

## BRINGING OUR WOUNDED WARRIORS HOME

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Walt, “the only child born in freedom,” was the son of German immigrants who arrived in the United States shortly after the end of World War II. His father had been a combat infantryman in the Wehrmacht, the German army. Growing up in the Cold War 1950s, Walt was compelled by his friends to always play the “bad guy.” He longed to be an all American boy but played Indians to his friends’ cowboys and “krauts” to their G.I. Joes. When he turned 18, Walt enlisted and volunteered for Vietnam. “I wanted to finally be one of the good guys,” Walt said. “Service in the American military in a righteous cause would expunge my family’s past and earn our place in society.”

Our troops do not enter our armed forces because they want to destroy or kill. No matter the political climate, most troops seek to serve traditional warrior values -- to preserve and protect the country they love, its ideals, and especially their families, communities and each other. If they must kill or be killed, they need transcendent reasons to do so. Throughout history, the only reason for fighting that has survived moral scrutiny is a direct attack with real, immediate threat to one's own and loved ones' lives, food and land. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is, in part, the tortured conscience of good people who did their best under conditions that would dehumanize anyone.

The role of warrior is one of the most universal in world cultures past and present. The values, practices, appearances, rituals, myths and uses of warriorhood have varied greatly between cultures and eras, but warriorhood itself is nearly universal. Almost all cultures, with the rare exceptions of those so isolated that they needed no protection from competitors, had warriors along with complex stories and rituals to help them recover from combat and guide them through the life cycle. The occurrence of warriors is so universal that depth psychologists understand Warrior to be one of our foundational psycho-spiritual archetypes.

In traditional cultures boys and men studied, practiced, emulated and modeled a "warrior's path." In these societies a warrior was not the same as a soldier, not merely a member of a huge, anonymous military institution used for the violent execution of political purposes. Rather, warrior was one of the foundational roles that kept societies whole and strong. Warriors were called upon not fundamentally to destroy and kill, but to preserve and protect their people, land, homes and food supplies, and the highest values of their culture. People respond to the same call today. Michael, a marine who served in Afghanistan, proudly declares that at age 18 he was the first in his state to enlist after 9/11. Nick, an army officer who served in Iraq, enlisted because of a lifelong desire “to be like Hector defending the gates of Troy.”

Warriorhood, however, is not so valued or nurtured in modern society. "Warrior" is not even a recognized social class. A veteran, especially one with disabilities, appears to many as a failure in terms of normal civilian identity. PTSD ratings, necessary to receive disability recognition and payments, are essentially scales judging the veteran on the degree to which he or she fulfills or fails at normative civilian functioning. Michael

fears that as an experienced combat veteran the only place on the planet he now fits is in the French Foreign Legion.

War abroad fosters war at home. When we go to war, we inevitably bring its violence and horror back to our homes and streets. We cannot help it. Thus Walt spent years ravaged by nightmares, homeless, abusing drugs and alcohol, and sitting with a shotgun in his mouth trying to find the will to end it all. He married and had children, then divorced and neglected them. He could not keep a job. He could not come home.

War echoes down the generations. Known or hidden, we all carry the wounds of war. Walt was wounded by his father's history. His children were wounded by his. When a veteran has PTSD, his or her entire family and community are inevitably affected. The individual symptoms of PTSD – sleep disturbances, substance abuse, depression, intimacy, employment and authority problems – are the same symptoms that exist in epidemic numbers in our society. PTSD is also a social disorder. When we take a close and unprotected look, we see: We are a nation and a planet of wounded warriors, and their offspring, and their neighbors.

War poisons the spirit and warriors return tainted. This is why, among many traditional cultures, including Native American, Zulu, Buddhist and ancient Israeli, returning warriors were put through significant rituals of purification before re-entering their families and communities. Traditional cultures recognized that unpurified warriors could, in fact, be dangerous. This helps explain why suicide, homicide and other destructive acts are common among veterans. In Viet Nam Walt had exhumed and reburied bodies of enemy dead from mass graves. He felt like he had dirtied and damaged his soul. Nick declared that, though he had wished to be a great champion of his people, “all they gave me was this dirty stinking little Iraq War.”

In traditional cultures warrior cleansing was often guided by shamans, and particular shamans presided over "warrior medicine." Among his many offices and honors, for example, Sitting Bull served as Medicine Chief of the Hunkpapa Warrior Society, responsible to oversee the spiritual lives and well-being of the society's warriors. Sitting Bull considered this to be the most important of all the offices he held.

Walt entered both individual and group psychotherapy for combat veterans. It helped to tell his stories, have his feelings and losses confirmed by other vets, and receive honor as part of a brotherhood. But he was in search of more cleansing, blessing and soul healing than traditional therapy could provide. He eventually partnered with a Native American woman. He studied her culture. With her people and with me he participated in sweat lodges and other traditional rituals. He attended Pow Wow where he was honored as a returned warrior. He was accepted by the Native community far more than he had experienced from mainstream America. Similarly, on healing journeys I annually lead back to Viet Nam, vets report feeling more welcomed and honored by their former foes than they have ever felt at home.

Sitting Bull and his warriors, and other bands from innumerable traditional cultures, were never plagued with self-doubt about the value of their mission, as many of our soldiers are today. In order to do battle with a whole heart, the danger and threat to one's home must be real, and the people must experience it as immediate and about to threaten their total existence. A people and their warriors must be in unity. Their cause and need to fight must be absolute in the sense that there is really nothing else they can do to preserve their food, families, and culture. Mr. Tiger, a robust, friendly and serene

man of 87 living in Viet Nam's Mekong Delta, is a veteran of wars against the Japanese, French and Americans. Though at war for a quarter century, he has no disturbing symptoms. "We Vietnamese," he says, "do not have PTSD because we never hated Americans. We only fought to protect our families and homes from invaders."

When, to the contrary, wars are based on false pretenses, a moral vacuum results. As Martin Luther King Jr. observed, troops then experience "not simply the brutalizing process that goes on in any war," but also "cynicism to the process of death, for our troops must know after a short time that none of the things we are fighting for are really involved." Walt explained, "I didn't realize until it was too late that I was just like my father – a good man fighting on the wrong side for the wrong cause." Moral trauma is at the core of PTSD. An idealistic and sincere young soldier discovering that he is in fact fighting for false or distorted political, economic or historical agendas can cause deeper, more complicated and sullied psychic wounds than those traditional warriors experienced.

It is essential that, as a society, we honor those wounds in ways that recognize their depth and degree of psychic suffering. Most conventional therapies teach healers to avoid talk of morality. But war is inherently a moral enterprise and veterans in search of healing are on a profound moral journey. Healers and communities must join them there.

The severity and extent to which veterans suffer with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder is a direct response to our culture's blindness about war's true cost. PTSD is the expression of the anguish, dislocation, and rage of the self as it attempts to cope with its loss of innocence, reformulate a new personal identity and cultural role, and awaken from massive denial. Veterans with PTSD are people whose belief systems have been shattered. We can better understand PTSD as an identity disorder and soul wound rather than a stress and anxiety disorder, as it is presently classified. War dehumanizes anyone it touches, especially if a veteran questions the cause he served. We spend enormous sums of money to train young people as soldiers and to pursue modern warfare. But we spend very little time, effort or money to rehumanize our troops upon return. Short de-briefings and arrays of medications to suppress the symptoms of pain and trauma cannot restore the hearts and souls of those who have seen combat and cannot recreate successful identities.

Traditional societies knew that their warriors served their needs for protection and all that was done was done in the tribe's name. They had rituals transferring responsibility for actions during warfare from veterans to the entire culture. Ultimately leaders, not ordinary troops, were held responsible for the results of battle and for the deaths that occurred. Our veterans cannot heal unless society accepts responsibility for its war making. To the returning veteran, our leaders and people must say, "You did this in our name and because you were subject to our orders. We lift the burden of your actions from you and take it onto our shoulders. We are responsible for you, for what you did, and for the consequences." Walt received this acceptance from Native American communities. Vietnamese today offer such acceptance and forgiveness to any Americans, veteran or not, returning to their country to reconcile. In contrast, since Afghanistan, Michael says, "I still love America but America does not love me."

Without this transfer of responsibility, the veteran carries war's secret grief and guilt for us all. Too many veterans collapse into a silent suffering disability and thus serve as our broken scapegoats while societal life proceeds with "business as usual." In contrast, during my healing retreats, veterans tell their stories, civilians speak of their lost loved

ones, and everyone shares their damaged values and broken dreams. Finally, our vets enter the center of our circle and civilians pledge to accept responsibility for any harm done in their name and to help carry the veterans' stories for the rest of their lives. By sharing this burden we become a community united in service to war-healing.

We wish, as the Gospel song says, "to study war no more." But scholars count over 14,600 wars in the last 5,600 years of recorded history. War is so epidemic in its occurrence, devastating in its impact, and lasting in its aftermath, that we must study it and tend to it and treat it. If we are to return war to its proper place, only a last defense when absolutely necessary, we must heal the wounds of our soldiers and communities. We cannot achieve peace-making without first achieving true and comprehensive war-healing.

Walt finally put away his shotgun and quit drinking. He enjoyed a successful relationship with his new partner and was adopted by her tribe and its warrior society. He took up a spiritual path that restored his belief in the goodness of life and order of the universe. He volunteered with more disabled veterans, visiting the infirm at his regional V.A. hospital and helping create annual veteran reunions. A soldier wounded by the moral trauma of modern political war-making, he carried wounds to body and soul far beyond a traditional warrior's experience. Both in therapy and beyond, we created rituals that allowed this soldier to find healing. The Native American and veteran communities helped support and bring this warrior's wandering spirit home. In turn, Walt became a devoted advocate of other veterans more wounded than he. The disabled veteran became an elder warrior.

But war completed its damage. Only in his 50s, Walt died of Agent Orange-related cancer last year.

War causes the most excruciating and comprehensive wounding to individual, community, society and planet. We cannot heal from war without involvement from the entire community and society, and without invoking transpersonal help. We must develop modern rituals that acknowledge the additional wounds caused by war for non-defense reasons. As much as we might disagree with a war, our rituals must include purification, public storytelling and community acceptance of responsibility for what the soldier has done.

These war-healing rituals and practices serve us all. They bring home to us the need to break the cycles of war-making and violence both within the individual soldier and within the society. When we return their silenced voices to our veterans, when we accept our true responsibility as individuals and as communities, we will no longer see war as an adventure or a legitimate tool of power politics. Then, perhaps, we may see that all over our country and world, we share the same legacy of war-wounding. When we join together to address those wounds wherever they appear, we will finally "study war no war."