

OTHERS SAY TOM PALAIMA

Special Contributor

Five student minds renew my hope

The University of Texas at Austin at the end of the spring semester is a place of relics and memories. Senior thesis writers and Ph.D. dissertators in the humanities leave their supervisors and readers with an assortment of parting gifts.

Their completed work offers insights into the human experience: how and why our society doesn't work as well as it should, what individuals can do to make a difference, what lies we are told, what lies we tell, and what lies we want to believe. I speak here personally about five students I have worked with who are leaving my colleagues and me with the kind of empty-nest feelings other faculty share.

Plan II honors student **Brina Bui** worked with psychiatrist Stephen Sonnenberg and me analyzing art programs in pediatric hospitals in Texas's five major cities. Only Dell Children's Hospital here in Austin employs trained art therapists who use art in an informed therapeutic process to discover what children are feeling and thinking. Bui's research suggests that art programs, despite their therapeutic value, generally are viewed as inessential add-ons in pediatric hospitals and are not prioritized in their budgets.

Johnathon Reddinger, who is part of the Polymathic Scholars Program, studied representations of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in Hollywood films and documentary films. Reddinger joined the Marine Corps out of high school in summer 2007. He was deployed in summer 2009 to Al Anbar province, Iraq, and in winter 2010-2011 to Helmand province, Afghanistan, serving as an infantry Rifle-

man and a light armored vehicle crewman. He graduated at UT Austin in 2011. Reddinger doesn't see the wars American soldiers fought in the war films Hollywood makes.

In his view, Hollywood films do bigger box office when their ideologies match the audience's. This explains the switch from anti-war sentiments in Vietnam war films to patriotic sentiments in Iraq and Afghanistan war films. Hollywood films leave out, except in hints, "the debilitating injuries – mental and physical – that soldiers sustain on the battlefield and then bring home." They stereotype the enemy and do not show how our wars devastate other cultures. Documentaries about soldiers and film interviews with soldiers get at the truth. But the truth doesn't sell tickets, reassure the general public or recruit soldiers.

Ciaran Dean Jones' Plan II thesis, directed by me with Sonnenberg and historian George Forgie as readers, helped earn him a \$3,000 UT Co-op George H. Mitchell Award as one of the top seven undergraduate researchers this year. Dean-Jones studied President Abraham Lincoln's writings closely to trace how Lincoln's emotional and psychological struggles in early adulthood related to the theological beliefs he developed during the Civil War. As seen in his second inaugural address, Lincoln took to using the suffering of the Civil War to move our divided nation toward reconciliation rather than punishment of the South.

Commander **Mike Flynn**, a 1995 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, also came to UT in 2011, like John Reddinger. He is taking up a teaching appointment at the acade-

my this fall. His doctoral dissertation in comparative literature, directed by Katie Arens with Cesar Salgado, Hector Dominguez-Ruvalcaba, Gabriela Polit and me as readers, runs a PTSD Geiger counter – as he puts it – over the literature set during the drug-war violence in Colombia. Flynn identifies the broader social pathology of trauma and highlights the destructive force of human greed. His work focuses our attention on complex PTSD, on the ways trauma is transmitted across generations and from person to person, on how it persists in memory, and on what narration can do to heal personal and collective trauma.

Finally **Jorge Wong**, a classics major and McNair Scholar, explored the crisis – ancient Greek for "point of decision" – that King Agamemnon, himself an inheritor of multigenerational trauma, faced in the Greek tragedy named after him. Agamemnon was given the same choice Yahweh gave to Abraham: Sacrifice your child or bear the consequences of divine disfavor. Jorge highlighted the Greek ritual vocabulary the playwright Aeschylus used to make clear to readers and viewers from 458 BCE to the present how complicated the factors in Agamemnon's decision were.

My memories of this academic year preserve my faith in students with bright minds and passionate souls who persist in examining who we are as a society, and I also am grateful to my learned colleagues who provide inspirational nurturing to fledglings in the UT nest – and even old birds like me.

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