

The Black Pain: PTSD and the Greek American Vietnam Veteran

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In the second act of William Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, Part 1, Lady Percy complains to her husband, Hotspur, of an affliction tormenting him about which he has not been told. She describes it in painful detail:

Tell me, sweet lord, what is't that takes from thee
Thy stomach, pleasure, and thy golden sleep?
Why dost thou bend thine eyes upon the earth
And start so often when thou sit'st alone?
Why hast thou lost the fresh blood in thy cheeks
And given my treasures and my rights of thee
To thick-eyed musing and curst melancholy?
In thy faint slumbers I by thee have watched,
And heard thee murmur tales of iron wars,
Speak terms of manage to thy bounding steed,
Cry "Courage! To the field!" And thou hast talk'd
Of sallies and retires, of trenches, tents,
Of palisades, frontiers, parapets,
Of basilisks, of cannon, culverin,
Of prisoners' ransom and of soldiers slain,
And all the currents of a heady fight.
Thy spirit within thee hath been so at war,
And thus hath so bestirred thee in thy sleep,
That beads of sweat have stood upon thy brow
Like bubbles in a late disturbèd stream,
And in thy face strange motions have appeared,
Such as we see when men restrain their breath
On some great sudden hest. O, what portents are these?
Some heavy business hath my lord in hand,
And I must know it, else he loves me not.

Lady Percy didn't know it, but her beloved Hotspur suffered from PTSD, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, a malady commented on not only by Shakespeare but by the ancient Greeks. PTSD--the current psychiatric label given to a disorder more commonly known as "shell shock,"

“combat fatigue”, or “war neurosis”-- caused the evacuation of 10% of enlisted men during the first world war and, at various points, over 30% more during the second World War. Today, an estimated 500,000 to one million Vietnam veterans suffer from symptoms similar to Hotspur's: flashbacks, nightmares, other sleep disturbances, hyper alertness (the startle response), depression, anxiety, survivor guilt, anger, and cynicism.

Central to the disorder is a form of emotional repression called psychic or emotional numbing. Under life-threatening conditions such as combat, the organism tends to shut down emotionally for purposes of survival. In Vietnam, for example, the typical soldier had to turn off his grief, anger, and fear, because feeling such sentiments would have been not only personally disorganizing, but life-threatening. If the combat vet had connected with such emotions during battle, he would have been less able to give and take directions or otherwise decide what to do next in order to save himself and others.

Furthermore, Vietnam military culture insisted that “real men” didn't cry. While Homer's heroes were not only permitted to grieve their dead, but highly respected for the intensity and duration of their grief, grunts in Vietnam were often ridiculed when they revealed sensitivities. Many thought that appearing “tough” was necessary not only to avoid psychological humiliation, but to avoid being assigned to the most dangerous positions and missions. When the veteran shut off his grief, fear, and feelings of helplessness, however, he also shut off his ability to feel positive emotions, such as joy, faith, love, and tenderness.

In the face of a traumatic event psychic numbing is an entirely appropriate response. Problems arise, however when the individual remains in the state of numbing long after the original trauma and carries the numbing over to present-day situations where there is no danger. This horrible feeling of being “dead inside,” of being incapable of experiencing any emotion, except perhaps anger and despair, can severely interfere with daily living, and especially with personal relationships. Psychic numbing is especially painful for Greek-American vets, whose ethnic tradition puts a premium on emotional aliveness and expressiveness and on close personal ties, especially within the family.

As a result of psychic numbing, the Greek-American Vietnam veteran may experience mild to severe difficulties relating to others (even relatives) and in comfortably attending the social and religious events central to Greek-American life. In addition, the emotional repression involved in numbing is the root cause of many of the symptoms listed above. PTSD, however, is more than a list of symptoms. The fundamental dynamic underlying the symptoms of PTSD is:

- A) The veterans re-experiencing of the trauma followed by
- B) The veterans attempting to squelch memories of the trauma, and the feelings associated with it, out of awareness and back into repression. Re-experiencing the trauma may occur in the form of:
 - a) Intrusive thoughts and images of the Vietnam experience.
 - b) Dreams, nightmares, or night terrors
 - c) Flashbacks, both conscious and unconscious, sometimes called dissociative states.

Approximately 580,000 Americans died in Vietnam, but many more are dying emotional and spiritual death here at home as they struggle daily with PTSD. Among them are Greek-American veterans, some of whom are high achievers and “well adjusted” on the outside but as tormented as Hotspur on the inside.

In the author's experience, Greek-American veterans are generally hesitant to turn to “psycho doctors” or government institutions for help. However, when the emotional pain becomes too great or the suicidal thoughts too intense they relinquish their Greek self-sufficient pride or their “mighty warrior” position and seek help. Or perhaps a mother, wife, or sister has tearfully begged them to at least give the mental health professionals a chance.

Only for his mother's sake did ex-marine Mike Lambros arrive at my office. Two days before, he had stormed out of his Cousin Basil's wedding, threatening to go live on a mountaintop with some war buddies and never see his family again. Alternatively, he said that he would blow his brains out with a smuggled M-16. (Some sources allege that there are as many that have died from their own hand as were killed in the Vietnam. Equally distressing are the high number of deaths and injuries due to single car collisions and other accidents among Vietnam veterans which could have been suicidal in nature.)

Mike and his cousin Basil grew up together. Both were infused with the Greek-American work ethic and dream of achieving financial success and a warm family life. At 33, Basil is almost a millionaire and now even found a woman to love. In contrast, Mike at forty, has periods of depression where he can barely pick up a pen, much less go to work. His potential is further crippled by recurring nightmares and intrusive thoughts of Vietnam.

Since much of Mike's psyche is bound up reliving his combat traumas, he has little emotional energy left for human relationships, especially for relationships with women. Psychologically "frozen" at stage nineteen, the age at which he, and most other vets, served in Vietnam, Mike is still struggling to overcome many of his adolescent conflicts regarding women, particularly marriageable Greek-American women.

"Am I capable of love?" he asked. "When I see my brothers and cousins all together with their wives and children in their nice suburban homes, I feel like a failure, a reject, an outcast in my own family. Do you know how it feels to be a Greek-American at midlife, with no wife and children, with a broken career, and worst of all, a broken spirit? Even when I'm happy, I'm sad. Nam is like a permanent black pain (*mavros ponos*) in my heart and mind.

"At my cousin's wedding, I was truly happy for him. I was even able to feel that Greek love for life again. But as I did the *pentozali*, I found myself stomping the ground angrily muttering 'damn you [Officer X] damn you, [Officer X]. You caused my buddy's death!' When I started flashing I knew it was time to leave. But, damn, where do I go to get away from my own head?"

When his *koumbara* became pregnant, Mike was troubled with fantasies of ripping her belly open "like I saw in Nam." Although he never purposely murdered any civilians, once his commanding officer ordered him to shoot into some bushes.

"I didn't know it was two little kids, I swear I didn't know, " Mike bawled. As Mike's nephews approached the ages of the children he shot, saw dead, or mutilated in Vietnam, Mike found it increasingly difficult to visit their home. Whenever his nephews play war games, Mike would suddenly disappear, even if it was Christmas or Easter. Most difficult for Mike to bear, however was the news of the 1974 invasion of the Cyprus. As his relatives lamented the Turkish

rape of Greek Cypriot women, Mike remembered being bullied by his peers into gang raping Vietnamese women. That night, Mike almost killed himself.

As research studies show, PTSD is more prevalent and more severe among veterans who experienced heavy combat and either witnessed or participated in random or abusive violence, i.e., the torture, rape, or murder of civilians and prisoners of war and for the needless destruction or abuse of property and animals. PTSD is also more common among veterans who were able to see the Vietnamese people, not as “gooks” to be killed, and who were thus, due to their ethnic background or political beliefs, able to empathize with the Vietnamese people’s suffering as they struggled against a superpower.

Conscious of Greece’s many struggles for liberation, some, but definitely not all, Greek-American vets, like many Black and Hispanic vets, suffer from the shame and confusion regarding their participation in the war due to the “good identification syndrome.” According to psychologist E. R. Parsons, the “good identification syndrome” is the “conscious and unconscious emotional identification by... soldiers with the devalued, maligned, abused and helpless aspects of the Vietnamese people.”

As if pursued by the Furies, the faces of the children he shot and the women he raped haunt Mike in nightmares. A major cause of his depression is his unresolved rage toward the officers and peers who coerced him into committing the acts of brutality “against poor peasants, like my grandparents were.” Although Mike went to Vietnam feeling like a *pallikari*, he left feeling like a pawn.

Furious with himself for not having the courage to stand up for his well ingrained childhood principles, Mike, a former altar boy, no longer attends church, not even on Easter. “Some sins God does not forgive,” he insists.

Mike's family is lucky. At least they have not lost Mike entirely. In contrast are families whose sons have sought “geographical cures” by leaving for distant states or continents (e.g., South America or Australia). Others have lost their vet to suicide. Elias S. drove his car into a river after his daughter was diagnosed as having an incurable illness, which he blamed on his

exposure to Agent Orange. His cousin, also exposed to Agent Orange, refuses to marry, much less have children.

Not all Vietnam veterans suffer from PTSD. Furthermore, the manner in which PTSD manifests itself in the veteran varies considerably from one individual to the next. However, in general, I have found that fewer Greek-American veterans complain that their relatives were unreceptive to their sharing about the war, perhaps because these relatives have been or were themselves children of refugees or combatants. In several cases, the family's supportiveness was critical to the veteran's recovery.

In other cases, however, a significant family member adopted a "macho" position which ran something like: "I (or my parents) got through the Smyrna Massacre, World War II, the Greek Civil War, without a breakdown. What's your problem?" Such a response conveyed to the veteran that he did not have the right to his feelings and betrayed a profound ignorance of the unique stresses of the Vietnam War, which include the gorilla nature of the war, the young age of the combatants, the political impediments to the military victory, and the war's widespread unpopularity. Until recently, the contributions of the Vietnam veteran were, for the most part, either rejected or ignored.

PTSD is not a sign of insanity, but a rather normal reaction to an abnormal amount of stress. The root of PTSD is fear of death, dismemberment, or losing others. It can be suffered by anyone who has experienced an event or series of events outside the usual range of human experience. The events must be life-threatening and of such magnitude of pain and horror that they overwhelm almost anyone's natural coping mechanisms.

Hence PTSD has been found among the survivors of Nazi concentration camps and the bombing of Hiroshima, among prisoners of war, and refugee children, and among survivors of natural catastrophes, such as earthquakes, floods, and fires. Victims of rape, incest, and other assaults have also suffered from PTSD, as have persons who although they do not experience trauma directly, witness trauma on a daily basis or are subject to unremitting stress as part of their job, e.g., police officers, firefighters, rescue workers, and health care workers.

PTSD is a progressive problem. Left untreated, the veterans maladaptive coping mechanisms become more rigid over time and only add to the stresses of midlife and aging. While many Greek-American vets have been taught that it is a shame (*dropi*) to seek help outside the family, help for PTSD is available at our nation's Veterans Administration Medical Centers. In addition, some VA hospitals sponsor inpatient PTSD units. Information about Agent Orange is available by calling your local Veterans Administration Medical Center.