LAUCKS FOUNDATION

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As a public service, Laucks Foundation calls attention to published material that might contribute toward clarification of issues affecting world peace, equity among peoples and environmental responsiblity.

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Excerpts from Pope John Paul II's speech to the United Nations General Assembly, October 5, 1995:

"The revolutions of 1989 were made possible by the commitment of brave men and women inspired by a different, and ultimately more profound and powerful, vision: the vision of man as a creature of intelligence and free will, immersed in a mystery which transcends his own being and endowed with the ability to reflect and the ability to choose - and thus capable of wisdom and virtue. . . .

"We must not be afraid of the future. We must not be afraid of man. It is no accident that we are here. Each and every human person has been created in the 'image and likeness' of the One who is the origin of all that is. We have within us the capacities for wisdom and virtue. With these gifts, and with the help of God's grace, we can build in the next century and the next millennium a civilization worthy of the human person, a true culture of freedom. We can and must do so! And in doing so, we shall see that the tears of this century have prepared the ground for a new springtime of the human spirit."

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Address: 1624 Harmon Place, Minneapolis, MN 55403

"There is no way to peace, peace is the way." A. J. MUSTE

BEING PEACE

Can we stop the violence and learn to live with our "enemies?" Even before the shock of the Oklahoma City bombing, Utne Reader's executive editor Marilyn Snell asked these questions around our offices, proposing and then conducting the interview with Utne 100 visionary Robert Jay Lifton, "Trials and Transformation," that appears on page 62.*

Robert Jay Lifton

ROBERT JAY LIFTON PHOTOGRAPH: ©THOMAS VICTOR; CARTOON: ©1974 ROBERT JAY LIFTON, FROM THE BOOK *PSYCHO BIRDS* (COUNTERMAN PRESS)

Lifton knows the dark depths to which human evil can descend better than just about anyone on the planet. He has looked deeply into the abyss for over 30 years as a psychiatrist and the author of books on Nazi doctors, prisoners of war, and the survivors of the Hiroshima atomic bomb blast.

Confronting human evil directly and daily has not broken Lifton's sense of hope. In fact, it has strengthened it. As Lifton says, "You have to look into the abyss to see beyond it."

Lifton's 1993 book, *The Protean Self* (Basic Books) has even been called optimistic. In it he describes a new, unprecedented character formation emerging in our postmodern, pre-millennial times—a survival strategy to stay sane in a world gone mad. He calls this contemporary *modus vivendi* the protean self, after the Greek sea god Proteus, who changes his form or appearance at will. The protean self is fluid and flexible, avoids dead ends, suspects dogma and struggles for authenticity and an ethical core. Lifton says, "It's not always easy. There are problems of diffusion. There can be anxieties that lead to the temptations of fundamentalism."

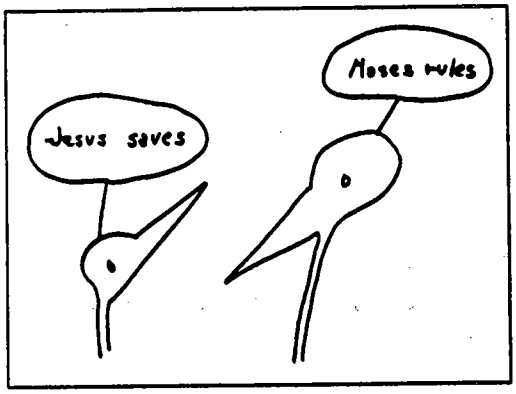
The protean self brings together odd combinations, comfortably blending eclectic elements from the past, the future, the modern, and the traditional. Proteans can laugh with David Letterman's cynical humor one moment and invoke divine guidance from elves and fairies the next.

Lifton hopes the openness of the protean self will lead us toward what he believes we must come to—the recognition of our essential oneness with people who are different from us. He calls this fellow-feeling, "species mentality or species self."

To see one's self in the other, in those who would be our enemies, requires a sense of hope, a belief in human possibility. Lifton finds his own balance by turning his attention from the darkness of the abyss to the whimsy of drawing bird cartoons, which he jests, "may be my greatest contribution to a visionary future."

Drawing bird cartoons is more than a countervailing tonic or restorative to the stress of dealing with demons. The simple act of creating a work of art, or even the carefree absentmindedness of doodling, is a kind of meditation itself. A way of *being* peace.

The Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for his anti-war efforts in Vietnam and at the Paris peace talks, puts it this way in his book, *Peace Is Every Step* (Bantam 1992): "Peace work is not



a means. Each step we make should be peace. . . . We can realize peace right in the present moment with our look, our smile, our words and our actions. . . . If we are determined, we can do it. We don't need the future. We can smile and relax. Everything we want is right here in the present moment."

Peace.

— Eric Utne

of **UTNE READER, July-August 1995*

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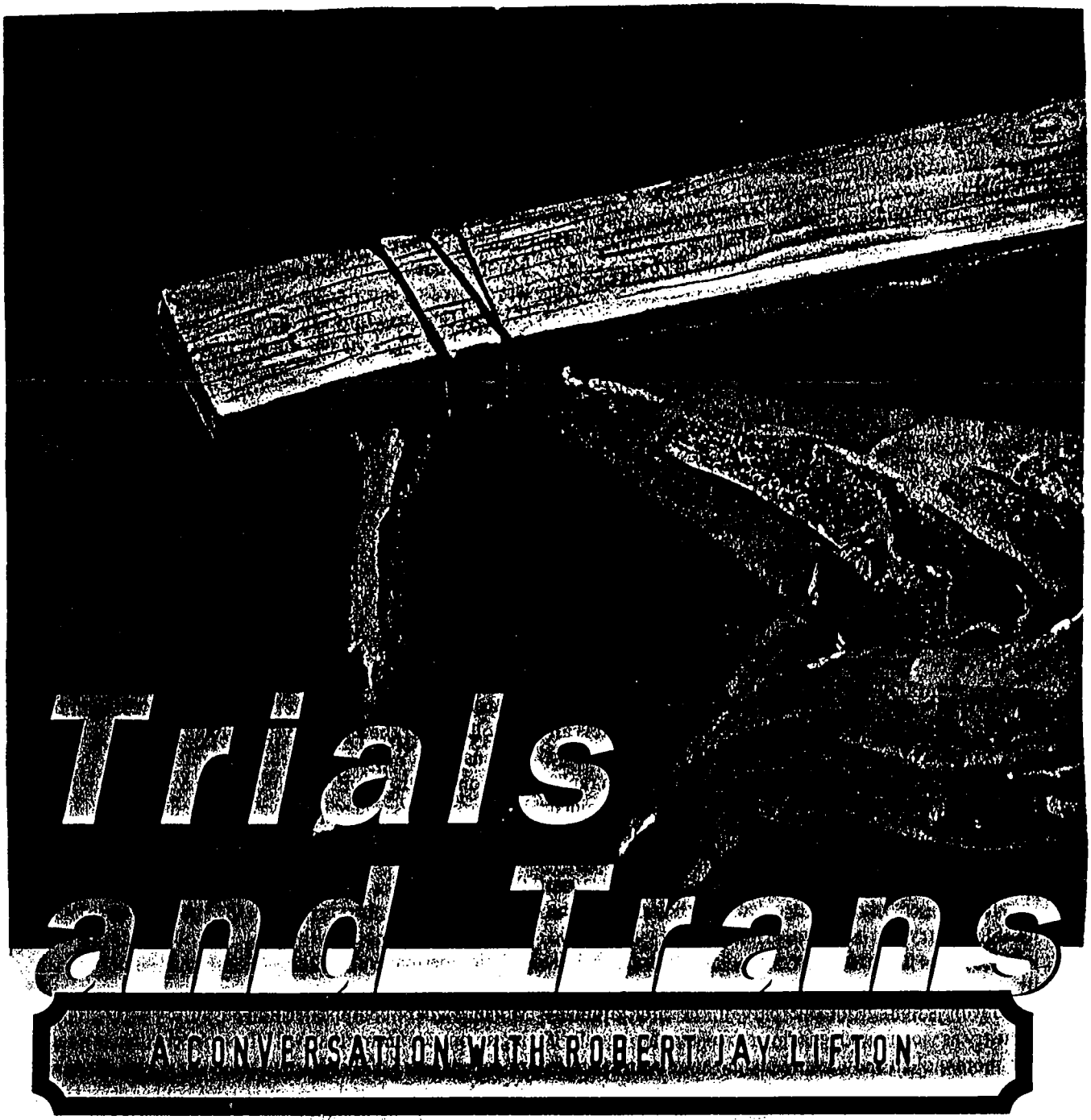
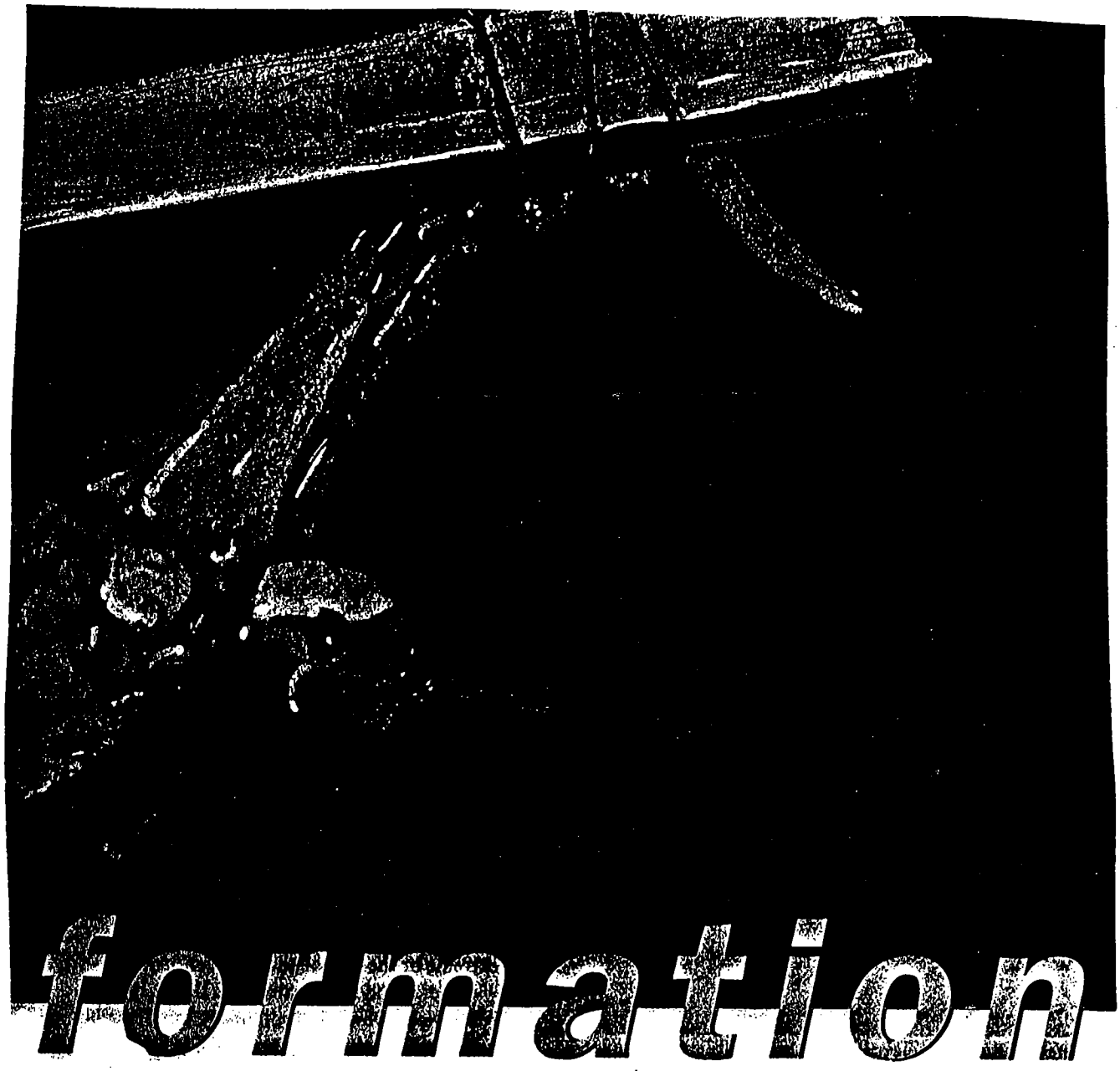


Trials and Trans

A CONVERSATION WITH ROBERT JAY LIFTON

SPECIAL TO UTNE READER | *Marilyn Berlin Snell*

In The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation *(1993), psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton attempted to make sense of the psychological, social, and political flux of our era. Lifton is also the author of 15 other books, among them* Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima, *for which he won the National Book Award in 1968;* The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide *(1986);* Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism *(1961), a study of brainwashing in China;* Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans *(1973), an examination of the psycho-mythology of making war based on work with Vietnam veterans; and* Indefensible Weapons: The Political and Psychological Case Against Nuclearism *(1982; with Richard A. Falk), an argument that the very*



formation

existence of nuclear weapons undermines our spiritual and social health. His new book with co-author Greg Mitchell, Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial, *will be out in July. He currently teaches at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and the Graduate School of the City University of New York.*

Utne Reader *executive editor Marilyn Berlin Snell recently spoke with Lifton about his work—past, present, and future.*

UTNE READER: In *The Protean Self,* you describe a world in which our values, beliefs, and lifestyles constantly need re-evaluation and adjustment. You also outline the ways we react to this bewildering state of affairs—with a protean sensibility, a fundamentalist sensibility, and often a little bit of both. Could you talk more about this?

ROBERT JAY LIFTON: The protean self is characterized by fluidity and many-sidedness. In our own lives, we change ideas and partners frequently, and do the same with jobs and places of residence. Enduring moral convictions, clear principles of action and behavior—we believe these must exist, but where? When we look around us, we see leaders who appear suddenly, recede equally rapidly, and are difficult for us to believe in when they *are* around. Whether we're dealing with world problems or child rearing, our behavior tends to be ad hoc, more or less decided upon as we go along.

But rather than collapse under these threats and pulls, the self turns out to be surprisingly resilient: The protean self can be both fluid and grounded, however tenuous that combination. A part of us, that is, continues

The Shadow Project: Guerrilla artists imitated the nuclear shadows of Hiroshima on the sidewalks of New York to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the bombing.

to experiment and change, while another part struggles to sustain certain beliefs or principles.

In contrast, the fundamentalist self—fundamentalism in general—is an apparently opposite kind of reaction to the flux of our time, and in fact is largely a reaction *to* proteanism. The fundamentalist self embodies a quest for a single absolute truth and embraces a past of perfect harmony that never was. It's a closing down as opposed to an opening out of the self.

What's more, some versions of the fundamentalist self are quite dangerous, even violent. In the post–Cold War world there is great need for nuanced thought, for compassion and for what I call the "species self"—that is, a sense of self that, in a nitty-gritty fashion (rather than as a distant ideal), includes an important awareness of being a member of humankind. But the fundamentalist self operates in the opposite direction. It polarizes; it cuts off empathy and compassion for those who don't embrace its tenets, and it's uneasy with anything that seems to move toward commonality or a species self.

But, as you suggested, it is misleading to discuss the protean self and the fundamentalist self by describing each separately. Most of us possess elements of both.

UR: What you seem to be encouraging by description is someone who can creatively navigate the terrain between the self and society—and accomplish this in a speeded-up world in which the terrain between and even the definition of "self" and "society" are in constant flux.

LIFTON: That's right, but I'd also add that we don't have complete choice in the matter; a certain measure of proteanism is thrust upon us.

In my work I focus on three powerful historical forces that are crucial in our time. One is dislocation, a breakdown of symbol systems and of clearly identified authority: religion, rituals of death and marriage, and so forth. Though these symbol systems once guided us through the life cycle, none currently exist in their classical form, and we are constantly trying to figure out how much and in what way we can internalize them. This difficulty began with the modern era, in the 18th century, but it's more extreme at the end of the 20th century.

The second historical force is the mass media revolution, which is profoundly important in ways we've hardly begun to grasp. This phenomenon of worldwide media saturation is both new and crucial to the late-20th-century self. While that self invokes defenses of withdrawal and numbing, it remains continuously bombarded by ideas and images and is in some degree recast by them.

And finally there is the historical force I've been preoccupied with for so long: our various struggles with the idea of futurelessness, brought on by our late-20th-century technological capacity to annihilate ourselves.

Such forces continue to evoke proteanlike tendencies. The self responds to breaks with the past while at the same time seeking elements of continuity. Hence what I call our "odd combinations" of involvements and attitudes: some approximating tradition, others experimental or even visionary, with every kind of in-between.

What is remarkable is that most of us *do* navigate

through this sea of multiplicity, however imperfectly. Though we often see ourselves as odd or scattered, when we look around we find that everyone else is in much the same boat. So we might as well give this psychological state a name and a dignity, and try to understand what it is and work with it.

I see this as a constructive means of preserving a sense of self, as opposed to certain groups that see this kind of proteanism as a threat to the self, or other groups that see the disappearance of the self as desirable.

UR: That said, I still wonder what provides the foundation for identity and for values and ethics, reasons for doing the right thing, in the protean self.

LIFTON: That is a serious question that others, too, have raised. Responsible proteanism requires an ethical core. My sense is that one always requires some sort of equilibrium, some sort of balance between elements of form or stability on the one hand and elements of experimentation with the self on the other.

In my book I offer several examples, one of which is the "integrative proteanism" of Czech president Václav Havel, particularly in his earlier oppositional years. In those years he was highly protean in his style as an absurdist playwright; he experimented with ideas, he had no single home, no single profession, and yet somehow people seemed to take hope from him.

Havel, at the same time, was profoundly committed to a version of truth he was willing to die for. You need some sort of ethical core in order to plunge into experimental shape shifting. The problem is that there is no single ethical core for all of us. People find it in religion, or in work, or in various personal attachments or connections.

Speaking personally, I consider myself secular and I'm also deeply committed to anti-nuclear, anti-war work and to other expressions of human liberation. Powerful secular influences on me include the psychoanalytic revolution; combinations of Enlightenment as well as postmodern principles (the latter not necessarily in contradiction to the former); and also the ethical wisdom of such writers as Albert Camus, Kurt Vonnegut, Günter Grass, and Don DeLillo.

But religious influences are there as well—the strong Jewish emphasis on the chain of human continuity (along with the cosmopolitan spirit of the Diaspora); and various Christian influences, partly through friendships and shared political struggles with such people as Paul Tillich, Daniel and Philip Berrigan, Paul Moore, and Colin Williams; and also Buddhist influences, partly from living for a number of years in the Far East.

This sounds like a wildly divergent array of influences, but I do not think it that unusual, as this is often the way with the protean self.

UR: Ironically, it seems that faith is more important than ever today, in a world full of "shapeshifters" who creatively adapt to constantly changing personal, social, and political situations.

LIFTON: I would substitute *hope* for *faith*. They are almost the same, but not quite.

My personal ethical stands and my professional work are very much based on hope. In *The Protean Self* the hope is more explicitly stated, but it is present in all my work. When confronting Nazi doctors and Hiroshima in my research, I took the work to be an act of hope. I was confronting these dark sides of human behavior in the service of alternatives.

One requires hope, which is not based exclusively on flux but rather on flux in the service of ethical advance toward a species mentality.

UR: What makes you think we are moving toward a species mentality?

When confronting Nazi doctors and Hiroshima in my research, I took the work to be an act of hope. I was confronting these dark sides of human behavior in the service of alternatives.

LIFTON: I believe that, in the midst of our often violent antagonisms, we are at the same time becoming increasingly capable of recognizing our commonality with people from alien cultures.

For instance, if you remember your own reactions while watching on television those extraordinary revolutions of 1989 and 1990 in eastern and central Europe, and also the move toward democracy movements in China and in South Africa, you weren't so much looking at alien people—Chinese, Czechs, Africans, whatever—as at fellow human beings moving toward liberation. In some powerfully vicarious sense, we joined in their experience. In those moments, we were engaged in a kind of species mentality.

I think that tendency is expanding, but when we're fearful or pulled by various nationalisms we retreat from it and polarize again—a process that is often exacerbated by political forces that fan antagonisms for political gain.

Both the polarizations and the species mentality are active at present. My hope is based on the periodic yet significant display of the latter.

UR: I get the sense from you that the protean self in some ways could be called the diplomatic self, a self

that's capable of mediating conflict both internally and externally.

LIFTON: I agree that this can be a version of the protean self. In fact, that's what many people expected from Bill Clinton, who initially seemed very intent on resolving conflict in different groups. But in addition to this kind of diplomatic protean capacity one also has to manifest some ethical core, and that hasn't been so clear with Clinton.

Further, I would say that proteanism isn't only for mediation. Havel, for example, was a rebel, not a mediator. You can be a political activist who evokes conflict all the time. And you can be an intensely religious person but with a certain amount of openness.

What is important in all this is balance.

UR: I'd like to talk about the idea of proteanism as it relates to history. The German philosopher Odo Marquard talks about the need to cultivate an appreciation of continuities—as a way to stay sane, but also as a way to cope with the increasing velocity of change in the modern world. And he says that there are several ways to pursue this, one of which is to develop a sense of history.

LIFTON: I, too, believe in a very strong focus on a sense of history, and I also believe in a focus on continuity. But there needs to be a balance between continuity and breaks in continuity; between tradition and transformation. A sense of history can help one understand why the breaks or transformations are necessary, even inevitable.

UR: But how, given this flux, this play between continuity and breaks in continuity, can one even *develop* a sense of history?

Let's look at the now infamous controversy over the Smithsonian museum's plans to commemorate the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, for example. It seems that if we've learned anything from this impassioned debate, it's not who won and who lost or who's right and who's wrong but that history is contentious; that it's not set in stone but is a living, breathing force of human nature.

Under these circumstances, in which competing worldviews vie for the corner on historical truth, it's a little difficult to interpret historical events.

LIFTON: I have just finished a book with co-author Greg Mitchell called *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial*, and in it we use the term "raw nerve" to describe the way Americans feel about Hiroshima. The historical event is so difficult for us because it impinges fundamentally on our sense of ourselves as a decent people. By saying this I am clearly *not* saying that history is totally relative or that there is no such thing as a historical event. There is the fact that America dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Everybody agrees to that. What is very much at issue is one's interpretation of those events: why they were dropped, under what conditions, what they did to people, and how we—the country responsible for using them—felt or should feel about having employed them.

But this dynamic is certainly not unique to Hiroshima. There have always been two levels to history—the factual level and the interpretive level—so that no fact is ever merely a fact.

The dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima is so difficult for us because it impinges fundamentally on our sense of ourselves as a decent people.

I'll use the example of the various Chinese dynasties: Through the centuries, in coming to power, dynasties systematically reinterpreted past history in order to make it conform with their point of view—and thus provide an official historical narrative. The difference now, in connection with Hiroshima, is that our ostensible commitment to open investigation prevents us from acknowledging that we are providing our own official narrative.

UR: But under such contentious circumstances—in which facts are not disputed but absolutely everything else is—how is it possible to learn any kind of lesson? Are we all just left to stumble in the dark, alone or in groups of like-minded people, about the meaning of Hiroshima?

LIFTON: First, I must say that the sequence of the Smithsonian controversy has been a scandal. It's been a case of systematic censorship in which powerful lobbies have kept alternative interpretations of the event from being included in the exhibit. Having said that, I can add that there has also been an odd benefit: We have the beginnings of the first national debate ever in America on Hiroshima. This cannot be underestimated.

In fact, my co-author and I just came upon a new Gallup Poll that showed that of those who were asked the question "If I had to make the decision about using the atomic bomb, (1) I would have used it, or (2) I would have tried to find some other approach," about half answered that they would have tried to find an alternative.

American consciousness about Hiroshima seems to be changing, which may be one source of the intensity with which the censors are operating. Hiroshima will be a continuous struggle over consciousness. The returns will never be in and the debate over this excruciating event will go on long after we've ceased to be around. One simply does what one can, particularly if one considers this issue important for the American and the human future.

UR: That's the best we can do? This is Hiroshima we're talking about. You described it in your book *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* as "the end of the world, and yet we still exist." Is there some way in which we can at least be conscientious observers of the 50th anniversary of this event?

LIFTON: The 50th anniversary is an enormous opportunity, a time when there's greater awareness of the whole issue than ever before. The most important action I can think of in this year would be to find a place for the kind of exhibit that was at first projected at the Smithsonian—

a fully open exhibit that includes military details of World War II (sacrifices of American servicemen and Japanese atrocities such as the Bataan Death March), the various points of view about the decision to drop the bomb (featuring relatively new evidence from Truman's diary and letters), and unsparing depictions of what happened on the ground in Hiroshima. That kind of exhibit would be a major contribution.

The best way to enter into this struggle over consciousness is the same way one always does: through sharing in it and finding means to express it, whether it's writing nonfiction or fiction or various kinds of artistic and more ordinary expression.

Most importantly, the 50th anniversary can serve as a basis for a new witness, what I would call a "rewitnessing" of the event. In witness one tries to enter into an event, to be there in order to be able to retell the event later. In rewitnessing Hiroshima, one wants to be true to that past moment as well as to our present moment.

The Hiroshima issue is inseparable from other approaches to history. And as with all issues it needs a combination of a certain amount of political and ethical firmness and intensity on the one hand, and on the other a certain amount of compassion and sensitivity to the complexity of events.

UR: You speak about this as if it's the easiest thing in the world to do. But what about what you refer to in your book as "psychic numbing"—a diminished capacity or inclination to feel? How would you suggest we nurture our capacity to express compassion and sensitivity while building our resistance against psychic numbing?

You have to imagine Hiroshima and then imagine the end of the world if you're really to have an appropriate or an accurate view of what nuclear weapons are.

LIFTON: I can give you a flip answer that really isn't so flip. I draw bird cartoons. In addition to this outlet, I also think one needs humor, love, and intimacy.

And it isn't that I'm tossing it off as something very easy. It's rather that over time you do certain things and become the person who does them; you don't always know how or why, and when you talk about them it always sounds more reasonable than it felt at the time. For me, the process has helped me evolve a sense of what I am about and what I want to stand for.

UR: I mentioned Marquard earlier with regard to gaining a sense of history. He also said that beyond developing that sense it is also important to develop "an appreciation for the usual." Specifically, he says customs, usual practices, and traditions "become indispensable precisely in modern times. The more difficult the life situation the greater the need for routine. For without them we would no longer be able to meet our need for continuity or to meet our need for familiarity and to endure the changes in reality."

I thought of this when I was reading your book *Death in Life*. You wrote that for Hiroshima survivors, the experience of being loved and cared for could bring them back to the world in some life-affirming way.

And I also thought about it in terms of your own situation. Your life work has been staring at evil and suffering. You willfully chose to walk to the brink of the abyss. Has "the usual," in the sense Marquard describes it, been important to you?

LIFTON: First, let me respond to your point about holding on to routine. There is much truth in that, but I would qualify it.

I have been told that one of the expressions of resistance among the people of Sarajevo is to maintain their routine as much as possible. On the other hand, routine cannot be embraced simply for its own sake. It's equally important to break routine at certain times.

For example, I remember my frustration and that of many of my friends and colleagues during the time of the Vietnam War. We testified at congressional conferences and a few of us engaged in some very modest civil disobedience. And in our efforts we pressed the congressmen and congresswomen to break their routine, to rebel right there in Congress. After all, we pleaded, people are dying, and they are dying for no reason, and they are killing for no reason. We thought that should be cause enough for them to break their routine. But of course they didn't.

As for myself and routines of life, sometimes friends have teased me about my advocacy of proteanism because, for example, I've stayed married to one woman for a thousand years (that's the figure *she* gives), and I've been fairly consistent in my work. But I see these aspects of my life as the anchoring elements in my wanderings and experiments.

And as to staring into the abyss, for me imagining the end of the world is a way of struggling to prevent that outcome. That's the model in almost all my work. You have to imagine Hiroshima and then imagine the end of the world if you're really to have an appropriate or an accurate view of what nuclear weapons are.

My work has always been about holocaust and transformation. And I've always seen the latter as crucial, as the ultimate justification for studying the former. There is a sense in which you need hope and an idea of a future in order to immerse yourself in the abyss,

whatever it may be.

Whenever I discuss these things with people I express myself as against simply being fixed on the abyss. Ideally, one stares into it only to be able to see beyond it.

UR: When I think of the way the various catastrophes of this century have been rendered successfully and perhaps transformatively in artistic form, two that come to mind are Carolyn Forché's recent book-length poem *The Angel of History* and also Maya Lin's Vietnam War Memorial. Of Lin's work, architectural historian Vincent Scully writes: "In Maya Lin's memorial the ground opens for all of us. We are drawn into it, touching the cool face of death with our hand. We commune with the dead. They have a country still. The ages crowd in with us, remembering the surface of the earth and the cut into it, the classic gesture to the horizon and to the temple and the sun. The impulse remains to respect the integrity of the earth, to find truth in it and, beyond dying, to shape a community with it for the common good."

I wonder if you share Scully's take on the memorial, but more broadly, if you think art can help us interpret our world, our history and our present, and hint at the way toward reconciliation.

LIFTON: Art is crucial for transforming death and pain into forms that can in some way enhance the life that remains. I have felt that personally, as have many who have confronted mass killing. After each of these studies, especially that of Nazi doctors, I gravitated more toward poetry—and throughout all the work I felt a need to read a great deal of fiction, especially contemporary American and European novels. I'm glad you mentioned Carolyn Forché, as she and I have drawn upon each other's work, which we affirmed when we met briefly recently.

About the Vietnam Memorial, what Scully has written is beautiful—and absolutely true in every word. I think it's the greatest memorial to anything I've ever experienced. And I was very moved to hear from the people who planned it that my book on Vietnam had some meaning for them.

The Vietnam Memorial does, as you say, hint toward reconciliation—but without being in any way didactic. It's visceral; it's also protean. And it's powerful partly because it's so simple. It's just this stark slab of polished black granite, and there is nothing else that would have been appropriate for that war but the names of the dead on it.

From "Frontiers", MANAS Nov. 24, 1954, p. 7:

"Back in the early days of the country, there was plenty to engage the patriotic idealism of Americans. A happy opportunity to combine pioneering for all with goals of personal achievement created a natural link between patriotism and self-interest. . . . Now, however, patriotism has has lost its familiar role as friend and supporter of personal ambitions. . . . So the present, it seems, is a time of waiting. . . . Americans may need community spirit, but more than anything they need a reason to *want* community spirit, and the reason ought to be a better one than those which grow out of fear and the symptoms of social disintegration."

UR: In all the work you have done over the years, did you think of yourself as "bearing witness"?

LIFTON: You know, at the time I did my research—on Chinese thought reform, on Hiroshima survivors, on Vietnam, on Nazi doctors—I didn't really think of myself as bearing witness, though the phrase jumped out now and then in my writing. By and large I thought of myself as a psychiatric or psychological researcher who was preoccupied with ethical issues and was trying to get at very difficult subjects.

But since, I've become interested in the whole principle of witness. Especially in the last year, I've begun to think systematically about what witness is, what it entails, and how it frees the mind. Bearing witness requires the full participation of the self—what Gabriel Marcel called "presence." One takes in the pain and recasts it in the retelling of the story. By struggling to contribute to larger consciousness, one calls forth portions of the self that have been slumbering. In helping others to break out from their numbing, one does the same—and more—for oneself.

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