

## 14. THE DEEPER JOURNEY

### *Marked by War*

Having a sense of discipline, a sense of how to work with your mind, to stay grounded, to gain some confidence in your own heart, prepares you for the road we now have to travel.

Few other experiences compare to the life and death intensity of war. Whatever people naively imagine about such an experience, it introduces them to a realm of terror, tragedy, heroism, and savagery that takes place in a dimension far removed from most of civilian life. It's an experience so singular and indelible, it inevitably marks those who pass through it (even including the base personnel who aren't directly in combat), often such that they can't continue beyond it. They carry those experiences with them, as if they've left a part of themselves in the war zone that has never returned.

This deep spiritual wound gets a current psychological term—Post-Traumatic Stress—but it's an experience mentioned as far back as the ancient Greeks. Both German and French doctors have in the past called it words that translate as “homesickness”—the soldier has lost his home and no longer knows where he belongs. In the World War I it was called “shell shock,” and in WWII and the Korean War it was termed “combat fatigue.” But maybe the most resonant term we have comes from the Civil War: “soldier's heart.” It's the heart of the soldier that sustains the wound, rather than the purely physical wounds suffered from combat.

Can we bring the skills of mindfulness and awareness to the challenge of war trauma? Can we embody the warriorship we've been discussing and bring light into that place where consciousness remains trapped in a war it can't emerge from?

### *The Symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress*

There's *physical* trauma, when the body sustains an injury and then struggles to recover from it. Similarly, the mind or spirit of a person can experience trauma, and then get mired in the echoes or subsequent "stress" of the experience. "Trauma" is a reaction individuals have to violent or otherwise extreme events that overwhelm them physically, emotionally, or cognitively, typically putting them in situations that they can't control or adequately cope with. There are, of course, many such situations in war.

A common PTS reaction can come from a sudden noise, as this Army vet describes:

Not too long after being out in the field at White Sands Missile Range playing war games, a group of us (5 or 6) were headed back to the base (Ft. Bliss) in a van driving down the freeway at 4 in the morning, when a car or truck (don't know which) backfired. The noise triggered a simultaneous reaction from each person in the van. Not a word was spoken. Everybody in the van just looked at each other and responded the same. The brakes were slammed on, and every door of

the van flew open, while each of us ran for cover and looked for a fight that wasn't there. I'm thankful the freeway was pretty much empty at 4 in the morning. Nobody got hurt, and we didn't start throwing rocks at cars. Loud noises still get me.

Nevertheless, a lot of trauma does purely relate to the subjective reaction of a given person to an outer event. What might have been highly traumatizing to one person could be experienced differently by another one going through the same event. While there may be standard responses the human body has to physical trauma, mental trauma can be highly individual and personal, and it requires a very personal journey from the individual who experienced it.

The patterns of "stress" that emerge from the trauma will also be particular to individuals, but we can track typical ways these manifest for people:

- Difficulty sleeping, repeating nightmares, night sweats
- The mind obsessively replaying images of traumatic events regardless of what's happening
- Flashbacks where you suddenly feel like you're back in the traumatic event
- Very strong physical and emotional reactions to things that trigger memories of the traumatic experience

- Avoiding anything that may have to do with the traumatic experience, like people, places, or activities
- Refusing to discuss the experience
- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Emotional numbness
- Rage, irritability, impulses to violence
- Hyper-sensitivity to movement and noises
- Hyper-alertness, always on guard against danger
- Difficulty focusing or remembering
- Dwelling on suicidal thoughts

If you suffer from any of these experiences for an extended time, they indicate underlying trauma. There's an essential disturbance based on war or military experience that remains unresolved in your being, and that generates internal discord which leaks out in your daily experience as nightmares, flashbacks, hyper-sensitivity, or any of the other things we've mentioned.

It's not unusual for soldiers to ignore these symptoms and what they might mean. There can be a fundamental embarrassment based on believing that "real soldiers" don't have these experiences, that they don't fit with someone who's genuinely strong, who upholds military values, and strives bravely in his or her role without complaint. There can be fear of what others in your unit might think, or perhaps simply a denial of how unsettled your consciousness has become, fearing what that might mean.

Sometimes you can succeed in keeping it all down, suppressed out of sight, while functioning fairly normally, at least until something shifts in your life that allows it to surface. Some vets seem to have no serious problems until they've retired and now have the time and space to reflect.

Generally, if the symptoms are there, avoiding the symptoms becomes an all-engrossing task. One strategy becomes evading situations that trigger you. If you find yourself in a crowd and you start to freak out, you learn to avoid crowds. If you feel deeply disturbed by your military experience, you may try to keep that from your family, wanting to prevent it from affecting them or to prevent them from knowing what a terrible person you secretly think you are. A very common choice is to self-medicate with alcohol or drugs, attempting to blot out your pain and anxiety.

2ndLt Finney fell into this last coping strategy while still in the service, with unfortunate results:

Alcohol became an easy way to avoid dealing directly with my own inner world, and while I was fortunate that my alcohol abuse didn't lead me into addiction, that path of denial and avoidance is temporary and has an unintended consequence of affecting good decision-making. Eventually my life felt completely unmanageable as I tried to maintain the facade of having everything together in spite of watching my second

marriage crumble and being well aware that my performance at work was starting to suffer, too.

One Saturday night before a Monday random urinalysis, I cared so little for myself that I used cocaine, and of course I popped when the results of the urinalysis came back two weeks later—which was a really big deal for a mustang lieutenant. Six months later, I pled guilty at my General Court Martial, telling the judge that I felt I only had about an inch of my honor left and wasn't willing to give that up, throwing myself on the mercy of the court. In acknowledgment of my years of service and the integrity of my plea, I was given a letter of reprimand, 60 days restriction to base, and a dismissal from the Marine Corps that I loved (and still do).

And I became a cautionary tale.

Unfortunately, all of these kinds of strategies, meant to dodge the short-term challenges, become mounting, long-term problems that create many further sufferings. It's not only the military person who grows more confused, but such behavior very definitely affects the people that he or she cares about.

Avoiding situations like crowds that trigger PTS creates a *habit of avoidance*, such that the vet has to elude more and more situations. Now she feels she can't go to the movies; he doesn't want to go grocery shopping anymore. Step by step, vets cut themselves off from even or-

dinary activities like visiting the mall, until they become extremely isolated.

You may want to save your family from knowing all the terrible things that happened, but your withdrawal from them upsets and confuses them. You become harder and harder to reach and share with, even around normal, daily things like picking the kids up from school or having a family dinner. You convince yourself they could never understand anyway. Your unavailability starts to poison communication and degrade your relationships.

Once drugs come heavily into the picture, there's the inevitable downward spiral. Work suffers; personal relationships become strained; you grow more and more dependent on the high to take you away from your problems, but instead your problems escalate while you need greater and greater doses to reach your high space. It begins to dominate your daily activities, distort your decisions, and weaken your health, while it curdles your relationships and separates you from the people you're close to.

Some common outcomes include divorce, loss of employment, full-blown addiction, even homelessness or imprisonment.

At this point, avoidance and denial have built a considerable barrier between you and the world. Dealing with the horror of war—what has been at the root of all these terrible manifestations—could seem virtually impossible, completely unreachable. You may feel like

you're condemned—though the one condemning you is only yourself.

### *A Change in Attitude*

Evolving your situation requires a change in attitude, one where you start to keep the warrior's seat instead of dodging your thoughts and feelings. You recognize that your situation has become untenable and must be faced, not merely for your own sake, but for everyone around you that you care about.

As Claude AnShin Thomas, who served as a gunner on a chopper in Vietnam and now conducts annual veterans retreats in North America and Europe, comments, "Healing does not mean the absence of suffering. It means learning to live in a different relationship with this suffering."

It's not realistic to want to bite the whole thing off at once. You have to work incrementally with your mind and gain confidence in what you're doing. You may not be able to confront gut-wrenching tragedy just yet, but you might be able to face your husband or wife and admit you've got a problem and you're struggling with it. You might be able to work with your anger at the clerk when you go to the V.A. or have to call the cable TV company because they cut off your service. You can try to genuinely respond to your children or friends when they reach out to you and want to engage. When you're thinking how terrible you are or how terrible other people are, drop it, and come back to the sunlight shafting



through the trees or the ground under your feet.

In other words, we're talking about applying what we've discussed to this point in the book. You may not be ready to take on your most deep-seated feelings, but you can start to work with the fringes of your experience, starting to shift yourself out your stuck place, out of the dark cocoon you've become wrapped up in. When you begin to part the fibers of habitual patterns and let in some light and fresh air, you're starting to take the journey.