

LEARNING TO WALK

*A Soldier's
Story*



CLIFFORD BECK

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To My Wife Sara

*“The hottest place in Hell
Is reserved for those who
remain neutral in times of
great moral conflict.”*

Dante Alighieri

CHAPTER 1

Everyone thinks the desert is always hot and dry. That's not necessarily true. Afghanistan has both mountains and deserts. It sees both blazing hot days in the desert sand and frigid temperatures in the mountains. The main export of Afghanistan is heroin. It's grown on the fertile slopes of the Afghan mountains. Recently, it was discovered that the Afghans had begun producing heroin that's ten times more potent than they'd previously made. And of course, the largest consumer of Afghan heroin is - you got it - us. The addicts here who get their hands on this stuff are dying before they get the needle out of their veins.

You might be asking yourself right now 'why should we care?' The world is going to hell and there seems to be little, if anything, any of us can do about it. I don't know. Maybe it would be better if good old planet earth took a hit from a mountain sized asteroid. After all, as big as the universe is, who would miss us? People don't seem to understand how insignificant we truly are. But, that doesn't mean we can't make a difference. Maybe not to the whole of humanity, but sometimes it only takes one person to step up and do the right thing. I'm not talking about God or anything.

Personally, I'm not so sure there's anything out there that could provide anyone with a sense of purpose. Whether you want to call it fate, determinism, the will of God or whatever it is that people call it. Truth of the matter is we're all alone - at least in this neck of the woods anyway. And all we really have is each other. But, I try not to see humanity as the random collection of sexually driven animals that others see us as. You know the people I'm talking about - the politicians, the corporations, the wealthy and all the other power hungry, self - delusional idiots who seem to have talked themselves into believing that they're somehow better than everyone else.

The line between right and wrong often becomes blurred when money and power are involved. Many times, the rich walk while the poor get locked up and forgotten - treated as if they're nothing more than the eye sores of society.

Unfortunately, there's nothing that one person can do to better the world. But, one person does what one person can. My name is Clarence. But in the eyes of the government, I have another name - Private Taylor. So, I suppose for the sake of accuracy, I should refer to myself with my proper government assigned name. So, let's start again. My name is Sergeant Clarence Taylor. My current address is a charming neighborhood in hell called Afghanistan. And this is my story.

I was born in Bangor, Maine in 1986. I went to school, did my homework and studied hard enough to graduate in the top ten percent of my high school class. My parents tried hard to instill in me a strong set of ethics and to make something of myself. They taught me not only the meaning of compromise, but that there would always be times when compromising could not be achieved. They also taught me the importance of doing the right thing, no matter what the cost. I wasn't raised with any kind of religion.

It's not that my parents thought it was a waste of time. They simply believed that if there was anything that could control our fate, it would have started by cleaning up the mess left over from a species 'it' created in the first place. I never saw the universe as possessing some grand scheme or divine plan. And if you asked that age old question - 'what is the meaning of life?' - you would have been disappointed by the answer. And the answer? Life has no meaning. Life is simply an event that happens wherever the conditions are right for its development. To be honest, I came to see that question as a something of a cop out, one that's asked by people who are unable or unwilling to take a good hard look in the mirror and deal with their own emptiness and misery.

The question that people don't seem to want to ask is 'what is the meaning of my own life?' It's a harder question to ask because it demands not only reflection, but accountability. And let's face it. We are all too willing to blame everyone else for the problems that we create for ourselves. And without accountability, indifference often raises its head. We've all heard it. The words 'why should I care?' are spoken far too

often. Don't get me wrong. I'm certainly not perfect and I don't expect the whole of human kind to suddenly achieve enlightenment. It would just be to watch the news some time and see more people doing some good for the world. I know that's asking a lot, but I guess it's just a little wishful thinking.

CHAPTER 2

Well, like I said before, I went to school in Bangor. After high school, I did what was expected and went on to college. My parents wanted me to major in something ‘marketable’. But, as something of an idealist, I choose to study philosophy. Besides, there was still grad school and I could earn a ‘marketable’ then. But at the time, I just wanted to explore and it seemed like philosophy would be an interesting way to find some direction. Classes were both interesting and deep - logic, existentialism, philosophical psychology. I couldn’t get enough.

And in the shelter of academia, there weren’t a lot if other things the average student needed to think about. But, I didn’t keep myself locked up like some cloistered monk. I went to a few parties and tried to fit in. But, the last thing any girl wanted to talk about was Plato’s Republic or how Aristotle’s ethics had become lost on a not so blind justice system. I took a class in Buddhism and found it refreshing that someone could follow a spiritual path without being compelled to answer to a divine authority. The concept of karmic law seemed more than reasonable to me. This idea states that we, as individuals, are responsible for the consequences of our actions and that our lives are guided purely be the decisions we make. But, there’s a downside. As creatures possessed by our humanness, we are incapable of seeing all possible outcomes for any one decision. So, although we can try to do our best, in the end we’re still - more or less - flying by the seat of our pants. Then again, if we could see all the possibilities we would no doubt become consumed by them. And without uncertainty, the search for meaning becomes pointless.

Now for some reason, subjects like this weren’t generally well received at social events where liberal amounts of alcohol were consumed. Either people weren’t interested or they were too incoherent to understand. And I quickly became thought of as something of a nerd and found myself largely excluded from the campus social scene. I didn’t really mind.