**Secrets From our Inner War**

*(I’m going to share this piece again from our good friend Rob for Mental Health Sunday in the UCC. He was here for a few years and is one of the most creative spirits and wonderful persons I have met. I miss you, Rob, and am grateful that you give voice for many through these words. Thank you. Pastor Mark.)*

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It’s been an exhausting war of attrition. I am weary. For decades this war, like most others, removed many things that I embraced. The people I love the most fell away. Constantly moving obliterated my concept of home. I was deeply wounded, many times. But this war also taught me important things. Pay attention, and I’ll tell you what it’s like behind barbed wired and deep inside cold, muddy trenches.

First of all, we [here it is time to switch to the plural, for we are many things that I will never be] envy you [being plural, all throughout this piece, and not disparaging] a great deal more than you know. Yes, difficulties in life are hard for you, as they are hard for us, but you seem to find a way to stay afloat when even the smallest challenge sucks us down into chaotic, locked places. At these depths even the sharks swim sedated.

We find this submersion confusing, and would do anything to stay on the surface. We don’t sink willingly, a great whirlpool pulls us down, and we rarely know what causes it. Sometimes we can resist, but there are times when, no matter how fast we tread water, we end up being dragged down into darkness.

You seem to have stronger life rafts than we do. Will you reach out for us, the next time we start to sink?

Sometimes we fall off a cliff. Our fingers leave claw marks near the edge. We wish we could hit the ground, but we just keep falling. Yes, we see you standing there above us, watching us fall through the air.

We have learned that our enemy is elusive and invisible. It also has the ability to live outside of the rules of time. Inside of us it can grow and eat away at every organ in our body. This can go on for centuries.

Our battles make us fragile. But they also make us very resilient. We are the survivors, but we still grieve for our fallen allies. We have watched many like us lose their war. We miss them.

Know this: when we get lost, it’s usually not something you did. Sometimes we run away, just to see if you will try and find us.

Sometimes we are terribly hurt, but we don’t walk around with plaster casts on our legs, or splints on our arms. No rashes or scars [well, sometimes scars] illustrate our skin. We don’t cough or limp. That doesn’t mean our wounds are not there, or they no longer hurt. They’re always there, and they always hurt. Sometimes the pain just simmers in the background, but there are other times when it explodes into a bonfire. We don’t control the ignition. Don’t think you do, either.

We spend a lot of time and effort trying to hold ourselves together, and sometimes this can make us focus only on ourselves. We must learn to care for ourselves as a matter of survival, so we know the importance of caring. We care for others like us, without judgment or condescension, and few communities can truthfully utter such words. We crawl out of trenches and across fields of tracer bullets to drag our companions to safety, for we count on them to do the same for us. We would also do the same for you.

We are generous people, for we choose to help others, mostly all of you, as a way of helping ourselves. When we help you, it proves to us that life can sometimes find stability. It’s like watching a wonderful movie, we can see it but we can’t jump into the screen. When we’re in despair, we feel like we have no value, so with our thoughtless generosity we get to experience something we’re desperate to believe still exists: you.

We also tend to be very creative people, the language of poetry and imaginative prose works best for defining the terrors we feel and the joys we desire that we can’t describe any other way. We paint in colors because we constantly think in color and the canvas gives substance to our feelings. We write in verse because our chaotic thoughts must sometimes be chained down. Creative expression gives shape to the inner world we find impossible to describe, for sometimes we cannot explain how we feel within the limitations of human conversation.

Emotions deeply confuse us, and we have trouble controlling them. They can overwhelm us with turbulence. We laugh at funerals and cry at parades.

We mean “love” when we say it; for we have, for reasons beyond our control, experienced its loss more often than most people will in ten lifetimes. This makes us experts that only harsh experience can forge. We also know that sometimes you say you love us, but then you have to let us go, and this is something we never get used to, nor understand. It’s rarely for our own good, even though you say it is, and we know this.

Our enemy keeps finding ways to show us people we have lost and miss the most. The wind sings with the voices of those who had to walk away. We would give anything for it to be silent. Clouds turn into faces we know we will never see again. The smell of breakfast breaks our heart. Everything reminds us of you. We carry you inside of us always, even though you have come to the conclusion that you had to let us go. We wish we knew how to do that. It must be quite a gift. Will you teach us?

At times, we know we act aloof and distant. We walk away from you when you engage us in conversation, or we look over your shoulder when you are talking to us. We do this because some of you you have deeply hurt us, and this can make us afraid of all of you.

The enemy within us is very good at whispering to us, and it whispers in our ears that thing we are most afraid of, the fear that we will never be of value to anyone, simply because you will never understand us when we can’t even understand ourselves. You disappear when we need a moderate shadow. Are we really that frightening?

Sometimes we choose to embrace our deceptive enemy. Lies are seductive when we are at our weakest. We hate our foe, but at least it never leaves us alone. The iron cell shared with an enemy can be better than solitary confinement.

There are days we have to shout out loud. We can vocalize terrible things. We know the reason this makes you uncomfortable, and why you cover your ears, is because we scream the fears that all of you keep safely inside.

We get confused when you say things like, “I clearly can’t give you what you need right now,” because we know that you are saying this to protect yourself from having to learn patience. Patience is hard, we know this. Please do not speak for us, for we are the experts on us.

We also know that you fear the part of us that you see in yourself so you stay away. Don’t worry, it’s okay, we know what it’s like to be afraid, and while you choose to give us distance, “for our sake,” take comfort in the fact that we will try not to do this to you.

Look for the courage to keep us in your life. It means a lot to us.

We hate to be lonely, yet sometimes we choose to find ways to be alone, because the universe is loud, people frighten us, and the world overwhelms us. Come sit quietly with us. It will be nice.

We also know loneliness better than most of you do, for this is an emotion fed by the enemy that lies deep inside of us. We have a parasite that constantly tells us we are not good enough for you, and we believe it, even though we don’t want to. Our enemy is an expert at making up lies about you.

Finally, always remember we are always at war, even when we appear to be at peace. When the attack comes, be patient. Do not abandon us, for we will eventually drive it back. When all’s quiet again you’ll realize that we truly are wonderful people. Then again, we’ve been waiting for you to realize this for a very long time.