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The Cambodian Crisis: Reason and Emotion

The invasion of Cambodia was a step backward in the struggle of today's youth to find a new humanness. President Nixon's decision was a product of reason and, once again, reason has failed.

We can ill afford to reject reason for emotion. But we must accept the place of emotion in individual life and human affairs. We must learn to let emotion play its proper role in the reasoning process and must find the ways to channel the force of emotion appropriately. We have been taught that the emotions, especially what we call negative emotions, are dangerous and bad. But each of the emotions, like any other significant part of the human being, has an inherently adaptive function.

Distress can lead to personal discouragement and crippling depression. But unless we feel something of the personal distress of the loved ones of the wounded or dying man, whether friend or foe, we cannot have an adequately human perspective on this or any war.

Disgust with yourself can lead to alienation and aloneness, and disgust with the world can lead to dangerous indifference. But unless we experience some disgust with ourselves for the complacency over the miseries and massacres of war we cannot have an adequately human perspective on this crisis.

Contempt of self can lead to the disaster of self-rejection, and contempt of others can sustain prejudice, misconception, and conflict between peoples. But unless we have some measure of contempt for killers of men and contempt for the act of killing, we cannot have an adequately human perspective on war's destruction of humanity.

The shame of defeat would strike deep at the heartstrings of a proud nation. But unless we can find greater shame in inflicting suffering and death than in a lost or stalemated war, we cannot have the kind of perspective that can lead to peace and progress in a search for a new humanness and a new humanity.

Anger can make a mockery of man's hope for reasoned negotiation and can increase the likelihood of destructive aggression. But a little anger properly channeled can defend a new kind of personal integrity and a new kind of integrity for humanity that disallows war's miseries and massacres.

Fear is the most toxic of all the emotions. This is not a time for panic, but, unless we have some fear of war, we cannot see the Cambodian crisis in true perspective.

I am not asking that you let distress lead to depression, disgust to indifference, contempt to aloofness, shame to withdrawal, anger to destruction, or fear to panic. I am asking you to be sad over war-inflicted suffering and death. I am asking you to be a little disgusted with complacency and a little contemptuous of the forces and conditions that lead to war. I ask us all to be a little ashamed of the inability of the most powerful nation on earth to accept defeat—or simply to redefine it as a colossal mistake.

I ask you to be a little angry at the grave threat that deepening and continuing commitment to war poses to our humanness and to our very survival. I ask you to be a little afraid of the horror of becoming extinct or, perhaps even worse, of becoming less and less human. I ask you to respond to each of these emotions with constructive effort before the emotion is dissipated and comes to nought or before it goes awry and wreaks destruction.—CARROLL E. IZARD, *Vanderbilt University*