In this piece, Chris Hedges quote Freud in order to suggest that war provides us with clarity and meaning and "fills our spiritual void." He also suggests that war might be a “false covenant.” But this essay is more exploration than argument, engaging the struggle to comprehend war experience.

In more than twenty years as a journalist, Chris Hedges has reported from some of the most war-torn regions of the world, including the Balkans and the Persian Gulf. In 2002, he was part of a New York Times reporting team that won the Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Reporting for their coverage of terrorism. “Eros and Thanatos” is an excerpt from his recent book, War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning (2002).

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Sigmund Freud divided the forces in human nature between the Eros instinct, the impulse within us that propels us to become close to others, to preserve and conserve, and the Thanatos, or death instinct, the impulse that works towards the annihilation of all living things, including ourselves. For Freud these forces were in eternal conflict. He was pessimistic about ever eradicating war. All human history, he argued, is a tug-of-war between these two instincts.

“The meaning of the evolution of civilization is no longer obscure to us,” Freud wrote in Civilization and Its Discontents. “It must present the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species. This struggle is what all life essentially consists of.”

We believe in the nobility and self-sacrifice demanded by war, especially when we are blinded by the narcotic of war. We discover in the communal struggle, the shared sense of meaning and purpose, a cause. War fills our spiritual void. I do not miss war, but I miss what it brought. I can never say I was happy in the midst of the fighting in El Salvador, or Bosnia, or Kosovo, but I had a sense of purpose, of calling. And this is a quality war shares with love, for we are, in love, also able to choose fealty and self-sacrifice over security.

Happiness is elusive and protean. And it is sterile when devoid of meaning. But meaning, when it is set in the vast arena of war with its high stakes, its adrenaline-driven rushes, its bold sweeps and drama, is heartless and self-destructive. The initial selflessness of war mirrors that of love, the chief emotion war destroys. And this is what war often looks and feels like, at its inception: love. The ancient Greeks understood this strange relationship between love and death in wartime. When Achilles kills Penthesilea, the queen of the Amazons, in the Trojan War, he falls in love with her as she expires on the battlefield. Once she is dead, once love is dead, Achilles is doomed.

1 Removing or destroying utterly
2 Any of a class of substances that blunt the senses, as opium, morphine, belladonna, and alcohol, that in large quantities produce euphoria, stupor, or coma, that when used constantly can cause habituation or addiction, and that are used in medicine to relieve pain, cause sedation, and induce sleep; anything that produces a soothing or numbing effect.
We are tempted to reduce life to a simple search for happiness. **Happiness, however, withers if there is no meaning.** The other temptation is to disavow the search for happiness in order to be faithful to that which provides meaning. But to live only for meaning—indifferent to all happiness—makes us fanatic, self-righteous, and cold. It leaves us cut off from our own humanity and the humanity of others. We must hope for grace, for our lives to be sustained by moments of meaning and happiness, both equally worthy of human communion.

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In the wake of catastrophe, including the attacks of September 11, 2001, there is a desperate longing by all those affected to be in the physical presence of those they love. When a heavy shell landed in Sarajevo, or an assassination took place in the streets of San Salvador, or a suicide bomber blew himself up in Jerusalem, mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, and children pawed through the onlookers seeking physical reunification with those they loved. This love, like death, radiates outwards. It battles Thanatos at the very moment of death’s sting. These two fundamental human impulses crash like breakers into each other. And however much beyond reason, there is always a feeling that love is not powerless or impotent as we had believed a few seconds before. Love alone fuses happiness and meaning. Love alone can fight the impulse that lures us toward self-destruction.

The question is whether America now courts death. We no longer seem chastened by war as we were in the years after the Vietnam War. The Bush administration has revised its “Nuclear Posture Review” to give us “more flexible nuclear strike capabilities.” Washington wants “more options” with which to confront contingencies “immediate, potential, and unexpected,” for smaller but more effective mega-tonnages to be deployed. This flirtation with weapons of mass destruction is a flirtation with our own obliteration, an embrace again of Thanatos.

There are few sanctuaries in war. But one is provided by couples in love. They are not able to staunch the slaughter. They are often powerless and can themselves become victims. But it was with them, seated around a wood stove, usually over a simple meal, that I found sanity and was reminded of what it means to be human. Love kept them grounded. It was to such couples that I retreated during the wars in Central America, the Middle East, and the Balkans. Love, when it is deep and sustained by two individuals, includes self-giving—often self-sacrifice—as well as desire. For the covenant of love is such that it recognizes both the fragility and the sanctity of the individual. It recognizes itself in the other. It alone can save us.

I did not sleep well in war. I could rarely recall my dreams, waking only to know that they had been harsh and violent. When I left war zones, the nightmares descended on me like furies. I had horrible visions of war. I would dream of being in combat with my father or young son and unable to protect them. But I could sleep in the homes of such couples. Their love spread like a protective blanket over us. It was able to blot out the war, although the lure of combat, the distant rattle of automatic weapons beckoned us back, and we always went.

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The cost of war is often measured in the physical destruction of a country’s infrastructure, in the blasted buildings, factories, and bridges, in the number of dead. But probably worse is the psychological

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Comment [H3]: Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

3 an agreement, usually formal, between two or more persons to do or not do something specified.

4 holiness, saintliness, or godliness.
and spiritual toll. This cost takes generations to heal. It cripples and perverts whole societies, as Europe saw with the shattered veterans from World War I. But even for those who know the cost of war, it still holds out the promise of eradicating the thorny problems of life.

In the beginning war looks and feels like love. But unlike love it gives nothing in return but an ever-deepening dependence, like all narcotics, on the road to self-destruction. It does not affirm but places upon us greater and greater demands. It destroys the outside world until it is hard to live outside war’s grip. It takes a higher and higher dose to achieve any thrill. Finally, one ingests war only to remain numb. The world outside war becomes, as Freud wrote, “uncanny.” The familiar becomes strangely unfamiliar—many who have been in war find this when they return home. The world we once understood and longed to return to stands before us as alien, strange, and beyond our grasp.

In 1999 the British journalist Anthony Loyd published *My War Gone By, I Miss It So*, a book about his twin additions to heroin and to the war in Bosnia. His account illuminates the self-destruction impulse that is fed by war and drugs as well as the highs that propel many into combat. For Loyd, like Micheal Herr, war was the ultimate drug experience. It was the chance to taste extremes that would, he hoped, bring about a catharsis or obliteration. In times of peace, drugs are war’s pale substitute. But drugs, in the end, cannot compare with the awful power and rush of battle. This was not why I went to war, but the twisted voyeurism and narcotic of war Loyd described attracted many to the battlefields and held them there.

Deep down I was aware at the time that many of my motivations were fairly dark. On one level my sense of despair had been dispelled by therapy, yet on another it had not been replaced by either the desire for a future or the concept of one. I felt more aware of who I was, but that in itself—dominated as it was by sensations of fragmentation and isolation—filled me with no great hope, and in many ways only fueled an appetite for destruction.

When the mask of war slips away and the rot and corruption is exposed, when the addiction turns sour and rank, when the myth is exposed as a fraud, we feel soiled and spent. It is then that we sink into despair, a despair that can lead us to welcome death. This despair is more common than many expect.

In the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, almost a third of all Israeli casualties were due to psychiatric causes, and the war lasted only a few weeks. A World War II study determined that after sixty days of continuous combat, 98 percent of all surviving soldiers will have become psychiatric casualties. They found that a common trait among the 2 percent who were able to endure sustained combat was a predisposition toward “aggressive psychopathic personalities.”

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5 the purging of the emotions or relieving of emotional tensions, especially through certain kinds of art, as tragedy or music; discharge of pent-up emotions so as to result in the alleviation of symptoms or the permanent relief of the condition.
During the war in El Salvador soldiers could serve in the army for three or four years or longer, virtually until they psychologically collapsed. In garrison towns commanders banned the sale of sedatives because of abuse by troops. In this war the emotionally maimed were common.

Ediberto Ayala, a nineteen-year-old Salvadoran army sergeant, spent five years fighting, and suddenly lost his vision after his unit walked into a rebel ambush. The rebels killed eleven soldiers in the firefight, including Ayala’s closest friend. A couple dozen soldiers were wounded. He was unable to see again until he was placed in an army hospital.

“I have these horrible headaches,” he told me, sitting on the edge of his hospital bed. “There is shrapnel in my head. I keep telling the doctors to take it out.”

But the doctors told me he had no head wounds.

J. Glenn Gray, a World War II combat veteran who taught philosophy after the war, wrote: “Few of us can hold on to our real selves long enough to discover the real truths about ourselves and this whirling earth to which we cling. This is especially true of men in war. The great god Mars tries to blind us when we enter his realm, and when we leave he gives us a generous cup of the waters of Lethe to drink.

This self-deception is powerful. It propels those in war forward. When it falls away, when we grasp war’s reality, a universe collapses. Many of those who suddenly perceive the raw brutality and lie of war crumble into heaps.

In the rise to power we become smaller, power absorbs us, and once power is attained we are often its pawn. As in Richard III, the all-powerful prince can swiftly fall prey to the forces he thought he had harnessed. So too in war. Shakespeare’s Lear and Richard III gain knowledge only as they are pushed down the ladder, as they are stripped of all illusions. Love many not always triumph, but it keeps us human. It offers the only chance to escape from the contagion of war. Perhaps it is the only antidote.

And there are times when remaining human is the only victory possible.

Kurt Schork, a Reuters correspondent who spent a decade in war zones before being killed in an ambush in Sierra Leone, wrote a story out of Sarajevo about Bosko Brkić, a Serb, and Admira Ismić, a Muslim, both twenty-five. They had been sweethearts since high school. The lovers tried to flee the besieged city in May 1993, a year after the war started, but were gunned down by Serb snipers.

They died together on the banks of the Sarajevo’s Miljacka River. Bosko fell dead instantly. Admira was badly wounded. She crawled over and hugged him. She expired in his arms. Bosko lay face-

6 the communication of disease by direct or indirect contact; a disease so communicated.

7 a medicine or other remedy for counteracting the effects of poison, disease, etc.

8 A country in African torn by domestic fighting among disparate ethnic groups, rebel groups, warlords, and youth gangs. Particularly known internationally for the illegal trade of conflict or “blood” diamonds. Conflict diamonds are diamonds that originate from areas controlled by forces or factions opposed to legitimate and internationally recognized governments, and are used to fund military action in opposition to those governments, or in contravention of the decisions of the Security Council. Did you know – Kanye West released a Grammy-winning song called “Diamonds of Sierra Leone.”
down on the pavement, his right arm bent awkwardly behind him. Admira lay next to him, her left arm across his back. Another corpse, that of a man shot five months earlier, lay decomposing nearby.

Their bodies lay there for four days, sprawled near the Vrbana bridge, a pitted wasteland of shell-blasted rubble, downed tree branches, and dangling power lines, before they were recovered. They are buried together, under a heart-shaped headstone, in the Lion’s Cemetery for the victims of the war. Kurt is buried next to them. Kurt, brilliant, courageous, and driven, had been unable to break free from the addiction of war. His entrapment, his long flirtation with Thanatos, was never mentioned at the memorial service staged for him in Washington by the Reuters bureaucrats he did not respect. Everyone tiptoed around it. But those of us who knew him understood that he had been consumed by his addiction. I had worked with Kurt for ten years, starting in northern Iraq. Literate, funny—it seems the brave are often funny—he and I passed books back and forth in our struggle to make sense of the madness around us. His loss was a hole that will never be filled.

I flew to Sarajevo and met the British filmmaker Dan Reed. It was an overcast November day. We stood over the grave and downed a pint of whiskey. Dan lit a candle. I recited a poem the Roman lyric poet Catullus had written to honor his dead brother.

By strangers’ coasts and waters, many days at sea,
I come here for the rites of your unworlding.
Bringing you, the dead, these last gifts of the living
And my words—vain sounds for the man of dust.
Alas, my brother,
You have been taken from me. You have been taken from me,
By cold chance turned a shadow, and my pain.
Here are the foods of the old ceremony, appointed
Long ago for the starvelings under the earth:
Take them: your brother’s tears have made them wet; and take
Into eternity my hail and my farewell.

It was there, among a few thousand war dead, that Kurt belonged. He died because he could not free himself from war, from the death impulse. He was in Africa searching for new highs. He was trying to replicate what he had found in Sarajevo. But he could not. War could never be new again. I had tried for years after El Salvador to make it come back. It was never the same. Kurt had been in East Timor and Chechnya. Sierra Leone, I was sure, meant little to him. Miguel Gil Morano, a Spanish cameraman, who had also covered the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo, died with him. They were, like all who do not let go, consumed by a ball of fire. But they lit the fuse. And they would be the first to admit it.

Viktor Frankl, in Man’s Search for Meaning, writes of the grim battle between love and Thanatos in Auschwitz.

A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth—that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the

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Comment [H10]: Does Hedges inclusion of the story of Bosko Brćić and Admira Ismić appeal to pathos, ethos, or logos? Explain.

Comment [H11]: Using context clues, what do you think Catullus means when he uses the word “unworlding” here?

Comment [H12]: Why has Catullus repeated “You have been taken from me?” What effect does it have on you, the reader?

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9 A German concentration and extermination camp; responsible for the deaths of around 1.1 million people, about 90% of them Jews.
meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: the salvation of man is through love and in love.

The Thanatos instinct is a drive toward suicide, individual and collective. War celebrates only power—and we come to believe in wartime that it is the only real form of power. It preys on our most primal and savage impulses. It allows us to do what peacetime society forbids or restrains us from doing. It allows us to kill. However much soldiers regret killing once it is finished, however much they spend their lives trying to cope with the experience, the act itself, fueled by fear, excitement, the pull of the crowd, and the godlike exhilaration of destroying, is often thrilling.

I have watched fighters in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, the Sudan, the Punjab, Iraq, Bosnia, and Kosovo enter villages, tense, exhausted, wary of ambushes, with the fear and tension that comes from combat, and begin to shoot at random. Flames soon lick up from house. Discipline, if there was any, disintegrates. Items are looted, civilians are battered with rifle butts, units fall apart, and the violence directed toward unarmed men, women, and children grows as it feeds on itself. The eyes of the soldiers who carry this orgy of death are crazed. They speak only in guttural\textsuperscript{10} shouts. They are high on the power to spare lives or take them, the divine power to destroy. And they are indeed, for a moment, gods swatting down powerless human beings like flies. The lust for violence, the freedom to eradicate the world around them, even human lives, is seductive. And the line that divides us, who would like to see ourselves as civilized and compassionate, from such communal barbarity is razor thin. In wartime it often seems to matter little where one came from or how well-schooled and moral one was before the war began. The frenzy of the crowd is overpowering.

The military histories—which tell little of war’s reality—crowd out the wrenching tales by the emotionally maimed. Each generation again responds to war as innocents. Each generation discovers its own disillusionment—often after a terrible price. The myth of war and the drug of war wait to be tasted. The mythical heroes of the past loom over us. Those who can tell us the truth are silenced or prefer to forget. The state needs the myth, as much as it needs its soldiers and its machines of war, to survive.

To say the least, killing is nearly always a sordid\textsuperscript{11} affair. Those who carry such memories do so with difficulty, even when the cause seems just. Moreover, those who are killed do not die the clean death we see on television or bodies of the newly slain retain a disquieting power. The rows of impersonal dead, stacked like firewood one next to the other, draped on roadsides, twisted into strange, often grimly humorous shapes, speak. I have looked into the open eyes of dead men and wished them shut, for they seemed to beckon me into the underworld. You will be me, the eyes call out, see what you will become. Even hardened soldiers drape cloth over such faces or reach out and push the eyelids shut. The eyes of the dead are windows into a world we fear.

Goodbye Darkness, William Manchester’s memoir of the Pacific war in World War II, has an unvarnished account of what it feels like to shoot another man. Nothing is more sickening in war than watching human lives get snuffed out. Nothing haunts you more. And it is never, as outsiders think, clean or easy or neat. Killing is a dirty business, more like butchering animals.

\textsuperscript{10}harsh; throaty.

\textsuperscript{11}morally ignoble or base; vile; dirty, filthy.
Manchester describes, in the opening pages of his memoir, the only time he shot a Japanese soldier he could see.

Not only was he the first Japanese soldier I had ever shot at; he was the only one I had seen at close quarters. He was a robin-fat, moon-faced, roly-poly little man with his thick, stubby, trunk-like legs sheathed in faded khaki puttees\(^\text{12}\) and the rest of him squeezed into a uniform that was much too tight. Unlike me, he was wearing a tin hat, dressed to kill. But I was quite safe from him. His Arisaka rifle was strapped on in a sniper’s harness, and though he had heard me, and was trying to turn toward me, the harness sling had him trapped. He couldn’t disentangle himself from it. His eyes were rolling in panic. Realizing that he couldn’t extricate his arms and defend himself, he was backing toward a corner with a curious, crablike motion.

My first shot had missed him, embedding itself in the straw wall, but the second caught him dead-on in the femoral artery. His left thigh blossomed, swiftly turning to mush. A wave of blood gushed from the wound; then another boiled out, sheeting across his legs, pooling on the earthen floor. Mutely he looked down at it. He dipped a hand in it and listlessly smeared his cheek red. His shoulders gave a little spasmodic jerk, as though someone had whacked him on the back; then he emitted a tremendous, raspy fart, slumped down, and died. I kept firing, wasting government property. Already I thought I detected the dark brown effluvium\(^\text{13}\) of the freshly slain, a sour, pervasive emanation which is different from anything you have known. Yet seeing death at this range, like smelling it, requires no previous experience. You instantly recognize it, the spastic convulsion and the rattle, which in his case was not loud, but deprecating and conciliatory, like the manners of the civilized Japanese. He continued to sink until he reached the earthen floor. His eye glazed over. Almost immediately a fly landed on his left eyeball. It was joined by another. I don’t know how long I stood there staring. I knew from previous combat what lay ahead for the corpse. It would swell, the bloat, bursting out of the uniform. Then the face would turn from yellow to red, to purple, to green, to black. My father’s account of the Argonne had omitted certain vital facts. A feeling of disgust and self-hatred clotted darkly in my throat, gagging me.

Jerking my head to shake off the stupor, I slipped a new, fully loaded magazine into the butt of my .45. Then I began to tremble, and next to shake, all over. I sobbed, in a voice still grainy with fear: “I’m sorry.” Then I threw up all over myself. I recognized the half-digested C-ration beans dribbling down my front, smelled the vomit above the cordite. At the same time, I noticed another odor; I had urinated in my skivvies\(^\text{14}\). I pondered fleetly why our excretions become so loathsome the instant they leave the body. Then Barney burst in on me, his carbine at the ready, his face gray, as though he, not I, had just become a partner in the firm of death. He ran over to the Nip’s body, grabbed its stacking swivel—its neck—and let go, satisfied that it was a cadaver.

\(^\text{12}\) a long strip of cloth wound spirally round the leg from ankle to knee, worn especially formerly as part of a soldier’s uniform.

\(^\text{13}\) a slight or invisible exhalation or vapor, especially one that is disagreeable or noxious.

\(^\text{14}\) underwear
marveled at his courage; I couldn't have taken a step toward that corner. He approached me and then backed away in revulsion, from my foul stench. He said: “Slim, you stink.” I said nothing. I knew I had become a thing of tears and twitchings and dirtied pants. I remember wondering dumbly: Is this what they mean by “conspicuous gallantry”?

There is among many who fight in war a sense of shame, one that is made worse by the patriotic drivel used to justify the act of killing in war. Those who seek meaning in patriotism do not want to hear the truth of war, wary of bursting the bubble. The tensions between those who were there and those who were not, those who refuse to let go of the myth and those who know it to be a lie feed into the dislocation and malaise after war. In the end, neither side cares to speak to the other. The shame and alienation of combat soldiers, coupled with the indifference to the truth of war by those who were not there, reduces many societies to silence. It seems better to forget.

I sat one morning with two war veterans on the porch of a dilapidated villa overlooking the Caspian. The men, who fished and used their boats to take people water skiing, were slumped in wicker chairs drinking cups of sweet tea.

The two men told me that they had easy access to the drugs, homemade beer, and grain alcohol that was sold on the beach. They smuggled out tins of caviar from the state-run packaging plant and traded it with Russian sailors, anchored offshore, for vodka. For a price they guided couples to secluded beaches, where women could swim in bathing suits and embrace their boyfriends, activities the clerics had forbidden. The money they earned was swallowed by their addiction.

“I will never be normal again,” said one of the men, who spent twenty-three months at the front. “I am nervous. I can’t control my anger. If anything disturbs me, like a minor car accident, I explode.”

The second man, who was a lieutenant in the war, looked out over the water and said in a monotone, “My battalion was ordered across the flats early one morning. Within a couple of hours four hundred soldiers were dead and hundreds more were wounded. It was a stupid, useless waste. When we got back they called us traitors.”

The men said they lived on the margins of existence, sometimes sleeping under grass-roofed huts. The pittance the men earned, the psychological burdens they bore, and their inability to afford a place to live had crushed them.

“All we have left is the sea,” a former office said, “and the sea is what keeps us here. But then one day even the sea isn’t enough.”

As long as we think abstractly, as long as we find in patriotism and the exuberance of war our fulfillment, we will never understand those who do battle against us, or how we are perceived by them, or finally those who do battle for us and how we should respond to it all. We will never discover who we are. We will fail to confront the capacity we all have for violence. And we will court our own extermination. By accepting the facile cliché that the battle under way against terrorism is a battle
against evil, by easily branding those who fight us as the barbarians, we, like them, refuse to acknowledge our own culpability. We ignore real injustices that have led many of those arrayed against us to their rage and despair.

Late one night, unable to sleep during the war in El Salvador, I picked up Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. It was not a calculated decision. I had come that day from a village where about a dozen people had been murdered by the death squads, their thumbs tied behind their backs with wire and their throats slit.

I had read the play before, but in my other life as a student. A thirst for power at the cost of human life was no longer an abstraction to me. It was a part of my universe.

I came upon Macduff’s wife’s speech made when the murderers, sent by Macbeth, arrive to kill her and her small children: “Whither should I fly?” she asks,

I have done no harm. But I remember now
I am in this earthly world—where to do harm
Is often laudable, to do good sometime
Accounted dangerous folly

Those words seized me like the furies and cried out for the dead I had seen lined up that day in a dusty market square, the dead I have seen since, the dead, including the two thousand children who were killed in Sarajevo. The words cried out for those whom I would see later in unmarked mass graves in Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, the Sudan, Algeria, El Salvador, the dead who are my own, who carried notebooks, cameras, and a vanquished idealism and sad addiction into war and never returned. Of course resistance is usually folly, of course power exercised with ruthlessness will win, of course force easily snuffs out gentle people, the compassionate, and the decent. A repentant Lear, who was unable to love because of his thirst for power and self-adulation acknowledges this in the final moments of the play.

Shakespeare celebrates, at his best, this magnificence of failure. When we view our lives honestly from the inside we are all failures, all sinners, all in need of forgiveness. Shakespeare lays bare the myths that blind and deform our souls. He understands that the world of the flesh and the world of the spirit are indivisible, that they coexist in a paradox, ever present.

Shakespeare reminds us that though we may not do what we want, we are responsible for our lives. It does not matter what has been made of us; what matters is what we ourselves make of what has been done to us.

To survive as a human being is possible only through love. And, when Thanatos is ascendant, the instinct must be to reach out to those we love, to see in them all the divinity, pity, and pathos of the human. And to recognize love in the lives of others—even those with whom we are in conflict—love that is like our own. It does not mean we will avoid war or death. It does not mean that we as distinct individuals will survive. But love, in its mystery, has its own power. It alone gives us meaning that endure. It alone allows us to embrace and cherish life. Love has power both to resist in our nature what we know we must resist, and to affirm what we know we must affirm. And love, as the poets remind us, is eternal.

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15 a position of dominance or controlling influence: possession of power, superiority, or preeminence