

PTSD From “War and the Soul”

“I shouldn’t be here. I should be dead a thousand times, the things I’ve been through. That’s why I’m just waitin’ for it. Death is chasing me. It’ll catch up to me. Nobody could survive what I did and still be alive. Sometimes I’m convinced I’m not.”

“You’ve been scared out of your wits”, I said. You’ve been through just about the most horrible things a person can endure. You must have been frightened down to your very soul.”

“My soul?” Art’s face turned white. He stared at me with pinpoint eyes. “My soul has fled.”

Art, recounting his time at Khe Sanh, Vietnam

“... If you had seventy near-fatal car accidents in one year of your life between the ages of eighteen and nineteen, do you think that would mess you up all by itself? That’s what it was like in Vietnam.”

Jack, Combat Reconnaissance Sergeant

*“The common therapeutic model, that is, misses the point that PTSD is primarily a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic disorder – in effect, not a **psychological** but a **soul** disorder. All of its aspects concern dimensions of the soul, inasmuch as the soul is the part of us that responds to morality, spirituality, aesthetics and intimacy.”*

“All wars are over words, God and Good. The Creator is one and the same for us all but we kill each other over our image of God. And all our wounds reduce to whether or not we were good. War is always terrible, but your lifetime of suffering is based on whether or not you know in your heart that you did good.”

Reid Mackey, a helicopter crew chief in Vietnam

“I feel like I’ve lost my sense of grace about myself and the world.” Walt said in one of our psychotherapy sessions. “I don’t belong here anymore. I don’t fit. I don’t deserve God’s love.”

“From the day I arrived on my base, I did not see any beauty. Beauty is the manifestation of the spirit. It’s the force that keeps the soul alive. Can you imagine not seeing a single speck of beauty for an entire year? Day by Day I felt my soul withering away inside me. Day by Day I fell further away from grace. For an entire year, I lived in the American Vietnam, the place of no beauty. That is the ultimate terror.”

Walt

As a guest on a Veterans Day radio talk show, I speak about the prevalence of homelessness and PTSD among Vietnam War veterans, about the unrelieved moral pain many carry to their graves. Ben, a World War II vet, calls in. Though sobbing, he forces himself to speak. “What about us?” He howls over the airwaves. “What about me? It wasn’t better in World War II. Just because history calls it ‘the good war,’ don’t believe it. It always hurts to kill. I want some peace before I die. Please, someone out there help me.”

Bob a World War II vet

“Warriors are meant to play major roles in the lives of their communities, providing help in times of need and restraining rather than encouraging violence. They need guidance from others who have been through similar experiences, and they need to pass their values, wisdom, and

experiences on to younger initiates. Ideally, during all phases of service, warriors interact with their people rather than remain separate from them. This is not the case in modern society. After soldiers are utilized for political and military purposes, they are called veterans. Other than receiving certain assistance, benefits, and occasional public ceremony, they are expected to return to civilian life and function accordingly. "Warrior" is not even a recognized social class; and a veteran, especially one with disabilities, appears to many as a failure in terms of normal civilian identity. In training and combat, soldiers are taught to release primal destructive impulses when threatened or ordered. Later, under stress, they are prone to resort to their old training. Veterans sometimes easily explode, attack, and strike out; what was normal during warfare becomes criminal or dysfunctional in peacetime. Veterans receive little help or compassion for these challenges and have no socially useful roles into which to channel these tendencies."

"My government spent over \$50,000 and many months to train me for Viet Nam," he commented, "but not a penny or a day to help me come home. How was I supposed to act civilized after being trained to beat and brutalize and then use that training against other Americans? After having watched my buddies get blown away? It takes a lot more time, effort, and money to recover from that than it does to turn a man into a beast who can behave like I did. That's why I never had kids. I can't trust myself."

Doug, military policeman and survivor of the Tet offensive

"Ironically, John Wayne himself successfully avoided conscription during World War II and never served in or experienced war. Yet through public performances of how he, and we, wished war to be, he established himself as the model for American GIs. In contrast, actor Jimmy Stewart, who did serve, said, "When I got back from the war in 1945 I refused to make war pictures."

"Let my spear lie idle for spiders to weave their web around it.

May I live in peace in white old age.

May I sing with garlands around my white head,

Having hung up my shield on the pillared house of the goddess.

May I unfold the voice of books, which the wise honor."

Euripides, Erechtheus

"While traditional cultures and mythology the world over teach us the way of life and service that is a warriors path, the specific term "warpath" is a Native American concept. In the indigenous tradition of North America, being on the warpath does not just mean going to war. It means walking the path of a spiritual warrior at all times—in war and peace, on the battlefield, and in the village. Thus the warrior's path is essentially a way of life, and it always includes the teaching and practice of the journey home."

"The pollution we accumulate through participation in war interrupts our connection to the Divine. The soul may achieve a return to divine presence through any religious or spiritual tradition; it is a simple yet profound prescription for healing and moral realignment. On the road to return, we cleanse, purify, rejoin the world community and the flow of life, and attain forgiveness.

“Unlike our contemporary culture that attempts to conduct life as usual even while we are waging a war overseas, tribal people realized that an entire society is afflicted by war and must participate in its warriors' healing. In traditional cultures, purification was the first order of business for bringing a warrior home. The Papago people, for example, held a sixteen-day purification ceremony for young warriors when they returned from their first experiences of taking life. During this ceremony they were tended only by older warriors, so that they had the benefit of their elders' experience to facilitate their transition back into civilian life. This is not to say that warriors in traditional cultures did not have what we now call PTSD. But the rituals around the condition did help to minimize its effects and lead to recovery. The condition was treated as a communal rather than an individual problem, and those who suffered from it were not pathologized.”

“Our leadership's refusal to accept responsibility for our wars helps explain the rage and mistrust veterans and their families often feel toward authority. The young man or woman, after all, went to war in the nation's name. Except in rare instances, a soldier did not kill because he was criminal or insane or possessed by selfish motives. To the contrary, and while striving under the most adverse conditions, he killed because his nation ordered him to do so in its service. Ultimately, he killed because, otherwise, he and his companions would be killed themselves. The nation and its leaders defined the enemy, provided moral and ideological reasons to go to war, trained the soldier for it, and put him in the kill-or-be-killed situation. In Plains cultures a war leader was held responsible for the casualties of his command. His people expected him to carry that difficult responsibility and judged him adversely if he did not. So should it be today.”