

MEMORIAL DAY, 1997

Ceremony: IN MEMORY, for those who died as a result of their military service due to Agent Orange, PTSD, and causes other than battlefield injuries

Remarks, by Aphrodite Matsakis, Ph.D.

1. I am not representing any group or institution. I'm here today as myself.

2. The Past isn't the past.

The past isn't even dead yet. Auden

3. It is a great honor for me to be here with you today. I've worked with veterans and their families for about twenty five years. To this day, I continue to be impressed by four qualities that can be found in many combat veterans: first, an incredible honesty; secondly, loyalty; and thirdly, an intense hatred of any form of cruelty, injustice, or corruption. The fourth quality is that of a deep form of caring of one combat veteran for another, and for his or her loved ones. The quality of this caring is unique in this world of competition and hate.

4. I have seen that same quality of caring in the mothers, fathers, wives and children and other relatives of these veterans. At a time in history when people, especially women, are being encouraged to put themselves first, I have seen many family members of veterans put themselves last in trying to help the veteran. These family members -- people like yourselves -- have shown a remarkable amount of patience, love and caring, and a willingness to sacrifice for their veteran,

similar to the veteran's willingness to sacrifice his life for his country.

5. And the men and women we are honoring today did give their lives for their country, even if they didn't die directly on the battlefield.

6. PTSD kills. So does Agent Orange. Depression can kill too, and lead to suicide. It is now well-known, that PTSD and depression, as well as other effects of combat trauma, for example, substance abuse, can damage the immune system, leaving the veteran vulnerable to all kinds of medical problems. Depression, PTSD, and other stress related problems are correlated with heart disease, strokes, cancer, diabetes, arthritis, and other diseases. It's also a proven fact that combat vets -- from all wars -- die at younger ages than men their age who never joined the service or who in the service, but did not see combat. This is especially the case with the Vietnam war, where, as we all know, the veteran was treated with indifference at best and hostility and disrespect at worst.

7. In previous and in former times societies, soldiers or warriors were considered an elite class. There was an unwritten contract between soldiers and society that went like this: soldiers were expected to give their best, their very lives. In return, they were to receive the best -- the highest honors, the highest social status, and the best care. But this contract has been broken time and time again. During the Korean War, e.g., certain wounds were not acknowledged and many WW2 veterans like many Vietnam veterans had to wait a long time receive the benefits and treatment they were legally entitled to.

8. But at no time in history was the returning warrior more rejected and reviled than in Vietnam. The Vietnam veteran's reception upon return was unprecedented in the extent of its hostility. It was this unwelcome welcome which broke the spirit of so many of the men who aren't here today.

9. When the Vietnam veteran was rejected, his family was also. When your veteran was turned into a second class citizen, you became a second class citizen also. Some twenty years ago, before the Vietnam Wall was erected, relatives of those who died in Vietnam sometimes feared to grieve openly because the stigma that fell on the warrior fell on his family. In her famous book, *SCHRAPNEL IN THE HEART*, Laura Palmer interviewed the family members of people whose names are on The WALL. Many expressed relief and gratitude that finally they could grieve in public. Before that time, not all of them, but a significant number of them, had been made to feel that they better hide the fact that their son, or uncle, or brother, or husband had died in Vietnam because of the stigma attached to having been in the war.

10. To me, this is an outrage, and a far cry from the hero's welcome and hero's funeral that attended warriors in previous times.

11. When I tell people I work with Vietnam veterans, a typical response I get is "Still? The war has been over for twenty years. They should forget about it."

I say, "No. They shouldn't forget. They should remember," just as you shouldn't forget the veteran you have come to honor and grieve. Remembering him is a way of honoring him, of

saying his life mattered, of saying that your love for him and all you gave him mattered, of saying that YOU matter. For if we say that the dead don't matter, then we are also saying that the living don't matter either.

12. In our society, there is a tendency to deny death, and other unpleasant aspect of life, such as illness, aging, and permanent loss. The Buddhists philosophy is that "life is suffering." The ancient Greeks said that "suffering is the beginning of wisdom." But ours is the microwave society. One, two, three, pop, we're supposed to be over things. We are supposed to be happy, optimistic, no matter how many losses we have to bear. We are supposed to "let go of the past" -- no matter what that past has cost us.

The "let's fix it" "lets move-on" zeal of country can be wonderful. It helped make America a progressive nation. But the idea of "let's fix it" doesn't apply to death.

There is no way to fix death, pretty it up or make it go away.

Death is part of the human condition. Part of being a fully alive person is to be aware that one day all we love, including ourselves, will die. Part of being emotionally aware is to know that it is "normal" to grieve and even to frequently grieve for the people you lost. "How much and how long one is supposed to grieve is culturally determined. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. There is no such thing as grieving too little or too much. It all the depends on the person.

14. here's a popular slogan in our society often told to people who have had major losses which goes like this, "If life hands you lemons, make lemonades." In other words, don't be sad, be glad,



no matter what. In my opinion, to tell this to someone who has lost someone dear is an insult, a slap in the face. When it comes to the death of a loved one, I would substitute a Greek saying, "I went to the desert looking for water. I looked and I looked but there wasn't any."

15. Let me end today with a Greek myth, as adopted by Ovid.

In ancient times the goddess Dawn lost her son in war. Dawn's son was half God and half man, but being born half-God did not spare him from death for all men must die.

The goddess Dawn, then went to Zeus, King of Gods. "Zeus," she said. "I am not the most important goddess on Mount Olympus. But my son has died and my heart is broken. My heart has been broken twice. First, I lost my son and secondly, his death hasn't been recognized. He died, but to the world it seemed as if nothing happened. But something did happen. My son died. Do something to show the world that it matters that he is dead."

Zeus granted her request and on the day of the funeral, he stopped time, which is exactly what we are doing here today -- stopping time -- interrupting our busy schedules to honor and remember the dead. Then Zeus turned the sky dark and sent blackbirds to screech and howl over the funeral pyre.

Dawn was satisfied, but Zeus had more recognition in store for the young son which Dawn did adore.

The day after the funeral, when Dawn woke up and went about her job of causing the sun to rise and wake up the world, she noticed that all the plants in the world were covered with dew. But the dew drops weren't really dew. They were her tears for her dead son. Dawn weeps for her

son every morning and the dew on flowers and plants is Zeus's way of having the world remember the death of her son and all warriors.

Notice that just because Dawn weeps for her son, daily, does not mean she doesn't have happiness in her life. It also doesn't mean she doesn't do her job. Have you noticed any day in the past thousand years where Dawn did not come and perform her duties?

When her son died, Dawn didn't lay down in bed and refuse to come out. She didn't become an alcoholic, an anorectic, an overeater, a child abuser, a bank robber, an ax-murderer. Neither did she become addicted to Valium or start taking prozac. All she did was grieve and go about her business. Her sadness and tears were not signs of mental illness or psychological immaturity or abnormality, but the reflection of a real and important loss.

Dawn's tears refresh the world and help to bring it life. That is the message of the myth: that in facing the grief and allowing it expression, whether that expression is through crying, helping others, coming to the WALL, or some quiet way within the privacy of your own mind and heart, there is a release. This release creates a positive energy which enables one to go on living -- and to give to others and the world.

It takes a tremendous amount of energy to suppress strong grief. You not only have the grief taking up room in your psyche, but are spending a lot of energy trying to suppress it. You are constantly fighting yourself, which is exhausting.

Therefore expressing grief is important. It doesn't have to be in form of tears, like Dawn. Once a Native American combat veteran told me, "Men don't cry. Don't even try to make me cry."

"But surely your people had a way for warriors to express grief. How did the men in

your tribe honor their dead, or grieve?"

There were several ways his tribe used to cope with grief. "Can you do any of those things?" I asked. He nodded "yes" and said he would pick one of the ways of his ancestors.

16.

Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak

Whispers the over fraught heart, and bids it break

Shakespeare

18. At Greek funerals, two things are usually said, Zoe Se Sas, or "Life to you -- the living" and Eonia H Mnemi, "Long live his (or her) memory." Let me end by saying "Long life to all of you and long life to the memory of the one you lost."