

SOLDIER'S heart

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TRANSFORMING OUR COMMUNITIES TO HEAL OUR VETERANS

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There is a necessary, proper and reciprocal relationship between any society and its warriors. Our warriors willingly go into harm's way in order to preserve and protect the rest of us. In response, we must provide everything they need in order to return, recover and be restored to full functioning and life. They gave all; so must we.

War wounds and distorts our thinking, feeling, perceiving, our aesthetics, intimacy and sexuality, or will and concentration, our participation in society. War wounds every function ever attributed to the soul. Socrates taught that the soul is the seat of morality. Many veterans are anguished over what they have seen or done, and what has been done to them both abroad and at home. Thus, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder is a soul sickness. The acronym PTSD could be translated Post-terror Soul Distress.

PTSD unfolds in the public social sphere as well as in the private psychological one. In order to pursue war and keep the public supportive, governmental leaders and society in general deny the pain and suffering war causes and refuse to take responsibility for it. In any healthy society, there is a proper reciprocal relationship between warriors and civilians. During threat, warriors encircle and protect the rest of us. When they return, it is our responsibility to encircle and protect and tend them. Instead, today, our wounded and veterans are shuffled out of view and their care left to experts or agencies that are understaffed and ill-equipped to respond. PTSD is a social disorder of any society that makes its veterans serve in dehumanizing conditions then denies, alienates and marginalizes them, their stories, experiences and suffering upon return. The acronym could be translated Post-terror social disorder.

We must see that PTSD is not just an individual psychological or medical pathology and cannot be healed through medical strategies alone. Rather, PTSD is both a soul sickness and a social disorder.

This is not a hopeless situation. Lifelong suffering from PTSD is not inevitable and our veterans ache for hope. When we understand PTSD as both a moral and social disorder that we have unwittingly forced our veterans to carry alone, then the path to home and healing becomes clear.

Here is some of what PTSD asks us to do for our veterans:

- *offer immediate response to any soldier or veteran crying out in unbearable pain;
- *create gathering places for veterans in every community;
- *create religious services that bring veterans spiritual cleansing and comfort;
- *restore the true meaning, respect and celebration of Memorial Day and Veterans Day – close the malls and gather in our communities and cemeteries instead;
- *create religious, educational and therapeutic programs by which veterans can seek not just psychological help but spiritual healing, cleansing and forgiveness;
- *create safe havens that are not only shelters for homeless or addicted vets, but are houses of initiation where vets receive not just job and sobriety training but education, therapy, and rehumanization processes;
- *invite veterans into schools and community centers to educate our young to the realities of war and service;

*foster programs in libraries, community and cultural centers where veterans tell their stories to civilians and civilians honor and help veterans;

*create a Veterans Service Corps so that those who have faced life's ultimate tests can find meaningful ways to serve for life rather than collapse into disability:

*pair elder veterans with new returnees, much as Twelve Step programs do, so that returnees never have to be alone with their nightmares and despair,

*create 24/7 hot lines and drop-in centers so that veterans can find immediate help when needed;

*teach veterans creative and expressive arts so that they develop tools for self-expression that balance the destructive forces and experiences they have encountered;

*create prison-based programs for the special needs of incarcerated veterans;

*evaluate veterans in the criminal justice system for the impact of military service upon criminal activities;

*create hospice programs for the special needs of terminally ill veterans and their families;

*create reconciliation programs with those we have previously fought, and between veterans and civilians;

*create restoration projects so that soldiers who had to destroy or kill can once again learn that they are good people who can preserve, create and build;

*create community based support systems for spouses and families of troops serving overseas;

*create community based support systems for families of newly returned veterans with preparation and training for living with PTSD;

*recognize and support other at-risk groups, such as grandparents and boy- and girlfriends of overseas troops and returnees;

*evaluate and re-create our military training system so that we do not dehumanize our troops as we train and prepare them for soldiering;

*train many more health and mental health workers in veterans' psychology and teach that it is different from normative civilian psychology and they must apply different philosophies and methods in working with veterans;

*educate health professionals and the public to become familiar with the ways of warriors and war so that we overcome veterans' alienation and society's denial.

We could institute such programs for our veterans and their loved ones. There is a path home. Restoration to full functioning is a goal toward which our vets can and want to strive. We must not rest from our healing efforts until they are restored.

By understanding the true holistic scope of PTSD and providing our veterans what they need for healing and return, we could set a model for the nation and the world. We can restore the broken relationship between our society and its warriors. We can reduce the incalculable losses that result from war. We would help heal not just our veterans but our entire society. Wandering and wounded warriors need a tribe waiting to receive and heal them. If we are that tribe, they will come home to us. Healing our veterans heals us all.