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As a friend and I watched the chaotic withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan, he turned livid. "Just like Vietnam," he yelled. "We shouldn't have been there in the first place." I had no answer to that. He served; I didn't. I do, however, open myself to people willing to share their experiences. Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* about American troops in Vietnam. Edith Eva Eger's *The Choice: Embrace the Possible*, which reflects her own WWII experiences along with those of recent war veterans she has treated.

Eger's book opens with a Foreword by Philip Zimbardo, PhD, a psychologist and professor emeritus at Stanford University and well-known author. Decades ago Zimbardo created the controversial Prison Experiment, in which some of his graduate students became "prisoners" while others acted as their "guards." The "guards" very soon began abusing their power over the "prisoners," and the undertaking deteriorated. About halfway through, Zimbardo had to call off the experiment, having been urged to do so by a colleague who later became his wife. Many years later, when the abuses at Abu Ghraib came to light, Zimbardo decided to write about the long-ago prison experiment and draw parallels. *The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil* appeared in 2007.

In his Foreword Zimbardo remarks on Eger's compassionate involvement with Navy men and women who'd just returned on the USS *Nimitz* aircraft carrier, one of the world's largest warships. "She was there to teach five thousand young Navy men [*sic*] how to deal with the adversity, trauma, and chaos of war," he writes. On countless occasions, Zimbardo adds, Eger

has been the clinical expert who treats soldiers who suffer from post-traumatic stress and debilitating brain injuries. “How is this gentle grandmother able to help so many military personnel heal from the . . . brutality of war?” he asks rhetorically.

Eger, too is a psychologist with a PhD. She is also a survivor of Auschwitz, one of the death camps the Nazis maintained during their reign of terror. Her family lived in Hungary and were incarcerated in 1944, when Eger was a teenager. Her parents were murdered at Auschwitz; miraculously, Eger and her sister were liberated by American troops when the Reich collapsed. Naturally, she holds a special place in her heart for the men and women who serve. In *The Choice* she writes of a military man who came to her for treatment, a “Captain Jason Fuller” so full of rage, he brings a loaded pistol to his first therapy session, saying he plans to kill his wife who has been unfaithful. For a follow-up session Eger requests that his family attend. She takes the couple’s children into another room, provides drawing paper and pens, and asks them to make a drawing of their family without using people while she talks with the parents. When the children rejoin them with the pictures they created, the teenaged girl has drawn an enormous bomb exploding while her eight-year-old brother’s drawing depicts a lion roaring at three cowering mice. Later in the book, Eger discloses that Jason Fuller had been brutalized by his father.

Eger asks him whether he’d like his son to be like him. Fuller answers, “God, no.” He realizes that, to his kids, he has become what his dad was to him; the drawings from his children confirm it. Still later we hear of his service in Vietnam. An order from his commanding officer threw him into turmoil. He realized what he was ordered to do would put his men in harm’s way; still, he followed the order without asking for additional air support. “They all died that night,”

he says to Eger with teeth clenched. “And I’m the one who sent them in there to die.”

“You were following an order.” The therapist is sympathetic. “In war people die.”

“But I knew it was the wrong decision. I knew those boys needed more air support. And I didn’t have the balls to demand it.”

“I’m mad,” he adds. “They send us in there. They feed us a bunch of bullshit about America being the strongest army in the world, that the gooks don’t stand a chance. They lied to us.”

When Eger asks Fuller if he ever wishes he were dead, he answers, “All the fucking time.”

That sense of futility is also inherent in an army unit that has returned from combat in Afghanistan “with a high suicide rate,” whom Eger is charged to help. At one point she realizes, the unit she’s addressing in 2010 in Fort Carson, Colorado, is the Seventy-First Infantry whose members, sixty-five years earlier, had liberated her and her fellow death-march prisoners. “I was bringing my story of freedom to the survivors of a war who once brought freedom to me,” she writes. She remembers the GI who, on May 4, 1945, fed her M&Ms one by one, a very dark Black man. Naturally, she is overcome with emotion as “the next generation of freedom fighters” surrounds her on the stage. Freedom lies in accepting what is and forgiving ourselves, says Eger. She reminds them that “Your sacrifice, your suffering, have meaning” and urges them to “dismantle the prison of your mind brick by brick.” This dismantling she advises her readers to undertake also, for most of us harbor memories that become secrets we are reluctant to share. Those memories are our prisons, just as Eger’s unwillingness to disclose her Auschwitz past in her new country constituted a prison she had difficulty dismantling. Luckily, she found therapists

to help her.

Trauma happens not just through war or accidents to refugees, to soldiers, to victims of rape—trauma happens to people we know. Often, we are unaware of their anguish, but even when we recognize the signs we may not be able to respond appropriately. We may advise the sufferer to “forgive and forget,” which is entirely the wrong message.

As much as I admire Edith Eger for revealing her struggle with disclosing herself, her unquestioned endorsement of military might leaves me uncomfortable. American military intervention saved her life, it’s true, and so, she gratefully devotes herself to the healing of trauma in the American military. Who would blame her? Not I. Still, I imagine that the opponents fighting the Seventy-First Infantry in 2010 considered themselves freedom fighters, too—and they had no psychologist to address the ensuing trauma. And what of the civilian casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq? Their survivors are unlikely to benefit from therapeutic intervention, post-traumatic suffering notwithstanding.

It will be left to another Edith Eger to take messages of healing to populations that have suffered wars, occupations, rape, and other disruptions at American hands. Natal individuals are just as suicidal and desperate as the GIs who left them behind—worse, these families subsist in famine, squalor, illness and disease. God, how I know that fate! I lived through it.

You may say, the war I suffered as a small child was my country’s own doing. True, but that doesn’t change civilian desperation and famine.