

# FIT FOR LIFE, FIT FOR WAR:

## Reflections on the Warrior Ethos

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*The battle is won before it is ever fought.*

— Chinese Art of War

*Don't confuse proximity to the target with importance to the mission.*

— Unknown

**W**arrior in the Iroquois tongue means “one who protects the Sacred Origins.”

This is the man or woman whose honor and duty before God flows from their commitment to protecting the people and the whole web of life that ensures the people's well-being. The warrior is also one who is capable of being fit for war and fit for life, succeeding in battle and after returning from war. Being fit for war and fit for life are very different skill sets employed for very different objectives. What saves you on the battlefield and enables you to “take the hill,” can kill you in the marriage and vice versa.

A U.S. Army officer was sitting across from me adjacent to his wife of 10 years. She had just sliced his head off with the silken edge of smooth words, articulating her feelings with that special logic of relationship which she wielded with the deftness of a samurai's blade. She had the equivalent of a black belt in interpersonal relationship skills while her partner, though highly accomplished, physically fit and effective as leader of his combat unit, was essentially an untested white belt. He had just been cut off at the neck so deftly he didn't realize his head was no longer attached; it just hadn't fallen

off yet. He looked fine outwardly and I asked him, “How are you?”

“Perfectly calm and in control” came the expected answer. When he obliged my request to take his pulse rate, it was over a hundred — clearly in the midst of a major battle as far as his autonomic nervous system was concerned, but in denial back in the rear where the executive branch of his frontal lobes and neocortex were supposed to be functioning. He was

effectively undergoing a chemical lobotomy and was now in limbic system fight/flight mode.

His options were fast becoming limited to the classic retreat “I'm outta here...” Or if not that, then to advance on his wife and do irreparable damage to the relationship by effectively “neutralizing the target” that was creating so much tension for him. What works on the battlefield in combat destroys the marriage. Why?

Many who succeed in being excellent soldiers rely on strength, logic, will, and “sucking it up” when it comes to any feelings that get in the way. In many cases they do so by not being in touch with the sensation of their own bodies and thus losing the value of their own incredible intelligence — the kind that is honed in life and death situations where soldiers learn to listen to the slightest sound changing around the perimeter or the hair standing up on the back of their necks. In a similar way these same men find they are not very successful in relationships because they haven't learned to translate the sensations of their own body and feelings into



information about interpersonal relationships and to articulate this learning into intimacy with their partners. Similar skills are involved but when their physical lives are not at stake and they are not in a war zone or a test of physical survival, the information is used differently and for very different goals.

A combat veteran in charge of a Special Forces unit described how important it was to be able to be present in the heat of a firefight when conditions suddenly change and to be able to make a decision based on new information that allowed for a totally different plan to be executed. Back home working on his marriage, he quickly realized how tuning into the sensation of his body with that same kind of presence of mind and making conscious decisions, allowed him to avoid negative consequences of addictive behavior. He was involved in avoiding painful emotional awareness related to grief over his relationships. Without his conscious presence and rational decision-making based on context and his goals, etc., he was experiencing his feelings as a “threat” to his life, which they weren’t.

Those who haven’t learned to stay present to their sensations and feelings, (or have forgotten this after combat) often do not know how to feel safe when threatened with loss of attachment to a loved one. Or they may feel threatened by shame or a sense of disgrace simply by feeling vulnerable in the presence of the spouse who is asking for emotional accountability and intimacy in the relationship. Either of these contexts can elicit a sense of helplessness which is intolerable and actually can feel threatening to the warrior who has learned to equate such a feeling with imminent threat and danger requiring decisive action. And for others, overcoming threat by force is equivalent to proving oneself a “real man.”

By contrast, the true warrior is someone who has learned the skills and found that being a fully alive human being requires commitment and courage both under fire in the heat of battle as well as under a different kind of fire in the heat of a love relationship. The warrior is willing and able to be faithful to preparing to be effective in both arenas because it is a matter of heart and the reason one depends on the other. This is one of the major distinguishing characteristics between the warrior and the soldier. Those who truly understand and commit to their purpose in each arena and succeed in moving between these two worlds tend to be among the best of the best in either realm.

As Jamie Moran, sub-chief of the Lakota Brave Heart Warrior Society observes, a soldier follows orders and fights because he is told to. He is externally motivated and disciplined by his commanders. The warrior, by contrast, is self-disciplined from within. A warrior knows why he fights because he has searched his own heart’s motives and has consciously and intentionally chosen to pay the price with full awareness of what will be needed off the battlefield when it is over. Although both warrior and soldier may show courage and

fortitude in battle, and thereby share in the brotherhood that is forged in war among those who have risked their lives for one another in a common purpose, it is only the warrior whose commitment fits within the larger scheme of life’s purpose and meaning, whereas the soldier may have little if any passion for or understanding of this larger purpose. The soldier follows orders.

But following orders alone is not a guarantee of the kind of moral confrontation that is required to consciously and intentionally kill others when absolutely necessary in defense of the Sacred Origins (our way of life). Killing another human being is something that must be trained into healthy men and women. According to Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman in his book *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, killing does not come naturally, and those who kill reactively without having fully examined the moral choice in their hearts often have problems later as a result of their actions. Further, when a war is wrong, for example - when deliberate genocide of another nation (or people) is involved, a deeper wound is incurred by those who fight for their country and those who send them to war in the first place. This is all the more reason for nations to be very sure of their purpose before sending soldiers into war; the damage to soldiers is far greater when the cause is not just.

Soldiers can become mercenaries when they become accustomed to the edgy thrill of war and grow numb to the qualities and skills that are needed to succeed in family and community life. While there are significant differences between a warrior, soldier and mercenary, there is an even greater gulf between the warrior who fights for a purpose and the thug who fights blindly and without purpose, eschewing law, abusing power, and fighting for the sake of fighting itself. The thug is a criminal who actually wages war against the country’s beliefs and values. The thug lacks respect and appreciation for life and is stimulated by abusing power and the destructiveness of rampage, compulsively and reactively entering into fights out of unacknowledged pain, despair, rage and other forms of brokenness. The thug lacks the purpose, skill, measure and free choice of the warrior.

When good men and women return from war without making the efforts to recognize and deal with the effects of the war on their psyche, they are much more vulnerable to inadvertently waging a kind of war on their families, with devastating consequences for the community now and in the future. This is one of the generally unacknowledged costs of war, which is far in excess of what is spent from the budget on the actual war itself. For example, a child’s exposure to his or her father abusing the mother is the strongest factor for transmitting violent behavior from one generation to the next. According to reports from the American Psychological Presidential Task Force on Violence and the Family, children who witness domestic



violence between their parents are six times more likely to commit suicide as a result.

This is why it is critical that soldiers be encouraged and trained as true warriors who know what and for whom they fight and why. This must be consciously and intentionally chosen and committed to both on the field of battle and off. The way of the warrior is not simply a job, but a larger life commitment to protecting and being able to enjoy one's way of life. The warrior's way cannot be divorced from commitment to being a fully alive man or woman serving both God and country, but this cannot be merely a patriotic foil used to quash dissent or demonize other nations in order to exploit them.

There is also a mission in peace, just as there is a mission in war – to grow and enjoy life. Different skill sets and emphases are needed to be able to intentionally shift between the exigencies of battle and the enjoyment or marriage, family, and community life. Not all combat veterans achieve this.

Traditional societies who valued martial education and were led and defended by their warrior-kings such as the American Indians and Japanese, recognized and valued being fit for war and fit for life. They held in honor those persons who displayed excellence and integrity in both arenas. Ohiyesa, a.k.a. Dr. Charles Eastman, was raised as a traditional warrior in Lakota Sioux society prior to being translated into white society as a young adult. He eventually went on to graduate from medical school and spent his life moving between the two worlds of traditional Indian life and white society. His experience and counsel are valuable in this regard, as he knew both cultures intimately. In his book *Light on the Indian World: The Essential Writings of Charles Eastman*, he makes a very important observation: "As a rule, the warrior who inspired the greatest terror in the hearts of his enemies was a man of the most exemplary gentleness and refinement among his family and friends."

The difference between the true warrior and others can be clearly seen in those who embody the principles and skills of martial arts. For example, Morihei Ueshiba, the late founder of Aikido, was one of the most highly regarded warriors of his time. Even in his 80s and suffering from cancer, once he entered the dojo and took his place on the mat, continued to defeat men half his

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age and twice his size, often several at a time. O Sensei had also excelled in military hand-to-hand combat, judo, and street fighting. Yet out of the arena of battle, he was known to be a model citizen who made extreme sacrifices in order to help his people build safe and stable communities that were environmentally harmonious. He was known to be a peaceful and refined man who kept his cool and presence whether under fire in battle or evidencing capacity for the inner stillness needed to steady the hand in the subtle art of Japanese calligraphy back at home. In fact, the art of Aikido came to him in a vision in which he saw that love was the basis of the universe and the most powerful force in existence which could not be defeated by any opposing power. Rather than merely opposing it, love enters into opposition transforming it in the process — something which is demonstrated in the actual movements of the aikidoist who draws closer to the attacker and redirecting the attacker's own opposing force in order to disable him without injuring him.

This same warrior ethos is found in Jesus Christ, who like Kings Saul, David and Solomon before him, was a leader as well as being a priest and prophet. He united all three of these dimensions in his being and lived them out in his mission. Contrary to many who see his passion as weakness or a form of "pacifism," it is more correctly understood as far more extraordinary – a warrior's stance who courageously took upon himself the well-being of his fellows while under fire, incarnating the very essence of Aikido in forgiving his attackers and carrying humanity all the way through hell and out, even when he himself felt abandoned by both God and country. Throughout the most difficult part of the

ordeal, he refused any sort of stimulant that would have disturbed the clarity of his intentions and purpose, and he allowed his heart to face the full impact of what he was doing once he had "set his face toward Jerusalem," which meant his certain death. This is the same kind of warrior ethos that allowed the ancient samurai to face the superior technology of the Western powers' gatling guns depicted in the recent movie, *The Last Samurai*, even though they knew it meant certain death. Their bodies were defeated, but they retained honor and victory of their spirits before the mystery of the Sacred Origins which they were vowed to defend. They served a calling higher than soldiering, and it began to affect their enemies who were firing the gatling guns to the point that their spirits began to be conquered by the sacrifice they were witnessing. The superior technology of bullets ripped open the samurais' bodies, but left their spirits unharmed and free to continue the battle.

Of course, the warrior's way is much more difficult than the soldier's or mercenary's. By contrast, the warrior's way requires the whole man or woman. It requires fully conscious intention, whether in the heat of battle or in the fervent joy and pain of family life in community which faces its own battles of sickness, tragedy, old age, loss of meaning, poverty, and most of all, the call to love to the point of self-sacrifice for the community as epitomized by Christ.

It has been said that an army travels on its stomach, but neither army nor community at home can endure and prevail without heart. We make a terrific mistake when we count the cost of war only in terms of money spent on deployment or in lives lost. This judgment miscalculates the cost to families and communities. It is not enough to be committed to "leaving no Soldier behind" dead or alive on the battlefield. A different war is waged upon return home. Along with the recognition that "war is hell" comes the understanding that no one goes to hell and comes back unscathed. When we deploy Soldiers to war, our plans should include ongoing and follow-up pastoral care and counseling to support the soul-searching and healing that must take place upon their return.

We need support to bring our Soldiers home psychologically, spiritually, and interpersonally so that they are able to again enjoy and contribute to the world of which they are such a vital part. But this is not a

given. Out of three million combatants who participated in the Vietnam conflict, nearly one-third suffered from PTSD at some point after deployment. According to the book *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body and Society*, even 20 years later, 15.2 percent of veterans continued to suffer from PTSD. (This compares with a two-percent incidence in the U.S. population at large.) Other complications involve loss of capacity for being vulnerable, of enjoying intimacy with one's spouse and children and a tendency toward various kinds of addictive compensations including drug and alcohol abuse. This is another significant contributor to community problems; the estimated cost of alcohol and drug abuse to American business is \$81 billion in one year. \$37 billion is due to premature death and \$44 billion to illness. Alcoholism causes 500 million lost workdays annually. To the degree that this is continuing damage to veterans who have not yet recovered, it underscores the strategic importance of the Chaplain Corps, both for the war effort and for the return home.

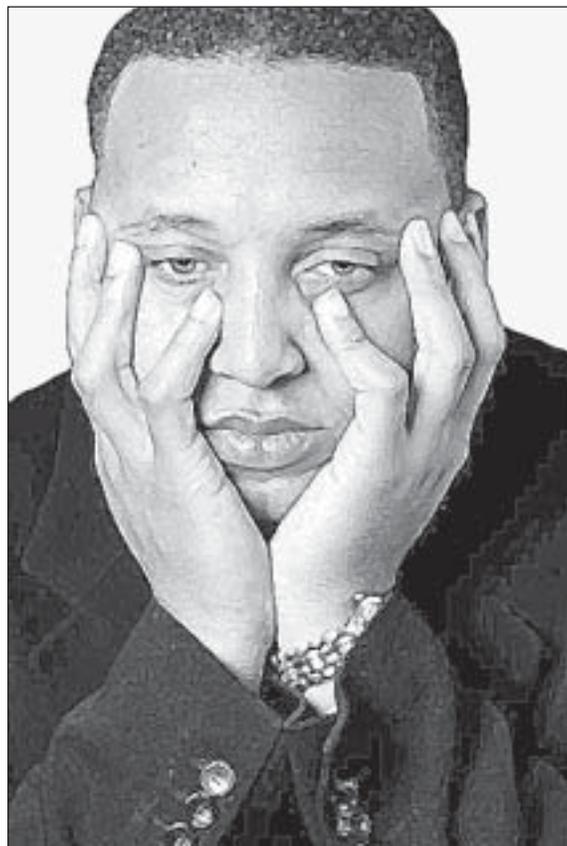
Even when known, various aspects of PTSD may not always be "seen" by professionals or admitted to by Soldiers who still see it as a "weakness" or "disgrace" of some sort, rather than part of what everyone to some extent experiences as a result of combat and has the mission to address upon return, in order to reintegrate effectively. Because of the tendency to deny it and its many varied manifestations, it is easy to miss and/or simply to collude with the veteran in ignoring how he or she is being affected. For example, though included as a diagnosis in the DSM-III as early as 1980, a study conducted in 1982 by Bessel van der Kolk of some 300 WWII veterans receiving outpatient treatment in VA systems, 85 percent qualified for the diagnosis of PTSD but not a single one had this diagnosis in his chart.

### **Existential and Spiritual Considerations**

When soldiers went out into the desert to hear the preaching of the prophet John the Baptist who called all to repent before God, they asked him "What must we do?" The response was not as might be expected from a "preacher," that is, "Lay down your arms." Or "Stop killing." Rather, it

was "Do not abuse your power." Extrapolating on this, we might also paraphrase, "Learn when and how to use power appropriately to defend our way of life." Then when the battle is through and the war is over, learn how to set aside the rules of engagement that pertained to war and divest of the use of power and the license and moral decision to kill that are necessary for war. Begin again to use power in the way that allows oneself and others to enjoy life with loved ones and the rest of the community.

The joys of life are not possible when the soul is held in check by fear arising from the PTSD. Wherever this ecstatic dimension of life is missing or blocked, some degree of PTSD is present with its telltale signs of joyless and compulsive addictive compensations, workaholicism, and numbness to everyday life whose glories and joys can no longer be felt and appreciated. In its more benign forms, it is a lackluster life of empty work, alternating with soul-numbing entrancement to the television each night after work because one is too exhausted and soul-drained to do anything else. In its more malignant forms, it appears in the various forms of addiction, domestic violence, and self-destructive criminal pursuits.



The problem is that soldiers who do not aim at becoming warriors (and worse, those who become mercenaries or thugs) also tend to be those who do not recognize and master the skills that allow for reentry into the community and family life after the war is over. They are not able to enter into productive work where they can make a contribution to society and often lack the ability to love someone and allow themselves to be loved in return. Even when they are able to endure the battle, they often fail in the mission to be able to once more enjoy life because of the hidden scars that remain within. So for 10 or 20 years — or sometimes an entire lifetime — they still do not know how to "come home from war." Tragedies of killing one's spouse, drug addiction, rage and violence or numbing isolation, which are part and parcel of the neurological disturbance inherent to post traumatic stress, are all part of the casualties of war that persist and can invade the soul and community life upon the combat veteran's return.

On a personal level, the effects of war are many, whether labeled PTSD or not. Interpersonal changes include building a wall of shame that blocks sensitivity and capacity for empathy in normal relationships. Sexual difficulties and obsessions often result from damage to the limbic system of the brain's fight/flight control center, so that the vulnerability of sex and intimacy become confused with aggression and/or invasion triggering fight/flight defenses set during the combat experiences, increasing reactivity and/or isolation from loved ones and from community. The excuse (all too often true) is that nobody can (or wants) to understand, but the fact of the matter is that generally the "nobody" is first and foremost the psyche of the traumatized person who avoids full contact with his experience which has been walled off, intra psychically just as society denies the price paid by those we send off to war, by ignoring them upon their return home because it is uncomfortable and even frightening to experience their rage, confusion, shame and hurt that is hidden behind the arguments, lack of joy or high risk behaviors that now characterizes their lives in contrast to who they seemed to be before they

deployed. Loved ones begin to feel “bad” because they interpret the changes in their veteran as being caused by something they are doing and this further stresses already endangered relationships which lack the communication skills necessary to work it through.

Another huge invisible wound kept secretly within the veteran is linked with unresolved conflict from having killed others. Shame and a sense of helplessness, disgrace or dishonor can arise from deep within the person who knows that what he or she did in war would be unthinkable and horrific if it occurred now in the context of the sweetness and joy of marriage and family and life in community. But what one has seen and done before has etched deep places that remain in the psyche. It can seem to the sensitive soul in the aftermath, that to have done such things then, now threatens to make them feel

like a “monster,” so it must not even be thought about, walled off, erased from memory if possible, or at least kept in a secret compartment not to be opened except among other vets and then only under the influence of alcohol. But the difficulty of this means only that further failure is involved because the person can’t avoid the nagging memory or if he should in part succeed, it is at the expense of having cut off access to a significant part of their own heart and capacity for joyful passionate relationships.

The intense stimulation of the nervous system at moments when killing occurs can be misinterpreted as a kind of pleasure or fascination, leaving veterans with a horror of feeling not only that they have committed a sin, but that they enjoyed it. The shame of this is intolerable and feels utterly disgraceful. They cannot be still for fear that the darkness will rise up to swallow them or get out of hand and poison or hurt the ones they love. This entails a huge loss of meaning in life and an isolation and loneliness that contribute to forms of antisocial behavior or drugs and alcohol and living on the edge as a means of numbing out awareness of these disgraceful things knocking at the door of the psyche from deep in the heart. This all amounts to a pervasive sense of helplessness which itself is an offense to the soldier whose credo in battle is to neutralize the threat and overcome all odds by force.

One veteran of the Vietnam conflict came for marriage therapy with his wife of six years. The complaint was that he was having multiple sexual affairs, working overtime and neglecting his wife. It turned out he was trying to avoid the “poison” he felt within himself as if allowing it out would “poison” his wife. The more he grew to love her, the greater was the pressure he felt inside to avoid her which he did through sex with other women and working overtime. He had been running away from the moral guilt he felt from what he’d done in the war coupled with the grief he still held in his heart frozen in time with the bloody body of his best friend who died in his arms...while he survived. What he’d done well and honorably in battle, now became a block to enjoying life



with his beloved wife and a source of shame for him which he had to avoid seemingly at all costs to himself and his marriage. When he recognized this and his wife saw that instead of not being loved, she was more loved now than six years before, they had a new place from which to work out a different kind of marriage.

On a societal level the psychological, emotional, and spiritual effects of war are present in some respect for all persons touched by war, just as much as those who suffer from medically diagnosed post traumatic stress disorder. For each and everyone this represents a communal responsibility for justice and healing. We haven’t prepared our Soldiers for war until we have prepared their hearts as well as their minds and bodies. And we cannot rest assured that we have brought our Soldiers home, until they are home spiritually, psychologically, and emotionally. For this reason, it is critical to support the mission of helping Soldiers become warriors who are capable of being fit for war and fit for life. In the end, the final war will be won only by those whose fight is from the heart for the purpose of protecting the Sacred Origins and who are able, after returning from the battle, to enjoy them and preserve them, as Chief Joseph of the Nez Percé said, for the “seventh generation” after them.

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A complete list of references for this article are on file and available with *Infantry Magazine*.

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