

Due date: Sunday, 22 May 2011, 11:55 PM

Last edited: Sunday, 22 May 2011, 04:22 PM (740 words)

“...Our sons need never be soldiers
Our daughters will never need guns
These are the years between
These are the years that were hard fought and won
Contracts torn at the edges
Old signatures stained with tears
Seasons of war and grace
These should not be forgotten years....”

“Forgotten Years” by Midnight Oil

Turning points and endings. A rhetorician may begin a paragraph in obscurity and leave it up to the reader to decipher the unintelligible. What does it mean, *really mean*, to face a turning point? When does an ending really signify an *end*? To me, these terms are only two of innumerable markers on the continuum of human activity, markers defined personally and arbitrarily. They’re terms designed to initiate conversation from a very personal point of commencement, the journey of a thousand ideas that begins with the pronoun “I.” But a rhetorician I’m not. The turning points in Appy’s book *Patriots* are a departure from one paradigm into a different; the ending describes the open doorway through which a new beginning is visible. The obscurity of turning points and endings is only unintelligible to those who live in “...the years between...” and never need to confront issues of moral and physical courage. But these should not be forgotten years.

Michael Bernhardt was assigned to Charlie Company, notorious for the atrocity at Mai Lai. “When I was assigned to Charlie Company I knew there was something wrong. You could see it and smell it.” [Appy, p. 350] The interview opens with Bernhardt describing his *turning point* in words common to popular fiction. Common words and phrasing, however, doesn’t mean inaccurate or poorly chosen. Bernhardt described what he personally saw and felt, based on what he also knew to be normative military behavior. His normative military behavior involved high standards of training and discipline. The men of Charlie Company were, Bernhardt says, like street thugs. The atrocities committed by them at Mai Lai cemented Bernhardt’s changing perspective and his collapsing paradigm, one witness to proper organizational structure and adherence to national and corps values, was replaced by one revolving around disappointment, revulsion and feelings of military marginalization. At the completion of this interview, the reader is left wondering if Bernhardt ever found another paradigm to cling to, something to balance what he’d witnessed in Vietnam.

The word *ending* is inherently melded with the idea of a beginning. Medic George Evans crossed through the doorway separating an *ending* into a

beginning at a hospital in Cam Rahn Bay. Given the task of cleaning the corpse of child and facing the raw, mourning emotions of who Evans believed was the child's mother, he accepted that Vietnam was "...a bad war." [Appy, p. 452] Six months from this event marks the point at which Evans embraces his *ending/beginning* and fights back in the only appropriate way he could: he refused to comply with military grooming standards and appearance at designated formations. I state that Evans fought back in the only appropriate way he could because, being a medic, if he failed to perform his duty soldiers would die. With his family history and respect for veterans, such an action was inconceivable, let alone inexcusable. He realized, though, that he needed to have an outlet against a "bad war" and protested in the ways he could. Evans, like his father before him, understood the meaning of *duty* as defined by himself and upheld the definition in the most important aspects – those aspects involving the lives of others.

Turning points and endings. A rhetorician I'm not, nor am I a person who has ever had to face war and its aftermath. I know people who have served in the military and were prisoners of war, been grievously wounded and had members of their family die. I've been privileged; I've been protected; and even more notable, I have lived with no fears of death or imprisonment. I, and generations before me, have thrived on the actions of those who've lived and fought before. Their *ending* passed to me as my *beginning* and, as Peter Garret of Midnight Oil sings,

*"The hardest years, the darkest years
The roarin' years, the fallen years
These should not be forgotten years.
The hardest years, the wildest years
The desperate and divided years
Our shoreline was never invaded
Our country was never in flames
This is the calm we breathe..."*

This is the calm I breathe.

Close this window

 [Moodle Docs for this page](#)