Viewpoint

‘Spiritual Resilience’

By The Reverend (Wing Commander) David Richardson

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Introduction

During the final months of RAF100, Air Publication (AP) 9012, 'Stress and Resilience Policy', was updated to include a chapter on 'Spiritual Resilience'. At first sight, this may appear to be a rather odd development for a modern air force more at home with electrons than the ethereal. However, this Viewpoint will argue that identity, meaning and morality – the key components of spiritual resilience – have a vital part to play in modern military thinking. As the policy states:

> The armed forces have long recognised the importance of transcendence – the sense of belonging to something greater than self - and meaning. Music, ceremonial, colours, mess life and medallic recognition all contribute to spiritual resilience. These things help us to develop common values, a sense of belonging and shared purpose. Their goal is to imbue military personnel with the background awareness that service and sacrifice is an honourable and worthwhile calling.[1]

This 'background awareness' is not a given and cannot simply be assumed. The 'common values' so easily taken for granted are in fact dependent on a wider context of meaning. The aim of this Viewpoint is to elucidate some of this context and to highlight its ongoing importance.

The Royal Air Force reached its largest numerical strength, in 1944 at the height of the Second World War, and some of its most iconic images date from that conflict, from Spitfires in sunny skies to Lancasters in flame-torn darkness. Whilst the readers of this journal are likely to be fluent in the strategic and tactical issues of the War, it is worth pausing to reflect on the cultural context in which the RAF made such great sacrifices. When Churchill and Roosevelt invoked 'Christian Civilization' in their public statements as the grand cause worthy of such commitment, they were not so much making a religious statement as appealing to a shared sense of identity and liberal democracy, which they expected their listeners to understand and relate to. Seventy-five years later, it is by no means obvious that this shared identity still holds.

This is the result of historical changes over many centuries. Pre-modern people could find their certainties in religious truth, framing their lives in the context of the church's teaching and hope of eternity. Enthusiasts for the Enlightenment could base their philosophy on a confidence that the truth was here on earth, for any rational person to discover through empirical analysis. Although these two views were divergent in almost every respect, they had this in common: a belief in a transcendent universe which provided a framework for understanding the place of human beings in the world.[2] As James Davison Hunter expresses

[1] AP9012, Chapter 12.

[2] James Davison Hunter, 'Liberal Democracy and the Unravelling of the Enlightenment Project', *The Hedgehog Review* (Vol 19 No 3 Fall 2017).

it, there was a 'common grammar for recognizing the natural affections and moral sentiments shared by all humanity...the seeds of social solidarity could be found in human sentiments, the public good within private interests, the universal within the individual'.[3] This is a concise interpretation of the transcendent worldview assumed by Churchill and Roosevelt in 1945. One of the tragic ironies of recent history, *pace* Fukuyama, is that, just as the liberal democratic project appeared to triumph in the wake of the Cold War, its internal coherence began to dissolve.

To put it crudely, liberal democracy bifurcated into liberal and democratic elements. In terms of liberalism, this is not simply a description of economic and social freedom in the traditions of Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill. Rather it is something new, literally neoliberalism. The basic assumption behind this concept is that the market is sovereign – and not simply over economic issues. Based on the theory of Friedrich Hayek, nothing has a given and immutable value, even those aspects of human significance and meaning that previous generations would have treated as normative. Objective truth is no longer 'out there' to be revealed to the religious, discovered by the scientist or reasoned out by the philosopher, but is determined by what the market will bear.

There is, in sum, no longer a shared, transcendent *mise en scène* for human existence. Virtues have transformed into values, both individually held and formulated, but of no binding or enduring significance. The very use of the word 'value' is worth pausing to reflect on. To paraphrase the small print of any financial product, 'the value of your morality may go up or down'; it has no innate or enduring worth of its own. The moral values of one's society will fluctuate dependent on what the market will bear – take Germany's 20-year moral odyssey from Weimar Republic to *Grundgesetz*[4] as a crude heuristic for such a process. As the Chinese historian Jung Chang remarks, 'if you have no God then your moral code is that of society. If society is turned upside down, then so is your moral code'.[5] One may debate what can and could be meant by 'God' here, but her point is cogent. The 'moral compass' avowed by many military personnel is arguably a useless if not downright dangerous device if the arrow has no external lodestone and simply swings along with market forces. If, for instance, the market is currently trading in personal peace and affluence, more abstract values such as loyalty and character may prove unattractive investments.[6]

In terms of democracy, the individual now has an unprecedented status. Once seen in relation to a divinity or wider society, human beings are now increasingly regarded as independent, free and sovereign agents. As the public sphere has become eviscerated of a shared cultural story, the individual is now free to decide his or her path through life. The individual may be

[3] Ibid.
[4] The 'Basic Law' of the Federal Republic of Germany, established in 1949 to safeguard human rights and democracy.
[5] Quoted in Jonathan Glover, *Humanity*, (Pimlico, London, 2001), p.405.
[6] Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Crossway, Wheaton, 1982), p.227.

freer to choose than ever before, but also carries an increasingly heavy burden for their own destiny.[7] Lacking the safeguards of a benevolent Providence (or a paternalistic society), – the individual must shift for themselves. The mantra that every schoolchild knows so well - 'follow your dreams and you can achieve whatever you want' has a darker side that few, if any, primary school assemblies ever spell out. Failure to achieve those dreams or ambitions will be the responsibility of the individual alone. In such a culture, one faces an unrelenting pressure to boost one's own image and status above all else. An intriguing textual analysis of Norway's main national newspaper between 1984 and 2005 revealed that, as the occurrence of self-referencing words such as 'I' and 'my' increased, instances of other-focused concepts such as 'duty' and 'obligation' declined.[8] The linkage between this cultural shift and the realities of twenty-first century warfare may not be obvious at first sight but can be easily traced.

The forces operating alongside the RAF in western Europe in 1944-45 did so against a broadly shared cultural outlook. The British, French and US national embodiments – Britannia, Marianne and Columbia – are hardly identical sisters, but bequeathed a remarkably similar legacy of shared understanding to their descendants and the freedoms for which the dead of two world wars gave their lives had a transcendent quality. This situation, it may be argued, no longer obtains. As the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor observes, 'the individual has been taken out of a rich community life and now enters instead into a series of mobile, changing, revocable associations'.[9] Holding their fragile future in their hands, each person makes their way through life via a series of short term contracts, which run the gamut of human existence from car insurance to employment. What matters most in such a culture is the utilitarian and the instrumental, an epistemic ecology where traditional concepts such as humility, duty and sacrifice seem anachronistic surds. And, as analysts of our neoliberal world have suggested, the promised blessings of prosperity and success have not trickled down universally, leading to a considerable degree of cynicism about public life, from fake news to the political establishment. This is not a development which augurs well for a strong common existence. If citizens withdraw from political and civic engagement into a private sphere of personal fulfilment, the liberal freedoms we take for granted are at risk.[10]

One of the founding principles of modern democracy is that the individual citizen surrenders certain freedoms and benefits to the state in exchange for protection and stability. This relationship is perhaps seen in its starkest form when a nation sends its citizens to war. In the West's post-2001 interventions, when the legitimacy of the campaigns was subject to intense public scrutiny, this affected the commemoration of those citizens who had given their lives. As Walklate, Jenkings and others have observed, British repatriation ceremonies

[7] Jackson Lears, 'The long con of Neoliberalism', *The Hedgehog Review* (Vol 19 No 3 Fall 2017).
[8] Jean Twenge and Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic*, (Free Press, New York, 2010), p.264.
[9] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992), p.502.
[10] Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual* (Penguin, London, 2014), p.363.

became 'deeply political acts' protesting against military action, where those who died were remembered as victims of government policy.[11] Anthony King, in his analysis of the obituaries of British service personnel, comments that the death of a soldier is not seen so much as an act of service for the nation as 'the meaningful expression of a man who defined himself by his profession'.[12] A strong relationship of trust between citizen and society is vital should that citizen be required to sacrifice everything for a bigger purpose.[13] This is especially the case if that purpose involves intangible issues such as freedom and democracy which defy inclusion in a bare economic calculus. If, however, there is no bigger purpose beyond personal fulfilment, then the citizen may well wonder whether the sacrifice is worthwhile.

One of the most fascinating commentaries on what may be at stake is provided by Yuval Noah Harari in his book *Homo Deus*. Harari's contention is that modern human beings have exchanged meaning for power; or, as we might express it, context for choice. Having once created an elaborate system of gods and religions to give meaning to our existence, we have now sloughed these off to live unfettered lives of self-determination. In Harari's view, however, even this freedom is itself illusory, as humans are simply driven by bio-chemical processes that are deterministic or random but most assuredly not free. Such a view could have significant consequences for military ethos, not least the entire honours and discipline structure. If valour and vice alike are merely responses to the chemical impulses in one's brain, the only distinction between them is that the former is currently more socially acceptable than the latter. According to such a calculus, to ascribe moral worth or censure to such actions is about as meaningful as condemning perspiration or praising frostbite: all are simply bio-chemical reactions to external stimuli. Harari comments that 'the sacred word 'freedom' turns out to be, just like 'soul', a hollow term empty of any discernible meaning. Free will exists only in the imaginary stories we humans have invented'.[14] Following his argument through, if free will is a chimera then, by extension, so is moral responsibility.

Harari even predicts that human beings as we know them may be gradually evolving out of existence as the algorithms which drive our universe improve and take new, more efficient forms. Intriguingly, however, Harari seems unable to live with the consequences of his own argument, implying in his conclusion that the evolutionary process should somehow be resisted to preserve human distinctiveness. He proves unable, however, to provide a convincing basis on which to do so. His philosophy suggests that even seemingly obvious ethical datum lines such as human equality are simply temporally limited by-products of a process which places no inherent worth on humans *qua* humans. Indeed, he explicitly

[11] S. Walklate, G. Mythen, and R. McGarry. 'Witnessing Wootton Bassett; An Exploration in Cultural Victimology', *Crime, Media and Culture* 7 (2), pp.149-165. K. N. Jenkings, N. Megoran, R. Woodward and D. Bos, 'Wootton Bassett and the political spaces of remembrance and mourning' *Area* 44.3, pp.356-363.
[12] A. King, 'The Afghan War and 'postmodern' memory: commemoration and the dead of Helmand', *The British Journal of Sociology*, Volume 61 Issue 1, pp.1-25.
[13] Lears, *op.cit*.
[14] J.N. Harari, *Homo Deus* (London, Penguin, 2016), p.329 and *passim*.

argues that human equality may soon slip away to be replaced by a hierarchal dystopia much worse than anything envisaged by Wells, Huxley or Orwell. Much as he may personally value the liberal world in which he currently lives, Harari has no way of justifying its superiority or desirability from his own trajectory of thought. For if freedom, democracy and equality are simply random grace notes generated by the blind music of the spheres, then there is no logical reason to prefer them above the alternatives. Nor, it follows, are they worth the sacrifice of blood and treasure. And if, as Harari maintains, there really is nothing ultimately sacred about human life, there may be drastic future implications for costly battlefield medical evacuation.

Harari's futurecast demonstrates the need for spiritual resilience, an awareness that human existence cannot be reduced to mere process – be that economic or biological without serious consequences. The free society which values the individual did not, and arguably could not, arise from a reductionistic, instrumentalist worldview. Indeed, Oxford academic Larry Siedentop has recently published a fascinating volume which explicitly traces the development of modern liberal equality right back to Christian thinkers in the middle ages, who translated Biblical views of humanity into practical political application.[15] One does not need to share the faith of these mediaeval scholars to appreciate their insights, which have shaped the cultural milieu we take for granted. Thus the openly agnostic Gunter Lewy has argued that 'reason alone ... is ... clearly not enough to provide moral inspiration'.[16] Perhaps it is time to pause in our relentless pursuit of ends-driven individualism to consider the possibility that there are bigger truths in the world to which we belong. Davison Hunter remarks that our current cultural trajectory is likely set to bend us away from the very concepts of justice, freedom and tolerance that we avowedly treasure.[17] Without spiritual resilience, we have no firm basis for even those ethical and moral principles which seem so obvious and self-evident. Before we are called upon to defend these convictions in conflict, it is surely worth reflecting on why they are worth defending in the first place.

This Viewpoint is a development of a brief hypothesis originally aired on the Australian air power website The Central Blue. It also includes some material from a paper delivered at the International Military Ethics Symposium held in Washington DC during August 2018; the full paper is due to be published with a selection of others from the symposium by the National Defense University Press during 2019.

[15] Siedentop, *op.cit*.
[16] G. Lewy, *Why America Needs Religion*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1996), p.146.
[17] Hunter, *op. cit*.