Headline: “Sheehan’s question is, ‘Why?’ Is an answer possible?"

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Body Text:

“I like that very much: 'If the accident will.' "

- Kurt Vonnegut "Slaughterhouse Five"

It is a mistake to see what Cindy Sheehan has been doing in Crawford purely as a political act. She is caught up in politics and is being used for political purposes by pro- and anti-war demonstrators and by media pundits. Those are sad facts. But Cindy Sheehan has a question, and she wants an answer no one can give.

Few of us even want to contemplate her question. Sigmund Freud explains why. War brings life's greatest mystery front and center. In peacetime, he said, we admit that death is a natural and unavoidable part of life. But we really behave otherwise. We push death aside. We eliminate it from life. We try to hush it up.

War, even fought half a planet away by volunteer soldiers, brings death to us on a regular basis. When it comes, it is obscene. Parents bury their children, a terrible inversion of the natural order. In their grief they naturally ask, "Why?" Most of them ask why silently, day after day, for years on end. A few, such as Sheehan, whose son was killed last year in Iraq, break the taboo and ask why out loud.

The real "why" question about death and other severe trauma has an answer, but Sheehan will not get it from President Bush. There is no factual answer. Answers even from men and women of God or caring friends sound like platitudinous guesses of people stumbling in the dark.

Where is the divine plan in 14 Marines being incinerated inside an amphibious assault vehicle by an improvised explosive device? What human plan can explain to parents why their sons, all brave men, were there in Haditha on Aug. 3, far from Fairfield, Ohio; Anchorage, Alaska; Folkston, Ga.? The answer lies elsewhere, and it is no analgesic.

Documentary filmmaker Werner Herzog calls it ecstatic truth. Austin, Texas, oral historian Leila Levinson has been interviewing soldiers who liberated the Nazi concentration camps and others who survived them. She calls it emotional truth. E.B. Sledge writes honestly about the horrors he and other Marines faced in fighting the Japanese in the Pacific. He follows British WW I poet Wilfred Owen in speaking of "chance's strange arithmetic." Herodotus, at the dawn of Western history, saw it as cruel bad luck combined with divine resentment of human happiness.

Kurt Vonnegut found the answer 22 years after WW II in the mangled English of a Dresden taxi driver. Such things happen "if the accident will." Vonnegut pondered deaths, and lives spared, during and after the war. It didn't matter whether the men and women, boys and girls were good or bad, kind or cruel, smart or stupid. They died. So he could only say, "And so it

goes." I have been thinking about these things for years. Don't lie. You have, too.

A few days ago, I was clearing brush behind my garage. A pliant branch whipped into my left eye, lacerating it and gouging the cornea. My eye doctor rushed to my help. He explained that if the branch had struck 2 mm to 3 mm to the left, I would have lost my sight. If the accident will.

Eleven years ago, a speeding driver skidded just as we had gotten out of our car on a residential street. My wife was seven months pregnant with our only child. I pushed her out of the way. My right leg was crushed. My head slammed the windshield and then the curb. The emergency team got me to the hospital fast. A skilled orthopedic surgeon performed many operations over nine months to save my leg. My mind recovered. So it goes.

On Oct. 30, 1985, I was on American Airlines Flight 203, Austin to Dallas, returning to New York City from interviewing for the position I now hold at the University of Texas. As we approached the gate in Dallas, a bomb went off in the luggage hold.

There were 147 passengers on board. A San Marcos salesman had insured his wife and two young children handsomely. He put them aboard. He had planted a homemade bomb in her cosmetics case. He set the timer wrong. No one died, but we all looked at death.

There it is.

I was lucky. My loved ones and I only came close to death and maiming. I can push incidents like these out of my mind most of the time. Search in your own soul and find a way that you, too, can feel even part of what mothers like Cindy Sheehan are feeling.

At the end of the classic Texas film "Tender Mercies" (1983), country singer Mac Sledge, a recovered alcoholic played by Robert Duvall, chops at weeds in a small garden patch out in the vast Texas landscape. His daughter has just died in a car wreck. He had lived through one once when he was dead drunk. His loving new wife asks him if he is OK. Mac wonders out loud: "And I prayed last night to know why I lived and she died. But I got no answer to my prayer. I still don't know why she died and I lived. I don't know the answers to nothing. Not a blessed thing. ... My daughter killed in an automobile accident. Why? You see I don't trust happiness. I never did, and I never will."

Duvall won an Academy Award for best actor and Horton Foote for best screenplay. Why? Together they revealed ecstatic truth about something we would rather not think about.

Cindy Sheehan and all parents who have lost their children, in war or peace, need our and God's tender mercies. And that will still not be enough.

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