I hope that you can see, as I do, that your profession can be a vehicle for worshipping that which is sacred. If you wish, your chosen profession can be an expression of your highest spiritual values." The room was quiet for a moment as we let his words sink in. Then

as he began to leave a very moving thing happened. The men stood in a spontaneous gesture of respect and many of them went up to him and silently shook his hand. They recognized Brother David as a warrior of the heart.

November 19

First snow. A wide storm front rolls down from the northeast. The landscape drifts to sleep under white pastures. My struggle against the wind and cold has abruptly stopped. The change is so sudden that my emotions swing quixotically from reverence to mischievousness. Alternately I want to run headlong into the oceanic whiteness, then I want to sit quietly and listen to the sound of the earth returning back into itself.

My friend Catherine and I drive northwest to Barre to visit friends at the Insight Meditation Society, a Buddhist retreat center established in the early eighties. Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg, two of the founders of the center and long-time personal friends, are in the middle of conducting a three-month retreat, but they happily greet us at the door. The center is the classic large, rambling New England building; it was once a Christian seminary. The mood in the hall is solemn and darkly quiet, almost morose. It's such a radical change from the Army post that I feel as if I'm sending a huge wake before me as I walk through the hushed hallways.

Joseph and I are cut from entirely different molds, but we have developed a mutual respect over ten years of friendship. He's tall and gawky. When we first get together he'll pat me on the head and ask in mock seriousness, "Why haven't you grown in the past year?" I chide him that he sits too much and manuever him into an aikido joint lock. Despite his large frame he's elfin in spirit except when he talks about the Dharma—and then a clarity and luminosity transform him. His book *The Experience of Insight: A Natural Unfolding*, which is required reading for the soldiers, expresses the light touch and penetrating insight of his teaching. After graduating in philosophy from Columbia University he went to Thailand and India with the Peace Corps. There he was introduced to Buddhist meditation. Since that time he has dedicated his life to teaching and practicing meditation.

As always, our conversation eventually includes a discussion about warrior virtues in the contemplative and martial disciplines.

until I'm up-ended and fall to the ground. He turns to the men and says, "Learn to wait. Be still in yourself. You don't have to jump out after your partner." He mimics the way in which they struggle with their partner. "Wait and tie into your partner. Practice *mutsubi*."

After a day and a half of training with Saotome Sensei I seesaw between elation and a sinking feeling of despair. While I'm elated that Saotome Sensei, a true aikido master, is with us, I'm equally consumed by a sense of failure as certain aspects of the rigidity and stiffness of these men appear unchanged from the first week. Jack tells me later that I'm tired and inordinately hard on myself. He reminds me of the first month of training and really how far we have all come together. But most important—and what I only half want to hear, probably because it's most true—is that when my teachers come I become both the son to their father and the father to their son. I understand what Jack points out to me as a fundamental aspect of my neurosis—unfinished business with my own father.

I've noticed that starting with Brother David and now with Saotome Sensei there's been a change of attitude in the men's response to the guest instructors, and in many ways to us, the core teachers. In the past the men would sit quietly and attentively during a visiting instructor's initial session, with their bullshit detector turned on high. During the second session they would ask polite, but controversial questions. By the beginning of the third session their predator instinct prevailed and they went for the kill. They challenged, cajoled, disagreed, fought and criticized wherever they felt a discrepancy. Sometimes they did this by making brilliant, scholarly arguments; at other times they would simply shout "Bullshit!" Then there would be the times that they would humorously mimic the style of the presenter. If the presenter responded with dignity and genuineness to the confrontation he would win the respect of the men. If he became defensive or evasive the men would either scornfully withdraw or escalate the confrontation. Then afterwards someone would always come up and say, "I hope you're not too thin-skinned. Don't take our attacks too seriously, we really don't mean anything by it."

They also pinpointed the idiosyncrasies of our team to perfection and took every opportunity to reflect them back to us. Sometimes it was lighthearted and fun but often it was brutally

ed. "I don't understand it."
 ily should leave immediately.
 it's chancy by sea. She thinks
 perhaps they can be of some
 Flynn's voice against the sound
 We promise to stay in touch.
 I want to be mad at somebody
 nment for always seeming to
 less Ton Ton Macoute? Baby
 sive gene? There is a sickness
 human soul. It is everywhere.
 s my life and I'm suddenly
 quietly in the next room. How
 ncestors to have stood outside
 g and claw of predators. The
 ist is like a virus, starting from
 until we're devoured by and

gentle snow luff by the sleep-
 urd white crust. The bareness
 n landscape are harshly inva-
 outside," I read. The battle is
 My tears are in sorrow for our
 y to combat this madness.

ter Ops looks exhausted. We
 n and so the men can be with
 hough I've had a month off;
 any more paperwork. Jack is
 his adventures. Although Col-
 skiing the reports of our two
 erson's expectations. Flynn
 0 teams come back from these
 s surly, cynical, and generally
 ok tired, sleepy, fatigued, or
 ne battalion S-2 commented,
 y and gave the best briefings

rew the most difficult mission,

having to travel further and stay longer than any of the other teams, we suffered no injuries or illness, while there were seventeen injuries to members of the other Battalion teams. Our teams successfully navigated approximately thirty kilometers of snow-covered mountainous terrain at altitudes between 7,500 and 8,500 feet with loads averaging 95 pounds. They remained in their hide sites undetected for ten days and completed as high a rate of accuracy in their reports as any team in the Battalion.

Compared to winter operations in previous years this exercise was particularly successful in terms of how the soldiers applied the work with us to an extremely arduous event. By all accounts they performed with a degree of body control not previously observed; and they did so without giving up any of their creative instincts for daring and aggressive action.

February 11

It's over. Things are moving fast, too fast for me. I want us to make a clean, clear ending, but as the men are preparing for their next assignments, we're packing things in boxes. Their way of handling the ending I know well. Growing up in the military you make friends, get assigned a new station, and then are gone. Oh, the care and feeling are there . . . but don't get too attached; you'll just have to leave.

I take an inventory of all the guest presenters and ask the men if they had to spend a year with one of the presenters which one would it be. The year might be spent in combat, at the post, or even sharing family time: "Who would you choose as a fellow warrior? Who would you choose as a fellow team member?" The pros and cons of all the presenters were discussed and the majority unequivocally chose Brother David Stendl-Rast, the gentle-hearted Benedictine monk.

Why?

"Because he wouldn't lean on you."

"He had an internal strength."

"You could depend on him to carry his own weight."

"He was true to himself."

* * *

I'm sad.

I feel so much loss.