

# THE GULF IN ME...

## Just how personal is the political?

by Michael Soth

*Michael Soth describes his experiences on the Gulf War of January 1991 and develops a Self and Society Editorial.*

After it was over I ran an evening on "What can I learn from the Gulf War?" I was quite explicitly intending to facilitate in a way where - as I said on the leaflet - "the distinction between personal and political doesn't even make sense any more". There were mostly women at the meeting, and two men. One of the men had come because he said he knew all the information (his work was very much connected with the Middle East), but wanted space for his feelings. He was a sensitive man, and very much aware of the connection between our patriarchal definition of masculinity and militarism, manifest as men's role in the war. The other man was big, self-assured, and came - in my perception - with a hidden agenda of 'standing his ground'. After all, this was supposed to be about 'feelings'- a territory which he didn't feel at home in, but for his own reasons felt obliged and moved to explore. In the initial go-round that I had suggested he immediately became the centre of attention. He declared that the main thing he had **felt** about the war was the lack of neutral information, but apart from that proviso his analysis of the situation was that... and so on.

### **Paralyse the Women**

Then came the interesting moment: the first man said that when listening to people's statements in the go-round he was aware of the different responses from me and women (apart from the other man there was only me, and I hadn't said anything as part of the round yet). When I asked him whether he would be inclined to be more direct, he said, yes, there was an attack in what he was saying, and that the other man's statement could only have come from a man. In order to protect people's identity I will not describe any further detail - suffice it to say that the men took the stage with 'their' conflict and that it wasn't before long that the women in the group felt paralysed. And so did I!

I couldn't believe it. I waffled on about the antagonism in the room, and feebly hinted at a parallel with the war. A parallel? In terms of "the vibes", energetically, the Gulf War was happening right inside the group - and I was scared. It all fitted: the big man's "invasion" of the group, the other man's sophisticated attack (which through the pre-determined nature of our meeting in the end 'won

the day'), everybody else's powerlessness. And me baffled and shaken by the spirits I had conjured up - or that had been waiting to be let out of the closet. I thought: people have not bargained for this, this is not what they came for and have consented to engage in, this is too personal, too confronting, too provocative.

To cut a long story short, I floundered for a while, and then launched into the structured exercises I had prepared. As a result we had a pleasant enough meeting, expressing our feelings about the war (I mean the one 'out there'). But nothing we did had that raw and naked quality of that first and immediate scenario at the beginning of the evening. It served as a reminder for my conviction that if we were to fully recognise just how all-pervasively personal the political is, it would blow our minds. But I would like to suggest that nothing less is needed in order for us to learn the lessons that will help us prevent the next war(s) and surrender to the radical personal-political transformations which our global crisis is inviting us to.

### **Good Guys v Good Guys**

The main reason why we find it difficult to be aware of our personal 'Gulf Wars' is, of course, projection - and especially projection of our 'shadow'. We immediately polarise with one side or the other - the 'good guys' against the 'bad guys'. Our 'choice' of sides is absolute, immediate and vehement, that means it's largely unconscious. The scenario holds such an intensity for us that we lose our self-reflexive abilities (that means I don't ask the question any more: what is it in me that makes me choose this side rather than the other?). Our 'choice' just appears obvious, and gets propounded as 'absolute truth' - and this process is not dissimilar in many peace activists, in our neighbours and in our leaders (just because someone is president, doesn't mean they have left behind ordinary (modern) human functioning). The first victim of every war is awareness of our interconnectedness. We deny our instinctive knowing that each position in the conflict represents some human reality, and as such holds some intrinsic validity. In the polarised atmosphere surrounding a war, it is therefore a relief to hear somebody standing outside the polarisation, and accord value to both sides. The example that touched me in this respect was David Jones' editorial in *Self and Society* (March 1991). He characterised the two sides as Secular Christianity on the one hand and Islam on the other, recognising valuable elements in both: "individual rights, employment and job identity more important than family" and free reign for sexual expression on the Western side and collective and community rights, family identity and modesty regarding sexuality on the Islamic side. "Both sides are capable of great love and service, great gentleness, compassion, creativity, risk taking and wisdom... But neither side has a good word to say about the other."

## **Activists Invalidate Religion**

This statement escapes polarisation in several ways: for a start it doesn't buy into the Western version of the allies as world policemen protecting the weak and other silly moral rationalisations (although I will try to find the kernel of 'truth' in that). But it hears and accepts what Islamic people were actually saying about **their** perspective of the war. Even many peace activists brushed away the clearly religious expression of Iraqi statements as irrelevant, and there are indeed enough economic reasons to tempt us to not look any further than power and oil. But that means we are still siding with the West, by not being willing to join the other side in **their** reality - and I am not just talking about official statements by Saddam, but also about what was said by people in the streets of Baghdad. Even when we expose the Western motives of control over oil, and calling this the first North-South war over natural resources, accurate as this may be about **our** side of the war, we are still caught in the Western perspective - it still doesn't necessarily occur to us what it looks like from the other side. Naming the two sides as Secular Christianity and Islam goes beyond the usual Western confines. I am not sure I would put the distinction quite like this, but the underlying attitude is what matters to me: that we can approach the conflict with the possibility and need for mutual learning. But what is not explicit, and what I am suggesting in addition, is to pay attention to the two sides as **inner polarities in each of us**. Because heartening as it is to see somebody not just automatically polarising on the political level, the step that's even rarer is awareness of the inner war, from a position of identifying with the global psychological process as something that I am personally challenged to integrate. Yes, I can manage to not take sides, and be empathically accepting, by keeping my awareness mainly on the outer conflict as a war between real, and lovable people, each with a valuable and valid spirituality and view of the world. But in this third position I am then in danger of diluting the urgency and ferocity of the inner Gulf War, on the level where it is **my** conflict, a battle which I personally share by virtue of just being alive on the planet, and which is every bit as fierce and 'un-embraceable' as the outer Gulf War.

Yes, I am speaking from a perspective of identity with the planet, of a kind of psychological 'deep ecology'. The dangers of inflation are immense (to be relieved of my ordinary individuality and be part of the big, global and archetypal drama - what a transformation!). But is the reduction to ego-consciousness any more sane, or 'true' for that matter? Which is more truly 'me' - this body, this masculinity, this family, this culture, this planet?

Yes, for the purposes of this article I will consistently read my internal personal dynamic into the process at large, recognise the story of humanity within, and invite you to do the same.