

CARING MEANS SHARING THE BURDEN

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War touches all of us. And despite how little of it we see in our everyday lives, our country is at war. I invite you all to close your eyes now for just a moment and say to yourself, "my country is at war...my country is at war. What images come to your mind? What sounds do you hear, what smells, what do you see when you imagine being at war? Now open your eyes and look around. You are here in this room, safe. Your home is safe, your street is safe, and your market is safe. Your life goes on as usual. There is little to signal to you that we are at war except for news reports, which you may choose not to listen to, and these only give numbers and places and the like, but not many details of what it really means to be in a war zone.

In the past, when this country was at war, the whole country was involved. Everyone had to do their part, make some sacrifice. In the U.S. during our involvement in WWII, women took to the work force for the first time to fill positions left by the men who were overseas and they kept this country running well. Gas and foodstuffs, like sugar and butter, were rationed. Cooking fat from roasts and bacon were poured into tin cans and taken to a collection center where they were used to make glycerin for explosives. Scrap metal was collected, even by little children. We were all in it together.

Today we are not all in it. Many of us don't even think about it much of the time. Those of us who do, and are concerned about it, direct most of their efforts at ending the present war and bringing the troops home. We have political discussions. We attend vigils and rallies and marches.

What usually isn't addressed however, is the fact that once a soldier is home, the war inside him or her doesn't just stop. Rather they come home with the images of their war experience still exploding in their heads while the rest of us are living life as usual. They don't just need to come home, they need us to help them heal.

Soldiers returning from the war zone have experienced the unimaginable, the ultimate – life and death, good and evil – and may have experienced all of these in themselves. They are disoriented by ordinary things at home that are not ordinary in a war zone, things like driving on the right hand side of the road – which in Baghdad can get you killed.

When soldiers come back, home can seem like another world. The usual problems of life seem trivial and superficial when you have just spent 15 months in Hell. In the war zone a soldier's primary concern is survival. Once home, out of harms way in the comfort of home, the full impact of what he or she has just endured can come crashing in. Anger, terror, shame, deep, deep grief.

The American Psychological Association estimates that 30% of returning soldiers suffer from PTSD, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Symptoms include nightmares, unrealistic fears, difficulty concentrating, bursts of rage, emotional withdrawal, substance abuse,

emotional and sexual intimacy problems, domestic abuse, difficulty holding a job or staying in school, and risky and often violent behaviors.

Britta Dragicevic, a reporter in Sarajavo just after the three and a half year siege there, and the wife of a Bosnian war survivor has this to say:

“Sometimes we hate the people war chisels us into – hearts beating with rage, angry, bitter, cynical, tense, lit fuses that seem to go off at the slightest sound, touch, memory, people who know too much. Most of us lose our sense of faith in God, religion, humanity and our sense of the existence of good. Life after war mires us into a complicated web of relationships, self image issues and questions about healing. Our entire worlds – everything we believed to be true and real and solid – are shattered and we’re left to try to recognize the pieces and then figure out a way to put them back together in some orderly fashion. All the while, we’re supposed to look and act and behave normally – as if the worst possible human experience has not happened to us.”

I believe that 30% is a very low estimate for PTSD. The truth is that anyone (except perhaps for psychopaths), anyone who survives a war zone experiences a wound to their souls and carries a heaviness in their hearts that we call Soldier’s Heart. I know an 83 year old WWII veteran who describes this as a quiet inner despair, a deep sorrow that is always with him.

The whole war experience is so horrendous, shakes our sensibilities so thoroughly that it changes us forever. A soldier who has survived a tour, or two, or four or six is not the same person he or she was before going to war, not the same person and never will be. After surviving war, life cannot go on as it was before because we are so utterly changed by it. And yet, no one prepares our troops or their families or their communities for these profound changes. Instead, we aim to help them become “normal again,” ignoring the reality that war inevitably makes that impossible.

Soldier’s Heart is a non-profit veterans’ healing initiative that Ed I have founded. We get several phone calls and emails from community members who want to know, “What can I do to help? How can I help our veterans come home.” I never doubt the sincerity of such inquiries. They are important questions that all of us, as American citizens, should be asking. How can we help the men and women who have served our nation by going to war? Regardless of how we, as individuals, may feel about any particular war, our veterans have courageously sacrificed and they are suffering, and we as responsible citizens owe it to them to help them heal.

I wish I had a quick, easy response to give to people who want to help, 3 or 4 solid, sure fire, power point, bulleted solutions. Just do x, y and z, and all will be well. What we need to do isn’t easy and it isn’t quick. But it is what we must do. And that is, we must be willing, as individuals and as a nation to carry a piece of the emotional and spiritual wounds of war with our brother and sister veterans. We can do this by being willing to listen to the stories of their ordeal and really hear them, not just the superficial details.

When a soldier comes home he or she has lost their old identity, but has not yet made enough sense of their experience to figure out who they are now. Sharing their experiences with those who can carry the stories with them is what can help them sort out and discover who they are now, now that they have looked death in the eye and witnessed the full impact of war's destructiveness.

We need to imagine, with open hearts, the horrendous minute details. We need to be able to listen without judgment to what happens to us human beings when we are placed in intolerable circumstances. We must listen with open minds to how war makes us crazy, makes us do unthinkable things and distorts what it means to be human. It means being willing to carry the images of war in our own hearts and souls so that we truly can listen and understand and affirm the soldier's spiritually blasted condition.

Healing occurs when one soul, full of love and wisdom, builds the bridge, crosses it, enters the barrenness and meets the lost soul there. Arm in arm, as brothers and sisters we can guide them out, back to a shared and meaningful world. This is what heals, letting them know that we really want to know what they have been through and that we will share the burdens that they carry. A soldier needs to claim his or her story as their true glimpse of Hell. Whose story is more important to our comprehension of what it means for nations to use military force against other nations than the survivors of such endeavors?

As a culture we need to make room for these truths and give our veterans a special role in our society as the keepers of this sacred wisdom. We not only help them and other war survivors heal the shattered remains of their hearts, but we also learn the full reality of the enduring impact that war has on the human psyche and soul. And perhaps, with this knowledge, we will one day put an end to war forever.