

Olga TOLMACHOVA
Psychologue Psychothérapeute
Conseiller existentiel
Conférencier international

Membre des associations :
AUCTE (Association Ukrainienne de Conseil et Thérapie Existentiels)
AFPE (Association Française de Psychologie Existentielle)
FETE (Federation for Existential Therapy in Europe)

Bénévole pour l'aide psychologique en ligne des associations :
MIEC (International Institute of Existential Consulting)
VITAWORLD (Communauté Psychologique Internationale)
Écoute Ukraine (Accueil des réfugiés ukrainiens)

+33645975020 : WhatsApp/Viber/Telegram
sagrada385@gmail.com

Helplessness, Loyalty, and Ethical Maturity in Times of War: A Personal and Clinical Examination

Abstract (English)

This article combines personal narrative, clinical insight, and philosophical reflection to explore the complex experience of helplessness during war. It presents raw, human accounts of the struggle to reconcile loyalty, guilt, and powerlessness when protection is impossible. Drawing on Taoist, Christian, humanistic, and stoic traditions, the text frames helplessness as a difficult but transformative state that invites new forms of strength, ethical presence, and mature love.

Abstract (Italian)

Questo articolo coniuga narrazione personale, visione clinica e riflessione filosofica per esplorare l'esperienza complessa dell'impotenza in guerra. Presenta testimonianze umane sincere della lotta per conciliare lealtà, senso di colpa e impotenza quando la protezione è impossibile. Basandosi su tradizioni taoiste, cristiane, umanistiche e stoiche, il testo inquadra l'impotenza come uno stato difficile ma trasformativo che invita a nuove forme di forza, presenza etica e amore maturo.

Introduction

Why do I want to share this with you? Why do these questions resonate so deeply within me?

- How do you keep living when caught between safety and duty?
- How do you stay sane when you can't change a thing?
- How do you live with helplessness?

This is not just theoretical for me. It became deeply personal when my mother, who lives near the frontline in Ukraine, refused to leave. No reasoning, no pleading, no tears work. She can't walk. I call her every day. She says, "A missile could hit me at home or on the road. What difference does it make, my dear?" She's right. But my heart is breaking. I feel desperate. Guilty. Powerless. I'm safe; she is not. And I can't influence anything.

It felt like standing before a blank wall—immense, immovable, silent, neutral, indifferent to my desires, my plans, my will. It didn't care about my existence.

The Ocean and the Wall: Reflecting on Helplessness

I remembered something a traveler once said about standing before the ocean: "It wasn't me looking at the sea. It was the Sea looking at me. Endless. Ancient. Great. Time seemed to stop. It was here long before me, and will remain long after. I am just a grain of sand in time and space."

This is the kind of helplessness I face and see it again and again in my work with Ukrainian refugees in France—people who fled war to protect their children but left others behind: parents, grandparents, the sick, the elderly. Some couldn't leave; others wouldn't. Some are frozen inside.

Something fundamental breaks: the belief that we can protect, influence, save. You feel a splitting helplessness—and guilt. And it's not just a feeling but a state of being. Mind, body, heart—cannot grasp what's happening.

Stories of Conflict and Loyalty

A woman told me, "My parents are buried there. And now—both my sons. How can I leave them?"

Another said, "My father says, 'I can't abandon my home. I built it with my own hands. Whatever will be, will be.' I panic because I know a bomb could fall at any moment. But I can't go back. I have children. I live between life and death. Should I have stayed? Am I a coward? Am I a bad daughter?"

And the relentless conflict intensifies—"My mother is in a wheelchair. I can't take her. I can't leave her. But my children are afraid every night. I can't decide. I just sit. I don't even breathe."

Helplessness becomes a conflict of loyalties: saving yourself feels like betraying someone else; staying feels like destroying yourself. It's a pain that makes you want to scream.

Anger, Acceptance, and Forbidden Feelings

There is also anger. "Don't push me," my mother says. "It's my life." And I'm angry she won't listen. But I have no right to be angry. Still—I am.

One person escapes; another stays behind. We are left with grief, rage, broken hearts.

Philosophical Reflections on Helplessness

The Taoists said, "To take something from someone, you must first give it." They also said, "If dazzled—you'll be deceived."

We think we're strong. We think we're the ones who cope, who solve, who act. We live under the illusion of omnipotence. And then one day, we can't.

We can't stop it. Can't ease it. Can't carry it for them. Someone we love is suffering—and this is the truth.

What if I can't save? What do I do, faced with that truth?

Psychological Perspectives: Living with Helplessness

Helplessness isn't just an obstacle to overcome. It's a state we learn to live with. A crisis of pride and omnipotence.

Like shifting from trying to control a river to learning to swim in it. At first, we build dams, reinforce banks, direct flows. Then we realize the river is stronger.

So, we learn to trust the water, ourselves, life.

Helplessness as Strength and Freedom

Taoism teaches helplessness as a return to essence: I am part of the current, not separate from it. It is a new strength: to be alive in the flow.

In Christianity, helplessness is voluntary vulnerability, a path to salvation.

Humanistic psychology sees helplessness as the beginning of growth and meaning.

Stoicism says we cannot control the world but can choose our attitudes.

The Mature Response: Conscious Helplessness

Helplessness can lead to apathy. Or it can open the way to maturity, dignity, and peace. By accepting our limits, we gain depth. We gain strength.

Conscious helplessness is not passivity, but a difficult mature choice. It is painful awareness:

- Yes, it hurts that I can't change their fate.
- Yes, I am angry.
- Yes, I am afraid and tired of saving.

It is recognizing boundaries: I can offer but not force, love but not live their lives.

It means returning freedom to our parents, even if we disagree with their choice. Even when it hurts.

The Art of Staying

It means doing what I can, and where I can't—staying with the fact.

Breathing. Asking for help. Trusting: yes, I did all I could; yes, I cannot save; yes, it hurts. Here, the inner omnipotent child breaks the one who hoped to fix everything. But now, we are standing in the truth. It is painful but honest. It's the start of maturity. When I finally say: «I cannot do everything. But I can *“be.”*»

It's like sitting beside a sick person through the night: you can't stop illness, but you stay, hold their hand. And your presence makes the pain more bearable.

Being present does not always mean doing something. It means not turning away.

Camus wrote, "Love is the art of staying when nothing can be fixed."

The strongest thing we can sometimes do is stop fighting—to acknowledge, stay, be real and loving.

You can stay close, even if you can't save. You can shine, even if you can't light the night. You can love, even when your heart is breaking. "There are moments," wrote Rilke, «when the greatest courage is simply to stay.»

Final Reflections and Open Questions

On the darkest night, someone lit a small fire. It didn't end the darkness or defeat the cold, but people could warm their hands and sit together in silence.

Still, many questions remain:

- What part of me believes I must save others?
- When is the moment to pull loved ones out, regardless of their wishes?
- What does "together" mean when life scatters us across borders?
- Does stopping resistance bring peace or reveal deeper longing?
- Can I love someone and still let them choose pain, risk or death?
- Do we suffer not because of powerless but because we love: we choose to stay human in a world that offers no guarantees?
- What strength grows from helplessness?
- Where am I called not to act, but to stay present?
- Do I dare to stay when that is all I can do?

I don't have these answers yet.

And you?