

AFTER THE WAR: AN INSIDERS LOOK

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Introduction

The memories that many live with can lead to difficult and trying times. Combat veterans have experienced a life-changing event in which many of them find themselves trying to cope with what they saw, felt and did during these extreme times of stress. Through the year's family, friends and veterans have tried to make sense of these experiences. Many families notice that their combat veteran never talks about what they experienced. They feel closed off from a part of the veteran's life and don't understand his/her struggles. This short paper is an attempt to tell a portion of the veteran's story from their perspective. I do not intend to give a list of symptoms or to describe particular combat experiences, but do want to give the general content of the spiritual struggles many deal with. As a result of the writing style I have used, some veterans may find that the perspective I communicate could raise some strong emotions in them. So, I would encourage those who have been traumatized to read this piece with some level of caution. I hope what is written will help three groups of people: 1). The family member who seeks to understand the emotional and spiritual pain that their loved one endures. 2). The veteran who needs help at putting into words what they feel. 3). Faith communities who seek to provide supportive spiritual care. It is important that this is read with a focus to understand and not an attempt to fix. The ability to be open and non-judgmental is essential in order to understand the problems so many go through. This paper does not reflect all combat veterans' struggle with war, but does reflect some common emotional and spiritual themes that a large number of combatants struggle with. It is also important that we do not impose our idea of wellness on someone who has been traumatized. What veterans need most is support and understanding.

The Story Begins

There are some things in life that no human should ever experience. Each of us grows up with rules and ethical principles that we believe we should never violate. We base many of our actions and our daily living on those principles. When we enter a combat zone we feel a change that sweeps over us. For some of us it feels like a wave of desperation that carries us across a bridge from where there is no return. We come to realize that our ethical underpinnings can become hindrances to our survival and we contemplate the possibility of doing the unimaginable. So, for a short time we do not allow ourselves to compare our actions to our standard of right and wrong. For the first time in our lives we come to realize that we are capable of doing anything to survive. This struggle for survival becomes so intense and life changing that it exacts a great toll on the human spirit.

After we return from combat we try to hide our wounded spirit. We avoid talking about the transformation we experienced and correctly remark: "They just don't understand."

We are confused and hurt, and it inhibits our ability to tell others about what we have learned about the world and ourselves. We are no longer among the ranks of the naïve and it troubles us deeply. Somehow we see the naïve as a blessed people, but we see ourselves as being cursed with enlightenment. We have become enlightened to something that we wish we could forget and we envy those who are still naïve. It confuses us that the naïve can be so cavalier when they say that they understand because we know that no one should understand our secret. It does not take us very long to realize that our knowledge and understanding is at a deeper and more painful level. Somehow we know that the depth and intimate level of our knowledge eclipses what humankind was ever meant to know. We have encountered evil, and the evil is personal for it was all around us, and may even reside in us.

When we reenter the world of the naïve, they either cheer or boo our role in battle. If they cheer and say "what a good thing you did for our country" our heart saddens and aches because we know that the warrior battles not for "God and Country" but for mere survival. If they boo our return, then our heart saddens and aches because their booing aligns us with the evil we felt and this encounter with evil becomes so personal that it seems to defile the human spirit.

We feel alone in a world filled with people. It is only for brief periods that we feel we have something in common with others. We don't feel it when we are with the naïve. We only feel it when we are able to share our space with another soul/comrade who is troubled and enlightened in the same way we are troubled and enlightened. We may not discuss the traumatic memories with our comrades, but just knowing that there is someone else in the world that has the same terrible secret is enough to give us a temporary sense of companionship with another living soul. It helps to take some of the weight off of our soul to know that there is someone else who understands and does not condemn us for our difficulties. We need someone who doesn't judge us and will accept us when we can't measure up to others expectations.

At first we thought we could manage without help. We denied that anything was wrong with us. We thought that we were strong enough to handle the terrible secrets we learned and didn't realize that the memories would come back and haunt us in ways that we couldn't understand. When we got angry we always thought we had a good reason. We could not see in ourselves what others saw. We didn't understand that our anger swelled over minor things and was way out of proportion to the situation. It was as if we walked around with a nerve exposed that would cause us to feel a charge of pain at the slightest breeze. We needed someone to understand and give us support, but the anger and isolation drove them away.

The anger inside of us swells whenever we think about our combat experiences. When things happen in our lives that make us feel helpless we lash out at those who are close by. We don't know how to manage our feelings of helplessness anymore. When we think about how our joy and innocence was taken from us we become angry. After all, someone knew it would happen to us but no one said anything. They don't seem to want to take responsibility for anything that happened to us, so we have to fight for the help we

so desperately need. We become angry because they told us that our cause was noble. We believed them when they told us that we were fighting to help others escape tyranny and injustice. After coming home we started to understand our involvement in combat in a completely different way. We feel used and betrayed because we have come to see our involvement in war as one that was used to further someone else's own personal goals. While we were there our leaders started saying "not one more life," but we started saying "not one more lie." We were told many things that we no longer believe are true. The feeling of betrayal runs so deep and seems to be so permanent that even though we want to trust others, something seems to hold us back. We are not sure anymore whom we can trust or even if we are able to trust anymore because of the lies and betrayals we feel. All we know is that we have this terrible ache inside and we don't know how to stop the ache.

Our anger and enlightenment also poisons our relationships with those we love. We don't feel close to them because we know that there is no way for them to understand the secret we carry except to experience it in person. They don't understand the evil we are capable of and shouldn't understand. We don't have the words to express how we feel anyway. Our emotions become so confused and garbled that it makes it difficult to think of anything except our experiences. The pictures we see in our mind are pictures that trouble us even in our sleep. We are helpless and at the mercy of our thoughts and feelings. There are times when we need our loved ones to remind us that things are going to be all right. Instead of receiving a hug from those we love, we push them away when we need them the most. We can tell that our mixed messages are confusing to them. It's just that we don't have the words to express what we feel and we don't like to admit that we are weak. It must be frustrating for them but we really do need their love and need them to keep trying to understand us. It scares us that they will just get tired and leave. We wish we didn't lash out at them. It's just that we feel this wave of intense pain and when we scream out in pain everyone gets caught in its wake. We need our loved ones to keep trying to understand. Please don't give up on us-we need you too much.

This terrible secret we carry with us somehow changes the way we see the entire world. Our world has become one that is not to be taken in a cavalier way. It is a world that has a more serious side than the naïve know and it becomes hard for us even to laugh. It is a world that is filled with danger. A world where evil has become personal and intimate. The guilt and shame that many of us feel sticks in the throat and chokes the joy out of life. The guilt haunts those of us who feel guilty like the dreams and memories haunt us. Some say there is forgiveness, but why do so many of us not feel forgiven? After all most of us have prayed a thousand times for forgiveness, but the feeling of peace and assurance of our forgiveness never lingers for very long. We wonder if the guilt remains because we cannot be forgiven for the way we betrayed humanity. Or is it that humanity betrayed us? We just don't know anymore. All we know that many of us still feel guilty even though it has been so long since our enlightenment. Some say that we did nothing wrong to feel guilty about. We say: "If we did nothing wrong, then why do we feel so ashamed?" They don't understand how war can influence us to kill out of malice and rage. They don't understand how the guilt is personal and can make us feel like we are beyond redemption. It is as if our close contact with evil has defiled us and there doesn't

seem to be a way to remove the shame we feel inside. It seems that the steps we take to remove the shame inside only increases it. So, the guilt confirms in our minds how close to evil we walked and somehow becomes connected with who we have become.

Sometimes the guilt gets mingled with the pain of loss we feel. We mourn and miss way we used to be. We mourn the tragedies of the innocent that we witnessed. We mourn the relationships, through the years, that have been damaged because of us. We cry and repeat over and over and over again how sorry we are for sabotaging things with those we love. We would like to repair those things that are broken, but don't know if we can ever live up to others' expectations again. We feel broken and want so desperately to feel whole again. We wonder if we will ever be complete again and it scares us because we suspect that our difficulties with others are only destined to be repeated.

They say the secret to living with what we have wrong is to use these tools. It sounds so simple but when we try them they don't seem to work very well. So, we ask ourselves what we are doing wrong. We wonder if there is something else wrong with us since the tools don't work right away. Maybe we are asking or expecting too much. All we know is that when we are struggling the most we find that the tools work the least. We wonder what good the tools are, if they don't work during our most desperate times. The naïve seem to think that we should just get over it. "After all, it was in the past." We scream back in frustration. "We keep trying but nothing always works." They don't understand that we cannot leave the past behind no matter how much we try. Oh, how hard we have tried. So, we struggle through life using the tools we have been given so that we can have moments to feel good about ourselves. We learn that the tools we use to deal with the memories take practice. Sooo much practice. We wish someone could tell those we care about, so that they know we are doing what we can. We survived once but wonder if we can survive life after enlightenment. Even when we go to those who say they understand, some seem to think that we have done something wrong in order to relapse and struggle again. It is so hard for us to find those who can accept us for the person we have become. After time we learn that we don't really need someone to understand to the same degree we understand. We just need a listening and empathetic ear that can spur us on to keep trying. It's even hard for us to find someone who understands, empathizes and supports us among those whose job it is to help. But after a while we finally find someone we can open up to and trust with most of our struggles and secrets.

Our faith has changed as well. Many of us that felt God's closeness in combat don't feel the exciting and vibrant spirit we once felt. We still believe but something else has happened to us. Our questions seem to have changed in some way. The questions are more personal now and the answers no longer roll off our tongues as if reading from a Sunday school lesson or a Catechetical primer. Many of the naïve seem to wonder about what happened to our faith as well. When they hear our questions, they begin to wonder about the quality of our relationship with God. They don't seem to like our questions or our struggles. However, for us there are no questions that are off limits and we are not able to hide our struggles as we were before. So, we keep asking those forbidden questions. The answers for these questions are not so forth coming and we come up dry every time we ask. We wish we didn't have these questions and wish our faith were as

before we became enlightened. Our faith was simple before our enlightenment and we wish we could return to those days. We know that God was with us when we were trying to survive, but we wonder why God feels distant now. Perhaps it is because we feel distant from everyone and God gets lumped together with the rest of the naïve. We know that God understands the panic that seized our heart and mind, and we ask why God doesn't take away those things that linger on. Something inside of us says that God supported the weak and flawed throughout history, but there are times when we wonder when He is going to support us. There are many who seem to expect an almost magical kind of healing to take place in us. They don't want to acknowledge a healing of any other type and seem to believe that faith is supposed to insulate us from our experiences. For us the healing we are experiencing defies their understanding. It is not a healing where things are restored to where they were before our enlightenment. It is a healing that helps us to understand and accept how we have changed. It is a healing that helps us to understand the burden we carry with us. It is a healing that helps us believe that some meaning can come from our experiences. We are not sure how this healing will happen in our lives, but we will keep trying even after we reach the end of our strength.

While some of us feel more distant from God than before there are others of us who didn't feel close to God until they went to war. We underwent quite a transformation when we were there. We believe strongly that God protected us and delivered us from harm while we were in combat. God's intervention is the only explanation that can account for our return. Even though we believe strongly that our survival was because of God's intervention we don't know why we can't feel the closeness to God we would like to feel. Our faith in God helps us to put some things into perspective but we are not sure why it doesn't help us with all our problems. Even if we attend services with our faith community we somehow feel more distant than we think we should feel. Our faith community doesn't understand why we don't join in like everyone else. We know that people notice that we are not like everyone else but we don't know how to tell them what is going on with us. Even if we tell them what is wrong with us we are not sure if they will understand. So, we just let them come up with their own explanation about what is going on with us. We tend to sit back and observe. We just can't show our faith like everyone else. We are not really satisfied with how we are but we don't know how to change anything. Even though God is the focal point in our lives our memories crowd out the close feelings we once had. We too are confused as to why we don't feel what everyone else feels. So, we have to set our sites lower than we would like. We learn that we must trust what we know instead of what we feel. There are so many times when our feelings can't be trusted.

It wasn't until we couldn't manage our lives anymore that we got the help we needed for our troubled soul. There was so much chaos around us and inside of us that we became desperate to get some relief. The desperation we felt finally helped us overcome our embarrassment that prevented us from getting help earlier. Sadly, we had waited too long to repair some of the damage we had done. We still don't understand why we have these problems when they claim that most of the other combatants don't suffer in the same way we suffer. We figure that we should be among those who don't struggle so. Perhaps there are many others who struggle like us but they must be able to hide it better some

how. So, they give the illusion that they don't have our problems. We ask ourselves why we can't be stronger. We know that being sensitive to our environment helped us survive but we figure that being sensitive is a negative thing now. It wasn't until we realized that if we stopped being so sensitive then we would become like the rest of the insensitive masses, and that would truly be a bad thing. The world needs sensitive people. After all we feel the insensitivity of people every time we hear the insults they level at us or the expectations they have that we can't meet. "Why can't he/she leave the past behind?" "Why is he/she so angry and critical?" "Why doesn't he/she just trust God?" Some of the criticism even seems to come from our faith communities. They expect us to find some sort of peace that is now beyond our reach. They try to help by quoting scriptures but don't realize that the ones they quote only increases the anger and isolation we feel. Why do they have to try to fix everything? Don't they know that some things will never be fixed? Why can't they just give us support? Don't they understand that if many of the prophets of old had flaws then God does not condemn us for ours? Why too can't we understand that if the prophets had severe moral shortcomings and were forgiven that we can be forgiven as well. We have difficulty fighting the voice inside of us that says it was alright for these prophets to have severe problems but it is not alright for us. "You see, they were God's chosen." We don't believe that we are chosen. It seems that our guilt has become part of who we are even though we know that our faith and trust has guaranteed God's love and forgiveness. It doesn't matter what anyone says we seem to be destined to condemn ourselves. Sometimes we condemn ourselves even when we know that God loves us and will not condemn us. The naïve seem to criticize us for not measuring up to expectations. They condemn us for our angry outbursts. They seem to think that we like to get angry. They don't understand that the anger makes it harder to sleep. The anger increases the depression we feel. The anger hinders our ability to relax and find peace. The naïve don't understand that the slightest criticism or rejection cuts like a thousand blades. They don't understand how a single word can prompt us to act in ways we later regret. When they criticize us we end up condemning ourselves even more. We remind ourselves how weak we must be to have these struggles. We condemn ourselves when we say that it was our fault when things turned out in a way we didn't plan on. We condemn ourselves for some of the things we did and saw while we were in combat. We condemn ourselves for thousands of things that have gone wrong over the years.

Some of the naïve confuse us when they say that we may have been chosen to have these difficulties. When we first heard that, we didn't know how to respond. We don't want to be chosen for suffering. If being chosen means that we are special somehow then why do we feel so cursed and alone. We are embarrassed to admit that it affected us so profoundly since we thought that if we made it back in one piece we would OK. Now we are confronted with the truth and are no longer able to avoid it. We are not OK and everyone seems to notice our difficulties even before we notice them. We can no longer avoid the changes that our spirit has made. When we first sought help our life seemed to be in such a downward spiral that there was no way to stop until we ended, broken in a thousand pieces. It seemed that we went for weeks without sleep. We couldn't understand why we were able to function yet be so tired. We were tired, oh so tired, but somehow we kept moving. We wanted desperately to rest but couldn't pause long

enough for rest to catch up with us. We felt on edge and couldn't stop moving no matter how tired we were. Our head seemed to be drowning in all the thoughts that flooded our mind but we weren't able to come up for air long enough to explain what was wrong. We want desperately to regain the peace of mind we once had but now we find ourselves helpless and powerless to regain what was lost so long ago. The peace of mind we seek is a daily struggle that seems to be just out of our reach. For some of us it's been so long since we've gotten peace that we're not even sure what it feels like anymore.

We used to think that God had this elaborate plan laid out for even the tiniest of creatures. Now we have a gnawing thought in the back of our mind and we wonder how much of the world God is really in control? Some of us wonder if God is really present in the world anymore. One thing is for sure. We don't understand why there was so much chaos. We don't understand why it seems that some of the best were killed while we were left to suffer in misery. Some of us don't understand how God could have been on our side when we felt overcome by the evil that was around us. While we were there we prayed and trusted God to protect us but since our return some of us don't understand how God could have been on our side when we were fighting a war that was not always noble in it's cause. We guess that in war nothing makes sense.

They say that our experiences can have such a powerful effect on our bodies that they can even cause some changes in our brain somehow. When we heard that our experiences can change us in such dramatic ways we became even more depressed. They told us that in some people it can be reversed but they didn't seem to have much hope for us. When we heard the news we started to believe that if we changed so completely then we are truly destined to live in misery. We still didn't understand why we feel so tense all the time and it puzzles us that we can't manage our everyday experiences. When they said that our experiences could have increased the amount of adrenaline our body produces then we started to understand a little more. Our body must have forgotten to turn it off. If our adrenaline increased because of the war; now we understand why it is difficult to slow down enough to get the rest we need. We startle easily because we are ready to jump into action when something unexpected happens. We are on edge all the time just in case danger comes around the corner. Sometimes we don't even notice ourselves watching everything around us until we can't stand another minute of stimulation and have to retreat into solitude. It helped us in combat but it seems to work against us now that we've returned. We are never completely at ease anymore and it takes only a tiny spark to reignite the fire inside of us. We learned to act even before a thought came to our mind. It is now only after the storm clears that we are able to see the devastation we have caused. The adrenaline causes us to lose control all too easily. We become irritable and quick to react anytime we feel attacked or helpless. We can't even stop ourselves when the perceived attack comes from those we love. Our loved ones don't seem to understand how much we want to be in control but our body pushes us to overreact and lose what control we can normally muster. We want them to understand but we don't know how to explain it to them. It is the pain we feel that seems to cause everything to go wrong.

We have so many problems that it becomes difficult to name them all. On top of everything else, many of us have difficulty with using drugs and drinking alcohol. For some of us it started before we went to war and increased when we came back. For others, it started when we came back and only tapers off for short periods. It may have started as fun but it's not fun anymore. No one understands the kind of things we are hiding and no one understands what we get out of using.

It is easier to use instead of talking about the intense feelings of guilt we have. It is easier to use than to live with the sleepless nights and endless days of haunting thoughts and memories. It is easier to use than trying to manage the emptiness and loneliness we feel. It is easier to use than to feel the constant tension in our body, where we can never completely let our guard down. We don't enjoy using but it seems at times that using is the only answer that gives us even the slightest relief. After drinking and using for a while we gain the reputation of having an addiction. Our struggles seemed to be lumped into one label, addiction, and there is an easy cure for that label. Everyone seems to say: "Attend and follow this recovery program and your problems will be solved." But when we attend no one talks about the kind of things that haunt us. The memories that are talked about in these groups are memories around using. The problems they talk about seem petty to us. The memories that stick in our mind are memories we are afraid to repeat in public. They are memories that when repeated cause us to return to our despair. Our memories don't seem to have much in common with others who have the addiction label. Once we become sober our lives started to spiral out of control again. So, even when we get clean we find that our problems get worse instead of better. We don't mean to say that the recovery groups don't help. They do. It's just that we don't seem to completely fit in anywhere.

In recovery they talk about having a spiritual awakening. They put such a strong emphasis on it that we figure that if we can just get this spiritual awakening that is talked about then our problems would be solved. Our quest to find our spiritual awakening is another thing that leaves us depressed because it too seems to be out of our reach. We just can't let our guard down enough to allow even good feeling to appear because once we start feeling good we know that the feeling that hurt return all too quickly. They talk about the experience of serenity but no matter how much we long for serenity our unanswered questions return and rob us of serenity even before we can feel it.

SOME THINGS HELP

After living with our struggles we find a few things that help our lives to become more manageable. The first thing we may have to do is find someone who will prescribe something so that we can get some sleep. Without help with sleep we don't know how long we can manage on the little bit of sleep we get. Without sleep all of our problems and difficulties spiral out of control. We need to find a way to limit the stress and chaos in our lives. We don't like to admit it but our experiences have made us more vulnerable to the stress and chaos around us. One of the ways we limit the stress is to find a place where we can retreat too. A place of peace and quiet with limited stimulation helps us to

recover and find some stability. You see, when there is a lot happening around us we get worn out trying to keep up with everything and this causes us to be on edge. We need to be able to develop an attitude of self-acceptance. Many of us must learn how to stop condemning ourselves and accept the changes that have happened to us. We must also define what wellness means to us and not accept views of wellness that are demeaning. Receiving warmth and positive regard from those we care about is extremely important in order for us to cope better. If we are able to feel the warmth of a relationship we do much better. It is important for us to find someone who can help us work through some of the nagging questions we have. This is not as easy as it seems. This person must be able to accept our unconventional questions and help us explore alternative ways of answering these questions. Conventional or "pat" answers don't work for us and we need to have freedom to explore explanations that are not often discussed. Developing a positive understanding of spirituality is also important. A positive spirituality that affirms the principles of God's loving kindness, grace, acceptance and forgiveness is a vital aspect in our ability to cope. I hope this paper has been helpful to you. I wish God blessing on all combat veterans as they seek to piece their lives back together and as they continue to live their lives. May God bless all loved ones in their quest to understand and support their veteran. May God bless the faith communities as they seek to provide ministry to those in their community. Lastly; may God bless America, the country that we still love so much. Our hopes are that our nation will continue to provide the highest level of care possible for those who have born the battle.