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BILL MOYERS JOURNAL

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TRANSCRIPT:

April 9, 2010

BILL MOYERS: Welcome to the Journal. The war in Afghanistan has claimed more than one thousand American lives and in the last two years alone the lives of more than four thousand Afghan civilians. It's costing American taxpayers over three-and-a-half billion dollars every month—a total of some \$264 billion so far. But for all that, in the words of one policy analyst quoted by the New York Times this week, "there are no better angels about to descend on Afghanistan."

The news from that torturous battleground continues to dismay, discourage and enrage. America's designated driver there, Hamid Karzai, is proving increasingly unstable behind the wheel. The United States put Karzai in power and our soldiers have been fighting and dying on his behalf ever since. Despite widespread corruption in his government. Now he's making threats against the western coalition that is shedding blood and treasure on his behalf.

Even more disturbing, for the moment, are the civilian deaths from nighttime raids and aerial bombings by American and other NATO troops. Just this week, we learned of an apparent cover-up following a Special Forces raid in February that killed five civilians, including three women, two of whom were pregnant. It's believed bullets were gouged from the women's bodies to conceal evidence of American involvement.

This slaughter of innocents has led the pro-American "Economist" magazine to question whether our entire effort in Afghanistan has been nothing but a meaningless exercise of misguided violence."

With me is a man with first-hand experience of war. Andrew Bacevich served 23 years, some of them in Vietnam, before retiring from the Army. He's now professor of history and international relations at Boston University. Just this week he was at a US Army War College symposium on the highly pertinent question, "How do we know when a war is over?" His book, "The Limits of Power," was a best-seller and his latest, "Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War," comes out this summer. Andrew Bacevich, welcome back to the Journal.

ANDREW BACEVICH: Thank you very much.

BILL MOYERS: These civilian casualties that we've been hearing about, they're inevitable in war, right?

ANDREW BACEVICH: Sure they are. But I think that what's particularly important about the incidents that we're reading about is that they really call into question U.S. strategy. I mean, when General McChrystal conceived of this counterinsurgency approach in Afghanistan, one of the, sort of the core principles is that we would act in ways that would demonstrate our benign intentions. We're supposed to be protecting the population. And when it turns out that U.S. forces are killing non-combatants, and there are repeated incidents that have occurred, I think it calls into question the sincerity, the seriousness of the strategy. Or it calls into question the extent to which McChrystal is actually in control of the forces that he commands.

There doesn't seem to be any noticeable change, and any noticeable reduction in the frequency with which these incidents are occurring. So, I mean, were I an Afghan, I

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think I would not place a whole heck of a lot of credibility on the claims that, you know, "We're here to help."

BILL MOYERS: That nighttime incident in February that I referred to, you know, one woman killed was a pregnant mother of 10 children. Another was a pregnant mother of 6 children. And our people peddled the story at the time that they had been stabbed to death by family members on an otherwise festive occasion. Was that a lie, do you think, a deliberate lie?

ANDREW BACEVICH: Based on the reports that we read in "The New York Times," yes, it was a deliberate lie. I mean, I think one of the hidden issues here, and it's one that really needs to be brought to the surface, is we have two kinds of forces operating in Afghanistan. We have conventional forces.

BILL MOYERS: The Marines and infantry.

ANDREW BACEVICH: Right. And they are accompanied by reporters. We get at least some amount of information about what these forces are doing and how they're doing it. But in a sense, we have a second army. And the second army are the units that comprise Special Operations forces. They exist in secrecy. They operate in secrecy. Clearly there was a violation of some kind in that incident in February that killed the pregnant women.

The question is, are they being held accountable? Who's being fired? Who's being disciplined? What actions are being taken to ensure that incidents like that will not occur again? And again, this secrecy, the fact that they operate behind this black curtain, I think, makes it more difficult for that kind of accountability to be asserted.

BILL MOYERS: To whom are they responsible behind that black curtain?

ANDREW BACEVICH: Well, presumably they're responsible to General McChrystal, who is the senior US and NATO commander in Afghanistan. And McChrystal himself comes out of the Special Operations community. That's his entire background is in Special Operations. And you might wonder whether or not that gives him a better understanding of Special Operations to enable him to use that capability more precisely. Or you might wonder if it makes him too sympathetic to Special Operations. They're his guys, so give them a break.

BILL MOYERS: General McChrystal himself has said that we've shot - and this is his words not mine—an amazing number of people over there who did not seem to be a threat to his troops.

ANDREW BACEVICH: I think that is—that's clearly the case. When McChrystal was put in command last year, and devised his counterinsurgency strategy, the essential core principle of that strategy is that we will protect the population. We will protect the people. And the contradiction is that ever since President Obama gave McChrystal the go-ahead to implement that strategy, we have nonetheless continued to have this series of incidents in which we're not only not protecting the population. But indeed we're killing non-combatants.

BILL MOYERS: Given what's happening in the killing of these innocent people, is the very term, "military victory in Afghanistan," an oxymoron?

ANDREW BACEVICH: Oh, this is—yes. And I think one of the most interesting and indeed perplexing things that's happened in the past three, four years is that in many respects, the officer corps itself has given up on the idea of military victory. We could find any number of quotations from General Petraeus, the central command commander, and General McChrystal, the immediate commander in Afghanistan, in which they say that there is no military solution in Afghanistan, that we will not win a military victory, that the only solution to be gained, if there is one, is through bringing to success this project of armed nation-building.

And the reason that's interesting, at least to a military historian of my generation, of the Vietnam generation, is that after Vietnam, this humiliation that we had experienced, the collective purpose of the officer corps, in a sense, was to demonstrate that war worked. To demonstrate that war could be purposeful.

That out of that collision, on the battlefield, would come decision, would come victory. And that soldiers could claim purposefulness for their profession by saying to both the political leadership and to the American people, "This is what we can do. We can, in certain situations, solve very difficult problems by giving you military victory."

Well, here in the year 2010, nobody in the officer corps believes in military victory. And in that sense, the officer corps has, I think, unwittingly really forfeited its claim to providing a unique and important service to American society. I mean, why, if indeed the purpose of the exercise in Afghanistan is to, I mean, to put it crudely,

drag this country into the modern world, why put a four-star general in charge of that? Why not—why not put a successful mayor of a big city? Why not put a legion of social reformers? Because the war in Afghanistan is not a war as the American military traditionally conceives of war.

BILL MOYERS: Well, President Obama was in Afghanistan not too long ago, as you know. And he attempted to state the purpose of our war there to our troops.

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA: Our broad mission is clear. We are going to disrupt and dismantle, defeat and destroy al Qaeda and its extremist allies. That is our mission. And to accomplish that goal, our objectives here in Afghanistan are also clear. We're going to deny al Qaeda safe haven. We're going to reverse the Taliban's momentum. We're going to strengthen the capacity of Afghan security forces and the Afghan government so that they can begin taking responsibility and gain confidence of the Afghan people.

BILL MOYERS: That sounds to me like a traditional, classical military assignment, to find the enemy and defeat him.

ANDREW BACEVICH: Well, but there's also then the reference to sort of building the capacity of the Afghan government. And that's where, of course, the president, he'd just come from this meeting with President Karzai. Basically, as we understand from press reports, the president sort of administered a tongue-lashing to Karzai to tell him to get his act together. Which then was followed by Karzai issuing his own tongue-lashing, calling into question whether or not he actually was committed to supporting the United States in its efforts in Afghanistan. And again, this kind of does bring us back, in a way, to Vietnam, where we found ourselves harnessed to allies, partners that turned out to be either incompetent or corrupt. Or simply did not share our understanding of what needed to be done for that country.

BILL MOYERS: What does it say to you as a soldier that our political leaders, time and again, send men and women to fight for, on behalf of corrupt guys like Karzai?

ANDREW BACEVICH: Well, we don't learn from history. And there is this persistent, and I think almost inexplicable belief that the use of military force in some godforsaken country on the far side of the planet will not only yield some kind of purposeful result, but by extension, will produce significant benefits for the United States. I mean, one of the obvious things about the Afghanistan war that is so striking and yet so frequently overlooked is that we're now in the ninth year of this war.

It is the longest war in American history. And it is a war for which there is no end in sight. And to my mind, it is a war that is utterly devoid of strategic purpose. And the fact that that gets so little attention from our political leaders, from the press or from our fellow citizens, I think is simply appalling, especially when you consider the amount of money we're spending over there and the lives that are being lost whether American or Afghan.

BILL MOYERS: But President Obama says, our purpose is to prevent the Taliban from creating another rogue state from which the jihadists can attack the United States, as happened on 9/11. Isn't that a strategic purpose?

ANDREW BACEVICH: I mean, if we could wave a magic wand tomorrow and achieve in Afghanistan all the purposes that General McChrystal would like us to achieve, would the Jihadist threat be substantially reduced as a consequence? And does anybody think that somehow, Jihadism is centered or headquartered in Afghanistan? When you think about it for three seconds, you say, "Well, of course, it's not. It is a transnational movement."

BILL MOYERS: They can come from Yemen. They can come from—

ANDREW BACEVICH: They can come from Brooklyn. So the notion that somehow, because the 9/11 attacks were concocted in this place, as indeed they were, the notion that therefore, the transformation of Afghanistan will provide some guarantee that there won't be another 9/11 is patently absurd. Quite frankly, the notion that we can prevent another 9/11 by invading and occupying and transforming countries is absurd.

BILL MOYERS: In this context, then, what do we do about what is a real threat, from people who want to kill us, the Jihadists. What do we do about that?

ANDREW BACEVICH: First of all, we need to assess the threat realistically. Osama bin Laden is not Adolf Hitler. Al-Qaeda is not Nazi Germany. Al-Qaeda poses a threat. It does not pose an existential threat. We should view Al-Qaeda as the equivalent of an international criminal conspiracy. Sort of a mafia that in some way or another draws its energy or legitimacy from a distorted understanding of a particular religious

tradition.

And as with any other international criminal conspiracy, the proper response is a police effort. I mean, a ruthless, sustained, international police effort to identify the thugs, root out the networks and destroy it. Something that would take a long period of time and would no more succeed fully in eliminating the threat than the NYPD is able to fully eliminate criminality in New York City.

BILL MOYERS: You participated this week in a symposium at the Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, on the subject, "How will we know when a war ends?" So, the boots are on the ground there. The troops are there, committed, at least through 2011. What do we do?

ANDREW BACEVICH: Well, I have to say, and I mean, I'm sure this sounds too simplistic. It would be way too simplistic for people in Washington. But if you want to get out of a war, you get out of a war. I mean, you call General McChrystal and say, "Your mission has changed. And your mission is to organize an orderly extrication of US forces."

You know, if it were me, I'd say, "General McChrystal, call me back in two weeks and tell me what the plan is and how long it's going to take." But war termination for us has come to be very difficult, because of our inability to understand the war that we undertake.

We are now close to a decade into what the Pentagon now calls, "The Long War." And it is a war in which one-half of one percent of the American people bear the burden. And the other 99.5 percent basically go on about their daily life, as if the war did not exist.

I mean, the great paradox of the Long War, is that it seems the Long War consists of a series of campaigns with Iraq and Afghanistan being the two most important, although one could add Pakistan and Yemen to the list, in which there seems to be no way to wind down the campaign.

Or to claim from the campaign some positive benefit that allows us to say that the end date of the long war is any closer. And we do find ourselves in this circumstance where permanent war now seems to have become the norm. And we don't know what to do about that.

BILL MOYERS: There's something else that President Obama said when he was in Afghanistan. **Take a look at this:**

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA: The United States of America does not quit once it starts on something. You don't quit, the American Armed Services does not quit, we keep at it, we persevere, and together with our partners we will prevail. I am absolutely confident of that.

BILL MOYERS: How do you read that?

ANDREW BACEVICH: Well, I think the president has, he's placed down this enormous bet. A bet involves 100 thousand American soldiers.

And the deterioration of circumstances, for example, if Karzai turns out to be an unreliable ally, even that will make it extraordinarily difficult for the president to now say, "Well, I've changed my mind. I'm going to take that, I'm going to take that bet off the table." So in that sense, the rhetoric is not at all surprising, I think. And of course, it's historically incorrect. We quit after the Mogadishu firefight in Somalia. I think that it probably was prudent to quit. That doesn't make Somalia a great place today. We quit in Vietnam, having paid an enormous cost, to try to maintain the viability of South Vietnam. So there are times actually when it makes sense to quit.

BILL MOYERS: Should we quit in Afghanistan?

ANDREW BACEVICH: I think so. I mean again, I believe that ultimately, a sound foreign policy should be informed by an enlightened understanding of one's own interests. That's what we pay people like President Obama big money to do, to advance our collective interests, what's good for this country, this people. And the perpetuation of the war in Afghanistan is not good for this country and for our people.

BILL MOYERS: Why?

ANDREW BACEVICH: Because we are squandering our treasure. We are losing lives for no purpose. And ultimately, the perpetuation of this unnecessary war does, I think, serve to exacerbate the problems within the Islamic world, rather than reducing those problems.

BILL MOYERS: Andrew Bacevich, thank you for joining me on the Journal. And we'll continue this conversation on our website at PBS.org.

BILL MOYERS: I recently had one of those experiences that I'll wager is familiar to you—the book I was reading so possessed me that I happily gave up a couple of consecutive nights of sleep just to finish it. Here it is: "Shadow Tag," by Louise Erdrich, who many of you know to be one of our most prolific and acclaimed writers.

LOUISE ERDRICH: [Foreign language]

BILL MOYERS: Louise Erdrich has created landscapes from her experience and imagination that become as real to her readers as their own hometowns. For her, it's Argus, North Dakota, a town like the place where she grew up, on the endless Dakota plains. Like many of her characters she was raised Catholic and deeply influenced by a mix of cultures—her mother was French Ojibwe, her father, German-American, and both taught at a school run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Louise went on to become one of the first women to graduate from Dartmouth College. After earning a master's at Johns Hopkins she wrote poetry, while eking out a living as a waitress, lifeguard, and other odd jobs, including teaching poetry in a prison, until she was 30. That's when her first novel "Love Medicine" was published to critical and popular success. She introduced us to several generations of three Native-American clans. And since then she's produced thirteen novels in all, and volumes of poetry and children's books.

But when she's not in her writer's attic, this is where she likes to hang out.

LOUISE ERDRICH: Yes, that's one of my favorite books...

BILL MOYERS: Birchbark Books, the independent bookstore she owns in Minneapolis—a local jewel of literature as well as Ojibwe and other Native American art and crafts. There's even a reminder of the Catholicism of her childhood—a confessional.

LOUISE ERDRICH: We let people come in, it's a forgiveness booth now. We've redesignated it.

BILL MOYERS: She's become quite serious about preserving the Ojibwe language...

MALE VOICE: [Foreign language]

GROUP: [Foreign language]

BILL MOYERS: Even taking part in language tables organized by the Native-American community....

She's with me now, and I've been impatient to ask her about "Shadow Tag," her fierce account of a troubled marriage and its impact on three precocious children.

Louise Erdrich, welcome to the Journal.

LOUISE ERDRICH: Thank you so much. It's good to be here.

BILL MOYERS: I have to tell you that when I opened that book and read the first page, it was like stepping onto a high-speed train that didn't stop until it got to its destination. And even when I got to the last page, I didn't want the trip to be over. I mean, it is a masterpiece of suspense and character.

LOUISE ERDRICH: Thank you.

BILL MOYERS: But where did this idea come from?

LOUISE ERDRICH: I wanted to write a suspense novel. I like that kind of narrative. And I wanted to do exactly what you what you picked out about it. I wanted to have a reader start it and—and keep reading it and want to know what happened.

BILL MOYERS: Where did the title, "Shadow Tag," come from?

LOUISE ERDRICH: I'm wondering if you played shadow tag, because when I asked that question in a Minnesota audience, everybody raised their hands.

BILL MOYERS: Well, I did in east Texas—

LOUISE ERDRICH: You did.

BILL MOYERS: —that's where you try to step on the shadow of the other—

LOUISE ERDRICH: The other person's shadow.

BILL MOYERS: Yeah.

LOUISE ERDRICH: That's when you grow up in a place where you can play outdoors, under a street lamp, late into the night. And that's what I did. I had that title for many, many, many years until it occurred to me that if the shadow selves in a relationship were to interact somehow, they would be playing shadow tag.

The shadow selves. I don't really mean only the darker sides of people, but I mean the dream sides, the sides that almost—the subterranean sides that we don't know. We don't always know what our actions are going to be in respect to another person, and somehow, in this setting, under their trapped circumstances, their shadow selves begin to interact.

BILL MOYERS : There is a moment in this book when Gil and Irene—we sense their shadow selves. We sense the layer of deception that is at the heart of their marriage. And the fact is she hates him and she loves him. Right?

LOUISE ERDRICH: They're very intertwined. Gil is a painter. And Irene is often his subject. He's an artist.

BILL MOYERS: Most of his paintings are of her, at different stages and in different poses, right? That's why it becomes sort of the story of a stolen identity about how a man steals his wife's image and power.

LOUISE ERDRICH: And it's also a book about diaries and about doubles. So—and I love the German word doppelganger, by the way. It's a great—that image kept coming back and back and into this book as well.

BILL MOYERS: Now here she is, keeping two diaries.

LOUISE ERDRICH: She's keeping a double diary—

BILL MOYERS: One—double diaries.

LOUISE ERDRICH: She begins to realize that he is reading her diary, and so she decides she can—

BILL MOYERS: Secretly, he—

LOUISE ERDRICH: Secretly. And so she keeps a diary that's the truth. And he reads a diary that's a falsehood.

BILL MOYERS: She's writing these lies deliberately for him to read.

LOUISE ERDRICH: She's manipulating him.

BILL MOYERS: Manipulating him.

LOUISE ERDRICH: Right.

BILL MOYERS: So from your own experience and from these characters you have invented, how much of love? How much of marriage involves holding back a part of ourselves?

LOUISE ERDRICH: About half.

BILL MOYERS: The shadow half?

LOUISE ERDRICH: No, I think the shadow half is very important to show in a marriage. That's the thing that doesn't happen really, you know. We wait and hold back and that half until we're absolutely secure with each other. You know, you can't completely immerse yourself in another human being.

BILL MOYERS: It seems to me this book's theme is love, survival and memory. And I would think that love, survival and memory are themes that come to you from your American Indian past, because that's what Indians have done. They've survived, and memory is very important to them, isn't it?

LOUISE ERDRICH: Memory is all. Memory is where the language resided, because it was an oral language. The stories resided. They were not written down. They were describing mnemonic devices. But I have to say that as you said that the image of my father came into my mind.

I thought about the letters he's written me. He's written me hundreds, maybe thousands of letters over my lifetime. And his letters are really the treasures of my life. They take in whole pieces of memory and they're his gift to me. He described everything that was happening around him. And as I read back through, I have a very different life than what I remember. I have—and I have it in his letters.

BILL MOYERS: Well, I know you are very close to your father. But you don't seem to live very close to that Germanic tradition. It seems to me that you really draw mostly from this Native American imagery that's in your, in your past.

LOUISE ERDRICH: I think that is one of the reasons that Native American people puzzle other people. Why is that so strong with them? Why don't they just become like the rest of us? What is it that's so important in their culture that they cling to it so?

I think it has to do with the belongingness and the sense of peace that I feel among other native people, this sense of community, you're in the comfort of a very funny, grounded people, who are related to everything that's around them, who don't feel this estrangement that people feel so often.

And that's why being Ojibwe or Anishinabe is so important to me. I'm very proud and very comfortable with it.

BILL MOYERS: You heard Ojibwe spoken, growing up?

LOUISE ERDRICH: My grandfather spoke. And he spoke it as he prayed. And he had his medicine bundle and his prayer objects. And he would walk in back of the house. And he would stand in front of the woods and just go a little way in. And then I would stand behind him and listen to him praying.

And as I grew up, I believed and thought that Ojibwe was like Latin. Like, you know, it was a ceremonial language. And it wasn't until I was in my teens that I walked into a situation where people in a store were all speaking Ojibwe. And they were laughing, and I wanted to know what jokes, what the jokes were. I wanted to get the jokes. And I began to think, "I have to know this language."

When I moved to Minnesota, I found there was a thriving and determined movement, a grassroots movement, to revitalize the Ojibwe language. And I've never come to be a competent speaker. I have to say that right now. But even learning the amount of Ojibwe that one can at my age is a life-altering experience.

BILL MOYERS: How so?

LOUISE ERDRICH: You see the world in a different way. And to be told that you're working in a language in which there is a spirit behind this language. I think it has to do with this being one of the indigenous languages of this continent. In which, as you look around, you see the forms of things that were named long, long ago. And you see the forms of things that have been named relatively recently. You know, this is—

BILL MOYERS: Give me an example of what you're talking about.

LOUISE ERDRICH: Well, I'm going to read to you from this book, because this is—

BILL MOYERS: What is this?

LOUISE ERDRICH: —a wonderful book. It's a vocabulary project. It's a book for Ojibwe immersion schools.

[Speaking Ojibwe]

That is a translation by a Rose Tainter of the first amendment.

BILL MOYERS: Is that right? Read it again.

LOUISE ERDRICH: [Speaking Ojibwe]

You know, Native Americans put their deepest trust in the United States government. And they teach their children in Ojibwe what their relationship is towards this government—

BILL MOYERS: After all the bad experiences with the government that constantly was going back on its word, breaking its promises?

LOUISE ERDRICH: After all those bad experiences, Native Americans first fought in World War I before they had citizenship. The American flag comes out first at every pow-wow. There's an incredible relationship that is felt—there is—a heart to heart

feeling about the government that we are nation to nation with you.

It's a sense of equality. That you will recognize us, that we did not vanish as you thought. That we survived. We exist. We are—we have our language. We have your words in our language. We have your constitution in our language.

BILL MOYERS: Are your children learning Ojibwe?

LOUISE ERDRICH: Yes.

BILL MOYERS: For what reason?

LOUISE ERDRICH: That sense of community, peace, comfort and because this language, it speaks to our background. I'd love to meet my ancestors. I'd love to be able to speak to them. There's a story that—a teaching that you're going to be asked after you die what your name is in Ojibwe. That's a teaching. You're going to have to give your name. You're going to have to speak to the spirit if you want to go to that place. Otherwise you will go to the Christian heaven, which doesn't seem like much fun.

BILL MOYERS: So what's the alternative?

LOUISE ERDRICH: You get to—you can do all sorts of things in your Ojibwe heaven that you can't do in the Christian heaven.

BILL MOYERS: What—such as?

LOUISE ERDRICH: You can gamble. You can make love. You can eat. You—it's like a world where there's no sad consequence to any pleasurable thing you do. It's a happy—it's a world like this one, but you don't have the pain.

BILL MOYERS: So when you reach the other side, and you're asked your name in Ojibwe, what are you going to say?

LOUISE ERDRICH: [Speaking Ojibwe] or I'll answer [speaking Ojibwe]. That was my grandfather's name for me. [speaking Ojibwe] is a beautiful Ojibwe name that means golden—the feather of the golden eagle.

And I don't know that I'm going to reach the other side, Bill. I don't even—I keep shifting my spiritual beliefs about an afterlife.

BILL MOYERS: Well, you may have to invoke your Catholic past, right?

LOUISE ERDRICH: That's the beauty of being a mixed person. You know, if there's a German afterlife—it'll all depend. I'm going to think fast.

BILL MOYERS: Well, you have that capacity.

Your cultures, plural, keep competing within your imagination, don't they?

LOUISE ERDRICH: Yeah. They do. They do.

BILL MOYERS: Where do your ideas come from, if you have this constant interplay between these many cultures?

LOUISE ERDRICH: You know, I live on the margin of just about everything. I'm a marginal person, and I think that is where I've become comfortable. I'm marginally there in my native life. I can do as much as I can, but I'm always German too, you know, and I'm always a mother. That's my first identity, but I'm always a writer too. I have to write. I have to be an artist. You know, I have a very fractured inner life, I think.

BILL MOYERS: The first non-fiction you did about your pregnancy and your child's birth. That first year of that child.

LOUISE ERDRICH: "The Blue Jay's Dance."

BILL MOYERS: "The Blue Jay's Dance." And what was the metaphor there?

LOUISE ERDRICH: It was a blue jay's dance of courage in front of a hawk. And I saw it from the window as I was nursing my baby, I saw outside the window this—I kept feeders and all sorts of birds came down. I saw a blue jay. And then a hawk came down and missed it.

And the blue jay knew it was doomed. But it started to dance at the hawk. And it so startled the hawk that the hawk sort of adjusted its vision, I think, because the blue

jay was confusing it. This dance of an inferior bird against a superior raptor finally so mortified the hawk that it flew away.

BILL MOYERS: So this is the mother's role, the blue jay's dance to keep the aggressive hawk at a distance, right?

LOUISE ERDRICH: I never really thought of it exactly that way. It may be that I thought about it in the book, but—yes. Well, it's the advantage so many of us have, in a small way. It's the advantage of behaving in a surprisingly courageous fashion, when the odds are completely against you.

BILL MOYERS: Which is what mothers do, right?

LOUISE ERDRICH: I've seen it—many do.

BILL MOYERS: And—

LOUISE ERDRICH: They do. They do.

BILL MOYERS: And it comes through in "Shadow Tag."

LOUISE ERDRICH: Yeah.

BILL MOYERS: There's this incredible kid in here named Stoney.

LOUISE ERDRICH: Yeah.

BILL MOYERS: And he comes to an amazing truth that you describe in this short passage. Read it, and I want to ask you about it then.

LOUISE ERDRICH: Irene bent over and held her son. With her arms locked, she backed up to the living room couch and toppled them both onto the pillows. Stoney tightened his arms around Irene, still sobbing so harshly that he couldn't form words. There was nothing to do but stroke his sun-shot hair. Soon Irene could feel the hot tears soak through her shirt.

What is it?

The crying began all over again with the same miserable force. Then Stoney quit. I don't want to be a human, he said. His voice was passionate. I want to be a snake. I want to be a rat or spider or wolf. Maybe a cheetah.

Why, what's wrong?

It's too hard to be a human. I wish I was born a crow, a raccoon, or I could be a horse. I don't want to be human anymore.

BILL MOYERS: I mean, unpack that moment when he says, "It's too hard to be human." This is a six-year-old saying this. What were you saying?

LOUISE ERDRICH: That we rationalize ourselves out of shame. We can rationalize anything away as we get older and older, but a child hasn't that capacity yet. And so when the shame hits, it's being knocked over. And it's the truth of shame. And it's what comes back to us.

Sometimes when we are—and it—this is what happens to everybody. There's going to be a time, no matter who we are, that we participate in the very oldest of human sorrows. We are at one with other people in our loss, in our shame, and we come to the very limit of who we are as people. We face that part of ourselves that we never wanted to look at. And then we experience shame the way a child experiences it.

BILL MOYERS: And how is that different?

LOUISE ERDRICH: It's pure. It's pure and that moment and other moments like it link us with other human beings, I think.

BILL MOYERS: Well, there's something else that comes up here too, which is that no matter how much a mother or a father, but in particular a mother can love a child, you can't protect him from the cruelty of the world, can you?

LOUISE ERDRICH: No. You can put up—you know, a mother is a frayed net, you know. We stretch ourselves over everything we can. But there's holes all over the place where things get through and we do everything we can and fathers and—you know, as parents, we try so hard. But we can't do it all. We can't completely protect.

I think in a very odd sense, I want things to be in ordinary for my children, routine. I want things to be simple, you know, for them to cope with. But that's not what the world is like. And that's not even what they want. They want to grow. They want to grow in every way that they possibly can and that's going to involve pain.

BILL MOYERS: I came across this very well-known reviewer who said that with each successive novel Louise Erdrich is writing, she's writing more like Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Albert Camus. I mean, that's a heavy burden, isn't it?

LOUISE ERDRICH: I think if I thought that way, you know, I wouldn't be able to do a thing.

BILL MOYERS: No, but the reviewers do, so the next novel you write, it's got to be Hemingway, Camus or Faulkner.

LOUISE ERDRICH: Just got to be Erdrich. I can't do anything else. I'm going to read this, 'cause this is what I finally had to do. I had to give myself advice. You know, I—there's many more—there's many writers who are more deserving of that sort of praise, but I don't think as many of them have as many children, as much—as messy a house. "Advice to myself."

Leave the dishes.

Let the celery rot in the bottom drawer of the refrigerator
and earthen scum harden on the kitchen floor.

Leave the black crumbs at the bottom of the toaster.

Throw the cracked bowl out and don't patch the cup.

Don't patch anything. Don't mend. Buy safety pins.

Don't even sew in a button.

Let the wind have its way, then the earth
that invades as dust and then the dead
foaming up in gray rolls under the couch.

Talk to them. Tell them they are welcome.

Don't keep all the pieces of the puzzle
or the doll's tiny shoes, don't worry
who uses whose toothbrush or if anything
matches, at all.

Except one word to another. Or a thought.

Pursue the authentic.

Go after it with all your heart.

Your heart, that place

you don't even think of cleaning out.

That closet stuffed with savage mementoes.

Don't sort the paperclips from screws from saved baby teeth
or worry if we're all eating cereal for dinner
again. Don't answer the telephone, ever,
or weep over anything that breaks.

Pink molds will grow within those sealed cartons
in the refrigerator. Accept new forms of life
and talk to the dead

who drift in through the screened windows, who collect
patiently on tops of food jars and books.

Recycle the mail, don't read it, don't read anything
except what destroys

the insulation between yourself and your experience.

BILL MOYERS: You know, I do have women writers, mothers, who say to me, "You know, how can she be so prolific? How can she find time? My kids have got out of school today because it was a snow day. And now I was planning to write, but I can't."

LOUISE ERDRICH: How do I do—I don't know. I've—my sisters have seen me. My husband has seen me. My kids have seen me every day, and they don't know how it happens, but I suspect it has to do with a small, incremental persistent insect-like devotion to putting one word next to the next word. It's a very dogged process.

LOUISE ERDRICH: I make myself go upstairs, where I write, whenever I can, no matter how—one thing about this is I never have writer's block, because I—if I went up there and I had writer's block, I think I'd lose my mind. You know, I have to get up to my papers and my books and my notebooks. I jot things down all the time. I just keep going.

BILL MOYERS: I guess that goes to the heart of the mystery of the writer. Writers don't really know why they write, do they? They just have to write. I mean, you've come such a long way from those days when you were a waitress, a single woman at a construction site. You kept getting a lot of rejection slips, didn't you?

But when you received rejection after rejection, why did you keep writing? That's, I think, what concerns most young writers. Why do you keep on, in the face, in the slap in the face?

LOUISE ERDRICH: I kept writing because I grew up as a Catholic. And my—the one

place you're allowed to be emotional and to really talk about yourself is in the confessional. And in the darkness of the confessional, where you are safe. And the priest is supposed to not be a conduit just to God, you're not—

And then in the, you begin to think, "Well, I have a sacred entity that is also able to receive these unknowable emotions." And it begins to move outward. Eventually, I began to write about what was innermost, but as I'm from a small town, it sometimes astonishes me what I'd read on paper, because I don't mean to have written some of those things. And sometimes, mothers come up to me in my daughters' grade schools, and they look at me and they say, "It must be unique, living in your head." You know? How could you read that? How could you write that?

BILL MOYERS: Of course—

LOUISE ERDRICH: Because it's—I don't know why the filter is not there, but I have to be as truthful. It's the—it's—I have to get as close to the bare truth as I can.

BILL MOYERS: The truth of what?

LOUISE ERDRICH: Experience. When I talked about the insulation between yourself and your experience, it's not there as a child—you don't develop that skin of insulation. You don't develop it until you begin to be hurt, over and over, until you began to rationalize, over and over.

But when you can go back to it as an adult in writing, it's a relief, you just hang on for dear life. You know, I loved writing because of that. And it—I'm able to live in a world where I can be expressive and I can be truthful about emotion and about human nature.

BILL MOYERS: You grew up Catholic because of your German father and background—

LOUISE ERDRICH: No, well, both. My mother—the Turtle Mountains was missionized by Benedictine priests and by Benedictine nuns. And my mother's a very strong Catholic. Very wonderful, I think, in her level of faith and understanding. She was the one I went to when I wanted to change a priest into a woman. She said, "Go for it. Do it."

BILL MOYERS: Oh, yes, that's what's—that's Damien?

LOUISE ERDRICH: That's from, Father Damien—

BILL MOYERS: Yes.

LOUISE ERDRICH: —in "The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse."

BILL MOYERS: Decades later, he turns out to be a she?

LOUISE ERDRICH: Yes, because she, although—having worn the habit of a sister, a nun—knows that she's called to be a priest. So knowing that, she has to be a priest and is a very good priest. The best priest I have ever written about.

BILL MOYERS: Did you want to be a priest when you were growing up?

LOUISE ERDRICH: I wanted the power of the priest. The priest had a great deal of power. And I think a lot of the women who taught me who were Franciscan sisters could have been happier as priests. Their power was thwarted.

BILL MOYERS: That's a theme to many of your stories.

LOUISE ERDRICH: Thwarted power.

BILL MOYERS: Thwarted power.

LOUISE ERDRICH: Thwarted female power. Yeah.

BILL MOYERS: And stolen identities, stolen often by the men in their lives and especially by the husbands in their lives, right?

LOUISE ERDRICH: Often.

BILL MOYERS: And do you feel different having written about this woman?

LOUISE ERDRICH: About Father Damien?

BILL MOYERS: Uh-huh.

LOUISE ERDRICH: Oh, Father Damien is my favorite character, but she sacrificed—

BILL MOYERS: Yeah, she—

LOUISE ERDRICH: —a great deal to live as the priest.

BILL MOYERS: She sacrificed her female identity.

LOUISE ERDRICH: Yes, she did. But she lived as the priest. She was able to do that.

BILL MOYERS: Was there a moment you push the lapse button? I mean, do you have an assured faith now?

LOUISE ERDRICH: I go through a continual questioning. And I think that is my assurance that if I was to let go of my doubt, that I would somehow have surrendered my faith. My job is to address the mystery. My job is to doubt. My job is to keep searching, keep looking. When I think about my version of what a God is and I keep changing it, right now I think of this creator as a great artist, we don't understand works of art when we see them.

They're—the greatest works of art are—we see them through a glass darkly. We don't understand them. They're very difficult for us to understand. So with this great work of art in which we're all participating, this great artist has made beauty and terror and death and cruelty and humor and mystery part of who we are and commerce. And health care reform. Everything is part of this mystery.

BILL MOYERS: So who is God in Ojibwe?

LOUISE ERDRICH: This interrelationship of spirit is also guided by a kindness of the creator believed to be the [speaking Ojibwe] or [speaking Ojibwe] the great kind spirit, the spirit that looks after all of the good in the world but has as well, looks after all that is painful in the world. It's not different than the spirit that I think every single religion or dogma tries to get at in one way or the other.

BILL MOYERS: So God is life.

LOUISE ERDRICH: Endless form's most beautiful.

BILL MOYERS: Louise Erdrich, thank you very much for joining me on the Journal.

LOUISE ERDRICH: Thank you so much. It was a delight to talk to you.

BILL MOYERS: That's it for the Journal. Go to our website at pbs.org were there's more about Louise Erdrich and you can watch my entire conversation with Andrew Bacevich. That's all at PBS.org.

I'm Bill Moyers and I'll see you next time.

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