

Learning To Walk  
A Soldier's Story  
By Clifford Beck

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*For my brother, Randy*

Chapter 1

Everyone thinks the desert is always hot and dry. That's not necessarily true, Afghanistan has both mountains and deserts. It sees both blazing hot days in the desert sand and frigid temperatures in the mountains. Their main export is heroin, grown on the fertile slopes of the Afghan mountains. Recently, it was discovered that the Afghanis had begun producing heroin that's ten times more potent than they had previously produced and of course, the largest consumer of Afghani heroin is - you got it - us. The addicts here who get their hands on this stuff are dying before they get the needle out of their veins.

You might be asking yourself right now 'why should I care?' The world is going to hell and there seems to be little, if anything, any of us can do about it. I don't know, maybe it would be better if good old planet earth took a hit from a mountain-sized asteroid. After all, as big as the universe is, who would miss us? People don't seem to understand how insignificant we truly are but that doesn't

mean we can't make a difference. Maybe not to the whole of humanity, but sometimes it only takes one person to step up and do the right thing. I'm not talking about God or anything. Personally, I'm not so sure there's anything out there that could provide anyone with a sense of purpose, whether you want to call it fate, determinism, the will of God or whatever it is that people call it. The truth of the matter is we're all alone, at least in this neck of the woods anyway and all we really have is each other. But, I try not to see humanity as the random collection of sexually driven animals that others see us as. You know the people I'm talking about - the politicians, the corporations, the wealthy and all the other power hungry, self-delusional idiots who seem to have talked themselves into believing that they're somehow better than everyone else.

The line between right and wrong often becomes blurred when money and power are involved. Many times, the rich walk while the poor get locked up and forgotten, treated as if they're nothing more than the eyesores of society. Unfortunately, there's nothing that one person can do to better the world, but one person does what one person can. My name is Clarence. But in the eyes of the government, I have another name - Private Taylor. So, I suppose for the sake of accuracy, I should refer to myself with my proper government assigned name. So, let's start again. My name is Private Clarence Taylor. My current address is a charming neighborhood in hell called Afghanistan. And this is my story.

I was born in Bangor, Maine in 1986. I went to school, did my homework and studied hard enough to graduate in the top ten percent of my high school class. My parents tried hard to instill in me a strong set of ethics and to make

something of myself. They taught me not only the meaning of compromise, but that there would always be times when compromising could not be achieved. They also taught me the importance of doing the right thing, no matter what the cost.

I wasn't raised with any kind of religion. It's not that my parents thought it was a waste of time, they simply believed that if there was anything that could control our fate, it would have started by cleaning up the mess left over from a species 'it' created in the first place. I never saw the universe as possessing some grand scheme or divine plan and if you asked that age-old question - 'what is the meaning of life?' - you would have been disappointed by the answer. And what is the answer? Life has no meaning. Life is simply an event that happens wherever the conditions are right for its development. To be honest, I came to see that question as something of a cop-out, one that's asked by people who are unable or unwilling to take a good hard look in the mirror and deal with their own emptiness, insecurities, and misery.

The question that people don't seem to want to ask is 'what is the meaning of 'my' life?' It's a hard question to ask because it demands not only reflection but accountability. And let's face it, we are all too willing to blame everyone else for the problems that we create for ourselves. And without accountability, indifference often raises its head. We've all heard the words 'why should I care?' spoken far too often. Don't get me wrong. I'm certainly not perfect and I don't expect the whole of humankind to suddenly achieve enlightenment. It would just be nice to watch the news someday and see more people doing some good for

the world. I know that's asking a lot, but I guess it's just a little wishful thinking.

## Chapter 2

Well, like I said before, I went to school in Bangor. After high school, I did what was expected and went on to college. My parents wanted me to major in something 'marketable' but as something of an idealist, I choose to study philosophy. Besides, there was still grad school and I could still earn a 'marketable' degree. But at the time, I just wanted to explore and it seemed like philosophy would be an interesting way to find some direction. Classes were both interesting and deep - logic, existentialism, philosophical psychology. I couldn't get enough.

In the shelter of academia, there weren't a lot of other things the average student needed to think about, but I didn't keep myself locked up like some cloistered monk. I went to a few parties and tried to fit in. However, the last thing any girl wanted to talk about was Plato's Republic or how Aristotle's ethics had become lost on a not so blind justice system. I took a class in Buddhism and found it refreshing that someone could follow a spiritual path without being compelled to answer to a divine authority. The concept of karmic law seemed more than reasonable to me. This idea states that we, as individuals, are responsible for the consequences of our actions and that our lives are guided purely by the decisions we make. But, there's a downside. As creatures possessed by humanness, we are incapable of seeing all possible outcomes for any one decision. So, although we can try to do our best, in the end,

we're still, more or less, flying by the seat of our pants. Then again, if we could see all the possibilities we would no doubt become consumed by them, and without uncertainty, the search for meaning becomes pointless.

Now, for some reason subjects like this weren't generally well-received at social events where liberal amounts of alcohol were consumed. Either people weren't interested or they were too incoherent to understand and I quickly became thought of as something of a nerd and found myself largely excluded from the campus social scene. I didn't really mind. In fact, I found it rather difficult to relate to most people. I guess I was just in a different place than most. Not that I ever considered myself to be 'special', perhaps I just wandered onto a different path. I found it troubling when people began referring to me as being 'different'. I didn't really understand what that word was supposed to mean and eventually, I reached two conclusions. The first was that the word 'different', in this context anyway, was and will likely always be used by small-minded people. We all know people like this. They will never understand what makes you tick and because they seem to be so caught up in themselves, they will never give themselves the opportunity to find out who you really are. They have already judged you based on the perception that, for some reason, you just don't fit in. The second conclusion I reached was that there's nothing wrong with standing away from the crowd, refusing to follow the herd.

You don't have to fit in and you should never bow down to the egos of those who stand at the tops of their ivory towers judging everyone but themselves. Eventually, I learned to not only accept the fact that I was somehow 'different', but to embrace it. I came to enjoy being as different as people

saw me and felt as though a heavy weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I had spent a good portion of my life being resentful of the opinions most people had of me. Now, I just didn't care anymore. Their opinions mean nothing to me. I can only live my own life, and they're just going to have to figure things out on their own. So, what I guess this all comes down to are two simple words. Fuck them. Not that I'm angry and please don't mistake these words for hostility. It's just that I've come to a place where I find it pointless to make a personal investment in people who will probably always see themselves as being better than everyone else.

I always seemed to have my head in a book, usually philosophy, history or literature. Not that there's anything wrong with reading novels, it's just that I see life as a learning process, a chance to grow. Besides, what's the point of living if you're burying yourself in other people's fantasies? And I'm sure that my penchant for learning has cost me more than a few social opportunities. But, my college life wasn't entirely devoid of socialization either. There were one or two girlfriends. I'm still not sure what they saw in me, but they must have seen something. Relating to girls was never something I was good at. Maybe it's because my head always seemed to be somewhere else. In fact, I found it difficult to relate to people in general and I still do sometimes. I suppose that socialization is a constant learning process too. Some people would tell me that I think too much and they're probably right. My mind always seemed to focus on loftier things, but at some point, I started reading the news. A lot. I'm still not sure why. I always believed that the world sucks anyway. Maybe I began to feel a need to get

connected, to raise my own awareness of why the world is the way it is.

I discovered or perhaps rediscovered, that civilization is in the midst of moral decline and no matter where you look money always seems to be at the center of it and I reached the conclusion that humanity is burying itself. We're simply on our way out. It'll be a very long process and who knows how the final stroke will arrive. Maybe we'll go out fighting or, maybe we won't see the end coming at all. I know this seems very pessimistic - even grim and some people might think that things can't get any worse but I disagree. I think that things can and will get worse - much worse. And I'm sure that anyone who takes the time to see the world as it is would likely agree as well. The question is: is it too late? I honestly don't know.

### Chapter 3

The spring of 2000 came without so much as a warning and I wasn't ready at all when graduation arrived. It's amazing how quickly four years can pass, but I did see graduation as the beginning of a time when I could use my new education to do some good. At the time, I was absolutely terrified and found myself confronted by the question: 'what the fuck do I do now?' I had lived the last four years of my life sheltered by the relatively quiet atmosphere of college. Now, I was expected to go out and get a job, make a living and face the world with a noble smile. The problem is that the world is not a noble place and jobs are very hard to come by. Even graduates with marketable degrees were finding hard to get work and many of them were forced to

settle for work outside their chosen fields. So, where does someone with a degree in philosophy go to find work? The answer? Anywhere they can, and after a few weeks, I took a job in the human service field with an agency here in Bangor. The pay wasn't very good, but I thought that this might an opportunity to make a difference. I worked as a teacher for the developmentally disabled, but after about three months it dawned on me how naive I could be. I found myself both stunned and disappointed to discover that many of the people who get hired into these jobs are hired out of desperation, as long as they pass a background check. To my shock, I also found that in many instances, the staff tends to have more issues than the people they were there to serve. I still don't know quite what to expect from people, but I do know that the idea of 'normal' is nothing more than a pipe dream. Once I fell into the routine of the job I started to notice that the staff had divided themselves into cliques. I had experienced this mentality to some degree in college and came to deeply resent it. The idea that someone could have the audacity to think of themselves, or their group, as being better than everyone else sickened me. Sure, it's all fine and good for high school students to adopt an attitude. After all, people of that age group seem to be rather idiotic, simply by virtue of their youth. However, at some point, one should develop the realization that they are not at the center of the universe. So, if you're not going to do anything meaningful with your life you should pick up your attitude and step aside. Then a question came to me. If the staff walked around thinking they were so much better than everyone else, what must they think of the people they are paid to serve? I didn't even want to think about what the answer might be and quickly began to feel that I was not taking the proper direction.

The job was both routine and boring. Sure, once in a while I got the chance to counsel someone who might be on the edge of losing their self-control, but I wasn't feeling challenged by what I was doing. I also found out that anyone could do this job and the employment opportunities for someone with a degree in philosophy were non-existent. So, while I decided to stick with a job I didn't like, I also decided that it was time to regroup. I spent weeks looking at colleges online. The thought of going out of state did occur to me, and although my parents would understand they still wouldn't like me being so far away. I decided to spend the next few months looking at my options. After all, going to grad school is a major investment of both time and money and I wanted to be certain about the field of study I was going to apply for. But one thing was certain, I had to move on. Working with the disabled seemed to be a good idea at the time, but there was no real future in it and most people who worked in this industry eventually went back to school anyway.

As fall arrived, that feeling of being out of place became magnified by the desire to go back to school. I thrived on knowledge and missed the academic atmosphere. Reading literature or philosophy gave me a great deal more pleasure than the idea of burying myself in a novel. I never saw that there was anything to learn by immersing myself in someone else's fantasy world. What I wanted was to grow, not to withdraw. Life will never come to you. You have to pursue it. So, I started ordering a few books online. I suppose I was also looking for things that could take me away from my job. It seemed to work, most of the time. In November I took the GRE at the University at Bangor. Unless I did well, I would never be considered. So

basically, grad school was my only hope of not only getting a good job, but also finding some direction, a way to make a real contribution. There would always be people to care for the disabled. Don't get me wrong. It's not that I don't care, I'm just looking for something that I can uniquely fit into and still be able to do my part.

I arrived at the campus early. There were a few familiar faces, mostly professors. It was an all-day event. But, as exhausted as I was by the end of the day, I walked away with the distinct feeling that I had scored high enough to ensure my acceptance. Two agonizing weeks later, I received a letter from the university. As I suspected, my GRE scores were more than sufficient and were made part of my graduate application. By this time, I had decided on a program of study and the university accepted me to their Master's program in social work. I'd be able to work in any part of the country, even become a licensed social worker and open a practice somewhere. I felt like I was on top of the world, finally finding my path - my calling if you will. I'd get to help people who had real problems without having the headache of state-funded sheltered workshops or day treatment facilities. These would be people whose situations threw them to the wolves - people with psych issues, marital problems, and addictions. The state was obligated to care for the disabled, but the people I'd deal with would be lost without someone to help them make sense of their lives.

Winter came with a vengeance and Bangor lies far enough from the coast that we manage to avoid storms coming in from the ocean. But, nor'easters always came up from the mid-west and by the time they got here they were monsters. Places like Portland seemed to dodge the bullet most of the

time. Even though it was on the coast, most of the bad weather just seemed to go around it. A few years ago, a Nor'easter blew its way up the coast, slamming into the entire state. The power was out for days and many people in northern Maine were in the dark for up to three weeks. Without power, Bangor had become a ghost town overnight. The storm was so ferocious that the wind began to sound like wolves howling at the winter moon. Most people hated winter, but I found something in its icy solitude -- the blizzards, the long nights, the feeling that, under the right conditions, the entire city could go black at any time. For me, winter brought an intensity and anticipation that nothing else could even come close to. One night, the frozen snowy earth would be blanketed in silence under a clear moonless sky. On another, the earth would tremble in fear as the persistent roar of a fierce winter onslaught approached. Winter in Bangor offered no mercy and would not be tamed even by God himself.

But as much as I enjoyed winter, spring was always a welcomed reprieve and this spring was certainly no exception. As winter held the earth in its dark, icy grasp, spring would force open its frozen grip and breathe new life back into the landscape. In Maine, it is well-known that there are, in fact, five seasons - summer, autumn, winter, spring, and mud. With all the snow that came with winter, rain and flooding would soon follow and we were now right in the middle of mud season.

Aside from the mud and rain, a noticeable chill remained in the air until almost the beginning of June. For me, summer didn't really get underway until the first thunderstorm and, a summer without at least two was a huge disappointment. A good thunderstorm brought the same intensity as a

blizzard - the way the sky opened up; the sight of lightning as it seemed to split the air and nothing's better than a thunderstorm at night. If there was a good chance that a storm was on its way, I'd stay up late listening to the thunder and watching flashes of lightning fill the night sky. The heat, however, was a different matter. For as long as I can remember, I never had much of a tolerance for the heat and sleeping in the summer was all but impossible. This summer brought a different feeling, dragging by as I anticipated going back to school. As with most things, waiting was the hardest part.

## Chapter 4

I gave notice at my job on the first of August and quite honestly, I was very glad to be leaving. It was routine and boring and like most companies, the management never seemed to get around to praising the staff. They seemed to think it wasn't necessary simply because we were just doing our job, but in two weeks, I'd be done with it - the politics, the attitudes and all the other bullshit that went into a largely thankless job. Don't misunderstand me, the people being served should always receive care, but it's a dead-end job. Even a nearly toothless thirty-year-old stripper can be trained to do it. I'm certain of that because that's what one of my co-workers was, at least before she started doing this job. But I am no one's judge. I just wish that places like this would be a bit more selective in who they hire. After all, these people are not only disabled, but defenseless and I don't think that a background check is enough to weed out those who could be potentially abusive.

I left two weeks later. There were no goodbyes -- no 'it's been nice working with you'. Even on my last day, most of

the staff continued to avoid me just as they had during the past year. I walked out the front door of the building and never looked back. But, I can say that I did learn something from this experience. I learned that it's hard, if not impossible, to care about people who only seem to care about themselves. This would reshape my perspective on people, but I would not allow it to make me cynical or jaded. We all have our issues. However, these people seem to think they're above having any issues at all and I don't think they would agree, but I think that the word 'perfect' loses its meaning when applied in human terms. But, that's just me and one person's opinion usually amounts to nothing in the face of insurmountable self-absorption. I don't hold anything against them personally. It's the quality of arrogance I despise and all it seems to do is hold us back from making any real progress as a people. A friend of mine would have said that someone had come along and 'pissed in their gene pool.' But, enough about that.

Classes started a couple of days later. I was back in my element and the previous years' memories quickly became replaced by textbooks, discussions, and assignments. I realized just how much I really missed the world of academia. It allowed me to not only grow, but to hide from the world, even if temporarily. With all the studying I was doing, there was no longer time to watch the news or read the paper and I actually felt a bit relieved about that. There were too many bad things going on in the world, from violence in the middle-east to incompetent leadership here at home. Then, about three weeks after classes began something unthinkable happened. This was an event that would not only change my life, but the lives of millions of others, and not just in this country but everywhere. I arrived on campus at seven thirty in the morning for an eight

o'clock class in clinical psychology. It was Tuesday and class began as usual with the professor checking attendance. At the graduate level, if you missed even one class it was almost impossible to catch up. If you had a serious health issue, you might as well start over next semester.

The class was two hours long and held on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, but as exhausting as it was, I still felt riveted by its content. At about ten minutes of nine, a teaching assistant entered the room unannounced.

"Um, excuse me," she said.

The professor looked at her with obvious irritation.

"I'm in the middle of teaching a class," he said. "Whatever it is, it'll have to wait."

She looked at the professor as though she'd seen a ghost and a tear began to roll down her face.

"New York's just been attacked," she said.

Everyone in the class was now looking at the teaching assistant with utter disbelief. She was not able to repeat herself and suddenly bursting into tears, ran out of the room. The next few moments were agonizingly quiet as the professor excused himself and left the room. Returned minutes later, he dismissed the class saying that for reasons of security the entire campus would be closed. I left the building with a strong sense of denial.

"We can't possibly be under attack," I thought. "Probably some kind of accident".

I stepped outside to see countless other students entering the campus center. Many of them seemed just as confused. In the cafeteria were two televisions, both set to the same channel.

As the images portrayed a large, burning tower, it had been announced that at eight forty-six eastern standard time, a commercial jet had collided with the north tower of the World Trade Center in New York. It was believed to have been an intentional act carried out by a terrorist group. What was not known was which one. Time stood still for everyone as shortly thereafter, at the reported time of three minutes after nine in the morning, a second jet slammed into the south tower. Some students began crying as people could be seen jumping from windows to avoid the fire of burning jet fuel. The television cameras intermittently focused on fire and rescue crews running into the towers to evacuate as many survivors as possible. Later, it would be reported that many of them would die in service to their fellow human beings and the only thing that anyone could do was watch.

All told, the number of dead came to two thousand nine hundred and seventy-six. But, that would not be the ‘official’ tally. In truth, the actual number would never be known. We all watched in horror as both towers collapsed under the increasing stress of melting steel. The smoke, dust, and debris now acted as a shroud for the dead. Those who had not been crushed by falling concrete and steel wandered the streets in a state of catatonic shock. They had been forced to stand on the line that lay between life and death and some of them would later realize that there were, indeed, things that were far worse than dying.

I left the campus an hour later, as did many other students. The media would continue to report the attacks and as with anything else, pound it into the nation’s traumatized psyche for weeks. By the time I got back to my apartment, the area had been buzzed by a small squadron of military jets.

Airborne patrols had been scrambled up and down the entire east coast as the country was put on high alert. I had not been in the habit of watching the news for quite some time, but when I got home my attention became glued to the television. It's not that I needed to witness the grotesque nature of this event. I just wanted to know why it happened. Who could we have been pissed off so much that someone would organize something that was no less than mass murder? I was certainly not alone in the asking of this question.

As newscasters and intelligence analysts struggled for an answer, the names of certain organizations came up. It was hypothesized by the media that one of three groups was responsible, the Taliban, Al-Qaeda and the Mujahideen. All three were notorious terrorist groups who were well funded by a few wealthy members of middle-eastern aristocracy. It would later be discovered that money was being funneled to them by one or two governments, including Pakistan, who would later be referred to as our 'frienemy'. The true meaning of that word still escapes me.

At some point, the grief that had swallowed up the country became something else, something that was entirely unexpected. People came out to celebrate and what was being called an 'attack on America' had generated an expression of public loyalty that caught even the media off guard. It was incredible. People came out of their homes waving flags. They lined the streets chanting 'USA, USA...' They came together as one, in every corner of the country. Not out of political loyalty, but out of love for their country. That day not only changed the course of history but left a painful wound on the collective psyche of the country, one that would never completely heal. But, I

had to see it for myself and I was close enough to downtown that I could easily walk there within only a few minutes. What I saw beyond belief. People stood shoulder to shoulder, waving small flags while passers-by honked their horns in support. Those who were not holding flags held lit candles as an expression of remembrance for the victims of that day. The words ‘nine eleven’ would be permanently etched into the collective consciousness of the entire country and everyone would remember where they were on the day when the world, as we knew it, came to an end.

## Chapter 5

The campus reopened the next morning, but everyone was obviously preoccupied with yesterday’s events. Upon investigation, it had been discovered that one of the attackers had flown into New York from Portland. The fact that he was under our very noses terrified people. During the cold war, things were different. We knew who the enemy was and the only thing we had to worry about was nuclear war. Now, we faced an enemy that seemed to be hiding in plain sight. They were nearly invisible, yet seemed to be everywhere. What was worse was the fact that they - whoever ‘they’ were - also attempted to attack the Pentagon, as a small plane was flown into the side of the building. Coincidentally, another jet had crashed in western Pennsylvania and although there were no survivors, it had been determined that it had been hijacked and into turning back towards D.C. leading some to believe that the White House was the next target. I wondered how someone could get that close to us. How long had they been here? How long had they been watching and planning? And if they were under government surveillance, why weren’t

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