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Keynote Speech

“At the Still Point of the Turning World”

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Karl Marlantes stared into the frightened eyes of the teenage boy and squeezed the trigger. All he felt, in that moment, was the desire to kill. As the kid was ripped apart by a hail of bullets, Marlantes reveled in the intense feelings of pleasure rushing over him. It was only later, much later, that he felt unhappy about what he'd done.

Marlantes isn't a monster. He's a decorated Marine. The shooting happened while he was fighting in the jungles of Vietnam. The teenage boy who died that day was a North Vietnamese Army soldier trying to kill him. As Marlantes crawled up and around a hill, the kid popped up and down like a jack in the box, hurling grenades. Pressing his face into the mud, Marlantes waited. The boy stood up, looked right at him, and lobbed a grenade. At the same time, Marlantes pulled the trigger—and missed. He kept shooting, and gunned the boy down a moment later with the help of a second Marine.

Years afterward, the young soldier's face haunted him. Marlantes wrote of how he'll never forget that moment, and about how the experience changed him forever.

“That kid’s dark eyes would stare at me in my mind’s eye at the oddest times. I’d be driving at night and his face would appear on the windscreen.” (Marlantes, 2011: 32).

War brings a kind of understanding that changes lives as dramatically as gaining vision changes the life of a blind person. The profound nature and intensity of battle will break them down and rebuild them, changing them forever. Who they are before going to war will not be the same as who they are afterwards.

That’s what happened to Karl Marlantes. Going to war was an extended process that created a fundamental shift in the way that he interpreted himself and others, irreversibly changing the course of his life. Through the transformative experience of battle, Marlantes learned new things about death and love. He gained insight into the complexity of human life, and into his own psychology. He discovered the value of respect, solidarity, honor, sacrifice, and having a moral code. This new knowledge generated a reorganization and replacement of what he cared about and believed, radically reshaping his values. He went off to basic training as one kind of person and came back from Vietnam as another.

How does a shift of this magnitude happen? Through having an intense experience that creates a personal transformation: the experience rebuilds the person who has it. For Marlantes, life on the front lines was an extended event of incredible intensity. Watching enemy combatants burning in napalm and phosphorus, cooking like paper in a campfire. Whispering for hours into a friend’s ear, his bleeding back ripped open by enemy fire, to keep him alive until help came.

When he found himself in combat, the fierce joy of killing and the overwhelming chaos of the front lines brought horror coupled with a kind of euphoria he'd never known or imagined. He felt the muscle of the firepower of massive weaponry and exulted in the sheer intensity of wielding immense lethal force.

“I experienced transcendence and, momentarily, ecstasy. I also experienced flawed humanity and raw savagery, my own and that of others, beyond comprehension for most people” (Marlantes, 2011: 255).

He was emotionally overwhelmed by these ferocious struggles to the death. Stumbling into safety after a brutal battle, he felt intense anger in response to the cheering of the crowd welcoming his return. They simply didn't get it.

The return home brought a different kind of shock. Going back into ordinary life initiated a personal collapse. He did a lot of drugs and wrestled with PTSD, struggling to connect emotionally with people who had not been to war.

“The world you left behind has changed and you have changed. You know parts of yourself that you, and those you've lived with all your life, never knew before” (Marlantes, 2011: 176).

He had to rebuild. Through an intense, extended process of emotional recovery and reflection, he reconstructed himself, painstakingly, and struggled with his psychological demons as he reflected on what he'd experienced and

on how it changed him. He became more spiritual, and more reflective about the nature of reality.

In these ways, war transformed him. It wrought deep and systemic changes in his beliefs about what people are capable of doing, and perhaps more importantly, what he himself was capable of doing. He struggled with the internal contradictions this knowledge brought, realizing he was someone who could feel exhilaration while gunning down an enemy soldier, yet tenderly embrace his dog as it was put to sleep.

“I would wake up at night trying to understand how I, this person who did want to be a good and decent person, and who really tried, could at the same time love an activity that hurt people so much” (Marlantes, 2011: 68).

Along with changes in what he knew and believed, the transformation brought changes in his values. His naïve views about honor and patriotism were replaced by a seasoned, knowledgeable embrace of the value of fighting for his country. His understanding of the sacrifices and tradeoffs he'd chosen were deepened and enriched, changing the way he valued his experiences. These changes in values, beliefs, and understanding, in turn, changed the way he assessed and made sense of himself, forming him into a mature, responsible, soldier. He became an emissary for reform in how the military trains and prepares its soldiers for battle, and for how the country should receive its warriors when they return home.

This kind of reconstruction of who you are in response to having an intense new kind of experience is the distinctive marker of transformative

experience. The experiences change you in two deeply related ways. First, they are *epistemically transformative*, that is, they transform what you know or understand. They do this because they are experiences that are new to you, that is, they are experiences of a new sort that you've never had before. Second, they are *personally transformative*, that is, they transform a core personal preference, in the process transforming something important about what you care about or how you define the kind of person you are. While, strictly speaking, you are the same person, after transformation you are realized anew. Who you are has changed in some deep and personal way, such that the self you are now is not the self you once were.

Strictly speaking, then, a transformative experience is an experience that is both epistemically and personally transformative: a new kind of experience that creates a profound epistemic shift that scales up into or creates a profound personal shift.

Crucially, for an experience to be epistemically transformative for a person, it must be new to them. As a type of experience, they have not had before, when they do have it, in virtue of discovering what it's like, they undergo an epistemic transformation. There is an important type of (physical) necessity here: having the experience is necessary for knowing what it is like, and so having the experience is necessary for the relevant type of epistemic shift. By having the experience, the person learns what that kind of experience is like, and this gives them new abilities to imaginatively represent and accurately simulate possible states of affairs involving it (Jackson, 1982; Lewis, 1988; Paul, 2014; Paul, 2020).

Part of the key here is that there’s something distinctive about what you learn: mere descriptions don’t suffice. You have to have the experience yourself in order to discover what it is like. This is just an interesting fact about the limits of language and the way the mind works when it is faced with a kind of experience that is truly new to it. Think of admiring the color of the sky on a blustery spring day, or of breathing in the scent of your lover’s skin. That color, or that scent, has a particular character, and we can’t describe what it is like to someone who has never had this kind of experience. (Look at the sky now. Try to describe it without using color words. That’s what you’d have to do to adequately describe the color of the sky to someone who has never seen color.)

We can use metaphors, images, and poetry to try to capture these qualities by suggesting evocative comparisons, but unless you’ve had the right sorts of experiences you won’t be suggestible in the right sort of way. For me to be able to describe to you what it’s like to experience a sensory quality like light blue, you have to have had the right sort of experience beforehand.

It isn’t just simple sensory experiences that defy description. Many of life’s most momentous experiences have a special, distinctive quality about them that’s like this. This quality arises, at least in part, from the contribution made by the sensory qualities involved in the experience. But the contribution can’t be isolated, or somehow pulled out and separated from the rest of the experience. Think of the distinctive feeling of being in love. It isn’t mere sensation, yet it isn’t obvious how the sensory components give rise to the overall feeling. Somehow, being in love is made up of a blend of emotion, belief, and desire, giving rise to a distinctive kind of experience, with a distinctive kind of feeling. You couldn’t subtract the sensory element out of

being in love and still have the feeling, yet, (despite what some popular songs might claim) being in love isn't merely a feeling. It's an experience that involves beliefs, desires, and other rich mental states. We can't capture the nature of these complex experiences with flat-footed descriptions any more than we can use simple language to describe the experience of seeing light blue.

As a result, knowing what the experience is like is the key that unlocks the door to a trove of additional important content: once the person can represent and simulate in the right way, they discover further information about this experience, including information that can lead to significant changes in their values, beliefs and preferences. Such discoveries are what lead to personal transformation: in virtue of having the epistemic transformation, the person changes in some deep and personally fundamental way, for example, some of their core personal preferences change, or how they understand their defining desires, intrinsic properties, or values changes. This is why transformative experiences are strictly defined as experiences that are both epistemically and personally transformative.

In my *Transformative Experience* (2014), I challenged a widely assumed story about how we should deliberate about these momentous, life-changing choices for ourselves. In this story, personal life choices essentially involve careful, forward-thinking reflection about what we should choose to do. If we are thoughtful, responsible people, we are supposed to make these choices in an informed, deliberate way. It's especially important to make these choices carefully when they involve other people, people who depend on us or whose lives are affected by what we decide.

On the usual account, making these choices carefully and in the right way is a kind of taking charge of your own life. The thought is that choices involve responsibility, and to choose responsibly, you need to assess how your choice will affect the world and how it will affect others in your life. Of course, you also need to assess how your choice will affect you. This is because your choices also structure your own life experiences and what happens to you in the world.

The ordinary story of how we are supposed to choose responsibly involves assessing the nature of each option. You assess the different possible ways you could act and the different possible results of your act. You map out the ways the future could develop if you go one way rather than another, and think about what the world could be like, and what you could be like, for each way to choose. You estimate the value of each path you could take, and the likelihoods of the expected outcomes. Of course, you also take into account expert advice and moral facts that bear on the question of what to do. If you choose deliberately, carefully, and rationally, you evaluate the options by weighing the evidence and considering the expected value of each act from your own perspective.

But when an experience is a radically new kind of experience for you, a kind you’ve never had before, you don’t know what it will be like before you try it. But you also don’t know what you will be missing if you don’t. You have to actually experience it to know what it will be like for you.

Big life experiences, especially once in a lifetime opportunities, that are radically new to us are often transformative. This makes the decision to have one, or to pass up having one, a significant kind of act. You might only have

one chance to make it work, but it's unclear what you are getting yourself into. It's the real life analogue of the genie who pops out of a bottle and offers you a wish. It's mysterious and exciting, and not necessarily what you expect it to be. It's also irreversibly life-changing. Transformative experiences come with big life choices like those where you have to make a commitment you can't easily change your mind about, like joining the military. Or maybe the choice is irreversible, like having a child. (Once the child exists, it's not like you can reverse time and make it as though you'd never become a parent.)

It's the type of choice you have when you have the opportunity to emigrate to a country with a very different culture for school or to go to war. It's an experience you can have that is so intense or dramatic that its effect on you can't be undone, even if there are other senses in which you can undo the action. The choice can seem reversible, but an important sense it isn't. The experience is such that it can't be wiped away or ignored, so it is effectively irreversible, making the decision to undergo one even more momentous.

Facing a choice to have a transformative experience is a very distinctive kind of situation to be in. In this sort of situation, you have to make a life-changing choice. But because it involves a new experience that is unlike any other experience you've had before, you know very little about your possible future. It's a kind of experience that you have to have in order to discover what it's like. Moreover, it will change you in a fundamental and irreversible way, remaking you into a new kind of person, creating a new self. And so, if you want to make the decision based on what your who you will make yourself into, you have a problem. You don't know how the experience will affect you, and so you don't know how you'll respond to it.

It's also an experience that's irreversibly life-changing. This means there's a whole additional dimension to what you don't know about your future: because the experience is likely to change what you care about and the kind of person you are, it isn't just that you don't know what your future will be like. There is also an important sense in which you don't know what you'll be like after having the experience. How can you, in this context, rationally choose to undertake something that will change you into a new self with new values, without knowing beforehand who this self will be?

The experience of going to war illustrates the transformative process. The first element involves facing an epistemic wall: you face a dramatically new kind of life-changing experience, one you can't mentally circumvent. An epistemic wall can block your ability to know what your future will be like for new kinds of experiences as diverse as gaining a sensory ability, leaving home, or facing death. As a new recruit, about to go to war, you can be taught and warned and guided by those who have already fought. From their stories and testimony, you can know at some level that you could face terrible suffering and pain. You can believe that you will undergo something intense and difficult, yet powerful. You can know that you might be killed, and others could be killed around you. You can anticipate that the sensory overload will be overwhelming, and that you'll face some of the grimmest parts of human life. You might even suspect that, in moments of fear and aggression, you'd focus so purely on the moment that you'd lose your sense of who you are. And yet, in an absolutely important and essential sense, you don't know what battle will be like. You can't know, and thus you can't know how you will

respond to it—how truly horrifying and frightening you will find it to be. To acquire this kind of knowledge of war, you must experience it.

Why do you actually have to experience war before you can understand its importance for you? For some experiences, their intense sensory or emotional content is an essential part of what they are. If such content is indescribable, testimony from others is insufficient: until you've actually experienced it, you cannot know its nature. The horrors of war may be like this. But that's not the most general reason why experience can be necessary for the kind of knowing that's important here. The general point is that, for a class of important cases, you can know beforehand that something will be awful (or wonderful, or something in between), and in fact, when you experience it is indeed awful (or wonderful, etc.)—yet you don't know how it will be awful (or wonderful, or whatever). You have knowledge that something is a certain way, but you don't know how it is that way, which entails, in an important sense, that you lack the ability to evaluate its impact on you (and in the same sense, its impact on others). In Marlantes' case, before going into battle, he didn't, and couldn't have, known what fighting in a war would be like, and so in essential ways he could not know how it would change him.

The second element stems from the process of discovery you undergo when you have this dramatically new experience: leaping the epistemic wall changes what you know and understand, and this changes what you value. You discover new things that create a profound shift in what you care about. When Karl Marlantes experienced the horrific nature of war, he learned things about himself and others that changed the way he judged and valued. He found nobility in the sacrifice of self, in the bond he built between himself

and the other Marines who went through that hell together, and in discovering truths, good and bad, about the nature of humankind. It brought a new understanding of himself. He came to understand life, pain, and suffering in an especially deep and clear way, both because he was experiencing so much death and loss and—importantly—because he was causing it.

The experiences of war brought new changes in his understanding, his beliefs, and in his core values, changing how he lived, worked, and made sense of himself and his world for the rest of his life. After the war, Marlantes saw loss and fear differently, and gained new appreciation for the fragility of life and the beauty of human connection and strength. “You’ve been evil, and you’ve been good, and you’ve been beyond evil and good. You’ve split your mind from your heart, and you’ve split your heart with grief and your mind with fear. Ultimately, you’ve been in touch with the infinite...”

The third element of the process involves how this shift in understanding realizes a new self, a self that is deeply different from the self that existed before the transformative experience. When a person’s experience transforms their beliefs and values, this can transform their old self into someone psychologically new. In Marlantes’ case, there was a deep psychological difference between the recruit who left for Vietnam in 1968 and the veteran who returned, a split between selves that was as deep as the split between the self of the blind man before his retina operation and the newly sighted one afterwards. Not only did Marlantes care about different things after the war: what he thought it was important to care about also changed. After the war, he thought of himself differently: he was not a boy anymore, nor an innocent. He was a warrior now, one who had experienced great loss and caused great

pain, and who had gained great insight, with all the responsibility that it entailed. He came to terms with his sadness and took responsibility for being someone who had performed brutal acts against others for the sake of his country. In these ways, the changes in his values and self-understanding caused him to rebuild his character. He emerged from the transformative process as a new man.

Strictly speaking, he was the same person—yet he was different. In transformation, not everything important about a person has to change (though it might). A person might keep many of their basic dispositions, and so count, strictly speaking, as the same person. And yet, something essential to the way they make sense of their world, stemming from some deep way they value or understand things, has changed. A core element of the framework that defines who they are now, the psychological framework that is structured by their values and the way they understand themselves and the world around them, is replaced. The changes create a new perspective, deeply restructuring one's lived experience, and thus realizing a new way of being in the world, a new self.

The changes in values and beliefs created changes in the foundational structure of Marlantes' personality and character, changing the way he defined and interpreted his life and himself. These changes in what he cared about changed the way he represented himself and his world, changing the way that he interpreted the stream of experience that conscious life brings, and redefining his sense of who he was and what his life's purpose should be. This in turn changed the nature of his lived experience, redefining his conscious first person perspective, thus changing the way he lived his life at its most basic

intellectual level. In this sense, when he chose to enlist and go to war, he couldn't know the future self he was choosing to become. This is the fundamental problem that we face when we are choosing to undergo a transformative experience.

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