

The observations below are based solely on clinical experience and thus are exploratory, not definitive.

DOUBLE WHAMMY

War-related PTSD & childhood trauma

by Aphrodite Matsakis

Some of the most chronic and severe cases of war-related post-traumatic stress disorder seem to be suffered by veterans who were physically abused as children. In over 50 cases I have seen thus far, rage reactions, numbing, low self-esteem, social isolation and difficulties with intimacy common to many PTSD-afflicted veterans

have been compounded by having experienced severe and repeated physical maltreatment at the hands of one or both parents or other caretakers.

Among these veterans, physical abuse almost always was accompanied by emotional abuse and other forms of humiliation. Usually emotional abuse included assaults on their worthiness and, more specifically, on their masculinity. Emotional abuse also included 1) damning, irrevocable, character judgments, 2) threats of further abuse, mutilation or even death and, 3) threats of abandonment.

ATTRACTION OF THE MILITARY

Formerly abused veterans who have come for help describe experiencing a great need to feel powerful and to belong somewhere during adolescence. In some cases they had been thrown out into the streets by an abusive parent. In other cases, they could not wait to find an alternative to their violent, chaotic home. In all cases, home was not home in the sense of being a place of rest, security and nurturance.

The military was highly attractive for these young men. It provided an image of masculine strength. It promised a sense of belonging and unity, as well as an identity. Many left home for the military as soon as possible. Often they lied about their age in order to be accepted.

In the military they sought not only to escape violence and humiliation, but to develop or affirm their manhood. Instead of helpless victims they would be warriors now, superior in strength to the parents or caretakers who abused them. Military training, they hoped, would cause them to view themselves and others to view them as "real men." Furthermore, they were certain that fighting techniques and strategies they acquired would erase or mitigate past memories of relative weakness and would assure them that they would never again be powerless in an interpersonal

relationship.

While some formerly abused veterans shunned all forms of violence during the war (except actions which were necessary to complete their mission), others engaged in abusive violence and atrocities. Some, but definitely not all of the formerly abused veterans I have seen, volunteered to serve in high-risk, aggressive roles like being tunnel rats, snipers or members of special forces units. High-risk roles not only entailed considerable amounts of killing, but also a high probability of being killed.

Over the course of therapy, many of those veterans who chose highly aggressive roles or who engaged in atrocities have come to realize that their lust to annihilate the enemy stemmed in part from leftover hostility they held toward an abusive parent. Some also realized that in choosing highly dangerous roles they were not only trying to prove to themselves that they were finally men, but setting themselves up to be killed. Some desired to die because they did not feel worthy to live. For them, the sense of unworthiness began with parental abuse.

These veterans' conclusions make clinical sense. As a result, any guilt such veterans may feel about killing or atrocities in which they engaged can be seen as incorporating childhood guilt about hating and wishing harm upon the abusive parent. Consequently, healing from war memories for these veterans will involve examining guilt and fear about negative feelings and/or death wishes held toward an abusive parent or caretaker.

It cannot be overemphasized that all abuse survivors did not go on killing rampages in Vietnam. Some veterans deeply regret any aggressive act they committed in Vietnam, especially if it involved children. For example, one veteran shot a young boy who was hurling a grenade at his unit. Any ambivalent feelings the veteran had about killing a child, even though the child was clearly on the enemy side, were compounded by the veteran's identification with child victims.

Most child abuse survivors who served in combat, among my clients, suffer from intense mood swings which involve painful suicidal and/or homicidal thoughts. For veterans who are more suicidal than homicidal, there is usually guilt over having killed.

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For those who are more homicidal than suicidal, there may or may not be stated or acknowledged guilt over having killed. However, there may be guilt for not feeling guilty about homicidal feelings. Still others feel no guilt at all; their only regret is that they cannot kill today without harming their families or dying themselves.

Some want to kill in order to get themselves killed. Others want to kill because they simply like to kill. If they were younger, they would rejoin the military and volunteer for the next front line available. Some are content with killing animals, some with beating their wives and children. Others avoid interpersonal relationships for fear of losing control and harming another person. However, the ensuing loneliness and social deprivation creates another source of rage which only feeds the combined anger stemming from childhood and the war.

BATTLE HEAT AND BLOOD LUST

In *Myths to Live By*, historian-mythologist Joseph Campbell discusses the exhilaration of battle known to warriors throughout the ages. The thrill of killing documented in the myths of a variety of people is now viewed as an adrenaline high by modern physiologists who have presented evidence of chemical addiction to battle or other aggressive acts. In more common parlance, once some soldiers begin to wage war an undetermined number develop blood lust or battle heat. This blood lust is appropriate and functional under conditions of war. In fact, soldiers who develop a love for killing may be highly regarded and reinforced.

Problems arise, however, when soldiers full of battle heat return to civilian society where blood lust is not socially acceptable. There are other problems. Joseph Campbell explains that primitive people had rites and rituals to assuage the ghosts or spirits of those who had been slain.

“Such ceremonies...also included rites for toning down the war mania and battle heat of those who have done the killing. For this whole business of killing, whether killing beasts or killing men, is supposed to be fraught with danger. On one hand, there is the danger of revenge from the person or animal killed. On the other hand, there is equal danger of the killer himself

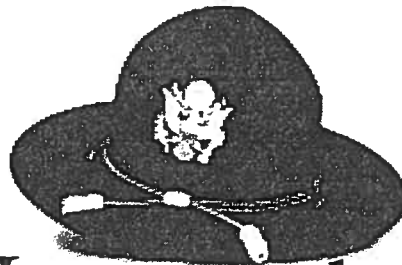
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becoming inflicted by a killing mania and running berserk. Along with rites to honor and appease ghosts, accordingly, there may be special rites to attune returning warriors to the manners of life at home.” (Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By*, Bantam Books, New York, N.Y., 1972, p. 175-176)

For veterans who are also child abuse survivors, the ghosts which need appeasing include the ghosts of their symbolically killed abusive parent. If it is a struggle for some veterans to accept the killing they did under acceptable limits of war, it is even more difficult for those who overstepped socially defined boundaries of acceptable killing.

Veterans whose killing in Vietnam was fired by rage toward an abusive parent or caretaker often find the process of self-acceptance and self-forgiveness harder. They must forgive themselves not only for war-related killing, but for symbolic patricide or matricide, acts toward which cultural taboos run deep no matter how heinous the parent was. At times, combat with their own rage reactions and homicidal/suicidal feelings can be epic in proportion. ■

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