

What Does It Mean to Be Human?

Ilya Kharkow

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To be human means to belong to an animal species capable of building a skyscraper and flying into space. But it also means being one of those who created and loved racism, genocide, and managed to turn war into a weapons business.

I remember how on the first day of the war, leaving Kyiv, I couldn't imagine my own future. I'm not talking about a global future. Nah. Because of the war, I suddenly lost the ability to plan my life even more than one day in advance. This means that regular workouts and a healthy diet immediately collapsed. Effective learning also relies on regularity, and since I couldn't plan for tomorrow, the ability to learn was suddenly lost. But even then, I was still human.

Reading the terrifying news about explosions, murders, and conditions of captivity, I understood that it was one of the boundaries of what we call being human. Cowardice and courage are equal constructors of us. Moreover, being the opposite of each other, they they are also different poles of one phenomenon.

“THREE SOLDIERS RAPED A WOMAN IN FRONT OF HER HUSBAND”

“A MILITARY MAN HAD SEXUAL CONTACT WITH AN ELDERLY WOMAN WHO REFUSED TO LEAVE HER HOUSE”

“A WOMAN TALKS ABOUT PREGNANCY AFTER CAPTURE”

Reading such news inevitably causes a numbing effect. I want to distance myself from what is happening. I want to grow a second skin. Can't trust anyone. I want to stay in the house. And when I accidentally witness someone else's kindness, I involuntarily begin to look with suspicion. They say that if one looks at a good person for a long time, a scoundrel appears. But the scoundrel is never us, but someone else, isn't it?

When I got an erection on the first day of the war, I wondered if I was human? Is it normal to feel horny knowing that I could die at any minute? The country in which I lived may cease to exist, and I hide my hand in my pocket, making simple movements.

Am I normal? Am I even human? I didn't know the answer then. A frightened brain was focused on survival and therefore simplifies reality. Military propaganda works on the same principle, but its goal is not to save your life, but to save the state.

Now I know that my sudden erection is also a sign of belonging to an animal species capable of building a skyscraper, flying into space, and also loving what hurts others.

What a monstrous delusion it is to believe that during war a person forgets about love.

What a monstrous delusion it is to judge others against yourself.

You can give your life for your ideologies, but this doesn't give you the right to demand that your ideologies become mine.

What is good for one person may be harmful for another. There is a great phrase in English – “to walk a mile in someone's shoes.” I would go further and suggest exchanging not shoes, but underwear.

Of course, I don't mean anything dirty; on the contrary, I'm talking about intimate things. Sexual preferences are intimate. Religious feelings are intimate. Ideals, life-changing decisions, a sense of duty, dignity – all this is intimate, which means individual, difficult to explain or for strangers to understand. Our life experiences have made it so. An attempt to impose one's own “intimate” on another reveals the barbaric desire to act based on conclusions drawn through their life experience.

So, why complicate things? There are certain points that are clear. For example, murder is definitely bad. War is definitely bad. But my writing instinct tells me that there are not so many clear-cut things in the world, and maybe there are none at all. After all, if you ask a murderer about his motives, he will offer a version of events in which he is not the villain.

The same thing happens with war and with the military. For some, war is the death of loved ones, but for others it is the restoration of historical justice. And all because humanity has this trait – the desire to find a noble justification for any action.

That's why all this talk of a debt to the homeland, which everyone must pay at the cost of their own life, is doubly insidious. Any soldier can become both a hero and a villain. The thing is – my homeland is not a commodity that I would like to pay for with my life.

So, what is it to be human?

In my novel *THE MINING BOYS*, I describe a conversation between two characters who managed to escape from Ukraine, despite the ban on men crossing the border. One of these guys wants to go to the Louvre, and the other to Auschwitz.

The Louvre is a place where the best manifestations of humanity are collected. And if everything is clear with the desire to visit the Louvre, then you can ask me why someone might want to visit Auschwitz, having fled a country in which there is a war? The fact is that places like Auschwitz demonstrate the worst that humanity is capable of. Visiting a concentration camp can show the limits of the horror that war can bring.

Will the war in Ukraine cross this border? Something tells me that it depends not only on the supply of weapons, but also on our ability to love in a time when even the question “how are you?” may sound like an insult. Your husband died in a house explosion because the country's authorities didn't let him go. How are you? Are you fine?

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