We Will Not Forget

My dad refused to talk about the war. We never found out why. Did he feel guilty not to have experienced the horror of combat (many service members do), or did he experience trauma and suppress it? Either way, he died with that knowledge. What we do know is that whatever happened out there in the middle of the Pacific Ocean changed him and became part of who he was.

So it is with chapters of our lives. We gladly share some stories. Others, not so much. Some experiences remain alive in us without our recognizing their impact. As for each other, we rarely know what burdens another person is carrying.

While today we remember all who have served in wartime and in peacetime, Veterans Day is largely intended to thank living military service members: to acknowledge their contributions to the national security and to underscore the fact that those who have served made sacrifices.

This is a complicated holiday. At the ceremony across the street in an hour, we’ll see flags and salutes, WWII vets in uniform – the “greatest generation.” We may or may not see younger generations of veterans as well. Some service members forge close ties with one another. Others isolate. Some can’t talk about it enough, and others won’t say a word.

So, in addition to honoring and thanking them, let us also observe this day with compassion. Without a doubt, for everyone who enlists in the military service, their life, and their families’ lives, change forever. When they come home, finally out of the woods, many may still be covered with thorns….

Some of us know this from personal experience. Others of us only have our impressions and opinions. How much does compassion come up when you think about Veterans Day? For me, though I live in Portsmouth, an active shipyard town, my life feels at a distance from today’s military-connected people. That distance feels a little like a buffer that protects me from some hard realities. I’d like to do better than that. I’d like to look again and bridge the gap.

Imagine becoming accustomed to life with regular loss of time with your family, without enjoying the freedom to choose where you live. Imagine leaving the life you know and moving into a highly structured environment. Imagine living every hour of the day for weeks and months and years according to a set of rules, not of your own making. Imagine always taking orders, always doing as you’re told. Rarely having to decide. So very different than life at home.

Some people excel in this environment, brought together with others by love of country, by a shared sense of duty, in a culture like no other which some think of as family. They rise through the ranks with a sense of achievement and success. Others struggle. And then, veterans come home. What must it be like to come back to a world where decisions – everyday decisions and
big life ones, too – are all yours to make? Veterans may have longed for this freedom and at the same time can find it a challenge.

Imagine living every minute of every day in survival mode, even in your sleep needing to be aware of your surroundings and constantly having to listen and watch for anything that could become a threat. What impact would this have on your basic sense of safety and well-being in the world? And once you have learned to bring this level of vigilance to every day, 24/7, what would unlearning it look like? Or would someone who now automatically responds to life with super-heightened awareness even want to unlearn it?

Hyper-vigilance is a common problem for combat veterans returning to civilian life. It can become troublesome, with some vets hooked on adrenaline and others acting in over-controlling ways. Their behavior stands out and can alarm people who don’t know what they’ve been through.

These are some of the invisible wounds of war. New Hampshire has some 118,000 veterans, each one uniquely impacted by the experience of serving. Some come home fine and successfully re-integrate. They’re able to work a job everyday. Veterans might work their way through a struggle and end up willing to speak about their experience publicly, a huge help to others still suffering.

And understandably, many service members struggle with trauma. Beyond the considerable toll of re-adjusting to unstructured everyday living, veterans come home changed by what they have seen and done and felt. Post-traumatic stress can cause debilitating flashbacks, nightmares, the inability to concentrate, anger and anxiety. A man hears helicopters whirring overhead at 4 a.m. every morning. Another, whose machinery once locked up and failed in a sandstorm overseas, panics at home when a household appliance jams and malfunctions. He hides for hours until he feels safe again. Over and over again, coaches and family members reassure veterans with post-traumatic stress that these are normal reactions to abnormal situations.

People also come home from war with TBI’s – Traumatic Brain Injuries. Brain injury can cause impulsive behaviors and difficulties with regulating emotions. People with TBI can suffer severe memory lapses and no longer be able do what they once could do easily. Proximity to explosions causes constant ringing in the ears. More invisible wounds of war.

Deployment takes place in three stages: 1) notice of deployment and prepping, 2) actually being deployed and 3) post-deployment. Each stage presents challenges that affect not only a service member but that person’s whole family. When a married service member is about to leave, the spouse has to learn how to do what that person has always done, from monthly bill-paying and house maintenance to everyday responsibilities: driving the kids to where they need to be, doing the laundry, cleaning, cutting the grass, clearing the driveway of snow. In the deployment phase, the spouse does double duty, taking on these responsibilities on top of their own. And then, when the veteran comes home, the spouse is fully in charge, doing everything. The vet doesn’t know how to fit into the family anymore. It’s very hard.
The good news is that help is available. The heartbreak is that only a handful of people here in New Hampshire – fewer than 25% – avail themselves of it. Although the VA has coaches to help family members get loved ones into treatment, it is hard for people to tap into help. Depending on their age and culture, some vets do not know how to ask for help, while others may not be aware that they need it. Some don’t think they’ll be covered, and others don’t know or don’t trust the services.

The needed change in direction is to make it OK and brave, in fact, to ask for help. Family members are key to getting people who suffer from the effects of war to accept help. They are the ones who usually recognize the symptoms. What works best is working through connections with other veterans – vets like to talk with vets. They feel understood with each other. In the military culture, companioning one another on the road to healing – extending a hand and saying, “Let’s do this together” – really helps.

My heart broke at the news last week that the shooter in Thousand Oaks was a combat veteran. We know little about him, other than that those years after high school as a machine gunner surely changed his life. Apparently he spent most of his time inside the house. His next-door neighbor, Tom Hanson, was also a veteran. He served in Viet Nam. Still in touch with other vets, they would meet to play football or basketball. “We’d spend time together,” he said, “get air, blow off some steam. It’s not like that now. This guy just kept to himself, probably tried to deal with whatever he had on his own.” How distressing.

And how might this event be impacting others who have served in the military service? When the news broke, a counselor said to me, “I’m thinking about how marines I know are feeling today. Are they wondering if they are capable of doing this, too?”

Our own behaviors can scare us. “I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat, who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate./And I am also the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.”

We cannot know another person’s burden, only that it exists. Today and every day, we thank our service members. We honor them. And let us do more. Let us respect them. Let us do what we can to assist them and their families tap into services that will help them heal and thrive.

May we call upon our most gentle, loving selves to embrace and recognize all those who have served and their families. May they feel safe again. May they know that they are good and that they are loved. For this we hope and pray. Amen.

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