

1-1 My Friend the Beast

As the first warm rays of daybreak clear the surrounding mountains, your sleepless night has ended. Although no safer now than in the darkness, there's a sense of relief that comes from the bantering back and forth between soldiers in war.

"These are my only 'true' friends, you think while deciding which of the MREs you'll have for breakfast. And, while tearing open the packet, "I'd die for these dumb shits... I feel closer to them than my own blood family."

It's been more than forty-five days since your last shower and a good meal, but a care package from home with baby wipes and bug spray made the last few weeks a lot better.

"Being clean doesn't mean that much compared to being alive."

As you think back to how many of your friends have been wounded and killed at this outpost.

"Damn! I've only been here six months! Seems like six years".

Today your squad's running point down the mountain and into the Korengal Valley (Valley of Death), a beautiful and yet dangerous region in the Kunar Province of Eastern Afghanistan. And as every other day you've walked "outside the wire" you embrace the reality of what just might be wait'in for you down that long, winding trail to the valley floor below.

Your weapon is clean, you've checked your ammo and the signal is given to "Move Out!"

A short distance from the firebase you look back and a chill goes down your neck. "You're Alone!" you think, "Except for the squad up ahead and Sanchez back there, bringing up the column".

Sanchez takes a quick look back too, turns and gives you a big shit-eatin grin, then yells “Fuck it Brother!” He knows exactly what you’re thinkin’, because everybody’s thinkin’ the same damn thing. You’re not alone, you’re surrounded by battle-hardened warriors!

And you know that if in fact you do engage the enemy down there, this day may be the last day of blowin’ out your knees under the weight of an eighty-plus pound pack. Bein’ a Medic, you’ve come to feel even closer to death in every firefight and even more responsible for every one of your “True Friends” than even the squad leader. “He kinda stands out up there.”

Johnson’s a six foot three inch farmer’s son from the Midwest, a sergeant E-5 and one tough son of a bitch. He never complains and watches out for all the new guys. But after Hanson took a round in the head two days ago, old Sarge hasn’t been quite the same. It’s his job to be strong, to be an example, but tears rolled down his cheeks same as the rest of us when Hansen’s body bag got zipped up and loaded on the chopper.

The crazy thing about this war is, I feel more alive here than any time I can ever remember. My life has real meaning now, purpose, and even a sense of power. I’m livin on adrenaline and MREs, my senses heightened and my combat skills peaked. Damn if I haven’t become the “Predator”, the executioner, truly walking through the Valley of Death. Hell, that old sayin about fearing no evil makes sense to me now.

But how in hell do I explain this to the folks back home? Imagine a civilian think’in that every day when he or she goes to work, they may not make it home for evening chow, or maybe come home in a body bag?

Your thoughts stop! The squad just passed through a

stand of pines and out onto the valley floor.

Johnson calls out! “Watch that tree line!”

So how then does a Warrior reach this state of “combat perfection,” you ask? How does he or she become the greatest predator on earth, facing death day after day, living in filth and delighting in the kill? You know, a lean, mean, fighting machine.

Well, my soon-to-be enlightened friends, to answer that, let’s go back to the basics... as in basic “Boot Camp.”

First off, I’ve been asked many times, ”How does a few months of boot camp change a person’s life for the rest of their life?” Hey, this ain’t rocket science here! It’s real simple.

In boot camp, we go through a perfect process of brainwashing. The shrinkers call this process “operant conditioning.” And since us Marines have an especially gnarly, dense mass of green substance behind our eyeballs, the process works exceedingly well. I’ll explain.

Just above the brain stem, entering at the base of the thick skull, there’s a lump of cells called (egg-head speak) the Hypothalamus. This is where a lot of the shit-bath experiences of war are stored for unsafe keeping.

Connected to that is a little stink-beetle sized thing called the Amygdala (Marines: Not a movie). Fact is, if you turn this whole lower brain-housing-group upside down, it looks like a shriveled up scrotum with old Chester stickin’ up. Wonder if it affects the little brain in men? Well anyway, this region of the brain is where the D.I. (Meaning, Divine Intelligence) focuses on in conditioning his troops.

Normal civilian-type humans have three reactions to a life-threatening situation. They either Flee (get the hell out of Dodge), they Freeze (like a rabbit wait'in to check out) or they Fight (like a junkyard dog). I find it interesting that the dog is the mascot of lots of military units.

Coincidence? Don't think so.

Anyway, by the time you get physically, mentally, and emotionally pounded on enough in boot camp, you only "react" one way, that being like a pit bull waiting for a dogfight. And all during this period of enlightenment, something called the "Primal Self" (shrinker talk) is developed and brought to full maturity. But hell, let's say it like it is. The primal self is the uncivilized savage, the unmerciful, the Beast, the non-compassionate side of human nature. It's the side of all humans that most humans pretend they don't have.

"Oh! Not me!" they say. Yeah right... we all got it, folks, and we sure as hell ain't getting rid of our Beast... so deal with it.

In boot camp, this Beast is fully developed but still in its cage. However, the door is unlocked, swung wide open... and there "It" stands, waiting; waiting for its chance at freedom, to feel the rush of combat adrenaline; to feel the satisfaction of killing; and the emotions of guilt, loss, and revenge. It's waiting for the blood lust to begin and all that gives it strength and control over its keeper.

In your first firefight or when your life is mortally threatened, that Beast is "Out!" And once out, it will never go back into its cage again, ever. You can't put it back, and the more you try (try means fail) the more you fail while it rips your life apart. And unless controlled, it will in fact destroy not only your life, but also all the lives of everyone around you... while feeling the pleasure of it all.

But let's give credit where credit's due. You need the Beast in battle. It keeps you and your friends alive, because "If we are going to survive War, we must become War." And our Beast is what reduces our enemy to less than human, to nothing more than an insect that we may step on while feeling a sense of satisfaction. It's what turns our enemy into the slant, the gook, the hajji, the jibber, or the skinny of Mogadishu; that we may kill them without compassion, without hesitation.

And by the way, hesitation means death to you and even more importantly, to your fellow Warriors. There is no political protocol, no Geneva Convention or Rules of Engagement in combat. There is only kill or be killed and no time to judge the correctness of pulling the trigger. In fact, my old Sarge used to say, "When in doubt, empty the magazine. At least you shit birds'll be alive to feel guilty later." These are the killing times of the Beast, and the Beast loves it, always wanting more.

Ask any Combat Veteran (You probably ought to be a Combat Veteran to ask), "Did you ever kill enough of those little enemy bastards?" And faster than you can chamber a round, their twitchy green brain, will fire out "Hell no!" Ya see? That's their Beast talkin' from the lizard brain, sayin', "Oh shit!" If I can't do it again, then at least I can feel the emotions of thinkin' about it again!" and, "So what do ya think, My Friend, how about just one more kill for old time sake? Please-o-please!!"

The Primal side of human nature scares the crap out of most so-called civilized people. And to most civilized people the Military "is" the Beast within our society, just like it is in our brain-housing-group. The Beast is the inseparable savage side of us, which has been "locked" into our brains since we made moonshine and drunkenly drew

stick animals on the walls of caves. And you wonder why the Military and Politicians don't see eye to eye? They aren't even in the same worlds, let alone thinkin' out of the same parts of the brain.

Strange thing is, for a lot of judgmental, goody-two-shoes, the Beast is in them too, just waitin' for a chance to kill, to feel the adrenaline rush, to explode with primitive emotions. For these folks, the Primal Side just hasn't had the right opportunity to taste blood yet. And given that right opportunity, all but the most advanced souls, the true Peace Makers of this often shit-bath world, are capable of killing. I've met a few of these beings, and that in itself is another book. Actually, book three.

"So what do we do if the Beast won't go back in its cage?" you ask timidly.

Good question! But this again, ain't launchin' the Space Shuttle either.

What you do is "Make Friends with It!"

"Oh man! Now I know this Jar Head is wacked!" you mutter tenderly.

As Warriors or civilians, the very first thing we all "must do" is to "admit" we've got a Beast. Doesn't seem too hard does it? Wrong! It's damn hard to admit you're carrying around a savage, bloodthirsty monster inside your head.

You start to think of science fiction movies, body snatchers and other such stupid-like things. If it helps, just think of it like a brain tumor... if left untreated, it gets bigger and stronger until eventually, it kills you.

In other words, you get use to the idea that you're actually "two" different people in the same body. That's what the whole Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde story was all

about. Hell, even Walt Disney showed people the truth about the Primal Side in his cartoons, when he stuck an angel on one shoulder and a little devil on the other. You know, with that forked tail stickin' out of its ass? Old Walt knew the primitive side of human beings; he just made it seem funny.

So then, you've taken the first step: You've accepted the "fact" that you have a Beast roaming around in your brain-housing-group, you have identified it, and acknowledged it as "yours". Next thing is, you've gotta make friends with it.

I know, I know, it sounds even crazier, but bear with me, there's a good reason for all this. And to really head for the padded cell and the Thorazine Shuffle, I'll go one better... it helps to name it!

Out here in New Mexico, my neighbors accuse me of bein' a redneck. Hell, I don't even know what that means, but I name everything. My truck (gun rack included) is called Miss Clare, my rifle is Raptor, the generator is Sparky and so on. Well, over the course of my sixty five jobs, on occasion, I've worked in wild life parks and zoo-like places.

Don't know if any of you have ever been up close and personal with a Kodiak bear, but they scare the be-je-bees out of you... at least they did me. They are huge, powerful, can out swim you, run ya down, and eat your ass alive at their leisure. Well, since I like to name things, I figured I'd call my Beast, Oso Grande, which means "Big Bear" in the Spanish lingo... seemed to fit.

This whole process took about two weeks or so, and by the end of that time, Oso and I became good "Friends." Fact is, after I thanked him for bringing me home alive from the battlefield, I realized it was Oso (the Primal Self)

that did all the killing, that watched people burn alive in napalm strikes while laughin' and callin' 'em "crispy critters." He's the one who looked forward to the firefights, for that opiate, combat adrenaline. And no shit, adrenaline is addictive.

The outstanding thing about all this is you can talk to your Beast any time you'd like, even in public. With all these fancy cell phones nowadays, I can't tell if these idiots in the supermarket are talkin to me, to themselves or the small, smiling face on a can of Chef Boy-are dinky-dow. So you're "Good to Go!"

OK, so now here's the shrinker part of all this. By understanding the "permanent, hard-wired, programmed-in" Primal Side of our human nature, I was able to "Transfer" all the "Guilt" I felt over to Oso, my Beast Friend. And that felt like a hundred pound pack off my shoulders.

As time went on, I began to not only like Oso, I began to love him, and therefore developed more and more self-respect, more self-esteem. Ya see how it works?

The Beast is PART of you, so by likin' it, Hell, by lovin' it, you'll automatically love yourself. You still gotta get to the source of what's eatin' you alive from your experiences. You know, to get through it. But at least now you've got some company when you're sittin' there scarin' the shit out of the trauma counselors at the VA or other such places.

My Friend Oso is always "watching" over me, he's always evaluating the threat level, always ready to kill again and feel the rush of combat adrenaline. So just because you've come to like or even love your Beast, it doesn't mean you don't have to always be aware of him (or her) at all times.

And by the way, some Troops call their Beast Osa (female), the Guardian, the Protector, the Tasmanian Devil, and even Lobo (the Wolf in Spanish), to name a few. But don't fret about comin' up with a name for your Beast, because it will pick its own name. Seems to me, "they" like to make things real personal based on your greatest fears. Wonder what I'd have called it if I was afraid of chipmunks?

So then, when someone flips you off on the freeway, the trick is to "identify" where the emotions are coming from. Ask yourself, "Is it the Angelic, higher-brain, civilized, loving side... or is it the hateful, murderous, adrenaline-seeking savage side?"

As an example, let's suppose you're cruisin' down the street in the right (curb) lane, and some shit-for-brains in the left lane speeds up, cuts you off, and turns into the very next parking lot exit... causin' you to spill that perfectly good cup of coffee and drop your newly lit cigarette in your lap. Chances are your Beast already pulled in after the idiot, has his K-Bar out, and is gonna make sure this maggot never wears sunglasses again... you know... like in take ears.

Now do ya think that reaction is higher order, rational thinking, or coming from the monitor lizard part of your brain-housing-group? There are a few more possibilities on this.

That is, if you happen to be a male Marine and the offending driver happens to be a good lookin', pearly-white-toothed female. In that case, the Marine's little brain would automatically take over and he'd become a dumb shit. Seen that happen many times.

Figurin' out where the emotions are coming from takes a little practice, but in a short time you'll get the hang

of it. It also helps to talk to a Combat Trauma Counselor if you get stuck a bit.

One tool that works for me is counting to three out loud!! Ten is too damn long. Here, I'll give you an example of how to control your Beast when it's on the scent of fresh blood.

I start by saying “ONE you're dead meat, asshole!” Then “TWO you're a worthless piece of dog shit!” (Thinkin of a dog, might just spark some compassion?) and “THREE, you ain't worth it, scum-bag... you get to live today”. Merry Fuckin' Christmas!

Now that approach may sound like advice from the local psycho-ward, but shrinkers call this a **mental stop**. You've given yourself time to think and not react.

It only takes two or three seconds to tighten the choker on your drooling, fury friend, and it'll keep you from some big, tattooed body-builder introducing you as, “Hay! Wanna meet my new Bitch?” in federal prison. You can make up whatever colorful words you'd like... just wait those three seconds.

And like any good animal keeper, you have to feed your Beast. How's that done? Well, here's what works for me.

I still self-medicate (shrinker talk for drinkin' booze) with alcohol in small quantities... two or three beers or a couple of glasses of wine a day. But on occasion, Oso gets a little restless. When that happens, I have an extra glass of red nectar and pop in a nice soothing war movie.

The last Rambo series works real well, when old John J. is flushing the toilet of humanity... you know, those deserving maggots who qualified for extinction by lead poisoning... the twenty millimeter machine gun at the end of the movie? Hell, by that time, me and Oso are even a

little teary-eyed, watchin' old battle-scarred Rambo walking down the road in Bowie Arizona, to his father's ranch house.

The point is that by the time that movie is over, Oso is purring, and so am I. Next morning I feel great, and Oso's back on his leash. Then I can go on a supply run to town without thoughts of setting clamors in the isles on my extraction from the supermarket.

For a little heads-up here, be advised that when you first hysterically gaze into the eyes of your Beast and it looks back at you, the bond is realized. You can't hide from it anymore... you can't escape it. It is You and you are It! So enjoy the new relationship. Look at it like a honeymoon with an alien Predator... like in the movie?

I can tell ya from experience, that doin' this is damn right scary as hell. Because there you are, face to face with a genetically, hard-wired-in monster that you've gotta control, or it will definitely kill your young ass.

It's sort'a like you ditty-boppin' down a forest trail, and an eight foot tall Kodiak bear stands up on his hind legs (while you're thinkin' "I just shit my shorts!") walks over, places his massive, smelly paws on your tremblin' shoulders... and then while drooling down your chest, looks into your eyes and says, "Hello my old friend!"

Do ya get the picture?

Through the process of trial and error (for Marines, mostly error) I've learned to control the large, furry friend that all us humans walk around chained to. And it's always ready and anxious to fight with someone else's Beast. You know, to feel a little rage, a little hit of combat adrenaline, maybe even a little sip of that tasty blood.

Next time you're in the supermarket, look around and

imagine that every shopper in that store is walkin' side-by-side with an eight foot Kodiak bear, and all the bears are ready to fight. It'd be damn right ugly to bump into one of 'em with your shopping cart.

Same thing when another Kodiak cuts you off on the road or flips you the middle claw! It ain't "Flee" or "Freeze" time... its Fight time. Think about it.

You can say whatever you'd like about the Beast and how to deal with it, but clinicians call this approach a "**Tool**" to help us Combat Vets adapt to society. And for many of us Warriors, it simply works.

As I said in the first book, a counselor once said to me, "Brandi, you can kill anyone you want in your mind, just don't do it in the street." He was tellin' me not to let Oso off his leash. And by controlling the Savage Side of our Nature, most often we control the emotions that drive us back onto the battlefield.

As hard as it is for most folks to understand, in many ways us Warriors may always feel more at home down range. I'll explain that as we move along here. But here in the civilian run world, we need to be the "Keepers of the Beast," in control and vigilant at all times. That is, to the potential we have of our Savage Side, our closest Friend.

Now for the sake of you Marines, who might be slowly readin' this, let's do a review of steps to control your Beast. And this ain't no training film, so pay attention... no heads bobbin' out there.

Steps to controlling your Lizard Brain, the Primal Side of human nature: (that be you!)

Acknowledge it Exists. It is genetically hard-wired into your brain-housing-group. It (the Beast) lives in the lower brain and is the survival mechanism that wants to save your ass. In a life

and death situation your reaction is either flee, freeze, or fight. (Advancing under fire is fleeing to the fight?)

We've all got it, so you may as well "Stand up, hook up, shuffle to the door. Jump right out and count to four." In other words, take the first leap!

Identify it. These emotions are easy to spot; like a water buffalo in a rice paddy, or a camel spider crawlin' up your leg. These are base emotions like hate, rage and anger.

Other such Beastoid-type feelings are justifying the de-humanizing of the opposition, being unmerciful, un-compassionate, reveling in the cruelest atrocities, blood lust, desiring the smells and emotions of violence, the temporary (false) satisfaction of killing, and the power over another individual or group, to name a few.

An easy guideline is, "If the feelings aren't loving, helpful, unselfish and kind", then watch where you're a steppin', cause your beast is about to shit in your mess gear.

Befriend it. That's right! See it as your friend! Start a dialogue (talk out loud) with it, and begin to thank it for bringin' your ass back from war. It wants you to live; it just wants to control the way you live. This is called, "taking back your power." What better way to start than in your own thick skull?

Transfer your guilt. It was the Primal Side, your Beast that enjoyed the hell out of the raw emotions of war. It's the one that killed other

human beings, blew shit up, and loved combat adrenaline. It was the Demonic side of your nature, not the Angelic side.

Look at it like this. The demonic side (Lizard Brain) is the only way you're gonna survive war. But the Angelic side is the only way you're gonna survive life. So what makes more sense?

You can walk around like I did for thirty seven years in military clothing, waiting for your big chance to gut the next enemy that comes along at the mall; or you can buy a nice pair of barn boots and some jeans, a car that ain't olive green, and get on with things.

Hell, you might even have a good relationship with one of them other human-like sorts, if you're not sleepin' in a cave and catchin' salmon in your mouth at spawning time.

Like it, then Love It! I would hope that if you have a friend, then you like that person. Otherwise we need to get your ass into counseling even quicker. Anyway, as you start to like the Beast as your friend, at some point you realize that you're both in the same body and you begin to like yourself.

Eventually, you begin to love your Beast and automatically begin to love yourself. Do ya see how it works?

If you're not the one who did all the nasties, then you must be the good guy (gal). You're the Hero! And who doesn't love a Hero? So unless you love pain and wanna keep up the forced march at Twenty Nine Palms in mid July, you'll get the joke. Not only is it OK to like yourself, it's OK to love

yourself. And that don't mean you're standin in front of a damn mirror with a shit-eatin' grin on your mug 24/7. It just means you're the good guy, the Hero. So get on with it, and enjoy what's left of your life.

Care for It, Control It, and Remain Constantly Vigilant of It.

You now know your Beast is always there watching, it's always a part of you. But now the separate parts have become the whole. We'll talk more about this later on.

Your Beast can never be unleashed except to protect life... including your own. Acknowledging that it can always handle any violent situation keeps it in check. If it starts to get restless, fantasize, count to three, and use the anger energy constructively. Always ask yourself "What kind of emotions am I feeling?" You know the difference now.

Enough said for the moment on "who" and "what" we all truly are. That'll give you a heads up on the topics to come. We'll develop this more in stories as we move along.

Time to head out to the next L.Z. (Landing Zone). Keep that body armor on; this next topic may be like an "Incoming" mortar round.

**Door Gunners at the Ready!
Board the Chopper!
We're Movin Out!!**