

Us and Them and Survival

by Gary Lark

Memories can hide, slip away like a fish behind a rock. At other times they run together or jump out of sequence. The time around the Kent State shootings is a little jumbled like that for me. I have a friend from that time who remembers these events somewhat differently. But the hot malevolence of that time is seared on my soul.

It could be any other day in the armory, hanging out between exercises or waiting for an inspection. But there's a different tension today as we assemble our gear on the gym floor, wash the trucks and wait. Our National Guard unit is preparing to invade the University of Oregon.

There are four dead and nine wounded on the campus of Kent State University. There are sit-ins, protests and burned buildings across our country. The protests against the Vietnam War intensify and spread. On the heels of the demonstrations at the 1968 Democratic convention and civil rights struggles, the shots that fell the Kennedys and Martin Luther King, more shots ring out in Ohio and our consciousness. By May of 1970 things have turned. Many people, including military, know that the war is a lost cause. Even nuking North Vietnam back to the stone age, as some advocate, would not make us the victor. The rank and file of the National Guard are left to deal with the resulting chaos in the streets.

There are demonstrations on most Oregon campuses. There are rumors flying, expectations, fears that someone will burn the ROTC building on the University of Oregon campus. It has happened elsewhere. There is a seething need wanting to be quenched and fire would do for the moment. Back at the armory we clean our rifles for the third time.

I am a student at Oregon State University and work part-time in the Student Union building. During the evenings I make sure rooms are ready for lectures, work the information desk and lock up at closing. But this week has seen a tent city spring up on the quad. Demonstrators are communicating with others up and down the west coast. The university president calls in the student body president.

“See if you can get these people to go home.”

“I’ll talk with them.”

He goes into the array of nylon domes and returns a few minutes later.

“They say they want to stay.”

“Well, tell them to leave.”

“I can relay your request.”

Again he goes and come back.

“They say they want to stay.”

The frustrated university president gazes out across what is normally a peaceful place, very seldom keeping him from his bed. There is something about this confrontation that bothers him. The students will not follow orders. The student body president will not make them follow orders. Nobody is in charge. It is unpredictable. This kind of empowerment makes the university president uncomfortable.

“Tell them to be gone in the morning,” he says.

“I can tell them what you said,” the student body president replies, refusing to be *Us* or *Them*.

“Well, hell.”

The university president leaves. Later that week the student body president resigns in protest of the rigid system. He is the third student body president in three years to resign in protest.

Riot training had been a part of our schedule, intermittently, for several years. Marching in V formations, gas masks limiting our vision, we confronted make-believe hippies. No one believed we would ever have live ammo, although we did affix bayonets at times. We would tromp around Cottage Grove in formation practicing against a few of our own. In Infantry Training some of the cadre had put mop heads on the bayonet targets to simulate long hair. Hippies, demonstrators, were *Them*.

Once I was a part of a group of people with thick glasses and the politically suspect who were named as aggressors. We were to be the enemy, a small crowd of protesters milling around, planning dark deeds. It was at an old mill site on the edge of town. Who knows where someone got a squirt gun or found the tripwire but we became spirited aggressors. Too spirited for the regular troops.

We set up a little ambush, in plain sight, so when the formation came tromping toward us we sprang the tripwire, squirted their gas masks with water and threw dust on the lenses; the resulting mud making it hard to see. We sprang a second tripwire, at which point we could have attempted to grab a rifle or two. It was then we recognized how angry they had become. They were, predominantly, the rifle platoon of our company, who we had served with for years and they were mad enough to club us with their rifle butts, given half a chance. They had just wanted to walk through the exercise and go back to the armory; they didn't want any grief.

I learned something that day: give people who are trained, regimented and dehumanized enough provocation and they'll shoot your ass. It doesn't matter that you and they come from the same system. *Us* and *Them* can be interchangeable. The military fuse is a short fuse.

So, while waiting in the armory I know how the shootings at Kent State had happened. I know that decisions could, and probably would, be made with disastrous consequences. The training has all been directed toward violent confrontation. We might be inept, but we are dangerous.

I also imagined a different scenario: What if we had mediators. And tables of food. Music. A commitment to understand one another. A way to express needs and frustrations. Could the people in the street, who were willing to confront, hate and maim the *other* people in the street, find a way to a solution? Or generate a new way of doing things?

I know these thoughts are the next thing to treason, or worse, a sign of weakness. And troubled by the lack of reason I knock on the First Sergeant's door. The First Sergeant, who is in charge of everybody but the officers, is an experienced military man and seems, at times, to see himself as a father figure, calls me in. I express my misgivings about following orders on the University of Oregon campus that I thought are wrong. He ponders a moment.

"That's the first time this has ever come up," he said.

His gaze is level. His eyes impossible to read.

He finishes with, "I hope it doesn't come to that."

I am dismissed. I go back to the main part of the armory to wait. In about an hour I am called with a few others on a detail to wash the trucks, again. The trucks, of course, have been sitting in the back of the armory and you have to look hard to find the dust accumulated in the four hours since the last wash. As a detail, washing trucks is a good one. Much better than washing the grime from pots and pans in the mess hall.

During the truck washing we check the lights and turn signals, check the oil and tire pressure. It is at this point when the hose finds its way into the crankcase. Several gallons of water go into the engine. To that point, I have not thought of sabotage, but it seems a logical next step. Previously, I have told friends at Oregon State who were headed to demonstrations in Seattle, Portland and San Francisco about what formations to expect, what tear gas is like, ways to deal with it. If we are going to be at the mercy of events and questionable decisions, shouldn't we act?

We come back into the hall to wait, go back outside once an hour to smoke, back in to wait. At the end of two days we are sent home. Tensions have eased, just slightly. It turns out we never invade the University. There are police and university people trying to find a way through the charged atmosphere; we are never called. Perhaps someone, somewhere, knew we would cause more problems than we would solve. There certainly was plenty of confrontation without us.

In everyday life our Guard unit was made up of students, loggers, accountants, mill workers, truck drivers, teachers, salesmen, a cross section of Oregonians. *Us* and *Them* became blurred in the street, in the armory and washing trucks.

Us and *Them* was also blurred when, that summer, Governor Tom McCall offered a state sponsored rock festival, dubbed Vortex I: A Biodegradable Festival of Life, fashioned on the Woodstock Festival, to draw protesters from the streets of Portland during an American Legion convention. It was a success, drawing over 50,000+ people. Antiwar groups had expected to draw that many into the streets to protest the Legion's pro Vietnam War stance. It was a momentary success, a political success. It certainly held risks for the sitting governor, but it didn't translate into changing the *Us* and *Them* situation.

I started to think about what an alternative service might look like. What if, along side our regular military, we had another service to choose. Imagine training as rigorous, probably more so, for thousands, then millions of people in nonviolent action, negotiation and mediation, leadership through empowerment, democratic action, intervention techniques, language skills, cultural education, food, music and dance as negotiating tools, creative expression to open dialog. Imagine dropping these people into crisis situations before the military is called for. Imagine this on an international scale. Imagine how this would change the fabric of human experience in a few generations.

It seems so logical to have a *Peace Service*, that I wonder why it wasn't an outgrowth of other organizations—the Peace Corps, perhaps. Could it be that the current power structure might find it threatening? Just in my lifetime I've seen the results of World War II on my parents, the Korean War on my cousins, the Vietnam War on my generation, the Gulf Wars eating at the human body and mind. And that doesn't count the myriad other blips on the radar screen. The amount of energy, money, resources, skill and lives that are wasted in the service of violent conflict is needed for our survival.

We have set tradition, institutional channels of power and emotional inertia against communication and empowerment. Against peace. Global climate change looks like it will challenge our thinking and ways of doing things. Like the addict, will we cling to our habits until they kill us? Are our ruts of need and greed too deep to climb out of? If our past foolishness isn't enough to encourage change perhaps survival can be. There is no *Us* and *Them* on this marvelous planet, only *Us*.

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