

The Limited Power of One Human Being:

Chris Hedges on Fundamentalism, War and Faith

By Bethany Saltman

BS: In *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* you say that you became hooked on war. What exactly is the source of the high?

CH: It gives you a sense of purpose, a sense of solidarity. I mean it's that passage in *War Is a Force* where I'm sitting with all these Bosnians who really suffered during the war. And they miss it. They're all in despair because the war is over. They'll never have that epic battle that will define them again.

BS: You actually write, "Combat is Zen. There is no past, no future."

CH: Well, I meant that the experience of combat itself is a Zen-like experience. You're just aware in ways that you never were before. Even colors are brighter. And it's true. You are just totally present.

I got hooked on the adrenaline rushes and bifurcation of power. The landscape in combat can resemble, probably, in the span of 24 hours or less every possible drug trip known to humankind from hallucinogenic landscapes of eviscerated bodies to zombie-like experiences, because you haven't slept, to adrenaline highs. It's all there.

I'm not a thrill seeker by nature. But I would take tremendous risks if I believed that it was worth the cost. For instance if a bunch of civilians were killed in a town in Kosovo and they blocked all the roads, I'd walk in even though it was really dangerous, because otherwise those civilian deaths would never be recorded. Now was I walking in because I was a really good person? I was also walking in because I liked the rush of it. I liked the excitement. I liked that—I mean it's all wrapped up in one. It's not easy to say it was this or that. And I think part of the problem with war correspondents is they're not always honest about the dark motives that push them.

People like getting as close as they can to the flame without getting burned. Because in the moment when you think you're going to get burned, i.e., when you think you're going to die, it is absolute terror.

BS: That sounds awful. What's the appeal?

CH HEDGES: The appeal is to get in and get out. You know, it's Winston Churchill and the river war: "There's nothing quite exhilarating as being shot at without success." That.

BS: Did you have a death wish?

CH HEDGES: No. By the time I ended up in the Balkans, I was disintegrating morally and physically and psychologically. And I realized that I had to break free from this kind of a lifestyle or it would kill me. I think it's like a drug addiction.

BS: What did that breakdown feel like?

CH: When you're exposed to that much trauma...at this point I probably carried a few hundred pretty traumatic violent images with me. You are completely disconnected and alienated from the world around you, or a world not at war. I would drink—I wasn't an alcoholic, but I would [drink] especially when [I couldn't] sleep. At night you revisit the trauma. And you wake up in the morning exhausted. You're numb. You can't connect with anyone around you including the people you love and who love you the most. You know? And two, three nights of that is brutal. I mean you just feel like you're at the bottom of a huge black hole. And in the morning, you don't know how you'll climb out. You are really alone. And just about no one can reach you. And what you do is you drink at night because if you drink enough, you don't remember your dreams. And so I went through all that.

BS: How long did this last?

CH: It probably took me three years to pull myself back together.

BS: How did you do that?

CH: Mostly by connecting with my kids. Becoming a soccer mom. That did it. I mean it was all those little things. Making school lunches and going to school plays and picking them up and going to their track races. And that more than anything, I think, healed me.

Dostoyevsky said: "What is hell? Hell is the inability to love." I think it's when you're so cut off that you can love that you die. And it was really working your way back to love that made healing possible.

BS: Did you get into therapy?

CH: I did, but it didn't work. Of course by the time I saw the guy who handled post-traumatic stress disorder, I'd read every single book on it that he'd read. It drove him crazy. I'm a great believer in therapy, but I think for somebody like myself, there's this tendency to out-intellectualize the therapist. He didn't want to see me, frankly. After three or four sessions, he'd had enough.

BS: What role did your faith play in healing?

CH HEDGES: I believe in a morally neutral universe. I don't think there's any sort of divine being up there; I think the sparks of divinity come from those around us. So I suppose it was a realization, a deep appreciation for the gifts that I had in my family.

BS: Did the war affect people differently, depending on their roles within it?

CH: I went to war as an idealist. And I drank deep from this very dark elixir that war is. Now other people go to war because they're voyeurs or because they're adrenaline junkies or because they have a kind of prurient fascination with violence or because they're recovering drug addicts. But I didn't go to war because I wanted to see dead bodies. I studiously avoided seeing them when I didn't have to. And other people went to them like road kill. When you spend as much time as I did in a war culture, it owns you. And it perverts and destroys you.

BS: Whether you're a soldier, a civilian or a reporter?

CH: Well there's a line between being a soldier and being a civilian or reporter in that I never killed anyone. That's a huge line. And I think the other line is that I went by choice and believed, despite all of those demons, that it was worthwhile. [I believed] that it was worth going to Sarajevo to report on the siege. I don't have to look back at war and say, "It was a waste." Like these poor kids do who come back from Iraq. Or like Vietnam veterans do. I don't have to do that. And I think that that is gigantic. Because it allows me to cope with the trauma in ways that people who were actively engaged in the fighting often can't.

BS: Do you think that America is hooked on war?

CH: Well it's the myth of war [they're hooked on], it's not really war. If anybody who really knows war is hooked in war, then they're sick. They're psychopaths. That's the huge dividing line between those who experience war on the ground and those who imbibe this mythic vision

of honor and heroism and glory and all these terms that are rendered hollow and obscene after 30 seconds of combat.

BS: You have said that you're not a pacifist. What constitutes a just war?

CH: I don't like the word "just." But the lesson of the holocaust is that if you have the capacity to stop genocide and you do not, you're culpable. And we are culpable in Rwanda, Cambodia. And I certainly supported the intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo. I don't think it was very well done. But I supported it.

BS: How do you understand that as a Christian?

CH: It's an understanding of evil, which I think many liberal Christians don't get.

BS: Can you say more about that?

CH: There are times when one must commit acts of immorality to prevent acts that are more immoral. And it's very rarely a choice between the moral and the immoral. It's usually a choice between the immoral and the more immoral. That's what making a moral decision is about. And pacifists, I think, flee from making moral decisions.

BS: The really tough moral decisions...

CH: Yeah, because they're unpleasant. I lived in Sarajevo. If the Serbs broke through the perimeters around the city, a third of the city would have been killed and the rest would have been driven into refugee or displacement camps. And we all knew what would happen by looking at the Adrena Valley [?]. And you know, when you are faced with the real possibility of your own [death] and the annihilation of your family and your community, most people pick up a weapon and fight back. It doesn't save them from the pernicious effects of violence, which is why the gangsters and the criminal class ... were the ones who organized the defenses of the city. When they weren't shooting Serbs, they were looting the apartments of ethnic Serbs and often executing them. And that's why war and violence is always tragic. But I think most people trapped in a besieged city like Sarajevo would do the same.

BS: And to say one's a pacifist is really just whimping out of the whole thing.

CH: You didn't find many pacifists in Sarajevo.

BS: But to be over here saying that is kind of ridiculous.

CH: It's easy here. You have to strip the structure of a society down to find out what people are really like. That's why Primo Levi or Dostoyevsky... they got it. Because they saw it.

BS: You don't think we'll be able to know who we really are until we get stripped down, de-cultured?

CH: Conrad wrote about this as well. We live in very false illusions of who we are, in these zones of opulence and safety.

BS: Americans do?

CH: Yeah.

BS: Is it impossible to know who you are in that context?

CH: No. But you have to seek out what's done in your name and what it is that sustains you. Whether that's what's happening in East New York or what's happening on the streets of Fallujah. And most people don't want to look. They just want to be nice. I think that's Americans like to define themselves. We're the nice people.

BETHANY: In an interview with someone else you said that the line between the victim and the victimizer is razor thin. Can you give me an example of when you have seen that at play?

CHRIS: Well in every war that I've ever covered, it's frighteningly easy to co-opt decent and moral people into projects of killing. There are very few people that are immune. That's true in every conflict I've ever covered. That's one of the most terrifying truths coming out of war is that you realize the capacity we all have for evil. The great moral philosophers, people like Primo Levi understood this, wrote about it. Many people argue that Levi committed suicide just because of that very deep and very disturbing truth about human nature, but he's right.

BETHANY: So you don't mean that the line between the victimizer and the victimized is a thin one?

CHRIS: No. It's not the same. You know in a war or when a society breaks down the victim is completely dependent for their life upon the victimizer and that power to give and take life is very intoxicating. Most of us are susceptible to it at least as silent accomplices if not active participants. Every roadblock I was ever stopped at in Africa or Latin America or the Balkans manned by drunk 18 year old kids with automatic weapons is a perfect example of how in societies where legal and social constraints break down you enter into a [inaudible/will follow-up] universe. When you empower young kids by handing them automatic weapons and allowing them to kill with impunity—it's what's happening in Iraq—they'll do it. We always said hand an automatic weapon to an 18-year-old kid and it takes them 4 days to become god. That's of course what is happening on the streets of Iraqi cities with American brain of soldiers and of course the mercenary army we have unleashed on Iraq.

We know from the Lancet study that probably 600,000 Iraqi soldiers [were killed] just a couple of years ago. Iraqi civilians have [also] been killed and numbers now are estimated as high as 1.2 million. This was the nature of this war. Wars are different. This one is a foreign occupation and it bears all the classic characteristics of a foreign occupation like the Israeli occupation of Gaza, like our occupation of Vietnam, like the French occupation of Algeria. That's different from the civil wars that I covered in Central America. They're different from the first gulf war with the exception of the heavy bombing of southern Iraq, which did heavy loss of civilian life, but the

actual clash took place between large mechanized units in the open desert. There are different types of wars, but this type of war is always the most venal and the most brutal because murder is always a part of war and by murder I mean the taking of a life of somebody who doesn't have the capacity to harm you, as opposed to killing: the taking of a life of someone who can harm you. In these kinds of wars, it is primarily about murder. There is very little killing. You can go through a year of occupying Iraq and never see the people who are trying to kill you. Those kinds of conflicts as Robert Jay Lifton points out are what he calls atrocity-producing situations. The lines between a hostile population and the enemy blur and it becomes legitimate just to strike out blindly at anyone. If you've ever seen an automatic grenade launcher or a 50 caliber or a saw, which is a light 7.6 machine gun mounted on the top of humvees at work and these are bell fed weapons. They are just massive in terms of their ability to lay down deadly fire, lethal fire over a broad area. And then understand that these weapons are being used daily in neighborhoods and cities and villages. You begin to get a sense of how deadly and lethal this war has become for Iraqi civilians and how rather than a force for stability, we contribute to the cauldron of violence that has become Iraq.

BETHANY: And so the kids on top of the humvees, they are the victimizers. Would they in another razor thin kind of moment perspective be a victim in some way?

CHRIS: No, I mean the victims are the poor people being shot on either side of the road. Are they victims? I suppose ultimately from posttraumatic stress disorder and betrayal on the part of the state when they return and are not cared for properly, yes. There are no neat lines in life. But

in that moment they are the victimizers. What you are at one moment is not what you are in the next moment. When they come home and are cast aside like human refuse, they become victims.

BS: What role do the mainstream media play in war?

CHRIS: A very pernicious role because as the media becomes more corporate and more commercialized, the only thing they care about is ratings and profit. Presenting uncomfortable truths to the American public is not good for ratings and not good for profit. So they encourage us to imbibe the myth that we tell ourselves about ourselves. Because it makes money because it's what we want to hear. But it's a form of entertainment; it's not a form of news.

BETHANY: What's your role in all of this do you think?

CHRIS: I think that given my background—which is sort of a bizarre mixture of somebody who comes out of years of theological study and then having been in disintegrating societies and covered them as a reporter—I have a kind of sensitivity to these sources that perhaps somebody who doesn't have those experiences might not have. I know what happens in societies that fall apart. I had to report them day in and day out.

My career was as a foreign correspondent, which frees me from a lot of the internal pressures that other reporters get. You know, I could go on Terry Gross and be quite frank about Slobodan Milosevic and his campaign of genocide in Bosnia. Expressing that kind of frankness about George Bush as a reporter on American soil is not tolerated as I found out. Well, I knew. It

wasn't a surprise to me. I think that I had a kind of consistency in my own mind. I worked for the New York Times for 15 years. I was very aware of what I was doing when I was criticized this disastrous plan to invade and occupy Iraq. I knew what I was doing.

BETHANY: Did you ever find it difficult to not get co-opted by the bigger machine?

CHRIS: No. Because of my dad. He was always fighting with the institutions he worked for and they were always trying to push him aside or get rid of him and that was his lifelong struggle and I understood very, very well at a very young age how institutions if you let them, including the church, will crush you. I had that sort of strange mixture of anger and even a streak of self-destruction and I just wasn't going to have it. It was a personality type. I never worried about being co-opted. My attitudes towards authority is that they are always trying to screw you even when they weren't.

BS: How did you develop such a passion for social justice?

CH: I grew up next to the church and next to my father's office [who was a Presbyterian minister]. My father was making public stances that cost him, at times, his jobs. It was my father who brought the gay speakers to my university when there was no gay public alliance. And so I think the pain that was inflicted on my father is what marked me. A lot of my anger towards these movements that embrace intolerance and injustice comes directly out of that experience, from having watched my father take stances that he believed in, and that I believe were moral. And then having to experience the retribution that was visited upon him for that.

BS: Do you feel like you're paying for your views, the way you watched your father pay for his?

CH: Yeah. You know, I was booed off of a commencement stage [at Rockford College in 2003] for denouncing the war. This was of course picked up by Fox News, and the Wall Street Journal wrote an editorial denouncing my stance. I was given a formal written reprimand by the New York Times [where I worked at the time]. So that goes into your file. I was told to stop speaking out about the war. And it was clear that once that's in your file and you've been given a warning, the next time you do it, they fire you. And they can fire you. And so I left the paper. I wasn't planning to leave the paper. I'd been part of the team that had won the Pulitzer the year before. Do you pay for it? I don't know. The irony is that [when] I left the paper, I didn't know what I was going to do. I don't have a doctorate. I thought I'd probably teach high school. But ever since I left the Times, I've made at least twice what I made at the paper every year since I left. So I really didn't pay for it.

BS: Not financially...

CH: And not even personally. I have maintained what is most valuable, which is my integrity and my voice, which they essentially tried to take away from me. So I don't think I've paid for it quite like he paid for it. You know, he was working within an institution that was often openly hostile to his stances. And that caused a great deal of personal anguish and suffering for him. And in my case, especially as a writer, I don't have the weight of an institution that I'm part of,

that is actively conspiring against me. So I would say that I've not paid, professionally, the kinds of prices he's paid.

BS: Back to the commencement speech, what did it feel like to get booed off the stage like that?

CH: Oh, it was very disconcerting. And then when I had two kids try and climb up on the stage to push me off the podium... I'd had hecklers and stuff like that. I never had anybody try to physically remove me from the podium. And that was a violation that affected me very deeply. The next time I spoke I would see people stand up, and I wasn't sure whether they were going to go forward or they were walking out the back exit. It was a very hard experience. I just stuck to my script. You can watch it on YouTube. It was difficult. Of course.

BS: Were you shaken up after it?

CH: No, it takes a lot to shake me up. I wouldn't pretend that it didn't affect me. But having been through ambushes in El Salvador, shelling in Sarajevo, I have a very small circle of security. That's what happens when you cover wars.

BS: But isn't that different from being personally aggressed in that way?

CH: I don't think the personal aggression bothered me. I think it's the fear of physical. What spooked me was the kids. It just never occurred to me that people would try and climb up on the podium.

BS: So it's not that you got your feelings hurt...

CH: Well, yeah, it wasn't a pleasant experience. However I wouldn't have done anything differently. I might have acknowledged the graduating class. That was a criticism that was made. And I think that was a fair criticism. I sort of started hammering home on the war. But on the other hand, I had been such a vocal critic of the war, for so many months in a very public way, that I assumed the university knew what they were getting. And as a matter of fact at the breakfast, I told them, "You know, this is a really harsh talk against the war." And they said, "Oh that's great, that's great." So they didn't have any idea either.

Of course nobody's invited me to give a commencement address since. And probably never will. But I'm not going to change where I stand. I look back on that talk I don't regret a word I said.

BS: It reminds me of the work that you did in Roxbury when you were at Harvard Divinity **[which I will describe in the intro]**. Looking back on that experience, what effect do you think you had on that community?

CH: Well the effect the community had on me was huge. Because it really shook up my whole understanding of oppression, the country I live in and of myself. When Tyrone and Patrick, these two heroin addicts, turned on me, even though I'd come to "help the poor," I reached for all the levers, the levers of oppression, that I could pull: The police, the courts, the probation officers, the truant officers, the cops. And I did it. And I *could* do it. And they couldn't. And that was a

profound understanding. I mean I think the line I use [in my book *Losing Moses on the Freeway*] is, *I'm not one of them, I'm the enemy*.

BS: Had you thought that maybe you were “one of them”?

CH: No, I never thought I was one of them, but I thought I could be on their side. But when my own security was in danger, I would reach out to the very instruments that were destroying them, to destroy them. That was a pretty profound realization of who I was in America.

BS: And is that who you are personally? Or is that who you are sociologically?

CH: No, that's who we all are when we're frightened and afraid and that's what we do. I mean these people were trying to kill me. They were waiting in my house with lead pipes. All I needed was one over the head. That was pretty deep.

BS: What effect did you have on the community? Are you in touch with anybody? Do you have any idea what happened to these people?

CH: I've gone back. People tend to move and they don't have forwarding addresses. I was in Boston in 1998/'99 on a Neiman Fellowship at Harvard and I did go back to Roxbury. What effect do you have on a young teenager who doesn't have many friends or role models or even a stable home? It's an important effect. But does it change in any way the landscape or the social conditions that have been into re-segregating American society and beating down the poor? No.

But I think all of that expended energy was worthwhile. The effect is probably nebulous in many ways.

BS: Is it hopeless?

CH: Not if you come out of a tradition of faith. Because I think the secret is to view the world as it is. To be a realist. And things don't look really good.

BS: So what's the point?

CH: If you believe that you're going to move into the ghetto and change the world, you're going to end up either a pessimist or a cynic. If you understand the limited power of one human being and you understand that your moral life is defined by your ability to resist, rather than what you accomplish, then I think it's much easier to bear.

BS: In [one of your books] you wrote about Orwell and his going off to fight fascism, and you said, "I wanted that epic battle to define my own life." You talk about the heroic journey a lot. How much of that battle is an interior one?

CH: Going back to the story of Roxbury — that was both an exterior and interior battle. And I think when you cover wars, as I wrote about in *War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*, I became deformed by the war around me. Addicted to the adrenaline highs. In war, there's a huge divide

between the powerless and the all-powerful. And I was part of the class of all-powerful. I didn't carry a weapon; I often had body guards. And that breeds a kind of sickness. You know? And I had it in spades. So I think that all of these battles were both interior as well as exterior battles. And one had to confront one's own flaws and deformities, whether that was in the ghetto or whether that was in Sarajevo.

It's not what we do in life. It's what we do with what life gives us. It's the great question of, who was more moral in the Warsaw ghetto uprising? Those people who didn't join the uprising to try and protect their children? Or those teenagers who led the uprising in a kind of suicidal fight against the Nazis? Well you can't say one was more moral than the other. It depends on who you were.

BS: And what your demons are or what your strengths are.

CH: What your responsibilities are.

BS: Your latest book, "I Don't Believe in Atheists" takes the so-called "New Atheists" like Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, to task for being, essentially, fundamentalists, no different from the Religious Right. Since we are used to associating fundamentalism with certain perspectives or doctrines, how exactly are you defining it?

CH: Fundamentalism has [a basic] certain generic component that can [be found] within a secular or religious framework: a binary world view—dividing the world between us and them,

between good and evil, between right and wrong—a belief that you and those who subscribe to your ideology have found an absolute truth that must be accepted by everyone, including those who oppose you, and if they won't accept it then they must be silenced or eradicated.

[Fundamentalism] is an abdication of moral responsibility because within a fundamentalist movement the followers are told what is right and wrong. They elevate themselves and their belief system to a higher moral plane above the belief systems of others. In other words, they don't believe in a plurality of truths, a plurality of ways of being. There is only one way to be and that is their way. That is a form of self-exaltation and it's deeply anti-intellectual because it discourages any kind of investigation into other cultures, other histories, other religious systems, other belief systems because they already know what the best belief system is and that is theirs.

BS: Fundamentalism seems to crop up everywhere in every context? Why is this such a tenacious human tendency?

CH: Many theologians and philosophers have written about the anxiety and the difficulty of living in an open society. This is what Karl Popper wrote about—that there is always a temptation, even in an open society for people to retreat into what he would call tribal groups. Fundamentalism is a potent form of tribalism. There's always great comfort in that because it discourages self-criticism. It discourages self-reflection. It discourages doubt. There is a kind of childish duplicity and security in those belief systems. If you understand the moral ambiguity of human existence and the frightening irrational and non-rational forces to drive human beings and human societies, it brings with it anxiety or, in Freudian terms, neurosis. All of us who live

within structured societies struggle with this neurosis or this anxiety. Retreating into tribal groups is a way to revert to a kind of child-like state.

BS: Can we ever tame that anxiety without resorting to fundamentalism?

CH: I think that those who remain open to other realities than their own reality must always cope with anxiety. That is the pain of being fully human.

BS: So is the comfort that fundamentalists feel real?

CH: Yes, because they are [being] offer[ed] absolute self-assurance.

BS: Is that kind of absolute self-assurance going to be able to function in this complicated world?

CH: It's possible but you descend into moral depravity and criminality. That is the starting point for the destruction of compassion and empathy and self-reflection. It's possible to live in an authoritarian system where moral choice is made for you. People do it in the military where you no longer have the anxiety of moral choice. That is willingly handed off to the leader who has absolute authority, whether because you have put yourself in a hierarchy where you agree to obey or in the case of religious fundamentalism that you believe that the person you follow is in direct communication with God, has higher knowledge, a higher understanding of truth, and therefore has been given the divine right to dictate to you how you shall behave...you no longer

have to make moral choice. You are told what is moral and what is immoral. There's a great kind of comfort in that because it removes that fundamental anxiety that is part of the moral life.

BS: Why do you think the new atheists are so popular?

CH: Because they speak in the epistemology of television and in clichés and slogans that are anti-thought. And the Christian right is just the same. So that when I debate them, they'll say, "Well you know, you're a secular humanist who wants to destroy the Christian nation." And that's all they repeat and their followers love to hear it. And really what I'm attacking, when I attack the new atheists like Harris or Hitchens or Dawkins or anyone else, including the Christian fundamentalists, is their self exultation. The reason that their reaction is vitriolic is because my fundamental message is you are just as messed up as the rest of us.

BS: The rest of us?

CH: We're all messed up. And they can't go there. They have elevated themselves to a moral level above other human beings. And that, at its core, is why the reaction is so fierce. And when I give talks, I will draw in atheists who spit venom at me with the same grace the Christian right does. Because it's that self-exaltation that I'm trying to tear down. And that's what I mean by sin. We're all bastards. And they don't get it. They don't get how culpable we are, how tainted we are, how irrational we are. They don't get it. What they do — the Christian right and the new atheists — is they have created squalid little belief systems in the service of their own power.

Essentially you have two wings of American thought that are at war with empathy and understanding and tolerance.

BS: But surely you must understand the atheists' point that countless conflicts in human history have been sparked by religious differences.

CH: Religious conflicts can be defined as religious conflicts, [but] the anteing that drives those conflicts doesn't come out of religion. It comes out of the irredeemable human depravity that makes up human societies and human beings. You can color it any way you want. It can be communist violence, fascist violence, religious fanaticism. It can be the Neo-con utopian projects in Iraq. There are all sorts of ways to motivate people to kill. Religion is a pretty good one but it's not the reason people kill.

BS: So then it means that the actual meat of the religion, the text, the doctrine, is relativistic? It's like water that flows into the container and is shaped by the container?

CH: Religion, theological systems are human creation. God is a human concept. These are flawed and imperfect attempts by human beings to acknowledge, cope with, explain, understand the infinite. The infinite is the reality. The transcendent is the reality. We confuse the reality with human constructs. And everybody who subscribes to a particular belief reads religious documents selectively. The Christian right. The liberal Christians. It doesn't matter.

BS: And you, too?

CH: Of course. There are morally repugnant and indispensable passages in the Bible. Towards women, towards homosexuals, towards Jews. The gospel of John is rabidly anti-Semitic. You know, god blesses acts of righteous genocide in Exodus. How do you pick and choose? There are three different versions of the ten commandments. Three different versions of the creation myth. The story of Jesus' life is not a coherent narrative between the four gospels. We're all selective literally. And that's not just true for Christians or Jews, it's true for every religion.

BS: So then what good is the religious text?

CH: It's like asking why care about art? I mean that's what religion is, at its best. It is an attempt at wisdom, which doesn't come from knowledge. You can memorize as many sutras as you want. It will never make you wise. It is the grappling with human reality, human nature, with those non-rational forces of love, beauty, truth, grief, meaning, which make one a complete and whole individual. Religion attempts to do that. Art attempts to do that. Many people have achieved exemplary lives without formal religious structure, religious language, or religious ritual.

Number one, the problem is not religion. The problem is the human heart. And they [the new atheists] don't get that. You know, people will find ways to act inhumanely, whether that's through religion or ethnic nationalism or fraternity, egalitarianism, liberty ... it doesn't matter. The workers' paradise. There are all sorts of ways to do it. Religion is a convenient one.

BS: It seems ironic that new atheists and the religious right would have, in your opinion, so much in common.

CH: Well often, yeah. Extreme ideologies are often the mirror image of each other. I saw that in the Balkans. Tudjman of the Croatian nationals was the mirror image of Milosevic of the Serbian nationals. Islamic fundamentalists are the mirror image of Christian radicals. It's not an uncommon phenomenon but in fact a usual phenomenon.

BS: You must get tired of this conversation. What comes of these kinds of public debates?

CH: I don't know. I don't know. I think that those ideas need to be fought. You know, I worry that it will have real consequences if...when we suffer another catastrophic terrorist attack, that you'll have these two apocalyptic extremes coming together, calling for a kind of horrific blood letting against Muslims if it's deemed the attacks came from the Muslim world. You know, and not only Muslims outside our gates, but the six million Muslims who live in the United States. And it's a kind of plea for sanity.

BS: Do you see any hope in de-polarizing these forces? Is this ever going to happen or is this again just human nature?

CH: There are many atheists who don't subscribe to that fundamentalist mindset. They're not a problem. Those who do subscribe to it are dangerous. The whole concept of my book was that

this mindset can and is being delivered to us in secular form. I fear it just as I fear religious fundamentalism.

BETHANY: Do you have ideas for how we can bring more, less fundamentalist, voices into the mainstream?

CHRIS: The problem is that those people who come out of I would argue an authentic religious perdition don't believe in heretics. The people who have usurped the Christian religion in this country are heretics. Jesus did not come to make us rich and powerful and that is just a complete distortion of the gospel. Jesus did not bless us as a nation above other nations and exalt us to use military force, to go around the world and impose our vision of the world and our power on others who are less powerful. That is a heretical use of the gospel. The tragedy of the liberal church is that they didn't stand up and fight these people and they got crowded out of the marketplace so that when you use the word Christian or religion, it's these charlatans and demagogues and emotional easily manipulated mass movements of born again Christians who are allowed to define themselves as authentically religious. That is not their fault. That is the fault of the liberal church that lacked the spine and the guts to stand up and fight back.

BETHANY: Since the mainstream media seems much more interested in a fundamentalist kind of show, what's the way forward? What do we do?

CHRIS: The liberal church has nothing to say to us. What does it have to say to us? It's mushy. It's about inclusiveness. It's about tolerance, a word by the way that Martin Luther King never

used. They are products of a self satisfied bourgeois upper middle class primarily group of people who have profited from an American empire and industrialization who left the city with white flight to talk about empowering people they never met. They've become placid and their decline is their own fault. They are sitting around debating whether gay people should be afforded equal rights with other American citizens. They've been sucked precisely into the kinds of debates the right wing wants them to be sucked into.

BETHANY: Is there a way out of this dilemma?

CHRIS: The corporate media. There are still avenues by which you can speak out. I use them. National Public Radio. Pacifica. The Internet. There are still reputable newspapers. They're dying, but they're there. There are still ways to speak out. There are less and less, but this whole phenomena of a politicized Christian right has been going on for three decades. We were very aware of it when I was a seminary student in the early 1980's. It was on the radar screen. The response was to build bridges. When I was at Harvard, one of my professors invited Jerry Fallwell to come give a talk at Harvard.

That's a classic example of failing to understand the movement. Harvard was one of probably three or four divinity schools at that time where you could be openly gay and studying for the ministry. It was the equivalent of inviting the Klu Klux Klan to come give a speech at Harvard..

Especially if you were gay. Roughly 46 out of my class was gay. It was real insulting. And what did he do? He showed up with the old time gospel hour television crew and delivered one of the

most insulting and demeaning talks because he knew how it would play to his audience. He wanted to be booed off the stage. He used them. That for me is a window into the moral failing. The role of Harvard Divinity School, I believe, should have been to denounce the bigot that he is.

BETHANY: Right. I wonder what they were thinking.

CHRIS: Well, they were thinking like so much of the liberal church, well we just want to talk to them. Well they'll talk to you until they have enough power to shut you out, which is what they are doing. I had organized the entire campus against the visit by the way.

BS: I admire how you take this all so personally.

CH: Well, I take it personally because I was raised in a tradition where it was real. And I'm watching two extremes within American society seek to de-legitimize that tradition. You know? You may not like it, but it is a real tradition. And one that I think has tremendous value. I don't know where the churches are. But I'm tired of the fact that people don't stand up and fight back on behalf of a tradition that I think has worked.

The problem with the churches is that they're split right down the middle between an aging liberal congregation and a rise of evangelicals within their midst. And so the church leaders are trying to hold these two disparate factions together. And so they won't say anything to piss off either one of them. So they say nothing.

BS: Do you go to church?

CH: No. Most sermons drive me crazy.

BS: So you're not part of any particular congregation?

CH: No, I very rarely go to church.

BS: So what aspect of the tradition calls you?

CH: Well that radical element of Christian faith—Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King— that for me is an authentic faith. I think it is very hard to sustain that kind of resistance without a spiritual core or let's say an authentically religious core.

BS: Can you say why?

CH: Yeah, because if you don't become preoccupied with the practical and you accept it, for you there are moral imperatives. Your fealty is to those moral imperatives, not to a political process. It's not about you assuming power. It is about you achieving or fighting for those moral imperatives. You saw that with the French with the anti-slavery movement, the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, at least among the religious.

BS: This feels so dark. How do you stay afloat in all of this, personally? I'm curious.

CH: You can spend your whole life struggling against war and end your life finding a world around you engaged in more violence than when you began. I think that resistance is what gives you your integrity and gives you your spiritual strength. The Bible never tells us after you challenge those forces where good will go. We don't know where good will go. You trust that it's worth doing and that it's going somewhere and perhaps the evidence of that work will never even be apparent in your lifetime, but I think you find worth in the ability to stand up and fight back without worrying too much about what you can do. That is part of the humility of being human. We're not God. We have very limited capacity to fight evil. We use the gifts and tools we've been given and then trust that life is meaningful even if ostensibly everything we did in our lives could be defined as a failure.

BS: That's your experience? Do you feel like you have been able to live out of that?

CH: I focus on the concrete and not on the abstract. The Serbs massacre a bunch of people in a village; my job as a reporter is to walk in, document it, get the story and walk out. Does it mean the Serbian Paramilitary won't go in the next day and massacre more people? No, but that is what, as a writer, I've been called to do in terms of fighting back and if you have ever undergone that experience it is a very harrowing because they block the roads, you have to go in; if they find you, they will often shoot at you. I think by focusing on the concrete, on those small seemingly insignificant acts, one sustains hope by backing off. Dealing with the abstraction of goodness and evil one can easily become demoralized.

BS: So it sounds like your writing life is a spiritual practice, in a sense.

CH: I don't like the word spiritual, especially as it's defined in American society. It's essentially another form of narcissism. I as a writer am very conscious of trying to give a voice to people who without my presence wouldn't have a voice. [And I try to] stand up for [them] even in the face of the crowd, to defy issues or policies that I feel are immoral whether that's the war in Iraq, or whether that's the mistreatment of the Palestinians.

There is no such thing as a pure morality. Motives are always mixed. Some are good, some are bad. I think anybody who starts whooping around saying I do this because I am moral starts falling into a trap of self-worship. There are reasons that I do that that are not healthy.

BETHANY: Like?

CHRIS: That I am attracted to confrontation. I mean I wrote about it in the first chapter of *Losing Moses on the Freeway*, this book about where I use the Ten Commandments as a prism or lens to look at American society. When I moved into the [Roxbury] ghetto, I was going to live in the projects and help the poor, but what did I really want? I wanted to be venerated. And when the heroin addicts in that chapter try to kill me, I turn to all of the mechanisms of repression, the police, the courts, the probation officers to destroy them because I can and they can't. That's when I really found out who I was. It may be a moral principle, but it's not a pure moral act.

BETHANY: Fair enough. But even what you're saying right now is explaining as honestly as you can—regardless of the consequences—what you see and part of what you see is yourself and your mixed motives.

CHRIS: Right, but if I don't do that, then I destroy everything that I care about.

BETHANY: So do you think that's at the basis of morality, creating and maintaining what we love?

CHRIS: I think that the moral life is one that requires constant self-criticism and self-reflection and self-examination and finally an acceptance of our own simpleness. No matter how moral we may think we are.

BETHANY: But to what end? What's the point?

CHRIS: Because if you don't have that you can never act morally. Once you believe that you have an absolute lock on what is moral you delve into self-worship or idolatry. What's moral for me may not be moral for you. In the funny way human life works, we may both be right.

BETHANY: Or wrong.

CHRIS: Or wrong. Exactly. Reinhold Niebuhr said, "You make a moral choice, you act and then you ask for forgiveness," and that's a very wise statement.

BETHANY: Right. Because you can't sit around hemming and hawing forever.

CHRIS: You can't sit around hemming and hawing forever and on the other hand you have to understand—to quote Paul, “We look through a glass darkly.” That what appears absolutely moral and good in our eyes not only does not appear absolutely good and moral in the eyes of not only our friends, but certainly our foes. Is it absolutely moral or good? When you act, life is rarely a choice between the moral and the immoral. It's a choice between the immoral and the more immoral.

BETHANY: If it were clear, do you think that people would always choose the moral?

CHRIS: Well it isn't clear. We don't live in a utopia where we have those absolutes.