

Memories of War; Need for Peace

The Veteran's Search for Healing

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Most Vietnam veterans I know still cling to the notion they could handle one more war and at least two more women. But all that I know of war and all I have heard of peace disavowed me long ago of such romantic illusions. I don't know that I'll ever be able to understand, much less handle, any women and I didn't handle my only war all that well. I once thought that made me less of a man, being traumatized by something we had all been told was some kind of rite of passage from adolescence to maturity. I never heard my father or his brother talk about being overwhelmed by World War II and his brother had flown bomber missions over Germany. They survived and didn't complain so I thought there must be something intrinsically wrong with me. I was afraid that we were the "least" generation of soldier: that we complained too often and too loud and that in so doing, we cheapened our service; we blurred our sacrifice, and we wallowed in our suffering.

I had help, of course. Our own generation – if they thought about us at all – saw Vietnam vets as suckers. Our fathers' generation thought us losers for not being able to conquer a rag-tag bunch of rice farmers. And me? I didn't know what to think. I was hurting. I was confused. And that guy that had carried me through the most terrifying times of my life was now a stranger to me and to those around me. It was but a blink of an eye from a violent Sunday night when I killed a man from ambush to a disoriented Friday night back home, among those I'd left behind when I went off to war.

It's over they kept telling me. It's over. Just forget about it.

In real time, they were right, of course. But my reality was somewhere between what I'd left and what I couldn't fully walk away from. My war was indeed over – and over and over and over again in my mind, playing on an endless loop – the same heat, the same hurt, the same horror ... always ending with me alive and so many of my friends dead.

It didn't take long for me to realize that surviving combat was almost as bad as not surviving.

So why did it take our government so long to realize it? Why did it take the psychiatric profession so long? Why didn't our fathers tell us the ugly, immutable truth about war: that never does anyone return as the same person who left?

Primitive societies knew it. They had no Dr. Phils ... no Sanjay Guptas ... no plethora of pop psychologists to gum the problem to death. But they had experience. They knew what war did to the soul and the mind as well as to the body. Reach back into antiquity. Go all the way back to Virgil and his classic "The Aeneid." In Book II, Aeneas recognizes:

'In me 't is impious holy things to bear,
Red as I am with slaughter, new from war,
Till in some living stream I cleanse the guilt
Of dire debate, and blood in battle spilt.'

Aeneas knows he has murdered and plundered. He knows he has offended the gods. His survival does not excuse it. His cause cannot justify it. He knows he must atone for his combat conduct and cannot even touch the cherished things of his life until he finds that living stream in which he can cleanse his guilt.

Why didn't anyone tell us that which the ancients knew? Why didn't they tell us about the guilt of dire debate and blood in battle spilt? Why didn't they help us find the living stream of cleansing?

Writing centuries after Virgil but with the same sting of truth, Rudyard Kipling wrote of his son's death in World War I –

“When they question why we died,
Tell them, because our fathers lied.”

Kipling's generation lied by touting the grand romance of war. It's hard to look back at the horror of the trenches and mustard gas and blind rushes into machine gun nests and think of anything romantic. Our fathers lied by omission, allowing us to believe that our war was like their war; that our cause was as righteous as their cause; and most of all, allowing us to believe that a grateful nation would take care of us in our pain and our suffering and our loss.

My generation lied in our silence as a new generation of warrior marched into battle. We failed to impart our experience. We did not share our knowledge. We committed the sin of our fathers – silently acquiescing to the necessity of war. In doing so, we ignored the lessons of our own combat survival and thus, inadequately prepared a new generation of survivors to understand, to recognize and to face the immutable, unalterable truth that we return from war different than we left. Instead of preparing our troops for that reality, we pump them full of the “army of one” philosophy. We imbue in them the warrior culture of the few and the proud. We challenge them to challenge themselves to face the test of honor that we say war is. Even as our military triumphs on the physical preparation of troops for war, it fails preparing for the psychological acceptance of the aftermath. Soldiers steeped in the warrior ethic and venerated by our national faith in force, saddle up for combat utterly unaware that the exhilaration of being shot at without result will one day be replaced by psychic damage deeply etched onto their brains.

Certainly, the lack of preparation for social assimilation inhibits the assimilation process and in that, many of us share varying degrees of responsibility. But at the core of the problem is the ugly reality that combat and exposure to combat change us in ways that the individual could never imagine and that those entrusted with our care fail to address. Aeneas knew what we fail to acknowledge: the trauma of war changes an individual in such profound ways that easy reacclimation to civilian life is the exception to the post-combat rule. In 1918, Americans hummed along to a song that asked “How 'ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm after they've seen Patee?” That song spoke to some of the ways that doughboys returning from the First World War would change. I believe it was a gentle way of telling loved ones not to expect their returning soldiers would be the same people who left.

A less gentle way would be to change the lyrics to ask how do we keep our soldiers sane after they've witnessed the horror. My generation went off to war in the tradition of the cinematic heroics of John Wayne. But I don't recall seeing Sgt. Stryker's soldiers blown into red mist by a booby trapped artillery round. I never saw one of Stryker's men with half a face missing after being shot in the cheek. I never saw a movie medic with his hands buried in a man's bowels working to stanch the flow of blood. I never saw traumatically amputated limbs littering a battle and I never heard the wailing of a dying soldier calling for his mother as his life leaked into the rotten earth of a country half a world away.

But we all saw that, or versions of it. We all experienced that mind shattering, sense numbing, stomach wrenching disgust of the reality of war. I didn't have to be in Baghdad or Bora-Bora to know that anymore than I needed to be at Gettysburg or Iwo Jima. I know that because I know war and in war, only the geography changes. War is brutal. It is ugly and it reeks with a stench that can never be cleansed. The ultimate truth is that war is a surrealistic penal colony for the young patriots of the real world who must pay the price for the believable myths of national furors and private enterprise. So if you watched men die at Hastings in 1066 or killed Cong in the Iron Triangle in 1966 we are all part of the same brotherhood of war altered spirits.

The other aspect of combat survival that inhibits a survivor's journey from then to now is killing. I was raised a Catholic and of the grand prohibitions expressed in the Ten Commandments, the grandest was that against killing. I could find detours around most of the Commandments but killing was one that stood out as being pretty much immutable. I spent a life in my faith and still practice it devotedly, so when I went off to war I did so in the naïve belief that I wouldn't have to violate this greatest of the commandments. So when I did ... when I shot an enemy from ambush and ended his life ... I ended part of mine as well. I had crossed a line from which I knew there would be no return. I had become someone different and would never be who I was again. I was not only ready for punishment but almost eager for it; eager for the atonement that would exiate my guilt at violating the most inviolate commandment of the Judeo-Christian ethic. Instead, I was rewarded. Truly, Voltaire was correct when he reminded us that all men are punished for killing, unless in large numbers and to the sound of trumpets. Think of the mental Mixmaster stirring all those conflicting beliefs into some kind of amoral paste: standing over an enemy body and trying to muster the pride your comrades say you should feel ... standing over a dead friend and feeling relief that it wasn't you who died ...

But no medals, no accolades, no matter how much approval my ability to kill earned, it was impossible to divorce myself from the notion that killing was wrong, that I was wrong. The survival instinct was strong and would get stronger as I went on but it would become the cause of the love-hate relationship I feel with my country to this day: loving it for what it has been and must be again in the world but hating it for what it made me do and endure in its name. Long after my shooting war ended, the battle with my conscience continued. That's a battle I've come to recognize as common to the combat experience and the essential reason that the combat soldier returns a different person.

We come home from combat and struggle with myriad issues: relationships, finances, romance, jobs ... but the biggest conflict is internal. We come home and reside in familiar surroundings with familiar people but it is much harder to find the familiar version of ourselves. We left one person but we come back another and the other is often not who we long to be. Killing and almost dying will do that. Bodies battered and broken by bullets, bombs and booby traps will do that. The intrusion of violence and bloodshed will also.

Aeneas knew it. Aeneas knew that he needed to be cleansed. He knew he needed a living stream to make him human again. But he wasn't the only one. American Indians knew it too – the ones we called primitive savages. They were smart enough to know that warriors return from battle damaged in body and spirit. Bodies heal themselves. Spirits need work. So the tribes sent returning warriors off to retreats distant from the tribe. They sent them off to decompress, to purge their guilt, to heal their spirits. In modern society, we assign too few to care for too many and take too long to do it. There remains a built-in bias against those who seek care for damaged spirits, considering them weak or effeminate, so we tend to physical wounds but we don't talk much about spiritual wounds. Our belief in the righteousness of our causal justification and the refusal to understand the conflict between a collective national conscience and individual mores increase the odds against any quick or complete return to normalcy. As the soldier struggles in the bivouac of his private first class world, society proclaims combat service a virtue. The dichotomy can be devastating. The veteran finds he is unable to be who he was, unable to connect with who he is and over time, becomes unable to be unable any more.

And the tragic aspect of the story is that none of this is new. The ancients knew what the stress of mortal combat could do. They understood survival guilt as well as anyone. They knew that healing the spirit and cleansing the guilt were essential parts of recovery. They knew it and addressed it long before we did in modern society. What they recognized remains for us to do and perfect. It would be wonderful to believe we have the will and the willingness to make war obsolete but I'm not that naïve. So we must, instead, make the living stream of psychic healing part and parcel of our understanding of war. Time is not the only measurement of the distance we've

traveled since the Roman poet Horace wrote “dulce est decorum est pro patria mori.” (It is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country.) We’re much closer to the sentiments expressed by Ernest Hemingway writing about WWII:

“In the old days, they wrote that it was sweet and fitting to die for one’s country. In modern war, there’s nothing sweet nor fitting. You die like a dog, for no good reason.”

I will leave it to others to decide the reasons for which our soldiers die and I am not about to judge the merits of their deaths. I salute service and am humbled by sacrifice. My mission today has been to start the search for our living streams, for those of us whose lives are testaments to the effects of war, and for those who struggle still today with the need to heal, to cleanse, and to be relieved of guilt.

I hope something I said this morning will help us all – veterans, caregivers, loved ones, and medical professional – get to that stream.