Pacifism, feminism -- and Catholicism?

by Colman McCarthy

In his pre-Christian past, which is most of his life, Stan Goff was a career soldier who stoutly carried out American foreign policy by obeying orders to inflict violence on human beings in Vietnam, Panama, Grenada, Somalia, Haiti and other combat zones. In two Army tours between 1970 and 1996, the San Diego native was a paratrooper who leapt from planes more than 400 times, a sniper, and a member of Airborne Ranger units or Special Forces groups.

In *Borderline*, he reports that he "terrorized and brutalized people who were weak and poor. I had burned houses, killed poor farmers' livestock, and lied on command to family, journalists, and the public. ... I had exploited prostituted women, who exist on the periphery of every military activity."

In his personal life, he had a failed marriage that he called "psychotic," was an alcoholic and "an
irresponsible parent."

Whether by grace, self-disgust, remorse or self-education, or a combination of those forces, he chose on Easter Sunday 2008 to be baptized as a Christian. He was 56. Four years later, he received confirmation as a Roman Catholic. He had embraced pacifism and feminism.

Remarried, he now lives in Southeast Michigan, gardens with the Adrian Dominican Sisters on a long-term permaculture land-use project, and belongs to the St. Mary of Good Counsel Parish in the Lansing diocese.

In 34 chapters and 446 pages, the essays in Borderline blend commentary, ruminations, autobiography and history -- all of it scented with the humility of a truth-seeker who knows that asking questions is far easier than questioning the answers. What's in these literate pages extends Goff's thoughts found in his earlier efforts: Hideous Dream: A Soldier's Memoir of the U.S. Invasion of Haiti (2000), Full Spectrum of Disorder: The Military in the New American Century (2004), and Sex & War (2006).

Goff offers few details on the moment of his conversion, except to acknowledge appreciatively that it was a gradual awakening induced by absorbing the ideas of Stanley Hauerwas, Ivan Illich, Amy Laura Hall, Catharine MacKinnon, John Howard Yoder and others.

"Studying feminism," he writes, "is not easy for men because all our unexamined privilege is exposed in the process. Our little hideaways are exposed. ... Not only did feminism disabuse me of some of my blind spots when I was professing secular leftism after the army -- a response to my shame and rage about the military -- but feminism exposed me to (what for me were) fresh philosophical insights."

It is puzzling, even baffling, that Goff choose Catholicism as his church, one that has no firm pacifist commitment and assuredly discriminates against women. Absent an explanation, readers are left to guess why he went with Rome and not one of the Christian peace churches: Mennonites, Quakers, Brethren.

It's not as if he is blinkered to the historical and current defects of organized Catholicism. He asks, "Why has the church been so consistently pulled away from the teachings and example of Christ by the world (a world constituted by male power and by war)?"

Further: "What the record shows is that the church has consistently adapted its practices and pronouncements to worldly power with an eye to preserving the church's political influence and church men's prerogative. ... Whether we are looking at the Constantinian compromise or the Crusades or the witch trials or the Reformation or the wars of modernity, we will see again and again how the church has been pulled away from the Gospels by the material and cultural potency of the principalities and powers."

By chance, Borderline appeared at the same moment that American Sniper, as both a book and film, was on a roll. In that story, Navy SEAL Chris Kyle simplistically equates manliness with violence, saying, "The first time you shoot someone, you get a little nervous. You think, can I really shoot this guy? Is it really okay? But after you kill your enemy, you see it's okay. You say, Great. You do it again. And again."

Well-removed from such macho mindlessness, Goff writes: "My experience of war is that war, as a practice, does not inculcate honor as often as hatred, hostility, cruelty, and the fragmentation of the soldier's personality. Bad soldiers do not make war a bad thing. War invariably makes soldiers do bad things, and we become what we do."
Goff's prose is mostly laced with clarity, with the pages running deep with theological, political and sociological allusions sure to reward any reader.


Hard to tell where Goff learned that lingo. Not from his boot camp drill sergeant, I suspect.

[Colman McCarthy, a former Washington Post columnist, is the author of the new book Teaching Peace: Students Exchange Letters With Their Teacher.]

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