

Chapter 2: In Pursuit of Peace

Elizabeth Mesok

As a child, I was preoccupied with war. My early focus on violence makes sense to me now, given that I was raised in a setting of domestic abuse and in a culture of omnipresent US militarism, where supporting “the troops” wasn’t an option but an obligation, where dissent was unpatriotic and out of the question, especially in my house. I can recall struggling to reconcile my grandfather’s stories of serving as an Army fighter pilot in World War II and his nostalgia for times of camaraderie among men with the litany of horrors that comprise a war. I have always been fascinated with how individuals navigate times of unspeakable violence, how they make lives among rubble, cultivate friendships and love amidst trauma. As a child, I consumed books like air: *Summer of My German Soldier* taught me the term “conscientious objector” and *Zlata’s Diary: A Child’s Life in Sarajevo* taught me empathy for a young girl only a few years older than I was at the time, whose childhood was marred by bombings and death. I began to ask why — why are wars fought? Why are wars considered inevitable? And how do the stories that we tell about war — to ourselves, to our countries, to our children — matter?

Looking back, it is clear that my interest in war also coincided with the Persian Gulf War and its media coverage, which was relentlessly broadcast into homes across the US in the early 1990s. This television coverage was carefully curated and highly dramatized, with shots of journalists in the midst of the war zone and images of missiles wreaking violent devastation. Yet these images were always juxtaposed with personal, emotional stories about the men and women in uniform, children shown tearfully wrenched from their parents’ arms. The me-

dia's focus on families in the US, what they suffered and lost, was a perfect distraction from what was happening just outside the frame. In school, we wrote letters to soldiers as a part of the "support our troops" campaign, a movement necessarily absent any antiwar commentary or protest. The campaign was symbolized by yellow ribbons, which appeared everywhere — pinned to labels, tied to mailboxes, shopping carts, and car radio antennas, wrapped around trees. I was taught that to be critical of the war was to be ungrateful for the service of these men and women, to be ungrateful for the freedom they allegedly secured. I was never supposed to ask how exactly war results in freedom. War was, and continues to be, normalized as the only means through which to solve conflict, an act justified by the always-abstract promise of peace.

I felt a restlessness, a dissatisfaction with the answers offered by teachers or religion. After relatively poor grades in high school, I was accepted into college and decided to major in English, a move that I have never regretted. I later chose to double major in politics in order to apply the poststructuralist and queer theory that excited me so deeply to something more concrete, something material. This proved critical to make sense of the political environment that shaped my early years in higher education: on September 11, 2001, mere weeks after I began my freshman year, the US was attacked and would go on to launch the global war on terror, invading and occupying Afghanistan and Iraq and catalyzing a new era of perpetual, preemptive warfare. Training with antiwar feminist scholars dramatically shaped my next steps, and from that point forward I was focused on what feminists and feminist theory had to say about politics, war, and peace — and what I could add.

The path to and through graduate school is rarely linear, and mine was no exception. Clinging to the encouragement of two professors, I fumbled my way through graduate applications to politics departments without understanding how much academic disciplines could vary regionally and institutionally. As a first-generation college student, I was driven by a tenacity and a stubbornness that served me well in the years to come, earning me a PhD from New York University and then a post-doctoral fellowship from Harvard University. I was, however, very naive about the realities of academia. It never even occurred to me that I would

not be able to find a job after graduating. The economic recession that began in late 2007 (the same year I started my PhD) transformed the hiring practices and working conditions of higher education, and tenure-track professorships became (and still are) incredibly hard to secure. Yet, my friends and colleagues largely still managed to be successful in obtaining permanent positions, leaving me to feel inadequate when I struggled year after year.

Those years were hard. I began to resent the academic culture that put me in direct competition with friends. I recoiled at the expectation of gratitude for the smallest wages for incredibly taxing work. I felt that with each passing year I did not obtain a professorship, US academic culture would perceive me as irrelevant. This was acutely painful, as academia was the first place I ever felt truly at home with myself, where all the parts of me were embraced by a community of activists, scholars, and radical thinkers hoping to make profound differences in the world. I felt more “me” in academia than I did anywhere else; and yet, I still decided to leave.

After completing a visiting assistant professorship and having failed to secure a tenure-track position for the fourth year in a row, I made the difficult decision to leave the US and join my now-husband in Switzerland. Friends and colleagues were shocked at my decision; some bluntly said I was “throwing it all away” and others flat out insisted that I not “give up.” But I was tired. I was always struggling, commuting far distances and working long hours, exhausted by the constant hustle that is living in New York City, always broke, always worrying about the student debt that is as normalized in the US as war. I was also battling a reproductive disease that I knew could rob me of the choice of having children if I did not receive the proper care. And so, I did the “least feminist” thing I could imagine, the one thing I said I would never do: I left my life behind and chose to prioritize my relationship over my career.

That move transformed my life in unexpected and beautiful ways that I could have never foreseen. That is not to say it wasn't hard — it was excruciatingly hard, especially in the beginning. In Switzerland, I faced unemployment and infertility at the same time. I went from “Dr. Mesok” to “Hausfrau,” as I was referred to in the mandatory German classes pro-

vided by the Canton. At times I felt like a ghost; it was as if I had disappeared. I walked, for hours and hours along the river, through the woods, wondering what the hell I had done, panicked I had made a terrible mistake. Terrified I had somehow lost myself. Yet, I held onto the idea of finding work that would allow me to still fight for a world without war; I prioritized the work I wanted to do over the title of the job. This focused me, and I let myself be vulnerable. I explored my feelings of failure and found out that I could not just be okay outside of academia — I could be happy.

And, in the words of my brilliant dissertation advisor, I am nothing if not persistent. I corralled my grief and fear into action. I emailed professors asking to have a coffee, I attended conferences without an invitation and networked, I applied for countless jobs both in and outside of academia. I would often go home and cry from the exhausting effort of having to prove myself once again, but this time in an entirely different system of academia and in a language I didn't speak. Nevertheless, I received small teaching contracts at universities in Basel and Geneva and I continued to publish articles — writing and teaching are my two greatest pleasures, which keep me grounded and connected to myself.

Then, things began to change. I received a small contract with a peace research institute and was once again able to start researching in the area of gender, war, and peace. This gave me the confidence I needed and, most importantly, a community of scholars and friends that sustained me over the years, buoyed me when things were tough or uncertain. I applied for the PRIMA grant from the Swiss National Science Foundation on a whim after being told by a colleague that I had no chance at getting it, bolstered by a familiar combination of stubbornness and tenacity. On the day of the interview, I wrote on one of the notecards that I would hold during my presentation: “You’ve already made it.” To me, this meant to remember that one decision, one acceptance or rejection does not change your life or who you are. It is just one thing, in a hopefully very long life full of many things. I was awarded the grant on my 36th birthday.

As I write this, my PRIMA grant is nearing its end. I do not know what is next. The US no longer feels like a place I want to live; I have a

daughter now and her future is my priority. I had great success over the duration of the grant and, of course, some failures, too. I am endlessly grateful to have had the time I did, to write and teach and think with a community of scholars that are committed to making the world a better and more peaceful place. I also know that, if and when the time comes, I will be able to leave academia without also feeling like I am losing myself.

It is easy to look back and think of all that I wish I had known. But I don't believe in regrets, because even though things could have been better, they could have been a lot worse, too. If I could, I would tell my younger self to hold tight: Remain driven by your convictions, by the work you want to do in the world, the change you want to see, and seek places where that can happen. Get comfortable with rejection; let the fear guide you but not rule you. Seek out mentors that are both smart and kind; be wary of hubris. Find your community and keep them close — you will need each other. Invest in your relationships and yourself and remember that, while important and meaningful, your work isn't you. It is of you, but it is not you. Cultivate your identity outside of your career and attend to that just as closely as you do your work. There will be overlaps, of course, but you are so much more than the research you do, the papers you author, the courses you teach. We all are.

