“Warrior” should not be used to describe every individual who now fights, has ever fought, or prepares to fight a war. The term would have more strength if we reserved it to apply only to those warriors who meet other important criteria, which may be less tangible, but ultimately more significant, than that of having taken up arms against an enemy. Before we call any collection of belligerents a culture of warriors, we should first ask why they fight, how they fight, what brings them honor, and what brings them shame. The answers to these questions will reveal whether or not they have a true warrior’s code.

On the first day of the philosophy course I teach at the U.S. Naval Academy called, “The Code of the Warrior,” I ask my students, who are midshipmen preparing for careers as officers in the U.S. Navy or Marine Corps, to reflect on the meaning of the word “warrior.” To facilitate this, I give them an exercise that requires them to identify whether any of a list of five words are perfect synonyms for “warrior.” They are then asked to write a brief explanation of why each of the five succeeds or fails as a synonym. The time constraint keeps their responses relatively raw, yet they are often surprisingly earnest or even impassioned.

The words I offer my students for their consideration are “murderer,” “killer,” “fighter,” “victor,” and “conqueror.” I have found them consistently to favor the rejection of all five. The reasons they offer to account for why they wish to dismiss each of these as synonyms for “warrior” regularly stress the idea that a true “warrior” has to be in some way superior to those who might qualify for the other suggested labels. Consider these representative comments from a variety of midshipmen:

**MURDERER**

“This word has connotations of unjust acts, namely killing for no reason. A warrior fights an enemy who fights to kill him.”

**KILLER**

“A warrior may be required to kill, but it should be for a purpose or cause greater than his own welfare,
for an ideal.”

**FIGHTER**

“Simply fighting doesn’t make a warrior. There are rules a warrior follows.”

**VICTOR**

“Warriors will lose, too – and the people who win aren’t always what a warrior should be.”

**CONQUEROR**

“A conqueror may simply command enough power to overcome opposition. He can be very lacking in the ethical beliefs that should be part of a warrior’s life.”

Almost without exception, my students insist that a “warrior” is not a “murderer.” They can even become emotional in the course of repudiating this (intentionally provocative) potential synonym. It is very important to them to be sure that I understand that while most warriors do *kill* people, they never *murder* anyone. Their remarks are filled with contempt for mere murderers:

- “Murder is committed in cold-blood, without a reason. A warrior should only kill in battle, when it is unavoidable.”
- “Murder seems to me something that is done for an individual motive: a motive that has no real purpose or cause.”
- “Murderers have no noble reason for their crimes.”
- “While a murderer often kills innocent or defenseless people, a warrior restricts his killing to willing combatants. He may stray, but that is an error, not the norm.”
- “This word has connotations of unjust acts, namely killing for no reason. A warrior fights an enemy who fights to kill him.”
- “A murderer is someone who kills and enjoys it. That is not a warrior.”
- “This term has very negative connotations associated with it because a murderer is one who usually kills innocent, unarmed people – while a warrior has honor in battle and does not take advantage of the weak.”
- “A murderer murders out of hate. A warrior does not. He knows how to control his anger.”
- “Murdering involves taking an innocent life, which does not make someone a warrior.”
- “A warrior is not a murderer because a warrior has a code that he lives by which is influenced by
morals which must be justified.”

- “Warriors fight other warriors. Therefore they kill, not murder.”
- “A murderer acts out of hate or personal selfishness.”
- “‘Murderer’ lacks any implication of honor or ethics, but rather calls to mind ruthlessness and disregard for human life.”
- “A murderer kills for gain, or out of anger. He does not allow victims a fair fight.”
- “The term ‘murder’ represents an act done with malice. Warriors killed people in an honorable way.”
- “‘Murder’ implies senseless and unjustified killing.”
- “A murderer has no honor.”

Clearly, my students do not regard the distinction between a warrior and a murderer as a trivial one. Nor should they. In fact, the distinction is an essential one.

Every human society on earth deems some behavior to be morally unacceptable, and murder is a good example of an act that is cross-culturally condemned. Whatever their other points of discord, the major religions of the world agree in the determination that murder (variously defined) is wrong. According to the somewhat cynical 17th-Century philosopher Thomas Hobbes, the fear of our own murderous appetites is what drove us (humans) to form societies in the first place. We eagerly entered into a social contract in which certain rules of civilized behavior could be enforced by a sovereign power in order to escape the miserable, anarchic State of Nature where existence is a “war of every man against every man,” and individual lives are “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” In other words, people want to live under some sort of system that at least attempts to make good the guarantee that when they go to sleep at night, they will not be murdered in their beds.

Unfortunately, the fact that we abhor murder produces a disturbing tension for those who are asked to fight wars for their tribes, clans, communities, cultures or nations. When they are trained for war, warriors are given a mandate by their society to take lives. But they must learn to take only certain lives in certain ways, at certain times, and for certain reasons. Otherwise, they become indistinguishable from murderers and will find themselves condemned by the very societies they were created to serve.

Whatever additional martial activities they may engage in, such as conquering foreign peoples,
acquiring booty or expanding territory, warriors (even the so-called “barbarian” warriors) exist for one primary purpose. That purpose is to defend their communities from any forces that may seek to undermine the security of the social contract: from the “Barbarians at the Gate.” The trick is that they must find some way to accomplish this goal without become the barbarians themselves.

Most projections into the haze of our prehistoric past suggest that early human societies were tribal, and that within these tribes a hunter class, charged with providing food for the tribe and protection from predatory animals, evolved into a warrior class having a broader mandate to protect the interests of the tribe generally against all threats, animal or human. Alterations in population sizes, migration, and the strained carrying capacity of certain regions of the earth caused more tribes to come in contact with one another and vie for resources. Inevitably, serious inter-tribal conflicts arose. Before long, a successful warrior class became essential to each tribe’s survival. As more complex social-political systems developed and civilization advanced, the composition and exact duties of warrior classes around the globe underwent some changes. But their primary role remained constant: to protect and promote their culture’s survival.

The survival of a society does not depend just upon the rescue of citizens or the retention of land. The survival of a culture depends as much, if not more, on the continued existence, recognition, and celebration of a coherent cultural self-conception – on the preservation of cultural identity – as it does on the continued existence of a sustained population or physical boundaries. Several cultures persist in the absence of any physical boundaries (e.g. nomadic cultures), and a culture can be destroyed or supplanted by other means than genocide or territorial conquest. A culture’s identity is defined by its deepest values: the values that its citizens believe are worth defending, worth dying for. These are the values that shape a society’s “way of life.” And it is that “way of life” that warriors fight to maintain.

Warrior cultures throughout history and from diverse regions around the globe have all constructed codes of behavior, which establish that culture’s image of the ideal warrior. These codes have not always been written down or literally codified into a set of explicit rules, yet they can be identified as they are carefully conveyed in some form to each succeeding generation of warriors. These codes tend to be quite demanding. They are often closely linked to a culture’s religious beliefs and can be connected to elaborate (in some cases, death defying or excruciatingly painful) rituals and rites of
passage. And in many cases they seem to hold the warrior to a higher ethical standard than that required for an ordinary citizen within the general population of the society that the warrior serves. The warriors themselves frequently police strict adherence to these standards; with violators being shamed, ostracized, or even killed by their peers. [One relevant historical example comes from the Roman legions, where a man who fell asleep while he was supposed to be on watch in time of war could expect to be stoned to death by the members of his own cohort.]

But why do warriors need such a code? Why should a warrior culture want to restrict the actions of its members and require them to commit to lofty ideals? Might not such restraints cripple their effectiveness as warriors? What’s wrong with, “All’s fair in love and war?” Isn’t winning all that matters? Why could any warrior be burdened with concerns about honor and shame?

One reason for such warriors’ codes may be to protect the warrior him- (or her-) self from serious psychological damage. The things that warriors are asked to do to guarantee their culture’s survival are not always pleasant. There is truth in the inescapable slogan, “War is hell.” The combination of the warriors’ own natural disgust at what they must see in battle and the fact that what they must do on the battlefield seems so uncivilized, so against what they have been taught by their society, could make warriors feel tremendous self-loathing.

Warriors need a way to distinguish what they must do out of a sense of duty from what a serial killer does for the sheer sadistic pleasure of it. Their actions, like those of the serial killer, set them apart from the rest of society. Warriors, however, are not sociopaths. They respect the values of the society in which they were raised and which they are prepared to die to protect. Therefore it is important for them to conduct themselves in such a way that they will be honored and esteemed by their communities, not reviled and rejected by them. They want to be seen as proud defenders and representatives of what is best about their culture: as heroes, not “baby-killers.”

By setting high standards for themselves, warriors can create a lifeline that will allow them to pull themselves out of the hell of war and reintegrate themselves into their society. A warrior’s code may cover everything from the treatment of prisoners of war to oath keeping to table etiquette, but its primary purpose is to grant nobility to the warriors’ profession. This allows warriors to retain both their self-respect and the respect of those they guard.
The question can then be asked, if a warrior’s code is indeed crucial to the warrior’s moral psychology, is enough being done at today’s U.S. service academies to present our warriors-in-training with such a code and promote their internalization of it? Certainly, there are honor codes and honor concepts, character development seminars, ethics classes and core values. All of these efforts seem aimed in the right direction, but do they in fact add up to the successful transmission of a true warrior’s code?

I have asked many midshipmen and cadets this question in a variety of contexts. The answer they typically give is a mixed review. They do believe that they are given a code to follow; however, they are not necessarily certain either that it is an adequate warrior’s code or that they are sufficiently inspired to take it on board as their own personal credo (a way of life, not mere memorized words). I believe one of the reasons for this was captured by Mark Osiel in his book Obeying Orders, in which he argues that the modern military too often relies on a rule-following approach to character training, rather than employing a more Aristotelian method of promoting key virtues and providing strong role models so that young warriors can form deeply ingrained habits of excellence. A second problem I believe can be traced to changes in the educational approach at the academies, that may be lumped under the broad umbrella of “political correctness.” For example, there is a push these days to avoid any lessons that might give our young warriors a sense of superiority over their civilian counterparts. This is driven by a well-intentioned concern over tension in civilian/military relations (the “widening gap”), but it can undermine the critical formation of confidence among our students. Midshipmen and cadets are exhorted not to regard themselves as an elite group, distinct from other cadres of the population. While I certainly agree that those who serve in the military should show (and, more importantly, feel) respect for those who achieve great things in the civilian world and make their own contributions to society out of uniform, I see no reason why such respect should be thought incompatible with feeling elite themselves. There is nothing odd about feeling immense pride in being, say, an excellent fire-fighter, and yet still having great respect for those who are, for example, excellent coaches, artists, or scholars. A warrior may take tremendous pride in the fact that he is among those few best qualified to defend his nation and still think very highly of those civilians who are best qualified to teach in urban high schools or run successful businesses or write an immortal sonnet.
On the moral side, I see nothing wrong with withholding respect from persons, in or out of uniform, who make no real attempt to adhere to ethical standards. If warriors do in fact live up to the high standards they set for themselves, it is not unfair or hypocritical of them to expect the same from others. On the other hand, warriors who are justifiably proud of the ethical components of their own code should not assume that all civilians lack any equally demanding code, simply because a civilian’s code, unlike the UCMJ, may not be backed by the threat of formal punishment. There are plenty of civilians who firmly believe that adultery is wrong and will remain faithful to their marriage vows, even if no laws required them to do so.

With regard to their martial abilities, warriors-in-training should be encouraged to feel that they are capable of things that most civilians (by choice or nature) are not. What is the point of training if, at the end of it, you do not feel that you can do or withstand what those not similarly trained cannot? Unfortunately, many rites of passage (events intended to prove to the participants that they can do or withstand what others cannot) have been softened to the point that they now carry little emotional significance. This was done to prevent a negative form of hazing, but it seems that the baby may have been thrown out with the bath water. Some hazing is nothing more the foolish exercise of petty power by one group over another. Hazing that claims the status of a rite of passage but in actuality does nothing to make the warrior feel more prepared to face the demands of his or her future career of service should indeed be avoided. True rites of passage, in contrast, are carefully designed to allow those who endure them to prove something to themselves. Even if they involve lessons in humility, they are ultimately intended to make the warrior feel more like a warrior, not to make those administering or observing the rite feel better about themselves. Well-conceived rites of passage enhance individual dignity; they do not damage it. It should be noted that in historical warrior traditions, many of the most powerful rites are entirely self-administered. Sioux braves willingly pierced their pectoral muscles and attached themselves by cords to a tall pole, dancing around it until the cords ripped loose out of their torn flesh. The Chinese monks of Shaolin entered the Corridor of Death of their own free will, knowing that even if they survived its deadly gauntlet of booby-traps, they could not escape without lifting a 300-pound, red-hot cauldron away from the exit, using only their bare arms (which would be permanently branded in the process with the images of a dragon and a tiger). Such rituals may seem unnecessarily savage, but a
similar criticism has been raised in modern times against mere blood pinning. I think it is both ridiculous and cruel to “protect” future warriors from rites of passage that may give them the confidence they will need to survive a genuine conflict, on the grounds that such rites may cause them physical or emotional distress, when we have no intention of protecting them from much greater physical and emotion distress in their careers or in combat. It is equally ludicrous to use the inclusion of women in warrior training as an excuse for watering down training. The desire to face real challenges, to demonstrate competence, and to build confidence by mastering trials is not gender-specific.

True rites of passage, along with other lessons and experiences conducive to making young men and women feel like warriors, have to be maintained at this country’s most prestigious service academies and other centers of military training. We must not send our defenders off to hunt through the caves of Afghanistan or subdue warlords in Somalia without first arming them with the internal strength and confidence that comes from struggling to live up to the demands of a warriors’ code. The specific skills and abilities that warriors need to succeed in responding to modern threats will continue to evolve, but as long as war involves killing and dying, there will be a need for warriors who feel like warriors. It is doing them a disservice to pretend that their jobs are no different than those of businesspeople, computer specialists, or engineers in the civilian world. They certainly need to know the difference between a warrior and a murderer. But they also need to know the difference between a warrior and a bureaucrat.