

A PERSONAL CONFESSION

by

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Sept. 17, 1939

This is a personal confession. It is the story of what happened to me in the last World War.

I am telling it for my own benefit. I am telling it because I must not forget what happened to me then. I am telling it for the benefit of those of you also who went through that experience, because you must not forget what happened to you then. I am telling it for the benefit of younger people who have no personal recollection of the world war--because they must not forget what happened to the world in those years from 1914 to 1918. I am telling it because I am afraid that it will happen all over again--unless we remember!

I started out on the German side--in 1914. I was a student at the University of Berlin. I was just finishing up my one-semester course when the crisis of July, 1914 broke upon us. I was as innocent of any knowledge of international relations as a two-year-old babe. All I knew was the German fear of Russia, the German fear of encirclement, the German fear of annihilation. It was a war of self-defense to them. They wanted peace, but what could you do when you were surrounded by enemies? What could you do but mobilize when the Russian armies were mobilizing and already on the march, bent on obliterating the Fatherland? That was the point of view of the man on the streets and the man in the university.

And that was mine. And so I marched up and down Unter den Linden with a crowd of excited university students. With them, I serenaded the home of the Austrian ambassador. With them and thousands of others, I cheered the Kaiser as he stepped out on the balcony of the imperial palace. With the crowd, I cheered and sang and waxed excited and enthusiastic on the German side.

With the crowd, I say. And three and a half years later I did exactly the same thing on the other side! With the crowd! That's a terrible experience to go through. It's a frightening experience to go through.

That's what war does to you. It makes you go with the crowd. Independent thinking goes by the board. Individual conscience goes by the board. And you go with the crowd, wherever the crowd may be and in whatever direction the crowd may be marching. You go with the crowd--unless by heroic effort and by religious conviction, you can hang on to independent judgment and individual conscience. Which is an enormously difficult thing to do.

NOT OUR WAR

Well, after some difficulty, I got back to this country in September, 1914. And I began to change my mind--or to have it changed for me. Maybe, there was another side to the story. Maybe, the Germans were most to blame after all. At any rate, the whole thing looked a long way off, viewed from long-distance America. It didn't seem so real any more.

And besides, it wasn't our war. And we weren't going to get into it. Of course we weren't! Why on earth should we? I would remind you that most of us felt that way about it--in 1914. American participation was brushed aside as a ridiculous impossibility. It just wasn't in the picture. Our sympathies, to be sure, were with the allies. But the thought of our helping the allies in any military fashion was a long way off in 1914.

That's one of the differences between now and then. Now, we recognize that American participation is a possibility. And our minds are far more unneutral today than they were in 1914.

In 1915 I went to the pastorate of my first church - in a small suburban town in New Jersey. I was chiefly interested there in trying to build a community church--just one church for the whole town, with room in it for people of every denominational affiliation.

War still seemed a very far-away thing. I did preach about it some. I said that war was unchristian. I said that it was a denial of the principles of Jesus and the laws of God. I said that war destroyed human personality and spiritual values. I said that it killed not only our bodies but the souls of men. That it blew to bits the highest and best things that we knew--things like Reason and Truth and Love.

And, therefore, it was wrong--fundamentally and disastrously wrong. And I did not see how the Christian Church could sanction it. And I did not see how individual Christians could participate in so un-Christlike a procedure.

WE MUST STAY OUT OF WAR!

As far as America's entry into the war was concerned, at first I waved it aside as belonging to the realm of the unthinkable. And when people began to talk about it more and more, I said, "It must not be! War is wrong. All war is wrong. As Christians, we cannot allow ourselves to be drawn into this system of mass murder. America must stay out of war!"

In 1916, I voted for Woodrow Wilson--because he had kept us out of war. I was convinced that we could keep on staying out of war--that we would keep on--that we must keep on staying out of war.

Well, you know what happened in the last months of 1916 and the early months of 1917. I do not need to repeat the story. Neutral rights interfered with. Notes of protest that did no good. Atrocity stories that we swallowed hook, line and sinker. Waves of propaganda, which we did not think of analyzing. Submarine warfare. The sinking of the Lusitania. The stalemate on the western front, with the appeal of the allies for help, lest all be lost. These were the factors on the surface that battered at us day after day and battered down our resistance to war. And so public opinion shifted and on April 6th came the declaration of war, and we were in for it.

That was a hard time for those of us who had been saying that war was wrong. But we too had been battered, and played upon by the psychology of the time, and carried along with the crowd. It was almost irresistible.

Some of us had tried hard to resist. We tried hard not to surrender our convictions nor sell out our consciences. Some of us sweat blood over the problem.

What, after all, was the Christian's duty in a time like this? And this is what we said. I said it, and many another said it: "War is wrong--but sometimes it may be the lesser of two evils. The other evil in this case is Kaiserism. Kaiserism is arrogant imperialism. It is ruthless militarism. It violates Belgium. It throws treaties into the scrap-basket. It puts military necessity in the place of international decency. It threatens to overrun Europe and then America and the rest of the world. What can we do in the face of a thing like that--diabolical, immoral, unchristian? Can we sit by and do nothing? No, it must be stopped! And war is the only way to stop it. War may be wrong, but in this case it is the lesser of two evils."

WRONG MEANS FOR RIGHT ENDS

And I said this, too: "War is wrong - but sometimes you have to use wrong means to achieve right ends. And certainly the goals of this war are high and holy goals. To crush militarism once and for all. To rid the world of the curse of Kaiserism. To win for the world a lasting security. To make the world safe for democracy. To banish war from the face of the earth."

I said: "These are sacred principles. War is a terrible method to use, but sometimes you have to use terrible methods to save Christian ideals and to preserve lofty principles." Well, I preached that doctrine for a few Sundays--absolutely convinced that it was the right doctrine to preach.

And then in May 1917 I enlisted in the United States Army Ambulance Service with the French army. They needed ambulance drivers right away. It was a chance to get to France right away. And it was an opportunity to serve the Cause right away, without involving the necessity of killing anybody. I didn't want to kill anybody.

My enlistment was proclaimed as a very noble and heroic act. Ministers did not have to be conscripted. But it wasn't noble and heroic at all. It was by all odds the easiest thing to do. When the drums get to beating, joining up is by all odds the easiest thing to do. It's so very easy to march with the procession.

The conscientious objectors had a much more difficult time, as they refused to march with the procession. And of course none of us had the faintest idea of what war was really like. We knew in a second-hand sort of way that it was terrible, but after all there was something of high adventure in it. The glamour of war had not yet been stripped off.

THE GLAMOUR STRIPPED OFF

Well, I soon began to find out what war was really like. After having been trained in the art of "fours left" and "fours right" and almost everything else except driving an ambulance, our section was sent over-seas in July 1917, and by September we were at the front.

And there we discovered that war is sometimes a very uninteresting thing. It was a stationary sector on the Champaign front - where for long periods nothing happened at all. Long stretches of interminable waiting and unbroken monotony. Long days of unrelieved dullness and drabness. Long weeks of discomfort and mud and lice and rats and the foul air of filthy dug-outs.

Of course, sometimes it was exciting. And sometimes it was sickening. It is a too long story to tell. It's the story of men mangled by shells, of children and old people strangled by gas, of cities blown to pieces by air bombs, of towns blotted out by shell fire, of kindly men going brutal, of sane men going mad, of clean men sinking into ditches of immorality, of men of good-will, turning into men of hate.

That is one of the things that happened to us. Many of us started with a clean line in our minds between the German government and the German people. Our war was with the government and not with the people. We must hang on to our good-will for the people, the misguided, well-meaning people of Germany.

But as time went on, that distinction got lost. We came to hate them all. We called them "Huns", barbarous Huns; and "Boches", dirty swine. The atrocity stories that came drifting down the trenches made us do that. We did not know that they were lies - calculated lies to make us see red. We only knew that they did make us see red. War is like that-- it has to be run by lies and hate. Men will not kill each other unless you fill them full of lies and hate.

Good-will and Truth are two of the necessary casualties of war. They have to be killed, along with the enemy.

Well, I didn't see all that during the war. But I saw enough to make me hate the thing for what it did to the bodies and souls of men. But I kept saying to myself, "Yes, it's all horrible and nasty and immoral, but, after all, it's a Great Cause that we're fighting for. And when it's all over German militarism is going to be smashed. And international decency is going to be revived. And democracy is going to be saved. And war will be no more!

"That being the case, this horrible thing is worth all it costs", I said.

DREAMS SMASHED

And then, it was over! After a long, long time, it was over at last. I shall never forget the joy and the hope of November 11, 1918. This, I said, marks a turn in the road. A new day in human history is dawning now. We're going to build a new world now. We're leaving behind us the sins of militarism and violence and imperialism and international anarchy. And we're going to build a world on the solid foundations of democratic procedure and international cooperation and enduring peace. At last - the world has been made safe for democracy and the war to end war has won its victory.

Well, that did not happen. You know what happened, instead. The Treaty of Versailles--with its lies and its vengeance. The broken promises of the allies. The crushing of Germany. The freezing of the League of Nations into a defense of the status quo. The refusal of the United States to share in international responsibility. The continuation of economic warfare. The increase of nationalisms. The refusal to support the German Republic. The refusal to adopt ways of peaceful change. The continued reliance upon force. The increase of armaments and hatreds....Until at last Hitlerism broke upon the world! And the war clouds began to gather. And the storm finally burst. And once again Europe is red with blood and black with catastrophe!

Well, we have watched this tragic process going on and our hearts have been sick within us. We have seen our dreams fading away and our hope of peace being strangled.

THE GREAT FUTILITY

And many of us have come to this conclusion: The world war was not only a great wrong; it was a great futility. It did not work. It did not get the results we were after. In spite of its appalling costs in human life and human suffering, it did not achieve a single objective for which we fought. It did not crush militarism--Look at militarism today. It did not win security--Look at the world-wide insecurity today. It did not make the world safe for democracy--Look at the dictatorships today. It did not end war--Look at the war today!

That means this for me: It means that I was mistaken in 1917. I was mistaken in thinking that war was the lesser of two evils. I was mistaken in thinking that we could use wrong means to achieve right results. I was mistaken in supposing that we could reach constructive ends by the use of destructive methods or that we could support Christian principles by the use of unchristian procedure.

I think now that it was folly to suppose that we could kill militarism by militarism, or uphold democracy by undemocratic practice, or achieve World Peace by World War. I think now that it was a tragic mistake for the United States to enter the World War. I think all this for two reasons:

First, war is wrong - it is so terribly wrong that I am inclined to believe that it is the greatest of all evils. I cannot imagine anything more totally evil than the World War.

Second, War is futile. There is nothing theoretical or "idealistic" about that statement. I appeal to the facts. Thirty-two million lives lost as the direct and indirect cost of the world war--and nothing to show for it! We paid to the limit for the ideals for which we fought--and nothing to show for it. Nothing--but more suffering and more tyranny and more hate and more militarism and more war.

I say, it does not work. Whatever may be true of the wars of yesterday, the wars of today are so thoroughly destructive that they do not work. They destroy the very things you fight for.

The only sure result is Ruin - ruin for everybody. War today is an earthquake, and nobody wins an earthquake. War today is the last word in Futility--the last word in insane, disastrous, totalitarian Futility!

I MUST NOT FORGET

Well, that's where I am at the present moment. I have told this story in order to make myself remember what happened to my mind during the last war and since. I must not forget!

I know that the pressures in the days that lie ahead are going to be terrific. I know that already America has taken sides in the European conflict. I have taken sides. I don't like Hitler. I abhor Hitlerism. I don't want Hitlerism to over-run Europe. Increasingly we are going to be told that the conflict is our conflict--that the cause of Britain and France is our cause. That the life of democracy is at stake. That militarism must be crushed. That imperialism must be halted and that Hitlerism must be stopped! Just as we were told in 1917.

Increasingly, I am afraid, the war drums are going to beat in our ears, and the flag is going to be waved before our eyes, and the passion to save democracy is going to get hold upon our emotions--just as in 1917!

And so, I must not forget 1917 and its "holy" causes. And I must not forget 1918 and its unholy results. I must keep asking myself - Am I going to do it all over again? Are We going to do it all over again?

God help me--God help us all not to do it all over again!