

“The Psychic Wounds of War”  
By Rev. Kim D. Wilson  
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Poconos  
November 1, 2015

“In the summer of 1862, John Hildt lost a limb. Then he lost his mind.” That was the opening line from a piece in Smithsonian Magazine, “Did Civil War Soldiers Have PTSD?” by Tony Horwitz.

Hildt spent the rest of his life at the Government Hospital for the Insane in Washington, D.C. His diagnosis was “acute mania.”

As we know, there was not a very good understanding of mental illness at that time. Civil war veterans and their families were often ashamed of and embarrassed by the mental afflictions, and it wasn’t unusual for their stories to be forgotten or buried along with the veteran’s death.

Stories like John Hildt’s have been ignored until very recently. Now that we’re finally beginning to understand the connections between war and conditions like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, historians, clinicians, and genealogists are sifting through old diaries, letters and pension files to look for clues. It’s taken a long time, but it seems that the Civil War soldiers who came home mentally broken by war -- are finally being recognized.

Historians are going back and looking at the evidence of other wars, too, and, not too surprisingly, they’re finding that PTSD probably affected soldiers going back to ancient Assyria, circa 1300 BC. Those are the earliest records we have.

But I think we can infer that humans fighting wars since the beginning of time have not only been physically injured, for many of them, their minds were seriously messed up by what they saw and did.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, terms like shell shock, battle fatigue and old sergeant syndrome were invented to describe a cluster of symptoms reported by some veterans. These veterans suffered from sleeplessness, nightmares, loss of taste, hearing and memory. Back then, they were considered to be signs of nerve weakness or mental instability.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder wasn't an official diagnosis until 1980. Hundreds of thousands of Vietnam veterans came back suffering from PTSD, and for many of them, it's actually getting worse. Some are getting help, but many more are not. We've come a long way in de-stigmatizing mental illness, but we're still not there yet.

My hope is that by "updating" past misperceptions, it will help pave the way for greater acceptance and understanding of our living veterans' psychic wounds. With Veteran's Day on the 11<sup>th</sup>, it seems like a timely message.

We don't talk much about war in our congregations these days. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq don't aren't as controversial as the Vietnam War was. But maybe they should be. And maybe we should be talking more about what we can do to end these wars. In the meantime, though, let's not turn our backs on our veterans the way we did during Vietnam. The way a lot of the country did.

The reception they got didn't help any of the returning soldiers, and it added psychic damage to the ones who were already suffering from PTSD.

I want to share an excerpt from a poem written by a Vietnam veteran, Victor H. Bausch. It's called

### **Civil War of the Soul**

You keep asking the same question  
over and over  
to those who will not listen:

If it wasn't a civil war,  
then why were we fighting  
men, women, and children?

For years you've looked for Viet Nam  
after Viet Nam  
in the drugs you took  
in the alcohol you consumed  
until you saw the lie  
for what it was.

Now in your early fifties  
you know how lemmings feel  
going over the cliff,  
know how pigs and cattle feel  
when they're led down the chute,  
know how young men feel  
when they're cannon fodder  
in another senseless war.

Left alone like a refugee  
forced to choose  
between two countries  
you stave off sadness  
and suicide  
wrestle the demons  
in this civil war of the soul.

*Copyright ©1998 by Victor H. Bausch*

Dave Wilner, UUF member, is a veteran of World War II. He writes poetry, and I want to share this one with you, called "Never Free."

My friend once said to me  
The past moves on  
But you stand still  
Your bombs and bullets never go  
And you forever die.

Right now, we have a new generation of veterans coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan. These men and women are suffering from PTSD symptoms at twice the rate of Vietnam veterans. Twenty to thirty percent. I find that to be a very disturbing statistic.

Men and women who return for a second tour are at greater risk. The more tours, the greater the chances that they will develop PTSD symptoms. There are veterans today who have completed as many as five tours. Other stressors that we now know increase the risk include: seeing dead bodies, shooting someone, being shot at, being attacked, receiving rocket or mortar fire and knowing someone who is killed or seriously wounded.

We're gaining a better understanding of the connections between what happens to soldiers and how it affects their minds. And we're developing more ways to treat PTSD in veterans. There are some new treatments that seem to work well for some. But there is no cure.

Now, there's another factor that is starting to be recognized. Hundreds of thousands of veterans are being diagnosed with Traumatic Brain Injury, where a blast event literally damages the brain. It's still not well-understood, it's difficult to diagnose, and there is no cure for it, either.

And there are still many veterans with mental health problems who haven't gotten help. We know that there are homeless veterans; veterans who are addicted to alcohol or drugs, veterans who come back so changed that they can't maintain relationships. Some veterans don't get help because they don't want to be seen as weak, or they worry that others will lose confidence in them.

And when veterans do go for help, it's not that easy. A report just released yesterday by the Government Accounting Office tells us that the average wait time for a veteran seeking mental health services to get an appointment at the VA is a month, and some vets have had to wait up to nine months.

Meanwhile 35 veterans a day commit suicide. (The commonly-quoted rate, 22, is only for those who are in the VA system.) Clearly, there is more than one way to destroy a soldier's life.

I suspect too many Unitarian Universalists have turned somewhat of a blind eye to the situation of our veterans, especially our younger ones. Is it because we're for peace and against war? If that's the case, I hope we've learned our lesson from the Vietnam War, and how poorly antiwar protestors treated our returning vets. Let's not repeat that mistake. We may be against war, but we still need to care for our veterans—and we need to do better than our government is doing.

What can we do to help our veterans? Are there policies that could be changed that you think would help prevent some of the trauma and brain injury? Are there messages we need to be giving our young people to counter the promises of honor and glory made by our culture?