First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

"Healing Moral Injury"

May 24, 2015 Samuel A. Trumbore

Sermon

Why do young soldiers go to war? You can hear why in this ballad composed in Chester County, Pennsylvania around 1755 while marching to battle in the French and Indian War:

> To arms, to arms! my jolly grenadiers!
> Hark, how the drums do roll it along!
> To horse, to horse, with valiant good cheer;
> We'll meet our proud foe before it is long.
>
> Let not your courage fail you;
> Be valiant, stout, and bold;
> And it will soon avail you,
> My loyal hearts of gold.
>
> Huzzah, my valiant countrymen!—again I say huzzah!
> Tis nobly done—the day's our own— huzzah, huzzah!
>
> March on, march on, brave Braddock leads the foremost;
> The battle is begun as you may fairly see.
> Stand firm, be bold, and it will soon be over;
> We'll soon gain the field from our proud enemy.
>
> A squadron now appears, my boys;
> If that they do but stand!
> Boys, never fear, be sure you mind
> The word of command!
>
> Huzzah. my valiant countrymen! again I say huzzah!
> Tis nobly done—the day's our own— huzzah, huzzah!
>
> See how, see how, they break and fly before us!
> See how they are scattered all over the plain!
> Now, Now,—now, now, our country will adore us!
> In peace, and in triumph, boys, when we return again!
>
> Then laurels shall our glory crown
> For all our actions told:
> The hills shall echo all around
> My loyal hearts of gold.

The archetype of the warrior inspires youth in every culture. These brave ones put their lives on the line to defend the nation, family and soil from invasion and desecration. Sequenced into our DNA is the urge to protect and defend not just ourselves but the ones we love.

Yet I doubt I need convince anyone here today, the reality of war is quite different than the brawny music soldiers sing to bolster their courage.

Robert E. Lee wrote these words to his wife in 1864:

> What a cruel thing is war: to separate and destroy families and friends, and mar the purest joys and happiness God has granted us in this world; to fill our hearts with hatred instead of love for our neighbors, and to devastate the fair face of this beautiful world.

Said President Eisenhower in a 1953 speech:

> Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. This is not a way of life, at all, in any true sense. Under the clouds of war, it is humanity hanging on a cross of iron.

Soldiers today are returning home more often in tatters rather than in glory. They return not only with visible wounds, but also with invisible wounds. We are just discovering, for example, how damaging exposure to explosive shock waves are to brain tissue. Those shock waves travel right through the skull knocking it back like a punch to the jaw. A flak jacket and helmet might stop shrapnel, but shock waves go right through it doing unseen damage called Traumatic Brain Injury or TBI.

What we hear most about, however, is post-traumatic stress symptoms that disrupt veteran's lives. Those symptoms are factors in breaking up their relationships and marriages, stimulating substance abuse to self-medicate, the inability to hold a job, homelessness, and suicide. Inability to sleep, restless wariness, hypersensitivity and reactivity, emotional numbness, inability to concentrate and fits of rage are just a few of the cognitive disruptions vets experience.

The Washington Post reports more than half of the 2.6 million people who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan have returned home with at least one of these problems.

This is a big deal.

While it has newer names like PTSD and TBI today, veterans returning from war with invisible problems isn't new. This damage has been known in the past by names like

- WAR NEUROSIS: mid-20th century
- BATTLE FATIGUE: World War II
- SHELL SHOCK: World War I
- SOLDIER'S HEART; DA COSTA'S SYNDROME; IRRITABLE HEART; THE EFFORT SYNDROME: American Civil War – WWI
- NOSTALGIA: Swiss;
- HEIMWEH: German;
- Maladie du Pays: French;
- "Homesickness", 1600s
- ESTAR ROTO: "To be broken", Spanish, 1600s

The chronicle of damage goes back to the Ancient Greeks. Dr. Ed Tick, my source for that list, points out "The Iliad can be read as a textbook on traumatic war wounding." We can clearly see the effects of trauma in the description of Achilles behavior.

Modern warfare has components that compound the trauma. Dr. Laurie Leitch and Elaine Miller-Karas, co-founders and co-directors of the Trauma Resource Institute explain:

> What makes it even harder for those with war-related trauma and other emotional disorders to get the help they need is that therapists often don't understand the unique, confounding, and anomalous situation of the war zone. As in no other potentially traumatizing situation, troops are predator and prey and witness, sometimes all three at once…
>
> For example, Joan, who was sent into Afghan villages to ferret out the Taliban, had the job of searching Muslim women suspected of carrying explosives. Armed and ready to engage with the Taliban, she was in the *predator* role, but she was simultaneously frightened *prey,* because if one of the explosives she was looking for actually detonated, she'd die instantly or be horribly wounded. She might also be shot from behind by a sniper. While she herself never discovered explosives, she did, tragically, become a direct *witness* to a traumatizing event—seeing one of her closest buddies blown up....
>
> In combat zones, however, these three roles often are experienced simultaneously, with the corresponding physiological arousal:
>
> - as prey, the biological impulse may be to flee;
> - as predator, to fight—often with great ferocity and rage (if a buddy has been killed, for example)—and
> - as witness, to freeze while terrible events unfold before one's eyes.
>
> Since the battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan have neither boundaries nor any predictable let-up to the violence, a soldier can be experiencing these states serially

> or simultaneously much of the time. Add multiple deployments with little chance to decompress in between them, and we can begin to appreciate the difficulties so many of our troops experience when they attempt to reintegrate back home.

And when they come home, they are not the same person they were when they left. Just about every soldier uses violence in one way or another that they find disturbing or later regret. No soldier goes onto the battlefield to kill innocent women and children, surrendering soldiers, to torture, poison and starve people, to destroy civilian homes and property, and to participate in the death of their comrades in arms. Yet this is the inescapable reality of war. Kill or be killed. Destroy or be destroyed. And soldiers bring all this home ***in their heart*** as a moral injury whether or not they return home with any physical injuries.

So the fact that Vietnam has very little evidence of PTSD in their population might be a little surprising. Whether North or South Vietnamese, just about all of them were involved or affected by the war. Millions died. (Just hold that statement for a moment.) Just about every family had someone who died or was injured during the forty year conflict. US bombing and the use of defoliants like Agent Orange did enormous damage. Yet most Vietnamese had little lasting psychological damage.

One reason is the nature of the conflict. They were defending their own homes and villages. This aligns much better with one's moral conscience than fighting in a foreign war for strategic advantage to stop the threat of Communism.

Another reason I'd like to highlight for us is the magnitude of the conflict. Every Vietnamese person, young and old, was part of the conflict and everyone understood the harsh conditions and the horrific experiences civilians as well as the military experienced. Returning soldiers had ready sources of compassion from those who fully understood what the soldier had experienced.

How different was and is the reception of the returning soldier from Iraq or Afghanistan. Less than 1% of Americans have had any experience of Iraq or Afghanistan, let alone combat. Their combat experiences were significantly different from previous World Wars where there was a front and an objective to accomplish that had a finish line. These soldiers were not warriors defending their own land as much as occupiers of someone else's land. And their Western ways were not welcomed and embraced by the populations they encountered.

When I sat in a healing circle listening to a veteran of Afghanistan talk about what he experienced, it was hard to stay with him and empathize. I haven't fought in war. I don't know what it is like to take the life of another person. I haven't had to follow lethal orders that I didn't believe were valid. I haven't had to make the awesome decision whether to shoot or to hold my fire – for myself or for someone else. I don't know what it is like to carry a wounded heart, a soldier's heart.

I can listen – and that has value. I can learn. But I am not a warrior and likely never will be.

For the first time in American history, during my lifetime, we have moved from a citizen army to a professional army. Much of our high tech weaponry requires a professional fighting force to operate it, maintain it and repair it. As these professional soldiers spend a career in service, they move further and further away from the civilian population, becoming almost a separate, isolated and insulated community. And a free society must guard against the divergence of their interests from that of the civilian population.

We let that separation happen at our peril.

Whether professional or civilian, our armed forces fight for us, the citizens of this nation. When they kill, ultimately they are killing to defend and protect us and our way of life. We have a responsibility to welcome them home and provide the care they need to reintegrate into society rather than live out their lives on the margins before suffering an early death, by disease, substance abuse or suicide.

We must learn to offer these returning vets respect for their "soldier's heart." Just as we are forever changed when a loved one dies, particularly a child, so is a soldier permanently changed by the trauma of war. The soul is changed when we witness man's inhumanity to man, experience the terror of sudden death or end another person's life by our own hand. Encountering life and death on a daily basis, not knowing whether we will see another sunset or another sunrise, exposes the harshness of reality and the cruelty of humanity in a way that is very hard to live with.

Yet that is the great nobility of the true warrior. He or she is able to look into the pit of hell, see the empty void, see the evil and the innocent victimization, and choose to live. The mature warrior knows this is ***one aspect of existence*** that cannot be removed from it. And because it cannot be removed or eliminated, at least not yet, warriors will be needed to stop it in its tracks. And that action will require the warrior to rise above this element in him or herself.

What I don't know today, is how I can help in this process or how you can help in that process.

I do know we can fully fund the Veteran's Administration to tend to the visible and invisible wounds of our returning vets and returned vets. I know we can support Unitarian Universalist Chaplains to serve in our military as we did with Chris Antal, our former intern, who will be speaking to us on father's day. We can advocate for humane treatment of our service men and women giving them adequate recovery time between deployments.

When Chris was here, we started a listening circle for veterans as a way to offer emotional support. Not enough people were willing to come on a consistent basis. My lack of service undermines my credibility to lead such a group. Today, I stand willing to join others in this

congregation who would like to provide services to veterans in our congregation.

While I don't know if I can be the person to do so, I have great confidence that veterans can learn to carry their wounded soldier's heart as true warriors. I hear that potential in the voice of Karl Roder, inmate of Dachau from 1933 to 1945. He wrote, "In Dachau I made a powerful discovery. No power exists in the world that is capable of destroying humans as spiritual beings."

Let us hold that confidence, even in our unknowing of the path to its realization, as we honor the sacrifice of our veterans on this Memorial Day weekend.