

THE
DAVIS FOUNDATION
FOR PROVIDING
EMOTIONAL COMFORT

Letter of January 24, 2007

Dear Reader,

A reader has called my attention to a recent television news story that described the experience of the man who reported abuses at Abu Graib prison in Iraq. The reader was struck by his courage and asks what enables a person to be so brave.

This soldier made copies of the infamous CDs that were lent to him by one of the perpetrators and left them anonymously in an envelope in the office of the CID (Criminal Investigation Division). He hadn't intended for the photos to become public because he felt that would hurt the Army but he turned them in because he knew the activity was wrong. The CID division was able to identify him but promised to keep his name secret for his safety. Some time later, however, he was described by name first in a magazine article and then, by a member of the Department of Defense, on TV. Some of his buddies supported him but others considered him a traitor to the unit. Fearing for his life he slept with a pistol until the Army moved him back to the United States.

His unit comprised a close-knit group of men from his rural hometown. The Army determined that it wouldn't be safe for him to return there because many of the townspeople considered him a traitor to his buddies and there were a number of death threats. Even a number of his relatives turned against him. The local commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars asked, "Do you put the enemy above your buddies?" He and his wife reluctantly allowed the Army to relocate them to a new, undisclosed location.

He received an award for courage but he hadn't meant to put himself in danger. He provided incriminating evidence anonymously. Perhaps the award should have been for integrity. Adherence to his moral principles overcame his bonds to his fellow soldiers. How is integrity developed? And what compromises it?

The mental apparatus matches each stimulus with the best available response. If a *true solution* is available it will be chosen because it completely ends the disequilibrium caused by the stimulus. An immoral choice is not a true solution because it hurts another. The other's pain is registered, even if only subliminally, and that creates a new disequilibrium.

Why then does anyone ever do anything immoral? True solutions are not always available. A young child often experiences stimuli for which there is no true solution. A *partial* or *false* solution must be chosen and these solutions become locked in. When the stimulus recurs the locked-in solution is matched. This pattern may generalize over time.

If a young child is mistreated there is no true solution. He can't make his caretakers change. He may respond to mistreatment with anxiety, depression, or anger. One partial



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solution is to identify with the aggressor and, as he becomes able, to hurt others. This solution may become generalized and create a bully or a sadist who, in turn, may mistreat his own children. Aggression often runs in families and in larger social groups.

Because each child experiences a unique environment, however, the partial solution that best diminishes the distress caused by mistreatment will vary. Although one child may identify with the aggressor another may take his anger out on himself and become self-critical or self-mutilating. Another may identify with a positive figure in his environment. In each case the mental apparatus will match the partial solution that best diminishes the disequilibrium.

In the soldier's unit and in his hometown there were some who supported him and others who viewed him as a traitor. For the latter, loyalty to the soldiers in the unit outweighed all other considerations. In some societies tribal loyalty is necessary for physical survival. In combat, too, soldiers' loyalty to each other is crucial. In the presence of grave danger loyalty can become greatly intensified. It can also be matched with associatively related stimuli. The enemy captives constituted a stimulus that was associatively related to danger. The torturers responded with aggression. Certain other unit members responded with an inappropriate intensification of loyalty. The townspeople who are themselves overly aggressive identified with the torturers. And some of those living with the distress of endangered relatives and friends responded, as their soldiers did, with a misguided sense of loyalty.

An Inner Guide, by eliminating maladaptive habit patterns, will enable us to match true solutions. As it does, we will find it increasingly easier to do the right thing.

BOOK RECOMMENDATION:

The Forgotten Soldier by Guy Sajer, Potomac Books, Washington, D.C., 2000

This gripping memoir (originally copyrighted in 1967) by a German soldier who fought on the Eastern front in World War II illustrates the development and value of loyalty and also the ever-present phenomenon of brutality. Sajer describes the horrors of war unsparingly and of his transformation from a naive recruit of sixteen to a deadened veteran at war's end three years later. It is a rare depiction of the experience of being on the losing side. I recommend it highly and thank my son, Richard Davis, for giving me this gift.

I welcome your questions and comments, and will publish as many of them as possible. I look forward to hearing from you, either by post or at info@davis-foundation.org. If you would like to be anonymous, just let me know.

Cordially,

Judith M. Davis