

Q&A with Sophia Raday

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Q: The divide between activist-enclave Berkeley and a wartime military base is difficult to contemplate. How were you able to make that transition?

Well, it wasn't exactly easy! But like so many things that aren't easy, it was incredibly interesting and taught me a great deal, so much that I wanted to share it through writing *Love in Condition Yellow*. Ultimately I came to see that it is not essential to agree with your partner to be emotionally close. Or your friend/sister/mother-in-law/neighbor etc. What IS vitally important is to get below the labels and the emotions and to find enough peace and strength and humility within yourself to generate some CURIOSITY about the other side. This was not easy for me because I am a person who loves to be right! But once I found some of that curiosity, it led me to ask questions - instead of jump into a debate - truly inquisitive questions, and the ocean of connection that opened up to me, with my husband, with people on Army bases and in Berkeley, was amazing. This connection -- and this is the part that really blew my mind -- is INDEPENDENT of agreement! But what the connection does, in an almost magical way, is soften and diminish the sense of distance between you and the person you perceive as so different, so alien. And that magical softening suddenly illuminates many areas where you can build something together. In the case of my husband and me, we learned that below the labels of "peacenik" and "hippie" and "cop" and "patriot," there are so many areas of connection and struggle: how to manage our fears, how to be true to ourselves and others, how to be courageous, and of course, how to love.

Q: What is Condition Yellow?

Condition Yellow is part of the idea of "combat mindset" developed by the late Colonel Jeff Cooper years before the 9/11 attacks. Cooper was one of the most respected firearms and personal defense experts in the world. If Gandhi is my guru, Colonel Cooper is my husband's. Cooper's revolutionary insight was that a key component of combat survival was mental, not physical training. Condition Yellow is the general state of alert that Cooper recommends when out in the world, and it means bringing yourself to the awareness that your life may be in danger, and you may have to do something about it. It is also, I think, a rather nice metaphor for the zeitgeist of our country after 9/11.

Q: How did your life and your relationship with your husband change after 9/11?

Prior to 9/11 my husband had decided to leave the Army Reserves to make more time for me and our then-infant son. After 9/11 my husband felt he could no longer leave the military. He was a soldier, we had been attacked, and the country needed him. This deepened an existing conflict between us, essentially a duty/family conflict, which is the

focus of the second half of *Love in Condition Yellow*. Our conflict is not unlike the conflict that our country experienced over how to respond to 9/11: one side feeling we should address the 9/11 attacks by focusing externally, and another group wanting to look internally at strengthening our nation's bonds and infrastructure, thereby leading the world by example. Also, after 9/11, my family's military commitments grow way beyond what I'd ever imagined - just like the country's - until ultimately my husband B. is deployed to Iraq. Eventually, through much turmoil, some of it funny, some of it heartwrenching, I come to understand and admire my husband's convictions and realize that supporting him does not, in fact, undermine my own ideals. I tried to write *Love in Condition Yellow* so that it might resonate on different levels: there is a personal love story - of overcoming differences, of coming to a new conception of peace, and indeed of what love and marriage should look like - and then there is also how these personal challenges and conflicts lead to insights about the political divisions in our country.

Q: Have your beliefs changed as a result of your relationship with Barrett and, if so, how?

I'm still a peace-seeker at heart. I've long liked to think of myself as an "independent thinker" but I've always been mostly on the lefty side of the political spectrum. I think I still am, though perhaps not quite as much as before. I will say that I've come to see that there is just as much demonizing on the left as on the right, at least if I myself am any indication. I thought I wasn't demonizing, after all I believed so much in diversity, but in fact I did it all the time! Cops, the military, business people, gun-owners, Christians were some of the people I tended to see in a flat, cardboard cutout fashion.

I like to tell the story of how one of my first titles for *Love in Condition Yellow* was "A Daisy for His Gun." The title was an allusion to a famous photograph from the 1967 Vietnam War protest organized by Abby Hoffman and the Yippies, where they were going to try to "Levitate the Pentagon." In the photo, two lines of people face off against each other: peace protestors vs. armed military policemen. A female protestor is reaching across and placing a flower in the muzzle of a police officer's rifle. Before I met Barrett I identified with the protestor side of this conflict, and thought the best way to achieve peace would be if my side would "win." Since then I've come to see that I was deeply enmeshed in conflict, to some degree of my own making. I thought I was right, and I couldn't see the views of the other side at all. How have I changed? Now I try to understand both sides of this debate, see them both as fully human and deserving of love, respect, and compassion. I still hold passionate views, but I don't worry so much about changing other people's minds. Instead I try to understand what experiences formulated their views. This is infinitely richer terrain than one finds in a shouting match.