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My Many Selves

Wayne C. Booth

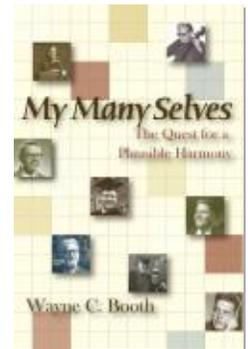
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Chapter Fifteen

The Man of Peace Tries to Tame the Slugger

We are as ugly as animals in our fashion, and unless we deal with the ugliness in ourselves, unless we deal with the violence in ourselves, the brutality in ourselves, and find some way to sublimate it, . . . we're never going to get anywhere with anything.

—Norman Mailer

Beware the fury of a patient man.

—John Dryden

Anger is a short madness.

—Horace, *Epistles* I.ii.62

*Twist ye, twine ye! Even so
Mingle shades of joy and woe,
Hope and fear, and peace and strife,
In the thread of human life.*

—Sir Walter Scott, *Guy Manning*

*I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.*

—William Blake, "A Poison Tree"

2000

As I was revising a speech for a “Christianity and Literature” conference, my computer suddenly went blank, losing about ninety minutes of the most satisfactory revising I’d done in a long time. I tried every conceivable recovery stroke, and the text would not return. Time rushed on. I had lost.

Feeling more and more frustrated, I was interrupted by Phyllis, who needed the machine for emailing; her computer had crashed. Not so much angry at her—what would be the point of that?—but furious at how life, or circumstance, was treating my work plans, I jumped up, grabbed the book closest to hand, and flung it violently to the floor.

After Phyllis had comforted me a bit—I was almost weeping from embarrassment about my outburst—I picked up the valued reference book and found that I had badly damaged the spine. Was I angry at Slugger-Booth for that discovery? No. Just disgusted that he is a part of me.

Most people who know me would be surprised, I think, if they saw a tape of that outburst. They think of me as an unusually peaceful, nonviolent man—a “dialogist” or “rhetorologist,” always working to achieve peaceful reconciliation between disputants through the pursuit of understanding. Many have accused me of being too much on the side of hypocritical tongue biting, cooperating when any *sincere* man would fight back. Yet what they would see in that flare-up is, I insist, a real Self in me.

The fact is that when that Self tries to take over in public, even suffering fantasies of committing real violence, I am quite skillful at transforming into—or pretending to transform into—a friendly, peaceful, cheerful pursuer of joint understanding. One Self forgives offenses honestly, easily, almost habitually, attempting not just to exhibit but to practice understanding. Another Self often defeats the peace lover—or tries to.

As an adult I’ve never slugged or physically battled with anyone, but I’ve often felt tempted. As a dean I once pounded a table with my fist, shocking everyone, especially the famous art critic whose ideas had angered me. Once when arguing about religion with colleagues at the faculty club, my fist again got out of hand, as it were. But since adulthood only our children and

Phyllis and one friend have seen me destroy things in anger. (That friend saw me destroy my tennis racket, furious at him for criticizing my playing.)

As a father, I did—far too often—spank or slap the kids, always reproaching myself for it afterward. (I swear that I always did it gently. Would my Kathie and Alison agree?¹)

PROFOUND HISTORY OF PERSONAL VIOLENCE

In a world where the daily papers are full of appalling violence, it may seem absurd for me to report my far less destructive outbursts. May 2001: as I write, the McVeigh bombing and forthcoming execution fills every journal with speculation about where his kind of “evil” comes from. May 2003: as I revise, the world is even fuller of accusations and speculations about who is evil and where evil destructiveness comes from; the Iraq war has escalated angry violence in all directions. January 8, 2005: as I revise again, news accounts are full not just of rising violence in Iraq but of actual genocide in Sudan. So where do my minor offenses fit in all that?

Obviously this chapter would be more gripping if I had ever bombed a federal building or if I’d been accused of murder because someone had seen me loading the pistol. But the structure of the soul division would be the same—as we see in many late confessions by repentant murderers.

ThinkerB and the LOVER have always been on the side of combating violence by turning to rhetorical reconciliations. Sometimes, as I’ll describe below, I’ve even been tempted to proclaim myself a complete pacifist: all violence, and especially all killing, all warfare, is wrong. Only threats like the Nazis under Hitler were enough to cancel my full pacifism.

The adrenalin flow I have often experienced must be to some degree “inherited” by every human being; it’s as if most parts of me just close down as some fluid floods in, taking over my whole body. Most skillful novelists portray their protagonists as committing such regretful outbursts, though some, like Dickens, idolize (mistakenly?) some heroines; Florence in *Dombey and Son* is portrayed as totally loving, no matter how badly treated.

The evolutionary inheritance of violence has been grappled with at least from the moment when that brilliant author of *Genesis* decided to tell a story about Cain’s angry murder of Abel. Religions have both condemned it and exploited it; some secularists now argue that the vast majority of atrocities are committed not from evolutionary survival drive but out of religious commitment. October 2001: terrorists are claiming their acts are holy, while we

1. Alison: “I don’t remember really. I do remember your spanking Richie.” Kathie: “Probably not gently—but never inflicting real bodily harm.”

antiterrorists defend our violent response as holy. July 2002: Prime Minister Sharon reportedly sees his bombing of innocent children as part of obeying Jehovah's commands. July 2004: President Bush makes it clear that in attacking Iraq he was following the voice of God.

My Mormonism was ambivalent about violence. Having suffered from violent mobs, we were taught part of the time to hope for revenge against those who killed Joseph Smith, and our history was full of angry violence against angry enemies. Yet we worshipped Jesus, the prince of peace. That ambivalence left me with one more division of Selves. After Daddy died, I was paradoxically both "machoed" and "pacified" by Mama. Making every effort to be "the man of our family now" and yet to be the "good boy" Mama could be proud of, I was led to avoid most "boys-will-be-boys" ways. I didn't hang out with "wild" kids. Mama would blame me if I came home showing signs of having been in a fistfight. For her, to hit somebody was just one more kind of naughtiness—except when one's child deserved punishment, as I sometimes did.

Behind Mama's back I did do quite a lot of fighting until my later teens. And I did it usually feeling some pride—so long as my enemy was smaller, as were almost all boys my age. But once I had skipped the third grade and was surrounded by guys a year older, I was doomed. In any fight, I was sure to lose—sure, indeed, to give up before even putting up a good battle. One of my current Selves is still ashamed about how often I would say to those older guys, "I know you can lick me."

For whatever reason, probably my excessive weeping about Daddy, I became the "sissy," the popular butt of jokes. In junior high school one time I was challenged by another guy for a "duel" behind the schoolhouse, to take place later during recess with many classmates watching and laughing. We fought a bit, but I soon retreated, weeping and again muttering something like "I know you can lick me."

Thus from age six to about twelve, I engaged in dozens of physical battles with other boys. I always lost with my classmates, older and tougher, and only sometimes won when fighting my previous classmates my age.

Grade 8

A group of us eighth-graders are walking down Center Street, past Grampa Clayson's orchard joined to a pig lot. Doug Mercer starts kicking out the picket slats in the fence. I tell him to stop. He kicks out another one. I jump him, he comes at me; I keep on flailing, while shouting, "I know you can lick me, I know you can lick me, but you're not going to . . ." Can't remember whether he kicked out any more slats, but I know I did not lick him. I fell to the ground and he stopped, as he and the others laughed at me. Total humiliation—but not a cure for violence.

Does my pacifist-inclined Self feel guilty about having lunged at Doug? Not really—it was Doug who should have felt guilty for kicking the slats. But my lunging does make a strong illustration of my failure to attempt dialogue or diplomacy or “rhetorology.” I should have said, “Doug, do you really think it’s right to break those pickets, with pigs in there that will come out onto the street? Why are you doing it?”

That’s a wild dream, about as hopeless as my many current efforts to reconcile science and religion.

Most early violent encounters were thus inflicted on me by others—or at least by the “circumstance” of my trying not to appear a sissy. But the more challenging ones were those that sprang from the irrepressible Slugger within. Here’s a rough selection.

Age Four or Four and a Half

My overworked, always hurrying Mama—she was teaching full-time to support Daddy’s college studies—was dressing me up to go to some kind of gathering, probably a Church service. We discovered that there were no stockings in the apartment; they were all hanging outside on the clothesline. She told me to sit quietly while she went outside to get the stockings. I sat for a few moments. She did not return. I felt increasingly distressed, then angry. Finally, after what may have been five minutes but felt like eternity, I lost my temper, grabbed a hammer, and pounded its claws eight or ten times into the linoleum floor cover, creating deep slashes that remained with us for many years as scars, as we hauled that linoleum along with our furniture from apartment to apartment.

The story of that misdeed became a family legend, and it was added to other outbursts when an uncle came to college and boarded with us. I was told years later that as he observed the many angry outbursts of the self-centered, volatile five-year-old, he finally said to Mama, “Lillian, you’ve got to do something about that child. If he goes on like that, he’s going to become a criminal.” I don’t know what Mama did about it, except for Church advisers, but her own rigorous supervision to control my temper never ceased over the years. And the wild outbursts did not go away.

My most appalling memory has been retold many times, as I’ve tried to figure out its meaning.

Age Ten or Eleven

At Grampa Clayson’s, my daily chores include filling the coal bucket with a mixture of large and small pieces of coal. I have been told many times not to cheat by filling it fast with *large* lumps; I must mix large lumps with

the smaller stuff remaining from previous breakings-up of the huge blocks the coalman delivers. CheaterB finds that he can save time by sneaking larger pieces into the coal bucket, filling it quickly, not bothering about the smaller bits. One night Uncle Joe, in effect my boss, comes into the shed, sees what I've done, and chews me out for it. Already furious at him because of his many mistreatments, I raise the ax and aim it at his head, blade foremost. At the last second, some other Self in me turns the blade away, and I hit him with the *blunt* side, knocking him down.

He lies there a moment or two, then rises, sobbing, with some blood on his forehead; he flees, apparently for once scared of me.

Whatever happened next has been totally forgotten. Over the years I have again and again imagined the consequences if I had not turned that blade away. I could have killed him—a tragic turning point in my life. Though I wouldn't have been executed, severe punishment would almost certainly have changed my character radically downward: reform school does that.

Skipping all the other youthful battles of SluggerB, fast forward to London in 1956–57. We now have three children, tended mainly by Phyllis as I work on *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Living for a year on a “half-year” Guggenheim Fellowship and borrowed cash, we have managed to afford, barely, at least one “cultural event” per week: a play, a concert, an opera.

One night, she and I are enraptured by a wonderful production of Verdi's *Otello*, one that at several points brings me to tears. Suddenly at the end, when Othello strikes and then kills his beloved Desdemona, I am almost sobbing, and I take a silent oath (later that night I report it to Phyllis) that I will never strike or slap our kids again. I proclaim that “We just shouldn't teach 'em violence by practicing it.”

I keep that oath—for a week or two. Then one day when we are a bit overanxious about getting all five of us on the road for some scheduled train, seven-year-old Kathie raises some issue that will slow us down—and insists on raising it. I shout at her, she shouts back, and I slap her, rather hard—and I immediately break into miserable sobs. I have violated my own *utterly sincere* oath.

As I am putting Kathie to bed that night, I am almost weeping again. “Kathie, dear, I just don't know what to do when I lose my temper about something you do wrong.” And Kathie looks up at me and says, “Well, Daddy, you could always pray.” (Unlike some of my remembered quotations, this wonderful one is confirmed by both Kathie and Phyllis!)

I don't know how I would have described that violation then; I can't find anything about it in my journals. But now it's clear: the Slugger overwhelmed

all other Selves, and immediately the other Selves labored to crush him. That in no way explains where the Son of a Bitch came from. Or why he goes on committing other minor outbursts about twice a month, like the following.

March 2000

I am practicing the cello, and Phyllis intrudes with “those last two notes are way out of tune.” Already tense, I blow it; the adrenalin flows, I stand up and shout at her, “Shut up!” and then—not with any temptation to hit *her*—the Slugger brandishes the cello bow and shouts, “When you interrupt like that I feel like throwing my bow out the window!” Somehow I manage not to throw it, maybe just because I remember that it’s worth thousands of dollars.

THE PACIFIST CONFRONTS NECESSARY WAR

I could go on and on with further episodes of how I’ve violated my own standards, with my peaceful self each time flooded with embarrassment. Only recently has ThinkerB seen how all that relates to his intellectual conflicts about pacifism and the need for war against violent enemies who threaten one’s very existence.

In high school I had been converted for a while to complete pacifism by Earl (Hap) Holmstead, a fine history teacher who had barely survived as an infantryman in World War I and was certain that *all* war is cruel and unjustified. He had somehow persuaded me to read Bertrand Russell’s powerful arguments about the stupidity and needless cruelty of that war—indeed of all war. But when news about rising threats from the Nazis arrived, I began to equivocate, like this.

August 16, 1937

Armis [Ashby, born on *Armistice Day*] & I have been talking about war and what we would do if war broke out. . . . Japan is invading China, there is a civil war on in Spain, with Italy, Germany & Russia secretly participating. . . . A war is, it seems to me, inevitable. Whether or not the U.S. enters into the war is problematical, but quite probable, although at present, the general sentiment, as well as thought, is against war participation of any kind by the U.S. The only trouble is, most of the people now against war [including himself] would be willing & eager to declare war at the first bit of propaganda such as was dished out in the [first] world war by the newspapers.

After some speculation about how Congress will react,

In two more years I will be in the draft age. [This turned out not to be true.] Armis said that he would not go to war even if drafted, that he would intentionally disable himself so as to avoid the draft, rather than go to war, kill off human beings, and run the risk of having his own life cut short. . . . I am in a quandary. If I were to employ some means to avoid being drafted, I am afraid I would feel that I was not doing my part, letting other people fight to protect me. I don't think I would volunteer, but as I feel now I would accept the draft. After all, I'm not so important that my death through war . . . should be very much of a calamity.

And I then went on speculating about the meaning of life and death and war. As a half-baked pacifist, I soon met the realities of the threat by Japan and Germany (as I saw it) to conquer the world. To stop them, it was increasingly clear that we—I—had to give up any form of pacifism. I later learned that Bertrand Russell had the same experience about World War II. Having been a jailed pacifist during WWI, he knew that to fail to fight Hitler, as the America Firsters were urging, would be sheer wickedness.

But the path to full rejection of the America Firsters was inevitably troubling. Here's how the nearly seventeen-year-old continued to equivocate about it in 1938, as he read the national journals, mostly left-wing.

Jan. 26, 1938, Wednesday

In the last few months Japan has been invading China, quite successfully. The U.S. has had one gunboat, the *Panay*, sunk.

The last year or two, more even than the last 20, there has been a lot of Pacifistic doctrine spread, with hardly any persons sticking up for war, or heavy armament. With the so-called *Panay* incident, and other war scares in other parts of the world, a marked, to me at least, change in the attitude of U.S. citizens has occurred. Many people have advocated an aggressive attitude and the congress has appropriated more for armaments, navy & army, than ever before in peace times. There are still many who cry "peace, isolation, etc." Almost everybody is still for peace, but the thing is, they are beginning to think that we can obtain peace by displaying "a big stick." I am in favor of being prepared for invasion, but I would be willing to bet that if the American sentiment keeps shifting as it is now, we will be in a war with somebody, probably one or all of the Fascist nations, within four years.² I hope to goodness we are not, but I can see the same shift occurring that came between 1914 & 1917 and I am worried. Oh, well. (Since 1918

2. Should I take stupid pride in that adolescent's accurate prescience about the coming war? Well, I shouldn't, but I do.

an alarming number of dictatorships have sprung up. Russia, in the name of Communism, has established probably the worst, with Italy (Mussolini) and Germany (Hitler) running close.)

By 1940, the equivocation ended: I was actively campaigning on Roosevelt's side, producing several local articles and radio interviews claiming that if we did not support "England's cause," we ourselves were doomed. I often sounded about the way Prime Minister Blair sounded in early October 2001, as he tried to persuade his citizens to join America in the "war" against terrorism. Yet editing this chapter in May 2003, I was even more angry about how many, especially in America, joined President Bush's totally unjustified preemptive strike. Editing in January 2004, I joined those who opposed an immediate withdrawal; the mess we have created must be addressed by those who created it. And by *now*, making final edits in March 2005, I don't know what the hell I would do if I were president.

In other conflicts, such as the Gulf War ("Desert Storm") and especially in the Vietnam scandal, I openly though blandly protested against war—still not a theoretical pacifist but appalled by . . . well, enough of that. As I emailed the President and Congress after 9/11, urging them to think harder about the consequences if they engaged in massive violence, I still blame myself for doing it all so mildly. (March 15, 2003: will I join the peace march downtown today, lambasting the U.S. militancy? No, I don't want to be identified with extremists, some of whom are more ignorant than even the warmongers. Yet I blame that Self for instead sitting here quietly, addressing some future audience about how the U.S. is now raising the likelihood of future disaster.)³

Such fence straddling has not been confined to wars. I could fill this book with examples of splits between what I believe and how the Slugger actually behaved.

I am, for example, strongly opposed to all capital punishment; I give some money annually to movements against it. Among my many reasons, the strongest is my conviction that when the state kills people, it teaches the world that killing "in a good cause" is a virtuous act—the very principle that motivates suicide terrorists. Yet I cannot deny that if a hood were threatening to kill or rape my grandchild, or indeed any child, I would not hesitate to kill him—in the unlikely event that I had a weapon handy. And I would do it even if it were clear that the act might harm some innocent bystander, "collateral damage"—the euphemism invented in the Gulf War and now used to defend our attacks on innocent civilians in Afghanistan, in Iraq, and who can predict where else?

3. As the move to war exploded, I did actually do some protest marching.

That degree of self-division about violence may be defensible: it dramatizes the need for the “casuistry” or “phronesis” or “balance of evils” that I discuss elsewhere. But the deeper division, always expressed in less spectacular ways, is harder to defend—a Self who would destroy a highly valued book by flinging it to the floor or destroy a tennis racket in blind rage against a beloved friend or slap his child in anger. I both laugh and cringe at such memories of physical outbursts, even as I feel guilty for having lied to save myself from the Battle of the Bulge. (There I go again, repeating a shameful confession that HypocriteB insists should be censored.)

Facing those conflicts, I’m a bit comforted by the fact that nobody seems able to reconcile our biological history of survival-by-killing and our various religious versions of the commandment, Thou shalt not kill.⁴ How do the devout believers in “love thy enemies” deal with the blatant conflict exhibited when they believe that God orders them to kill ’em all? And how does God Himself reconcile His commandment with His decision to kill off the whole of creation—saving only Noah’s clan? Thou shalt turn the other cheek instead of fighting back, and thou shalt forgive thine enemies rather than attacking them. Right? But how many professed Christians are conscientious objectors, as I could never quite talk myself into being?

So, taking some comfort from the universality of hypocrisy about violence, with all human beings openly or secretly my siblings in this matter, it still troubles me when I often find myself unable to turn the other cheek, even when the offence has been minor.

I must now end with a matter that may seem to many readers anticlimactic: the conflict between a defender of animal rights and the hypocrite who eats meat regularly. Am I a vegetarian? Obviously not. Do I think vegetarians are justified in their nonviolent criticism of us who feed on violence against animals? Yes, in theory; Pacifist-Booth would prefer a world with no violence of any kind. Do I ever wear clothing made from animal fur? Well, yes, but not often. And when I do, I always remember, painfully, the most violent job I was ever paid for.

American Fork, 1937

Armis’s father has hired me to work on his fox farm, caring for the foxes, forcing medical pills down their throats, learning how to avoid being bitten by the victims (I still have visible scars). I write in my journal: “we are cutting the tendons that lead to the toes in their front feet so they cannot dig.” Some violence so far but not a lot.

4. Some recent defenders of the Bible have insisted that the commandment is “Thou shalt not *murder*,” with other forms of killing, in good causes, justified.

I soon learn how the foxes have been killed: put them into a little air-tight wagon behind the car, and asphyxiate them with gas fumes. But then the boss decides that for some reason that process diminishes the quality of the fur, so he develops another form of killing: we are ordered to grab the fox by the neck, pulling the head back so it can't bite, force it to the ground, place our heel over the heart, and stand on the fox for the few seconds or minute required before it dies.

As I obey the order, I quickly feel nausea, revulsion, inner pain. But I go on obeying, not even mentioning the revulsion in my diary. I just do what I'm told, fox after fox, for some months. Killing, killing, killing, of the most painful kind, for my "salary" of thirty cents an hour.

What appalls me now is remembering a rapid diminishment of my horror. The habit of killing killed the nausea, and of course I never protested, since protest would have been pointless. Right?

Is it any wonder that I now *wonder* whether those who kill the beef sources I eat ever *wonder* guiltily about their repeated killings? Obviously I cannot argue that what they are doing is wrong, unless I become a vegetarian. Yet the very thought of their job horrifies me. And all I can do is give a little support to those animal rights groups that try to make the killings as painless as possible.⁵

As I may have mentioned just once or twice before, Booth is himself a divided creature, aware that deep down there is a potential killer in him and that life itself, both a blessing and a curse, will finally kill him.

5. For a first-class bit of grappling with animal rights issues, see J. M. Coetzee's recent novel, *Elizabeth Costello* (2003).



Two of my many selves