

“A Soldier’s Heart’: Healing the Warrior’s Soul”

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“When a soldier kills
He must dig two graves:
One in the earth for the dead
And one in his soul,
As he will not return.”

This poem by Larry Winters, an American who served in the Vietnam conflict, speaks of the profound wounds some veterans carry when they return home. They may bear physical wounds from their service – lost limbs, brain injuries, scars - but Winters speaks of another kind of wound, a spiritual wound. Winters speaks of the experience of bearing “a soldier’s heart.”

“A soldier’s heart” is a phrase from the Civil War, describing the struggle survivors of that armed conflict endured after service. But their challenges were not specific to that war. The condition of “a soldier’s heart” is known the world over, in every culture and generation.

Some European cultures in the 1600’s used the words “nostalgia” or “homesickness” to diagnose troubled veterans as it seemed as if their souls were lost. The Lakota people describe this way of being as “nagi napayape” - “the spirits leave him.” Accounts from World War I speak of “the effort syndrome” in veterans, the appearance that the will has detached from the mind. By World War II, the phrase “shell shock” came into use, a precursor to the term “post-traumatic stress disorder,” the affliction now defined as a medical pathology, not a spiritual crisis.

This Saturday, our nation will recognize Veterans’ Day, honoring the generations throughout our history who have served in the armed forces in the United States. We will hold parades, make speeches and visit cemeteries. We will say “thank you” to those who have served. And, as part of a holiday weekend, we will relax, we will travel and take advantage of sales in stores.

But healer, writer, educator and psychotherapist Edward Tick invites us to do more. Through his work with veterans, bearing witness to their stories of battle and returning home, Tick calls us to see our veterans not as citizens who have performed a job for the nation but as members of a separate class, as warriors. He calls us to see veterans as part of an unbroken line called to protect their people and who, as a result, sometimes receive the familiar wound we now call PTSD. Tick asks us to stop going to the mall on Veterans Day and, as some feel conflicted about their actions in military service, to stop saying “thank you.” Tick asks all of us – citizens and veterans, witness and warrior – to play our part in honoring the role of the warrior in society and, thus, to participate in the spiritual care of those who serve in our collective defense. My reflection this morning lifts up Edward Tick’s wisdom so we all might better minister to the warriors among us.

Tick began to care for veterans in his earliest days as a psychotherapist. He did not intend to specialize in counseling veterans; his career coincidentally began when many were returning home from Vietnam. Observation of these veterans’ struggles inspired Tick to learn about cultural traditions around the world regarding warriors, traditions that define the warrior experience as a spiritual journey. Drawing on his years of research and therapeutic practice, Tick leads pilgrimages around the world, bringing contingents of Vietnam veterans back to that country and warriors from many conflicts to Greece, the cradle of modern medicine and a source of rich mythology about the human experiences of war and peace.

Early in Tick’s resource for returning veterans and their families, *Restoring the Warrior’s Soul: An Essential Guide to Coming Home*, Tick recounts a conversation he once had with a veteran, a conversation that illustrates the spiritual dimensions of the warrior experience and Tick’s radical diversion from conventional psychotherapy in his practice.

Dr. Tick was meeting with a veteran named Art, a survivor of intense combat in Vietnam. As Art told Edward Tick, in the most precarious moments, he would curl into a fetal position in his foxhole. This was, he said, not just to protect his body but also to protect his soul. Art went on to

affirm that, “the soul is attached to the body by an invisible umbilical cord. It’s an energy cord; you can feel it. And I know because I felt it when it started to fray.”

In this dangerous environment, Art felt the cord getting thinner and thinner until it finally unraveled. Facing enemy fire, Art tried to put an end to the violence. “Go home!” he yelled at the Vietnamese soldiers. “Don’t make me do this! I don’t want to do this.” All the while, the two sides kept firing at each other.

In time, the Americans were overwhelmed and needed to retreat. But Art was trapped among the enemy soldiers. He recalls, “That’s when I felt my soul leave my body and pull me up the hill by the invisible cord.” Through climbing the hill, Art joined the rest of his platoon, completely unharmed. “Do you believe me?” he asks Edward Tick.

“Yes,” Tick replied. “Souls are living, souls are inside us, souls can get lost, souls can get wounded, souls can flee.”

“I thought I was crazy,” Art said. No, Edward Tick replied. “We talk about veterans going crazy but your story is one of ‘going sane’ in combat.”

“I thought docs didn’t talk about souls.” Art said. Tick responded, “Traditional people around the world know about the soul and would tend to it.” He then asked, “How is your soul now? Where is it?”

“It’s still outside of me. It stays nearby. Right now, it is in that empty chair, watching you to see if it can trust you.”

Edward Tick then turned to the empty chair, bowed and said “Thank you for saving Art’s life. Thank you for not breaking the connection but keeping him alive and with us. And we, together, will work and pray and strive for Art’s life, this world, this body to be a safe enough place for you to return to.”

While Edward Tick's approach to counseling veterans is unique in American psychotherapy, there are abundant resources in mainstream culture that resonate with the understanding of veterans as warriors on a spiritual path.

Our centering thought and opening hymn this morning is the text of a familiar psalm from the Hebrew bible, Psalm 23. As we read and sing the words, I can't help but think of the many times I have heard them at bedsides – "Yea, though I pass through shadowed vale, yet will I fear no ill" - and in memorial services – "Thou art with me; and Thy rod and staff comfort me still." This poetic illustration of communion with the divine brings a sense of peace in times of suffering and loss.

But Edward Tick reminds us of the context of these words. They were written by David, remembered as a great king but also as a warrior. And, as the psalms are sequential, we gain a greater understanding of Psalm 23 when we read Psalm 22, which laments, in part:

For dogs are all around me;
a company of evildoers encircles me.
My hands and feet have shriveled;
I can count all my bones.
They stare and gloat over me;
they divide my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots.

But you, O LORD, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!
Deliver my soul from the sword,
my life from the power of the dog!
Save me from the mouth of the lion!¹

As we hear David's words, speaking of "a company of evildoers encircling," I remember Art's story of curling in a protective stance amid enemy fire, his desperation to find aid. I remember his need to have, in the words of the next, more famous psalm, his "soul restored."

¹ <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+22&version=NRSV>

Edward Tick identifies these psalms as two chapters of one experience, the experience of PTSD – what he calls “post-traumatic soul distress” - and healing from this wound – “my cup overflows.”

This is but one example of the warrior experience reflected in religious traditions. From these psalms to recognizing the sacrifice of Isaac as a symbol of the warrior, sacrificed by a nation, to myths and traditions of many cultures, scripture and war stories are intimately entwined and part of our cultural vocabulary.

Part of healing spiritual war wounds is, paradoxically, reimagining the wound of the “soldier’s heart.” In its current, clinical model, PTSD is defined as a medical problem, an imbalance of brain chemistry. Yet, Tick reminds us that a PTSD diagnosis is, in itself, a testament to something deeper. “A soldier’s heart” reveals the veteran’s humanity as it emerges, in the words of one war survivor, “when your head tells you to do things your heart knows is wrong.” In this way, Tick affirms, “symptoms are the language of the soul.” As combat stress is known throughout human history, Tick defines PTSD as a “noble wound,” one that serves to define a warrior’s identity and as a possible gateway to future growth.

But a “soldier’s heart” is only one part of the story. Tick talks about another kind of PTSD, what he calls “post-traumatic social disorder.” For a warrior to claim their identity, for a wounded warrior to heal, there is a role for the broader culture. So much of the suffering returning veterans face is not rooted in their wartime experience but the inability for the people and the place they call home to authentically bear witness to their story or to take any responsibility for the warrior being sent in the first place.

One who has lived through war is changed forever. To return home is often a lonely experience as the strange intimacy of combat often leaves veterans dissatisfied with the quiet stability of civilian life.

To heal both kinds of PTSD – soul distress in the warrior and social disorder in the community - Tick identifies six steps a warrior and their people must take for the warrior to receive “a full return journey.”

The first step is “isolation and tending.” Tick notes that in some American Indian cultures, when warriors return from battle, they are separated from the community, not on the margins but in the center where they are tended by the elders and healers. Sometimes their war clothing is burned and they are purified through ceremonies. The goal is to prevent the poison of war from touching the tribe.

In US history, as World War II veterans returned home by ship, the long journey served as a form of isolation that may have supported these veterans in transitioning home well. Conversely, Tick observes that many veterans isolate themselves after returning home, living in anonymous motels or drifting between friends’ couches or hiding in their parents’ basement.

The second step is “affirmation of warrior destiny.” In some cultures, the warriors are not permitted to leave their state of isolation until they personally claim their identity and role as warriors, until they affirm their willingness to bear the burdens of the warrior path.

Affirmation is followed by “purification.” The diversity of religious traditions offer returning veterans many rituals for cleansing – the Catholic confession, the Protestant adult baptism, the fasting and atonement practices of Yom Kippur, the American Indian sweat lodge. Even visits to secular saunas can become part of a purification process.

Tick recalls a time when an entire nation went through a purification ritual. After the fall of the Nazis, children in Austria were invited to each research an individual victim of the Holocaust – their name, their station in life, their fate. On the anniversary of Hitler’s annexation of Austria, the children wrote letters to the person they adopted and sent them into the air, tied to helium balloons. Thus, one step was taken to repair the shattered social and spiritual covenant of the nation.

The fourth step is storytelling, opportunities for veterans to share honest stories of their experiences in war, in safe spaces, without judgment or comment. In so doing, the stories become part of the public sphere and narrative, where they belong.

Then comes restitution, the process by which warriors, their families and their nation “buy back what has been lost.” As reflected in today’s reading, the community claims responsibility for the warrior’s actions and thus the warrior transforms from destroyer to protector.

The last step is initiation, the claiming of the warrior identity once the process is complete, once a veteran has been to war, has come home, has cleansed, confessed, has shared stories and has been reunited with community and can therefore “carry their story now without collapse” and also bear the honorable title of elder warrior.

Perhaps one of the most powerful examples of healing those with “a soldier’s heart” is the journey Tick leads to Vietnam. Those who once annihilated forests with agent orange and committed acts of violence on Vietnamese soil are welcomed by the Vietnamese veterans as friends. They take turns sharing stories and poems about the war, in time claiming the other’s stories as their own. The American veterans find ways to make restitution to the Vietnamese people, building homes for impoverished war widows or providing medical care to ailing elders. The American veterans return to the place where they once were destroyers and serve as builders, as healers, as partners. Thus the story of their relationship with the Vietnamese people shifts and evolves as they, like Art, seek to find a way for their souls to return within and to be at rest.

Many of us know the iconic image from the Vietnam war of a young girl, burned with napalm. She, too, has a story that continues, as does her brother, also burned in the attack. People around the world contributed to his healing so he was able to receive a prosthetic eye. As Tick observes, this gesture of restitution redefines the saying “an eye for an eye.”

As the veterans Tick serves demonstrate, it is possible to evolve from destroyer to protector, from aggressor to preserver. I believe it is possible, too, for society to evolve from denier to companion with our veterans, from exploiter to healer. For the health of society depends on this growth as the wounds of a “soldier’s heart” are not just carried by veterans. Shared too is the vision of a world safe enough for all souls to come home to.

Prayer

As Edward Tick said to Art's soul, part of welcoming warriors home is working and praying for wholeness, for each individual veteran, for the community they were charged to protect and for the world-at-large. In this spirit, I invite us into prayer:

Spirit of life and love,
God of the ages,
our days of war and our days of peace,
for those who gladly served,
for those who were sent,
for the loved ones who wait and worry at home,
may you have the courage to tell your story
and may others have the courage to hear.
May all of us –
Leader and voter, citizen and warrior –
Claim what is ours to own in the actions of our military.

May we find our way to peace –
Peace in the nations,
Peace in the cities,
Peace in the homes
And peace in our hearts –
This Veterans Day

And for all the days to come.

Amen.