

**Executive Presbyter's Report to the Presbytery of Grand Canyon  
John Calvin Presbyterian Church, Apache Junction, AZ  
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Many church people are deeply troubled by the war in Iraq, and quite a few are actively speaking against it. Other church people support the war fully, while yet others harbor ambivalent feelings about it. My report today deals with the subject of war but will not take a position for or against the current war in Iraq. My concern is the human effects of this and other wars in the context of pastoral ministry, and I hope this is a subject that Presbyterians on all sides of the war issue can embrace.

In the early 1990s, in Central Pennsylvania, I gave a series of talks on the spiritual struggles of combat veterans. The major focus was the large number of Viet Nam veterans who had problems with the institutional church, and who were either absent from or invisible within congregations. Though these presentations were well attended, very few actual Viet Nam veterans came. Their absence was a sign of the continuing distrust many Viet Nam era veterans held and continue to hold for the church. The audiences were mostly spouses of Viet Nam vets, along with World War II and Korean War veterans.

As a result of these talks about the traumatic effects of war on religious faith, I was approached privately by a number of World War II veterans who had been silently suffering for five decades from the psychological traumas of their war experiences. They had spoken to no one about their inner turmoil. They had returned home heroes from a popular war, with the tacit understanding that they would not tell a grateful nation about the horrors of that war. To admit they had engaged in atrocities would harm the vision of American goodness. To admit that they had been scarred by the horrors they had seen would somehow sully the great victory they had achieved. And it *was* a great and necessary victory that saved the world from barbaric fascism. So they let the awful memories eat away at them, and they sat in church pews and felt like frauds.

One of the major casualties of war is religious faith. Oh, I know there are many soldiers who hold fast to faith in God throughout their soul-numbing stints in war zones, although they usually discover that the simple Sunday school theology that had served them well in their youths requires considerable revising. But just as many become disillusioned and come to question the goodness and even the existence of God in the face of the savagery they have seen and participated in. The old adage that there are no atheists in foxholes rings hollow for one whose faith in God has been torn asunder by war. War may turn some atheists into believers but it also turns believers into atheists.

Journalist Philip Caputo, in his autobiographical book *A Rumor of War*, described his experiences as a Marine platoon leader in Viet Nam. He wrote, "The sight of mutilation did more than cause me physical revulsion; it burst the religious myths of my Catholic childhood. I could not look at those men and still believe their souls had passed on to another existence, or that they had had souls in the first place. I could not believe those bloody messes would be capable of a resurrection on the last day."<sup>1</sup>

Later in the book, Caputo made a bitter theological observation about the war: "We were all victims of a great practical joke played on us by God or Nature. Maybe that was why corpses always grinned. They saw the joke at the last minute."<sup>2</sup>

The hardest task combat veterans face is forgiving themselves and concomitantly accepting God's forgiveness for their deeds. For some the task grows so overwhelming that they angrily reject God. No matter how noble the cause, the ugly reality of war exacts extreme psychic damage on warriors. And the more just and decent the warrior, the greater the psychic damage. Many people of faith have experienced what the mystics call the dark night of the soul. I must confess to you that I am among them, hence the passion with which I offer these words. Among the most painful dark nights of the soul are those of combat veterans struggling with questions about the existence and nature of God. Such struggles typically begin with a sense of rage born of the combat experience. That rage radiates in many directions, often striking people who only want to help.

Pastoral counseling in such situations can be extremely difficult. In his book *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders of the Vietnam Veteran*, Tom Williams identified the profound cynicism and distrust that many veterans develop about institutions, including the church. "It is not easy to work with these veterans," he wrote, "because they are in emotional pain. It is difficult to achieve the necessary clinical detachment because these men raise moral and political questions... There are times when the war stories are gruesome, awful, ugly and very frightening... It is difficult not to get distracted into thinking about whether the war was right or wrong."<sup>3</sup>

Pastors do not need clinical detachment when working with combat veterans. But if they are to connect with soldiers, they need to have strong stomachs. And they must be able to distinguish in their minds between the warrior and the war. When pastors listen to confessions about spousal abuse, they have behind them the moral authority of both church and society recognizing such behavior as wrong. But with war veterans, the moral authority is often contradictory. Indeed, the state has sanctioned the violence of war and the military establishment gives medals for behavior that the national administration says is justified. And many in the church also accept certain justifications for wartime violence.

But soldiers who have committed state-sanctioned violence are nevertheless traumatized by what they have done and what they have seen done by and to other human beings. This is where separating the warrior from the war is crucial. But it is also very difficult. Well meaning pastors might be tempted to offer quick assurances of pardon. But premature and glib grace does not help those struggling with profoundly disturbing experiences any more than categorical condemnation does. Other pastors may be tempted to get the veteran out of the building as fast as possible, or to refer the veteran to a psychiatrist. Referral to an appropriate mental health professional is good, but that's only part of what's needed. Simple caring, maintaining relationships and open-ended listening are vitally important aspects of ministering to returning vets.

Two years into the war in Iraq, it is clear that terrible and sickening deeds have been carried out by soldiers, insurgents, and civilians on all sides of an extremely complex situation. And some of these deeds that have been done by Americans – murder and torture - have been publicly condemned, and rightly so. Most violent actions carried out in war zones, however, never reach the light of day, never receive public scrutiny. Rather, they fester in the minds of the soldiers who were involved.

Living in a combat zone numbs the mind. Writing in *USA Today*, William Welch quoted Marine Corporal Sean Huze saying, "I saw a dead child, probably 3 or 4 years old, lying on the road in Nasiriyah. It moved me less than if I saw a dead dog at the time. I didn't care. Then you

come back, if you are fortunate enough, and hold your own child, and you think of the dead child you didn't care about... You think about how little you cared at the time, and that hurts."<sup>4</sup>

That same February 28<sup>th</sup> article quotes Army Infantry scout Jesus Bocanegra after he returned home from service in Tikrit. "I had real bad flashbacks. I couldn't control them. I saw the murder of children, women," he said. Seared into his mind is the time Bocanegra called in an Apache helicopter strike on a house where he had seen enemy ammunition stored. When the attack was over and the shooting stopped, there was silence at first. Then children's screams rose from the destroyed house. "I didn't know there were kids in there," he said. "Those screams are the most horrible thing you can hear." His friends in Texas threw him a homecoming party, and he got drunk.<sup>5</sup> Alcohol abuse is common among combat vets. It's a cheap and legal way to numb the brain to blot out hideous memories.

I believe we in the church can play a redemptive role in the lives of men and women traumatized by combat. But we can't be squeamish about it, and we must refrain from defensive responses when combat veterans express feelings of betrayal by God or the churches they grew up in. Whether we believe the war is entirely justified or a colossal and evil blunder, we have to set aside our judgments about the war itself in order to minister to those returning from it and to their families. The families -spouses and children- suffer also from the effects of war on their loved ones. And the family members are more likely to have contact with pastors and churches than are the veterans themselves.

And then there are the families in which the soldier returned in a coffin, and the families in which the soldier returned missing limbs or with other physical wounds. Surviving families and disabled veterans certainly deserve the pastoral care of the church. Yet these tragedies are so compelling that caring for those who have suffered merely invisible wounds to their souls are easy to ignore. And ignored they often are, though they form a majority of the casualties of war.

Our denomination has a long history of caring for war veterans. The 1982 General Assembly (UPCUSA) adopted a resolution expressing "deep pastoral concern" for the various social and medical problems experienced by veterans.<sup>6</sup> The 1977 General Assembly (UPCUSA) received a lengthy report called "Let's Not Forget – Study on Ministry to Veterans."<sup>7</sup> This was an excellent piece of work, but its major emphasis was helping veterans deal with governmental agencies, employment, and medical issues. What we as a church so often overlook is the spiritual illness suffered by people who have been exposed to battle.

The 1977 report noted, "Victims of war, ancient and modern, have always received the ministrations of the church... Many veterans are clearly victims of war."<sup>8</sup> There are many other reports, statements, and proclamations made by our denomination dealing with soldiers and veterans issues, and all of them demonstrate pastoral concern. Typically they call for assistance to those who have fought in our country's wars. This is all to the good as far as it goes. But if the church looks upon veterans solely as unfortunate cases to be cared for, the church becomes yet another social service institution to be mistrusted.

What's missing is a commitment to enter into relationship with these veterans and listen to their theodicies as a result of their wartime experiences. The next step is to seek spiritual cures for their souls. Cures, I might add, that are not simplistic, doctrinaire, or in service to the church's agenda. Spiritual healing is not easy or quick. It is frequently frustrating. Chaplain William Mahedy said, "If the church is to understand and interpret the vets' experience, it, too, must grapple with God at the same primordial depth."<sup>9</sup> This is a tall task, yet one that ultimately offers healing not only for the souls of war veterans but for the very soul of the church.

I want to close with a story of healing and redemption. In his book, *Out of the Night, the Spiritual Journey of Vietnam Vets*, former Army Chaplain William Mahedy described the experience of Timothy Sims, a Marine who lived through the siege of Khe Sahn. Sims told of encountering a Lutheran Chaplain at Khe Sahn. This chaplain walked among the embattled troops, “preaching no sermon, simply going among those of us who were left with bread saying, ‘the body of Christ, the body of Christ’ ... With the smell of our dead buddies, stacked in empty bunkers, still in our noses, he walked among us with another broken body.”<sup>10</sup>

It is significant that this chaplain refrained from preaching in that situation. Preaching does not help and often gets in the way of ministering among those who have known the depths of hell on earth. Sims found himself in a spiritual wilderness as a result of his combat experience, intent on exorcising God from his life, but the sacramental presence of that chaplain stayed with him.

Crying out in rage in the midst of what he described as a gulag experience, Sims had a mystical encounter. About this he later wrote, “My vision was of heavenly Mother, crying and howling with me, seeking to hold me to her comforting breast; the vision was of heavenly Father, grieved and wounded with me, holding me with aching arms. God’s mystic presence would not leave me alone, so I decided to give his ‘dirty bride’ another look.”<sup>11</sup> His reference to the dirty bride was his term for the institutional church. The Bride of Christ the church may be, but it is stained with loveless moralism and failure of compassion. Sims returned to this less than perfect institution, drawn by the sacramental presence of the wounded Christ and by images of the healing nature of God. Timothy Sims journey back into the life of the church led him in time to ordination as a Lutheran pastor.

Ironically, it may be the very imperfection and lack of purity of the church that make it possible to provide healing ministry to disillusioned and mentally tormented veterans. Claiming the high moral ground, from either the theological right or the theological left, is bound to produce failure. But as we who serve the church embrace our own mistakes and woundedness we gain the key to healing for others.

Let me close with a hymn text I wrote some years ago on behalf of suffering veterans. It is to the tune Passion Chorale, but I won’t attempt to sing it.

O warrior’s soul now wounded with shame your only crown,  
 What secret sins of battle now weigh your psyche down?  
 What God forsaken trauma explodes inside your head?  
 What dreams of guilt and terror revisit you in bed?

No love can reach your center of raw unuttered prayer;  
 No God can bring you healing who hasn’t known despair.  
 So for your aching spirit the wounded God has said  
 Your sorrows are forgiven, now rise up from the dead.<sup>12</sup>

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1. Caputo, Philip: *A Rumor of War* (New York, Ballantine Books, 1977), p. 121.
  2. Ibid, p. 219.
  3. Williams, Tom, ed: *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders of the Vietnam Veteran* (Cincinnati, DAV Press, 1980), p. 27.

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4. Welch, William M.: "Trauma of Iraq War Haunting Thousands Returning Home," USA Today, February 28, 2005.
  5. Ibid.
  6. Minutes of the General Assembly (UPCUSA), Part I, 1977, p. 295.
  7. Minutes of the General Assembly (UPCUSA), Part I, 1982, p. 450.
  8. Ibid, p. 450.
  9. Mahedy, William P.: *Out of the Night, The Spiritual Journey of Vietnam Vets* (New York, Ballantine Books, 1986), p. 151.
  10. Ibid, p. 155.
  11. Ibid, p. 154.
  12. Moe, Kenneth Alan: "O Warrior's Soul Now Wounded" © 1997.  
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