PART I
CHAPTER 1

Betrayal of “What’s Right”

Every instance of severe traumatic psychological injury is a standing challenge to the rightness of the social order.

—Judith Lewis Herman, 1990 Harvard Trauma Conference

We begin in the moral world of the soldier—what his culture understands to be right—and betrayal of that moral order by a commander. This is how Homer operates the Iliad. Agamemnon, Achilles’ commander, wrongfully seizes the prize of honor voted to Achilles by the troops. Achilles’ experience of betrayal of “what’s right,” and his reactions to it, are identical to those of American soldiers in Vietnam. I shall describe some of the many violations of what American soldiers understood to be right by holders of responsibility and trust.

Now, there was a LURP [Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol] team from the First Brigade off of Highway One, that looked over the South China Sea. There was a bay there.... Now, they saw boats come in. And they suspected, now, uh—the word came down [that] they were unloading weapons off them. Three boats.

At that time we moved. It was about ten o’clock at night. We moved down, across Highway One along the beach line, and it took us [until] about three or four o’clock in the morning to get on line while these people are unloading their boats. And we opened up on them—aaah.

And the fucking firepower was unreal, the firepower that we put into them boats. It was just a constant, constant firepower. It seemed like no one ever ran out of ammo.

Daylight came [long pause], and we found out we killed a lot of fishermen and kids.

What got us thoroughly fucking confused is, at that time you
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turn to the team and you say to the team, "Don't worry about it. Everything's fucking fine." Because that's what you're getting from upstairs.

The fucking colonel says, "Don't worry about it. We'll take care of it." Y'know, uh, "We got body count!" "We have body count!" So it starts working on your head.

So you know in your heart it's wrong, but at the time, here's your superiors telling you that it was okay. So, I mean, that's okay then, right? This is part of war. Y'know? Gung-HO! Y'know? "AirBONE! AirBONE! Let's go!"

So we packed up and we moved out.

They wanted to give us a fucking Unit Citation—them fucking maggots. A lot of medals came down from it. The lieutenants got medals, and I know the colonel got his fucking medal. And they would have award ceremonies. Y'know, I'd be standing like a fucking jerk and they'd be handing out fucking medals for killing civilians.

This veteran received his Combat Infantry Badge for participating in this action. The CIB was one of the most prized U.S. Army awards, supposed to be awarded for actual engagement in ground combat. He subsequently earned his CIB a thousand times over in four combat tours. Nonetheless, he still feels deeply dishonored by the circumstances of its official award for killing unarmed civilians on an intelligence error. He declares that the day it happened, Christmas Eve, should be stricken from the calendar.

We shall hear this man's voice and the voices of other combat veterans many times in these pages. I shall argue throughout this book that healing from trauma depends upon communalization of the trauma—being able safely to tell the story to someone who is listening and who can be trusted to retell it truthfully to others in the community. So before analyzing, before classifying, before thinking, before trying to do anything—we should listen. Categories and classifications play a large role in the institutions of mental health care for veterans, in the education of mental health professionals, and as tentative guides to perception. All too often, however, our mode of listening deteriorates into intellectual sorting, with the professional grabbing the veterans' words from the air and sticking them in mental bins. To some degree that is institutionally and educationally necessary, but listening this way destroys trust. At its worst our educational system produces counselors, psychiatrists, psychologists, and therapists who resemble museum-goers whose whole experience consists of mentally saying, "That's cubist! . . . That's El Greco!" and who never see anything they've looked at. "Just listen!" say the veterans when telling mental health professionals what they need to know to work with them, and I believe that is their wish for the general public as well. Passages of narrative here contain the particularity of individual men's experiences, bearing a different order of meaningfulness than any categories they might be put into. In the words of one veteran, these stories are "sacred stuff."

The mortal dependence of the modern soldier on the military organization for everything he needs to survive is as great as that of a small child on his or her parents. One Vietnam combat veteran said, "The U.S. Army [in Vietnam] was like a mother who sold out her kids to be raped by [their] father to protect her own interests."

No single English word takes in the whole sweep of a culture's definition of right and wrong; we use terms such as moral order, convention, normative expectations, ethics, and commonly understood social values. The ancient Greek word that Homer used, themis, encompasses all these meanings. A word of this scope is needed for the betrayals experienced by Vietnam combat veterans. In this book I shall use the phrase "what's right" as an equivalent of themis. The specific content of the Homeric warriors' themis was often quite different from that of American soldiers in Vietnam, but what has not changed in three millennia are violent rage and social withdrawal when deep assumptions of "what's right" are violated. The vulnerability of the soldier's moral world has increased in three thousand years because of the vast number and physical distance of people in a position to betray "what's right" in ways that threaten the survival of soldiers in battle. Homeric soldiers actually saw their commander in chief, perhaps daily.

AN ARMY IS A MORAL CONSTRUCTION

Book 1 of the Iliad sets the tragedy in motion with Agamemnon's seizure of Achilles' woman, "a prize I [Achilles] sweated for, and soldiers gave me!" (1:189) We must understand the cultural context to see that this episode is more than a personal squabble
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between two soldiers over a woman. The outrageousness of Agamemnon's behavior is repeatedly made clear: Achilles' mother, the goddess Thetis, makes her case to Zeus: "Now Lord Marshal Agamemnon has been highhanded with him, has commandeered and holds his prize of war [gēras, portion of honor]. . . ." The prize of honor was voted by the troops for Achilles' valor in combat. A modern equivalent might be a commander telling a soldier, "I'll take that Congressional Medal of Honor of yours, because I don't have one." Obviously, Achilles' grievance was magnified by his attachment to the particular person of Briseis, the captive woman who was the prize, but violation of "what's right" was central to the clash between Achilles and Agamemnon.

Any army, ancient or modern, is a social construction defined by shared expectations and values. Some of these are embodied in formal regulations, defined authority, written orders, ranks, incentives, punishments, and formal task and occupational definitions. Others circulate as traditions, archetypal stories of things to be emulated or shunned, and accepted truth about what is praise-worthy and what is culpable. All together, these form a moral world that most of the participants most of the time regard as legitimate. "natural," and personally binding. The moral power of an army is so great that it can motivate men to get up out of a trench and step into enemy machine-gun fire.

When a leader destroys the legitimacy of the army's moral order by betraying "what's right," he inflicts manifold injuries on his men. The Iliad is a story of these immediate and devastating consequences. Vietnam has forced us to see that these consequences go beyond the war's "loss upon bitter loss . . . leaving so many dead men" (1:3ff) to taint the lives of those who survive it.

VICTORY, DEFEAT, AND THE HOVERING DEAD

In victory, the meaning of the dead has rarely been a problem to the living—soldiers have died "for" victory. Ancient and modern war are alike in defining the relationship between victory and the army's dead, after the fact. At the time of the deaths, victory has not yet been achieved, so the corpses' meaning hovers in the void until the lethal contest has been decided. Victory—and the cut, crushed, burned, impaled, suffocated, frozen, diseased, drowned, poisoned, or blown-up corpses—mutually anchor each other's meaning. Homerics participants in warfare understood a very simple relationship between civilians and the soldiers who fought to protect them: In defeat, all male civilians were massacred and all female civilians were raped and carried away into slavery. In the modern world, the meaning of the dead to the defeated is a bitter, unhealed wound, where defeat rarely means obliteration of the people and civilization. As we recently witnessed in the Persian Gulf War, defeat may not even bring the fall of the opposing government. At the level of grand strategy in Vietnam, the United States had been defeated, and yet American soldiers had won every battle.

For the veterans, the unanchored dead continue to hover. They visit their surviving comrades at night like the ghost of Patroklos, Achilles' friend, visits Achilles:

... let me pass the gates of Death.
... I wander
about the wide gates and the hall of Death.
Give me your hand. I sorrow. (23:88)

The returning Vietnam soldiers were not honored. Much of the public treated them with indifference or derision, further denying the unanchored dead a resting place.

SOME VETERANS' VIEW—WHAT IS DEFEAT? WHAT IS VICTORY?

During a group therapy session, I once blundered into a casual mention of "our defeat" in Vietnam. Many veterans returned from Vietnam and found themselves outcast and humiliated in American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars posts where they had assumed that they would be welcomed, supported, and understood. Time and again they were assailed as "losers" by World War II veterans. The pain and rage at being blamed for defeat in Vietnam was beyond bearing and resulted in many brawls.

These feelings reflect not only outrage at the heartless wrongheadedness of such remarks but also a concept of victory in war that left Vietnam veterans bewildered. "We knew that we never lost a battle," say the veterans. Winning, as far as I have been able to determine, meant to them being in possession of the ground at
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the end of the battle. So the hit-and-run or hit-and-hide small-unit tactics of the enemy always meant that we had “won” after a given engagement. However, many men experienced a deep malaise that their concepts of victory, of strength embodied in fire superiority and often in great local numerical superiority, somehow didn’t fit, were futile. The enemy initiated 90 percent of all engagements but “lost” them all. Even battles like Dak To and Ap Bia Mountain (Hamburger Hill) were American victories in the sense that Americans held the ground when the last shot was fired.

Larger images of victory seem to have been formed out of newscast footage of World War II surrender ceremonies and beautiful women weeping for joy at their liberation; defeat was a document signed in a railway carriage and German troops marching in Paris. As I listen to some veterans, there are times when it seems they believe that the Vietnamese cannot have won the war. Therefore, because we won all our battles, our victory was somehow stolen. Many veterans have a well-developed “stab in the back” theory akin to that developed by German veterans of World War I—that the war could have been handily won had the fighting forces not been betrayed by home-front politicians. My interest here is in the soldiers’ experiences and not in the larger historical question of whether they were “sold out” by the politicians somehow brought under the spell of such still-hated figures as Jane Fonda.

Once or twice I have tried to explore with veterans these concepts of victory and defeat. I have abandoned these discussions, because the sense of betrayal is still too great and the equation of defeat with abandonment by God and personal devaluation still too vivid.

To return to my blunder in group therapy, a veteran whose voice is often heard in this book turned black with anger and, glaring at me, said, “I won my war. It’s you who fucking lost!” He got up and left the room to remove himself from the opportunity to physically hurt me. Toward the end of the group session he returned and said, “What we lost in Vietnam was a lot of good fucking kids!”

More than a year after this experience I gingerly approached the subject with another veteran, prefacing what I was about to say (the paradox that we had “lost” the war while “winning” every battle) by saying that I knew that this was a very sensitive subject and that it made many vets very angry. When I had said it, he smiled in a not very friendly way and drew his finger across his throat. “It makes you want to cut my throat?” I asked. “Uh-huh,” he replied.

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DIMENSIONS OF BETRAYAL OF “WHAT’S RIGHT”

To grasp the significance of betrayal we must consider two independent dimensions: first, what is at stake, and second, what thémis has been violated.

ON DANGER IN WAR

“To someone who has never experienced danger, the idea is attractive,” wrote the famous nineteenth-century military theorist Carl von Clausewitz. So it appeared to many young men who volunteered—only about 10 percent of the men I see were drafted—for military service during the Vietnam War. For some it was a way to “prove” themselves to themselves, sometimes to their fathers and uncles who were World War II veterans. For some it was attractive as an expression of patriotic and religious idealism, often understood to be equivalent to anti-Communism:

You get brought up with God an’ country and—y’know, something good turned out bad. They told me I was fighting Communism. And I really believed in my country and I believed everyone served their country.

Another veteran:

It was better to fight Communism there in Vietnam than in your own back yard. Catholics had the worst of it. We had to be the Legions of God. We were doing it for your faith. We were told: Communists don’t like Catholics.

For some the war was a cause that expressed an heroic ideal of human worth, in the words of one veteran, “the highest stage of mankind, willing to put your life on the line for an idea.” For others it was the excitement, the spectacle of war. One veteran
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described his motive for joining the Marines: “I was bored. Vietnam was where it was happening, and in the Marines everybody went to Vietnam.”

All knew that war was dangerous, but none were prepared for the “final shock, the sight of men being killed and mutilated [which] moves our pounding hearts to awe and pity.” They went to war with the innocence built from films in which war, in Paul Fussell’s words, was

systematically sanitized and Norman Rockwellized, not to mention Disneyfied... In these, no matter how severely wounded, Allied troops are never shown suffering what was termed, in the Vietnam War, traumatic amputation: everyone has all his limbs, his hands and feet and digits, not to mention expressions of courage and cheer.”

Danger of death and mutilation is the pervading medium of combat. It is a viscous liquid in which everything looks strangely refracted and moves about in odd ways, a powerful corrosive that breaks down many fixed contours of perception and utterly dissolves others. Without an accurate conception of danger we cannot comprehend war and cannot properly value the moral structure of an army. We must grasp what is at stake: lethal danger and the fear of it.

THE FAIRNESS ASSUMPTION

Adults rightly think that a sense of proportion about petty injustice is intrinsic to maturity and hear their children shrilling “It’s not fair!” as evidence of their childishness. The culture shock of civilians entering the stratified and ritualized military world is well known. It is also the world of “chickenshit.” As Paul Fussell put it:

If you are an enlisted man, you’ll know you’ve been the victim of chickenshit if your sergeant assigns you to K.P. not because it’s your turn but because you disagreed with him on a question of taste a few evenings ago. Or, you might find your pass to town canceled at the last moment because, you finally remember, a few days ago you asked a question during the sergeant’s lecture on map-reading that he couldn’t answer.

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Civilians and noncombat veterans often equate complaints about military life to adolescent whining because of the unexamined assumption that its injustices are always of this low-stakes variety. The experiences that Fussell invokes here undoubtedly cause anger and indignation, but the essential element of mortal danger is lacking. However, Fussell, himself a World War II combat veteran, continues the passage without a change in tone:

Or, if you uttered your... [indiscretion] while in combat instead of in camp, you might find yourself repeatedly selected to take out the more hazardous night patrols to secure information, the kind, a former junior officer recalls, ‘we already knew from daytime observations, and had reported.’

Because we have entered the realm of mortal danger, the experience of betrayal merits full, respectful attention. Paradoxically, the reader must respond emotionally to the reality of combat danger in order to make rational sense of the injury inflicted when those in charge violate “what’s right.” If the emotion of terror is completely absent from the reader’s experience of this book, crucial information about the experience of combat is not getting through.

A veteran recalls,

Walking point71 was an extremely dangerous job. The decision on who was going to do it was so carefree, so carefree, yeah. The decision was made politically [laughs]. Most of the time politically. Certain people got the shit. Certain people didn’t. Certain people on the right side of certain people.

Another veteran:

The CO had his favorites. Two companies, Delta [this veteran’s company] and Charlie, always got sent out. The other two always stayed back on the hill at ______.

This may sound like a child complaining, “It’s not fair!” about taking turns carrying out the trash, unless one grasps what was at stake. During the course of this man’s year with Delta Company, it suffered more than 100 percent casualties, taking replacements into account. The companies that were the CO’s favorites suffered few casualties. Contrary to what the young men anticipated in training and in watching war films, once they encountered the reality of battle, they fervently wanted to avoid it and wanted risk
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to be fairly distributed. Many aspects of the _thémis_ of American soldiers cluster around fairness. When they perceived that distribution of risk was unjust, they became filled with indignant rage, just as Achilles was filled with _ménis_, indignant rage.

Soldiers grow most doubtful about the fair distribution of risk when they see that their commanders shelter themselves from it. Writing of the Vietnam War, a respected military historian commented:

*Officers in every armed force must find ways of inducing their men to fight and risk their lives—a most unnatural activity. . . . In modern warfare, where automatic weapons, artillery, and air power impose dispersal, men can rarely be pushed into combat; they must be pulled by the prestige of their immediate leader and the officers above him. Combat expertise that soldiers recognize and personal qualities of authority are important, but so is an evident willingness to share in the . . . deadly risks of war.*

. . . The deadly risks of combat must unfailingly be shared whether it is tactically necessary to do so or not, and junior officers cannot do all the sharing.

If soldiers see that their immediate leader is exposed to risk while his superiors stay away from combat, they will be loyal to the man but disaffected from the army. . . . In Vietnam, the mere fact that officers above the most junior rank were so abundant and mostly found in well-protected bases suggested a very unequal sharing of the risk. And statistics support the troops’ suspicion. During the Second World War, the Army ground forces had a full colonel for every 672 enlisted men; in Vietnam (1971) there was a colonel for every 163 enlisted men. In the Second World War, 77 colonels died in combat, one for every 2,206 men thus killed; throughout the Vietnam war, from 1961 till 1972, only 8 colonels were killed in action, one for every 3,407 men.\(^\text{11}\)

The _Iliad_ reminds us that military and political leaders have not always been thousands of miles away from the war zone. Agamemnon, the highest Greek political and military authority, personally shares every soldier’s risk on the battlefield and is wounded in action (11:289ff); the King of Lykia, a Trojan ally, is killed in action (15:568ff). Only within the last few centuries has the era of “stone-age command” ended. Before the modern age the ruler and commander in chief were united in one person who was present and at risk in battle. Rear-echelon officers in Vietnam

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who attempted to micro-manage battles by radio from the rear were known as Base Camp Commandos; those who operated from a helicopter safely out of range of ground fire came to be called Great Leaders in the Sky. Martin van Creveld wrote:

*Under the conditions peculiar to the war in Vietnam, major units seldom had more than one of their subordinate outfits engage the enemy at any one time. . . . A hapless company commander engaged in a firefight on the ground was subjected to direct observation by the battalion commander circling above, who was in turn supervised by the brigade commander circling a thousand or so feet higher up, who in his turn was monitored by the division commander in the next highest chopper, who might even be so unlucky as to have his own performance watched by the Field Force (corps) commander.\(^\text{13}\)*

If American career officers in Vietnam did not share the risks of combat, cultural and institutional factors, rather than personal cowardice, were primarily responsible for this. The officers of World War II had a different culture, which focused on the substance of their work rather than on the institutional definition and status of their jobs, as in Vietnam. And compared to World War II, there were simply too many officers in Vietnam, leading them to become so absorbed in bureaucratic processes that the most elementary aspects of leadership dropped beyond their horizon.

Officers, the only soldiers we meet in the _Iliad_, went into danger in quest of “honor.”

*What is the point of being honored so with precedence at table, choice of meat, and brimming cups, . . . And why have lands been granted you and me . . .? So that we two at times like this in the . . . front line: may face the blaze of battle and fight well. (12:348ff)*

Honor was conferred by others for going into danger and fighting competently. Honor was embodied in its valuable tokens, such as the best portions of meat at feasts, land grants, or, in Achilles’ case, the prize of Briseis. And so could honor be removed; a man could be dis-honored by seizure of the tokens of honor. Homer makes it plain that men were willing to risk their lives for honor and that the
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material goods that symbolized honor were not *per se* what made them face “a thousand shapes of death.” (12:366) It is easy for us to caricature ancient warriors as simple brigands or booty hunters motivated by greed, but this is almost certainly a misunderstanding. The quest for social honor and avoidance of social shame are the prime motives of Homeric warriors. Achilles says,

Only this bitterness eats at my heart
when one man would deprive and shame his equal,
taking back his prize by abuse of power.
The girl whom the Akhaians chose for me
I won by my own spear. A town with walls
I stormed and sacked for her; Then Agamemnon
stole her back, out of my hands, as though
I were some vagabond held cheap. (16:61ff)

The rage is the same, whether it is fairness, so valued by Americans, or honor, the highest good of Homer’s officers, that has been violated. In both cases life is at stake. In both cases the moral constitution of the army, its cultural contract, has been impaired under risk of death and mutilating wounds.

**The Fiduciary Assumption**

Compared to the modern soldier, the Homeric soldier hardly depended on others at all, and when he did it was upon comrades he knew personally and called on by name without technology to assist his own voice. He depended upon himself for his weapons and armor; his eyes and ears provided most of the tactical intelligence he required. He did not need to rely on the competence, mental clarity, and sense of responsibility of a chain of people he would never meet to assure that artillery or air strikes meant to protect him did not kill him by mistake.

Consider the following “routine” event of combat in Vietnam: A man on night watch on the perimeter of a landing zone, using a starlight scope, observes enemy soldiers moving toward the helicopter landing zone (LZ) through the darkness. He calls this in to the command post (CP); his words awaken his comrades, lightly asleep beside him while not on watch. Meanwhile, the officer in

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the CP calls in a request for illumination shells and artillery fire to turn back or weaken the oncoming assault.

Note the dependency of every man on others: the sleeping men on the one on watch, the one on watch on night-vision equipment supplied by others, all of them upon the radio sets connecting the bunker with the CP. They depend upon the radio-telephone operator (RTO) on watch in the CP and the officer who calls in the request for fire support with the correct coordinates and correct munitions, upon the artillery watch officer issuing the correct orders for a fire mission to the nearby fire base, upon these being carried out with the correct munitions and the guns correctly laid—the wrong coordinates could bring the fire down on the Americans, ironically dubbed “friendly fire,” the phrase invoked when the action of one’s own arms results in any wounding or death.

The vast and distant military and civilian structure that provides a modern soldier with his orders, arms, ammunition, food, water, information, training, and fire support is ultimately a moral structure, a *fiduciary,* a trustee holding the life and safety of that soldier. The need for an intact moral world increases with every added coil of a soldier’s mortal dependency on others. The vulnerability of the soldier’s moral world has vastly increased in three millennia.

The following narrative, which contrasts a respected company commander with his successor, illuminates both obvious and hidden dimensions of the fiduciary relationship:

I told you about that captain I liked, he kept moving us, you know, always move. We’d set up, we’d sleep, if you could sleep, and then get out of there. I think that we walked a lot of unbroken paths, off trails, never set up—see, my second captain, he’d come up and say, “Well, that’s a nice NDP [night defensive position]. It’s already dug, little foxholes. It’s beautiful, we’ll just set up right there.” My captain wouldn’t do that. He’d shake his head and say, “Uh-uh, we’re going over there, and we’re going to cut.” ... Cutting, cutting, cutting ... My captain, I hated his goddamn guts, but I admired him, admired the living shit. I hated his goddamn guts because he was so hard... He would always stay off trails, stay off used NDPs. Y’know, when he left and he was replaced, I thought I’d never get out of there. I’d never get out of there alive.
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At first glance, this veteran appears simply to be contrasting a competent company commander with his incompetent replacement. The first captain understood that previously used NDPs were probably mined and booby-trapped, or that at the very least, enemy mortars and artillery had their coordinates. Existing trails, which would allow the company to move more quickly without the long labor of cutting through, were likewise mined and booby-trapped as well as invitations to ambush.

Why did the captain who replaced the admired commander not know these things? The answer to this question goes deep into the betrayals of trust of the higher officers who (1) designed a system of officer rotation that rotated officers (above second lieutenant) in and out of combat assignments every six months, (2) were responsible for training, evaluating, and assigning officers to combat command, and (3) placed institutional and career considerations above the lives of the soldiers under their responsibility. By the time a company or battalion commander acquired knowledge of the enemy's habits, the terrain and weather, the strengths and weaknesses of his men and their arms, whose advice to heed among the junior officers and NCOs, and the arts of deception, he was replaced. Some canny commanders would set up in an existing NDP and then move out of it after dark to another position. Such skills are only slightly transferable from one officer to his replacement and mainly have to be acquired from experience.

However, these larger systemic failures such as too-rapid turnover, inadequate training, and incompetent selection of troop commanders misses another important point that was much more visible to soldiers. Was there no one to tell the new captain that he should not use existing trails? Of course there were NCOs and lieutenants to tell him. The old commander, whose way of moving was "cut, cut, cut," probably displeased his superiors who ordered him to move from point A to point B in two hours—a movement that could be done in that time only if he took his company along highly dangerous existing trails. Possibly he answered back, saying, "No, that can't be done."

Officers who wanted to stay in the field beyond six months were said to have "gone bush" or "gone native." They were suspected of not being "with the program" and of having nurtured a "personality cult" in which the troops were loyal to them as individuals rather than to the chain of command. The veteran quoted above continues.

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I had a lieutenant who I loved. I would've walked into hell with him, walked right into hell... Now, when he was supposed to leave the field, he wouldn't leave, they had to bring two armed guards, no lie. They brought a special bird [helicopter] out. They said, "Now get on the bird! You're under orders." He didn't want to go.

Neither the admired captain nor the beloved lieutenant were cowards, avoiding the enemy out of fear. As far as I can determine from this veteran's account, both were effective officers with real loyalty both to their military tasks and to the men under them. They did not place the self-interest of "looking good" to their superiors above the safety of their men. They were not swayed by bureaucratically structured measures of "productivity" derived from industrial processes. The most fundamental incompetence in the Vietnam War was the misapplication of the social and mental model of an industrial process to human warfare.

A full analysis of how war can destroy the social contract binding soldiers to each other, to their commanders, and to the society that raised them as an army deserves a whole book in itself. My purpose here is to draw the reader's attention to the importance in itself of betrayal of thémis, to the soldier's reactions, and to the catastrophic outcomes that often flow from these reactions. I shall do this primarily by focusing on those things that the Iliad brings into view but which long familiarity has made invisible to us.

Let us look further at the extreme state of dependence of the modern soldier on his army for everything he needs to stay alive in combat: his arms, his training, food and water, communications, knowledge of the enemy, and the skills of his superiors:

My personal weapon until just after this op. [Union J] was the M-14. It was heavy, but at least you could depend on it. Then we got the M-16. It was a piece of shit that never should have gone over there with all the malfunctions... I started hating the fucking government. At least in Union I we had rifles we could depend on. The stocks [of the M-16] broke in hand-to-hand. I started feeling like the government really didn't want us to get back, that there needed to be fewer of us back home. This was a constant thing, they kept changing the spring, the buffer. It was like they was testing it. Our lives depended on them. We cleaned the damned things every day, but they were just no fucking good. There were times when we'd rather use their weapons than our own. I once took an AK [AK-47] from a dead NVA and used it instead of my Mattel toy [M-16].
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It was about a week or two into Union II. I was walking point. I seen this NVA soldier at a distance. We were approaching him and he spotted us. We spread out to look for him. I was coming around a stand of grass and heard noise. I couldn’t tell who it was, us or him. I stuck my head in the bush and saw this NVA hiding there and told him to come out. He started to move back and I saw he had one of those commando weapons, y’know, with a pistol grip under his thigh, and I brought it up and I was looking straight down the bore. I pulled the trigger on my M-16 and nothing happened.

Obviously this soldier survived the failure of his arms to tell the story, but the experience of betrayal that he took from it has been far more destructive of his subsequent life than the grazing wound inflicted by the NVA. A vast number of military officers, civilian defense officials, and civilian contractors were involved in the specification, design, prototyping, testing, manufacture, field testing, and acceptance of the M-16. Yet as one retired military officer blandly put it, “Early models were plagued by stoppages that caused some units to request reissue of the older M-14.” The veteran quoted above experienced the deficiencies of design, manufacture, and especially field testing and acceptance of the M-16 as a gross betrayal of the duties of care and of loyalty by the officers who, by virtue of their office, held his life in trust.

Equipment failure is not new in modern warfare. I count nineteen instances of equipment failure in the Iliad, of which nine were fatal to the soldier in question. Each Homeric soldier, or his father, supplied his own equipment; its failure did not cast doubt on the moral structure of the army in which he served. The ancient soldier was far less dependent in every way on military institutions than his modern counterpart, whose dependency is as complete as that of a small child on his or her family.

During one patrol in the dry season, ____’s squad ran out of water and was not resupplied. They walked for a day and a half in search of water in Vietcong-controlled territory. When men started to collapse from dehydration in the heat, an officer’s plea for emergency resupply was heeded: A helicopter flew over and “bombed” the squad with cases of Tab, seriously injuring one of the men. The major whose helicopter dropped the Tab was recalled to evacuate the casualty. There was no enemy activity. ____ subsequently read

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in the division newspaper that the major had put himself in for and had received the Bronze Star for resupplying the troops and evacuating the wounded “under fire.”

Extreme dependency on others is fundamental to modern combat. We have become so accustomed to this that it easily escapes notice.

Shortages of all sorts—food, water, ammunition, clothing, shelter from the elements, medical care—are intrinsic to prolonged combat, if for no other reason than enemy attacks on the army’s logistical support services. The fortitude of soldiers under such conditions, for example during the siege of Dien Bien Phu or Khe Sanh, is legendary. However, when deprivation is perceived as the outcome of indifference or disrespect by superiors, it arouses mérit as an unbearable offense.

They had a fucking pet dog at the camp and they always got in fresh hamburger for the dog, but there were times we were out and starving, not even getting C-rations, because they wouldn’t resupply us. The dog got sick and they had a chopper in there to fly it to Danang. I had a machete wound in my calf and had to walk for miles back to the base camp.

The shortage that the combat soldier finds most offensive, however, is shortage of competence.

The first deaths in ____’s platoon were caused by “friendly fire” from adjoining sectors of the defense perimeter; the officer had neglected to inform them that he was sending men out on the berm... In two successive helicopter-borne combat insertions the company left the landing zone in parallel columns and after a few “klicks” in the jungle lost track of each other until they met in a furious fire fight. Two men were injured in the first one, five in the second. ____ never heard of any investigation or disciplinary action.

Another veteran:

There was just one stupid fucking thing after another. They decided to use tear gas on a ville [cluster of hamlets] after we had crossed a river neck deep, and of course everything was soaked, the canisters of the gas masks were soaked and they decided to use tear gas. Of course the masks didn’t work. They gassed us almost to death.
Betrayal o “What’s Right”

No one has successfully defined where the inescapable SNAFU—a World War II expression: Situation Normal, All Fucked Up—of war end and culpable incompetence begins.

Is betrayal of “what’s right” essential to combat trauma, or is betrayal simply one of many terrible things that happen in war? Aren’t terror, shock, horror, and grief at the death of friends trauma enough? No one can conclusively answer these questions today. However, I shall argue what I’ve come to strongly believe through my work with Vietnam veterans: that moral injury is an essential part of any combat trauma that leads to lifelong psychological injury. Veterans can usually recover from horror, fear, and grief once they return to civilian life, so long as “what’s right” has not also been violated.

We now turn our attention to the soldiers’ reactions to betrayal of “what’s right.” These are unchanged across three millennia. Indignant rage will occupy us for the remainder of this chapter. It opens the way for berserk rage, which I will describe in chapter 5.

SOLDIERS’ RAGE—THE BEGINNING

*Rage* is properly the title of Homer’s poem, and his audience may have known it by that name, not *Iliad.*" King Agamémnon causes a ravaging plague in the Greek army by his refusal to accept ransom for the daughter of a priest of Apollo, god of disease and healing. The plague ends only after Achilles mobilizes moral pressure on Agamémnon to return the captive woman. In doing this, Achilles forces him to do what a pious and prudent man would have done of his own accord. Agamémnon, however, takes it as a personal attack by Achilles and seizes Achilles’ prize of honor, the captive woman Briséis, to replace the one he gave up to save the plague-devastated army. Achilles’ rage at this wrong is immediate:

... in his shaggy chest this way and that
the passion of his heart ran: should he draw
longsword from hip, ... kill
[Agamémnon] in single combat . . . ,
or hold his rage in check . . . ?

... As he slid
the big blade slowly from the sheath, Athêna

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... stepping
up behind him, visible to no one
except Akhilleus [Achilles], gripped his
red-gold hair . . .
The grey-eyed goddess Athêna said to him:

“It was to check this killing rage I came
from heaven . . . .” (1:221ff)

Achilles submits and withdraws. His *ménis,* restrained at the brink of cutting down Agamémnon, is diverted to hacking away emotional bonds and driving away those he used to love. In Vietnam men were not able, as Achilles was, to withdraw physically from combat. They did, however, have the freedom to withdraw emotionally and mentally from everything beyond their small circle of combat-proven comrades.

Homer’s starting point, then, is *ménis,* indignant wrath. I believe it is also the first and possibly the primary trauma that converted subsequent terror, horror, grief, and guilt into lifelong disability for Vietnam veterans. Indignant rage is uncomfortably familiar to all who work with combat veterans.

Homer uses the word *ménis* for Achilles only in connection with the wrong done to him by Agamémnon, and never in connection with his berserk rage at Hektor for killing his friend Páthroklos. I prefer “indignant rage” as a translation for *ménis,* because I can hear the word *dignity* hidden in the word *indignant.* It is the kind of rage arising from social betrayal that impairs a person’s dignity through violation of “what’s right.” Apart from its use as a word for divine rage, Homer uses *ménis* only as the word for the rage that ruptures social attachments. We now turn to this choking-off of the social and moral world.
Shrinkage of the Social and Moral Horizon

Through [thémis] humans can make themselves stable. . . . Annihilation of convention [thémis] by another's acts can destroy . . . stable character. . . . It can, quite simply, produce bestiality, the utter loss of human relatedness.

—Martha C. Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy

The social horizon of the unscarred soldier encompasses not only his family and other civilian ties but also all those military formations to which his unit belongs and with which it cooperates. Imagine the social world as a physical space, and then imagine a map of the space representing a soldier's sense of social connectedness. How does this map change after someone above the soldier violates "what's right"? Men fight mainly for their comrades; this has become conventional wisdom even among civilians. Prolonged exposure to danger and the profound strain of battle compel this contraction of loyalty to some degree in every war. However, soldiers sometimes lose responsiveness to the claims of any bonds, ideals, or loyalties outside a tiny circle of immediate comrades. An us-against-them mentality severs all other attachments or commitments.

ONE AMERICAN SOLDIER'S SOCIAL SPACE

This veteran speaks of his training in an elite unit:

We were down in Kentucky, and you got to care about people there, everyone in that outfit, . . . you grew like a hand.
Shrinkage of the Social and Moral Horizon

His social and moral horizon extended to his whole battalion. Then
the battalion was sent to Vietnam. His experience there was a
series of betrayals of “what’s right,” one of which is described here:

You see, what you’d do is you’d set up an ambush. Now, Bravo
Company’s probably three miles away from you. And you make
contact [with the enemy] and run towards Bravo Company. So
what happened is we got into a fucking ambush and we couldn’t
get out of the ambush. And the motherfuckers wouldn’t move. . . .
So from then on, we didn’t fucking [inaudible]. Y’know, you
wouldn’t fucking tell them nothing. “Fuck Bravo Company. I hope
all them motherfuckers die.”

The social map of this soldier’s world has shrunk and now
excludes Company B, which it formerly included. In fact, it has
shrunk to only the five men of his reconnaissance team:

It was constant now. I was watching the other five guys like they
was my children. . . . It wasn’t seventy-two guys [in the company] I
was worried about. It was five guys.

His social horizon, in the midst of lethal dangers to them all, has
contracted to this small circle of comrades. As we shall see,
Achilles’ horizon shrinks even further, until it contains only one
other person.

TRACKING ACHILLES THROUGH SOCIAL SPACE

We can map Achilles’ social space, just as we surveyed that of the
American sergeant in the previous section. The two maps are
remarkably similar.

Achilles is a very high-ranking officer, so his social and moral
horizon is in the beginning much wider than that of an enlisted
man. As the Iliad opens, the god Apollo devastates the Greek
army with plague. Agamemnon has brought this on by his arro-
gnant refusal to accept ransom for the daughter of the priest of
Apollo, captured during the sack of a city near Troy. Achilles calls
an assembly of the army (1:64) to determine what is needed to
propitiate Apollo and end the plague. Achilles cares about the
whole army. These broad sympathies and wide moral commit-
ment are inseparable from Achilles’ good character prior to the
events recounted in the Iliad.

The seer Kalkhas makes the diagnosis and gives the prescription:
Return the priest’s daughter. When Agamemnon balks at returning
the captive woman and demands an immediate replacement,
Achilles speaks of “we” for the whole army: “How can the army
make you a new gift? . . . we’ll make it up to you.” (1:156ff) However,
Agamemnon turns on him and orders the captive woman Briseis,
Achilles’ prize of honor, seized as the replacement. Homer makes
clear that this is undeserved, and not within Agamemnon’s rights. In
the course of the Iliad, the other Greek officers say it was unde-
served, and the gods eventually Agamemnon himself agree.
Achilles’ response is to withdraw his moral, emotional, and military
commitment from the army. He bitterly tells the assembled army, “I
swear a day will come when every Akhaian [Greek] soldier will
groan to have Achkilous back . . . though a thousand men perish
before the killer, Hektor.” (1:283ff) Homer reinforces this with the
rich symbol of the “great staff . . . Akhaian officers in council take . . .
in hand by turns, when they observe . . . due order in debate
(1:276ff). . . . [Achilles] hurled the staff . . . before him on the
ground.” (1:292) This is the same sentiment voiced in the previous
section by the American Airborne trooper when he said, “Fuck
Bravo Company. I hope them motherfuckers all die.”

Significantly, as Gregory Nagy points out, the name Achilles
(Akhile + lāous) means he “whose lāos [host of fighting men] has
akhos [grief]”. The Achilles figure entails pēma [pain, grief] for
. . . the Acheans . . . when he withdraws from the war . . .”: The
reason for withdrawal of commitment is the same for both the
American sergeant and Achilles: betrayal of “what’s right.”

After betrayal of themis in warfare, an us-against-them mentality
takes hold in which everyone, no matter how close before, is either
an absolute ally or an absolute enemy. This simplification and
shrinking of loyalties flows directly from the betrayal of “what’s
right.” Achilles’ wrath has numbed him to any responsiveness to
the catastrophic of his fellow Greeks, for whom he has formerly
cared deeply. When a delegation of senior fellow officers begs him
to rejoin the fight, he castigates them: who is closest to him:

“Old uncle Phoinix, . . . [do not speak]
for Agamemnon, whom you must not honor;
you would be hateful to me, dear as you are.
Loyalty should array you at my side
in giving pain to him who gives me pain.” (9:739ff)
Shrinkage of the Social and Moral Horizon

We have gotten only the briefest glimpse of Achilles' broad commitments prior to the moral injury inflicted on him by Agamémnon. However, as I shall show below, his moral horizon was broader even than the whole Greek army. Before the psychological injuries recorded in the *Iliad*, Achilles' habit was to respect enemy dead rather than defile them, and to ransom enemy prisoners rather than kill them. Achilles loses his humanity in two stages: He ceases to care about his fellow Greeks after betrayal by his commander and then he loses all compassion for any human being after the death of Pátroklos. The *Iliad* is the story of the undoing of Achilles' character.

**DESERTION**

In response to Agamémnon's betrayal in the opening moments of the epic, Achilles prepares to desert:

Now it is I who do not care to fight.  
Tomorrow at dawn when I have...    
...hailed my ships  
for loading in the shallows, if you like  
and if it interests you, look out and see  
my ships...     
And if the great Earthshaker [Poseidon] gives a breeze,  
the third day out I'll make it home to Phtíla. (9:436ff)

As the political and military head of an independent contingent, Achilles could indeed leave if he wished. The modern soldier who does the same commits the gravest military crime. During a declared war, desertion can be a capital offense under American law. Rather than be diverted by generalities, let us listen again to the voice of the same reconnaissance sergeant we heard in the previous section:

The only one who ever fucking did anything, anything right was fucking ___. He was sent home with ___'s body—and he didn't come back. He did the right fucking thing. When you had a guy get killed in our outfit, one of the team went home with him [a practice only in elite units, and only for part of the war]. And ____ went home with him. He took him back to New York. He quit...  
Deserted, I guess—whatever you want to call it.

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The dead man was the sergeant's closest friend. While the sergeant was hospitalized with pneumonia, his friend was killed when the team was sent out on a frivolous mission designed simply to get the men out of the camp. Betrayal and grief came to him and to the others on the team in one stroke. The sergeant stayed for three more combat tours to get revenge; another team member deserted. The sergeant's present judgment of the deserter: 'The only one who ever fucking did anything, anything right.'

The moral strength of an army is impaired by every injustice, whether it personally touches an individual soldier or not. When Agamémnon wrongfully seizes Achilles' prize of honor, he inflicts an injury not on just this one man but on the whole army. I believe that commentators on the *Iliad* have overlooked this in their interpretation of the episode in Book 2, where the Greeks stampede for their ships after Agamémnon puts them to the bizarre "test" by telling them in Assembly:

...let us act on what I say:  
Retreat! Embark for our own fatherland!  
We cannot hope any longer to take Troy! (2:157ff)

They are war-weary after nine years of fighting, to be sure, and their commander has just stood before them and ordered abandonment of the beachhead. Nonetheless, everyone—Agamémnon, the officers privy to his "test" of the army, and the gods themselves—is taken aback by the single-hearted response of the army:

He made their hearts leap in their breasts, ...  
and all that throng, aroused, began to surge  
as ground swells do. ...  
...just so moved this assembly.

Shouting confusedly, they all began  
to scramble for the ships. High in the air  
a dust cloud from their scuffling rose, commands  
rang back and forth—to man the cables, haul  
the black ships to the salt immortal sea.  
They cleared the launching ways, their hearts on home,  
and shouts went up as props were pulled away. (2:160ff)

I believe that this mass desertion by the Greek army is prompted more than anything else by the commander's betrayal of thémis that they witnessed at the prior Assembly.
Shrinkage of the Social and Moral Horizon

Agamémnon’s public betrayal of thémis with Achilles has pushed his soldiers to the brink of desertion and mutiny and will shortly cost them “loss on bitter loss.” (1:3) Vietnam provides us with many parallels. Investigative reporter Neil Sheehan has written:

[By 1969] it was an Army in which men escaped into marijuana and heroin and other men died because their comrades were “stoned” on these drugs. . . . It was an Army whose units in the field were on the edge of mutiny, whose soldiers rebelled against the senselessness of their sacrifice by assassinating officers and noncoms in “accidental” shootings and “fraggings” with grenades."

SIMPLIFICATION OF THE SOCIAL WORLD TO A SINGLE COMRADE

Initially, Achilles’ horizon shrinks from the whole Greek army (1:63) to his own troop, the Myrmidons. As wrath festers, his field of moral vision and emotional responsiveness shrinks further to just one man, his foster brother, Pátraklos (23:105):

Ab, Father Zeus, Athéna, and Apollo! If not one Trojan of them all should get away from death, and not one Argive [Greek] save ourselves were spared, we two alone could pull down Troy’s old coronekt of towers! (16:115ff)

In this imagined apocalypse, everyone would die except Achilles and Pátraklos; not only the hated Agamémnon would be carried away, but friends such as Odysseus, Ajax, Phoinix, and all the Myrmidons. It bears remembering that at this point Achilles is unscarred by grief—betrayal of “what’s right” alone has done this damage.

ACHILLES’ CHARACTER BEFORE HIS PSYCHOLOGICAL INJURIES

We see Achilles only briefly before his quarrel with Agamémnon, but cumulatively we learn much about his former character from the remarks of others throughout the Iliad.

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RESPECT FOR THE DEAD

Achilles was not in the habit of defiling his fallen enemies, as he later does horribly to Hektor. Early in the Iliad, Hektor’s wife, Andrómahé, praises Achilles’ past respect for the dead:

"My father great Akhilleus killed when he . . . plundered Thébè . . . He killed him, but, reverent at least in this, did not despoil him. Body, gear, and weapons forged so handsomely, he burned, and heaped up a barrow over the ashes." (6:484ff)

Enemy arms were legitimate spoils of war. In renouncing them, Achilles showed a generous, extra measure of respect to this fallen enemy beyond what was required by conventional piety. After Agamémnon’s betrayal and Pátraklos’ death, Achilles kills Hektor before the eyes of his wife and parents and then mutilates and atrociously debases his corpse.

Achilles’ character has changed. Before, he was responsive to all thémis for the dead, the cultural definition of “what’s right” toward enemy corpses. Achilles had earlier counted himself as part of the human community that encompassed both Greeks and Trojans. His brutal treatment of Hektor’s body did not stem from mutual cultural ignorance or contempt, as was the case so often in Vietnam, where each side rejected the other’s values and customs. Agamémnon acknowledges the shared thémis for the dead in Book 7 when the Trojans ask for a truce to permit them to burn their dead. He says, "As to the dead, I would withhold no decency of burning; a man should spare no pains to see cadavers given as soon as may be after death to purifying flame." (7:485ff)

TAKING PRISONERS ALIVE

We become aware of Achilles’ prior attitude toward captives when Homer again puts Achilles’ past conduct in the mouth of someone close to Hektor. This time it is Hektor’s mother, Hékabé, addressing his corpse:

Akhilleus captured other sons of mine in other years, and sold them overseas
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...That was not his way with you.
After he took your life, cutting you down
with his sharp-bladed spear, he trussed and dragged you
many times round the barrow of his friend,
Pátroklos, whom you killed—though not by this
could that friend live again.... (24:895ff)

In all the Iliad's fighting—and there are hundreds of pages of fighting—not a single prisoner is taken for ransom or for sale as a slave. Homer goes out of his way to emphasize Achilles' past practice of ransoming or selling prisoners rather than killing them. The former Achilles stands out as quite the humanitarian, especially when compared to his fellow warriors. Diomèdes and Odysses kill Dolón; Agamémnon talks Meneláos out of sparing Adrēstos; the sons of Anímakhos beg to be taken for ransom, but Agamémnon kills them, having just dispatched Isos and Antíphos, whom Achilles had formerly ransomed; and Aias Olliades takes Kleóboulos prisoner but kills him without discussion.1 When Achilles kills Trós (20:533ff) and later Lykáon as he begs to be ransomed, Achilles explicitly acknowledges his change of character. He says to Lykáon, who had just been ransomed home from Lemnos, where Achilles had shipped him after a previous capture:

Young fool, don't talk to me of what you'll barter.
in days past, before Pátroklos died
I had a mind to spare the Trojans, took them
alive in shoals, and shipped them out abroad. (21:116ff)

To summarize, we have direct evidence regarding Achilles' former moderation toward enemy dead and enemy prisoners. We have already seen that before Agamémnon's betrayal, Achilles had other marks of good character, such as concern for the well-being of his community as a whole, not merely his own private sphere.

MORAL LUCK

Greek tragic poets, starting with Homer, confront us with a harrowing dimension of human social existence. This is the possibility, as Brown University Professor Martha Nussbaum declares,
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The painful awareness that in all likelihood one's own character would not have stood firm. Merely allowing ourselves to hear the combat veteran's story threatens our culturally defined sense of self-respect. We have powerful motives not to listen to the veteran's story, or to deny its truth.

The vulnerable relationship between child and parent is a metaphor for the relationship between a soldier and his army. It is also more than a metaphor when we consider the formation and maintenance of good character. The parent's betrayal of themis through incest, abuse, or neglect puts the child in mortal danger. Despite intellectual limitations, the small child usually grasps the danger, although the child's mental representation of the danger differs from the adult's. The child's inner sense of safety in the world emerges from the trustworthiness, reliability, and simple competence of the family. Similarly, the child's acquisition of self-control, self-esteem, and consideration for others depends upon the family. Absent inherited mental disorders, good parenting will produce good character and all the other adult resources of dignity and maturity, including ideals, respect for others, self-respect, ambitions, self-care, prosocial rather than antisocial activity, reliable capacity to distinguish reality from fantasy, and so forth. Lurking behind these supposedly settled truths is the Platonic assertion that good character is a firm wall between a good person and evil acts, regardless of the betrayals of "what's right" and other blows, such as bereavement, that may simply happen to an adult. Often there is the invisible, unstated assumption that those who hold power in society exhibit loyalty and care in their fulfillment of themis.

WAR DESTROYS THE TRUSTWORTHY SOCIAL ORDER OF THE MIND

Homer makes us witness to the weakening of Achilles' fine character by betrayal and its subsequent destruction by bereavement. Many veterans' narratives ask us to witness the same. This man did three Vietnam combat tours in tanks:

I was eighteen years old. And I was like your typical young American boy. A virgin. I had strong religious beliefs. For the longest time I wanted to be a priest when I was growing up. You know, I didn't just go to church Sundays, it was every day of the week. I'd come home from school and go right down to the church, and spend an hour in the church. And I was into athletics, sports. I was nothing unique. I was just a typical American boy— High School, Class of 1965... It was the way you were taught, like, "Whenever you're alone, make believe God's there with you. Would he approve of what you are doing?" That's basically—sure, I wasn't no angel, either. I mean, I had my little fistfights and stuff. It was, you're only human. But evil didn't enter it till Vietnam.

I mean real evil. I wasn't prepared for it at all.

Why I became like that? It was all evil. All evil. Where before, I wasn't. I look back, I look back today, and I'm horrified at what I turned into. What I was. What I did. I just look at it like it was somebody else. I really do. It was somebody else. Somebody had control of me.

War changes you, changes you. Strips you, strips you of all your beliefs, your religion, takes your dignity away, you become an animal. I know the animals don't—the animal in the sense of being evil. You know, it's unbelievable what humans can do to each other.

I never in a million years thought I would be capable of doing that. Never, never, never.

Revenge became this veteran's single value. No other value had any claim on him; all previous relationships ceased to have meaning. When he entered this berserk state, he stopped writing home, even ceased to care about the other men on his tank, except as instruments of his revenge.

I carried this home with me. I lost all my friends, beat up my sister, went after my father. I mean, I just went after anybody and everything. Every three days I would totally explode, lose it for no reason at all. I'd be sitting there calm as could be, and this monster would come out of me with a fury that most people didn't want to be around. So it wasn't just over there. I brought it back here with me.

This man's account makes clear that the changes combat brought about in him were not limited to the war zone.

Combat trauma destroys the capacity for social trust, accounting for the paranoid state of being that blights the lives of the most severely traumatized combat veterans. This is not a selective mistrust directed at a specific individual or institution that has
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betrayed its charge, but a comprehensive destruction of social trust. Lies and euphemisms by the soldier’s own military superiors and civilian leaders of course undermine social trust by destroying confidence in language. Perversion of language and destruction of the trustworthy meaning of words by official lies were not new to the Vietnam War. This is well known and need not be elaborated here. What has been largely overlooked, however, is the way that enemy activities contribute to the destruction of a soldier’s social trust. The enemy does severe damage to a part of mental function that is critical to the maintenance of social trust: the trustworthiness of perception.

In Vietnam the enemy struck not only at the body but also at the most basic functions of the soldier’s mind, attacking his perceptions by concealment; his cognitions by camouflage and deception; his intentions by surprise, anticipation, and ambush. These mind games have been part of war since time immemorial, but never in American military experience have they been directed so skillfully and with such thoroughness at the enlisted man as in Vietnam. Our historical image of surprise and deception focuses on the strategies of leaders and commanders, such as Germany’s surprise attack on the Soviet Union or the successful ruse that convinced German leadership that the invasion of France would land at Pas de Calais rather than Normandy. These deceptions were directed at the high command. Our images of the bitter fighting among the hedgerows of Normandy do not include booby-trapped wine bottles or French babies sitting in the road atop command-detonated mines. Only 3 to 4 percent of American casualties in World War II and Korea were from booby traps, while 11 percent of the deaths and 17 percent of the injuries in Vietnam were from these lowest-echelon attacks of surprise and deception.

American soldiers literally felt tortured by their Vietnamese enemy. Prolonged patrolling in Vietnam led to a decomposition of the normal, the familiar, the safe. Every familiar item of the physical world could be made to be or to conceal an explosive by the Vietnamese, whether a shiny aluminum rice carrier, a Parker-51 fountain pen, a bicycle, a coconut, Coke cans, C-ration cans, and discarded American artillery-shell casings. The trained, safest response to being fired upon was to take cover; the Vietcong prepared some ambush sites with small boards mounted with barbed spikes, which they would conceal in the vegetation, spike side up.

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When American troops dove for cover, they would impale themselves on the spikes. In such warfare nothing is what it seems; all certainties liquefy; stable truths turn into their opposites.

I see a deep similarity between the experience of the Vietnam combat soldier and the victim of torture. Describing torture, Elaine Scarry writes:

The contents of the [torture] room, its furnishings, are converted into weapons: the most common instance of this is the bathtub that figures prominently in the reports from numerous countries, but it is only one among many. Men and women being tortured . . . describe being handcuffed in a constricted position for hours, days, and in some cases months to a chair, to a cot, to a filing cabinet, to a bed; they describe being beaten with “family-sized soft drink bottles” or having a hand crushed with a chair, of having their heads “repeatedly banged on the edges of a refrigerator door.” . . . The room . . . is converted into a weapon . . . made to demonstrate that everything is a weapon, the objects themselves, and with them the fact of civilization, are annihilated: there is no wall, no window, no door, no bathtub, no refrigerator, no chair, no bed. 

Prolonged contact with the enemy in war destroys the soldier’s confidence in his own mental functions as surely as would prolonged torture in a political prison. The opportunity to fight back, which the soldier enjoys but the prisoner does not, may not make much difference. Without confidence in one’s own mental functions, ordinary economic, political, and domestic life becomes virtually impossible.

COMBAT IS A CONDITION OF CAPTIVITY AND ENSLAVEMENT

"War is only a branch of political activity . . . simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means." 31

Before beginning this work I would have understood this classic formulation by the famed nineteenth-century Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz to refer to whole campaigns, the realm of generals and national leaders in the conduct of contests between nations. But men who have actually fought in war have taught me another level of its meaning—for the people who were outside the perimeter in night listening posts, on the riverboats,
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behind the trees. They have taught me that even down to the individual soldier and his squad, war is profoundly political, because it is about power. For soldiers in prolonged combat, war is the mutual struggle to paralyze or control the will of enemy soldiers by inflicting wounds and death and creating the terror of these. Some combat units had printed “calling cards” or “death cards,” the most common of which was the ace of spades. One veteran recalls, “We used to put it in the mouth of all the kills we got.” The domination that a soldier seeks over his enemy is as total as the domination a master has over a slave, aiming for fear to so completely grip the enemy that he flees in panic, surrenders, or is too terrified even to move, let alone resist. When such domination is complete, a battle is a “walkover.”

The struggle to dominate the will, however, is reciprocal. All the tools of physical warfare can be understood as attempts to create in the enemy the broken mental state of a slave. The enemy is a human enemy, not inanimate matter, and uses all possible social and psychological resources, such as training, unit cohesion, leadership, and coercion to resist this enslavement of the will and to inflict it in return. The enemy’s attempts to dominate the soldier’s will are inevitably met by counterdomination by his own side. The mind, the heart, the soul of the combat soldier become the focus of competing attempts to enslave.

The social institution of modern war makes the soldier a captive, but unlike other forms of captivity, the role of his captor is continuously shared by the enemy and the soldier’s own army. Imagine for a moment a conventional war with a defined front line and rear areas on both sides of the front line. If a soldier flees the terror of the battle, it makes no difference in which direction he flees. He flees toward death or imprisonment no matter which direction he takes. If he flees toward the enemy he may be shot out of hand when his surrender is not accepted, or he may be imprisoned as a POW. If he flees toward his own rear, he may be summarily shot or imprisoned as a deserter. The front line is thus a narrow zone of fear and death lying between two prisons. In this narrow zone two massive social organizations compete to enslave the soldier. The social institution of war creates total captivity with opposing armies working in perfect harmony to keep the soldiers in place and at each other.

Terror, mortal dependency, barriers to escape—these are characteristics of modern combat that mark it as a condition of captivity and enslavement as harsh as any political prison or labor camp. The reader may think that this is overstated and reflects a prejudice against the American military. “It can’t really be that bad . . . can it?” Necessity dictates strict discipline in time of war, does it not? I am not demonizing the American military but emphasizing that it is the world of war itself that creates conditions that add up to captivity and enslavement. The Vietnamese enemy and the American armed forces cooperated perfectly to create these conditions for the individual soldiers of both sides.

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“DON'T MEAN NOTHIN’”—DESTRUCTION OF IDEALS, AMBITIONS, AFFILIATIONS

Homer and the Greek tragic poets held the terrifying view that apparently stable adult character continues to be dependent and vulnerable, even after it has been established by good nurturing in childhood. According to these tragic poets, good character is dependent on good-enough stability and reliability of thēmis and remains vulnerable to high-stakes betrayal of thēmis by power holders. The moral dimension of trauma destroys virtue, undoes good character.

Soldiers did not “set themselves up for it” when they received M-16 rifles that did not work. They did not “ask for it” any more than an eight-year-old girl or boy “asks for it” when he or she is raped by a relative. The insistence with which such reflexive equations as “set himself up for it” and “asked for it” push forward as an explanation for trauma is a reflection of how frightening and painful it is to believe accounts of high-stakes betrayal of “what’s right.” Normal adults wrap thēmis around themselves as a mantle of safety in the world. Every trauma narrative pierces our adult cloak of safety; it challenges the rightness of thēmis and leaves us terrified and disoriented. This is another powerful motive to deny the truth of trauma narratives, to avoid hearing them, or to forget them.

When ruptures are too violent between the social realization of “what’s right” and the inner thēmis of ideals, ambitions, and affiliations, the inner thēmis can collapse. A veteran recalls a typical exchange between himself and other team members after deaths among them:
Shrinkage of the Social and Moral Horizon

"F*ck it. They're dead. No big f*cking deal. Move on."
"**'s dead."
"F*cking **** f*cked up. He's dead."
"He shouldn't have f*cked up. He wouldn't be f*cking dead."
"Where's the compassion? Where's your sense of human—This is another fellow American."

Y'know? He didn't f*ck up. He's dead. You know? Why can't I feel? Y'know, why can't I grieve for him? That's where they put that hardening in you.

"Don't mean nothin" and "F*ck it," the Vietnam combat soldier's mantras, spread out to engulf everything valued or wanted, every person, loyalty, and commitment.

CHAPTER 3

Grief at the Death of a Special Comrade

The dignity of these humans is to weep.
—Martha Nussbaum,
Introduction to The Bacchae, p. xl

We can never fathom the soldier's grief if we do not know the human attachment which battle nourishes and then amputates. As civilians we have no native understanding of the soldier's grief. Combat calls forth a passion of care among men who fight beside each other that is comparable to the earliest and most deeply felt family relationships. The experiences of Vietnam combat veterans and the accounts of comradeship in Homer's Iliad illuminate each other, enhancing our understanding of the soldier's relationship to a special comrade, be it Achilles to Patroklos or an American soldier to his buddy. We often hear that the death of a special friend-in-arms broke the survivor's life into unhealable halves, with everything before his death radically severed from everything after.

After probing the relationship to a special comrade, I shall examine grief per se. Vietnam and the Iliad again throw light on each other, clarifying the role of Thetis, Achilles' goddess mother, and the state of being "already dead" while still biologically alive.

Any blow in life will have longer-lasting and more serious consequences if there is no opportunity to communalize it. This means some mix of formal social ceremony and informal telling of the story with feeling to socially connected others who do not let the survivor go through it alone. The virtual suppression of social griefwork in Vietnam contrasts vividly with the powerful expressions of communal mourning recorded in Homeric epic. I believe that numerous military, cultural, institutional, and historical fac-
CHAPTER 11

Healing and Tragedy

I will tell you something about stories, . . .
They aren’t just entertainment.
Don’t be fooled.
They are all we have, you see,
all we have to fight off
illness and death.

—L. M. Silko,
Ceremony, page 2

Anything in the form or substance of an account of combat trauma that offers the reader easy reassurance betrays the truth in the veterans’ narratives and in the Iliad. Homer ends the Iliad with mourning, not reassurance. The aching reconciliation of Achilles and Priam in Book 24 is comfort between men who both know they are doomed. Neither the conclusion of the Iliad nor the healing achieved by severely injured combat veterans can be snugly characterized as “the triumph of the human spirit.” As Vietnam combat veteran Tim O’Brien wrote in his novel The Things They Carried:

A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil. . . . You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you. If you don’t care for obscenity, you don’t care for the truth;
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if you don’t care for the truth, watch how you vote. Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty.1

The *Iliad* tells the tragedy of Achilles. In these pages veterans have narrated their own tragedies. Today, twenty-nine years after the first U.S. combat troops landed in Vietnam and twenty-two years after the last U.S. ground combat battalion was withdrawn, more than 250,000 Vietnam combat veterans currently meet the full DSM-III-R criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder.2 Time does not heal all wounds. Can these veterans ever recover? What treatment will help? What stands in the way?

IS RECOVERY POSSIBLE?

Despair—suffocating despair—occurs in every therapeutic relationship with survivors of severe trauma. This is true in group therapy, in individual therapy, and in every relationship the survivor manages to sustain. Despair is communicable. It communicates itself to mental health professionals, families, employers, co-workers, social service workers, and administrators. Is there any hope? Is recovery possible after severe trauma of the sort described here?

At the risk of seeming evasive, I shall respond to the question “Is recovery possible?” with three answers: (1) Return to “normal” is not possible. (2) We don’t know. (3) Yes.

RETURN TO “NORMAL” IS NOT POSSIBLE

Veterans speak of losing their innocence and longing to regain it. They ask: “Why can’t I just go back to the way I was?”

I was eighteen years old. And I was like your typical young American boy. A virgin. I had strong religious beliefs. . . . My religious upbringing was, God was good. Everything good was—it was like obeying your mother and father, y’know. Everything good was what God wanted. Y’know, evil was the Devil’s way.

Evil was not going to church, that was a bad thing. Swearing, fighting, hurting people, that was bad. I lived in a very simple world. It was the way you were taught, like, “Whenever you’re

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alone, make believe God’s there with you. Would he approve of what you are doing?” That’s basically—sure, I wasn’t no angel, either. I mean, I had my little fistfights and stuff. It was, you’re only human.

But evil didn’t enter it till Vietnaam. I mean real evil. I wasn’t prepared for it at all. . . .

It was all evil. All evil. Where before, I wasn’t. I look back I look back today, and I’m horrified at what I turned into. What I was. What I did. I just look at it like it was somebody else. I really do. It was somebody else.

Any knowledge is potentially transforming; the knowledge of evil, particularly in trusted authorities, custodians of thénis, and within oneself, brings irreversible change. The word *innocent* has the double meaning of having done no harm and of being unacquainted with evil and malevolence. To encounter radical evil is to make one forever different from the trusting, “normal” person who wraps the rightness of the social order around himself snugly, like a cloak of safety. Trust, which was once an unthinking assumption and granted with no awareness of possible betrayal, is now a staggering accomplishment for survivors of severe trauma. Trauma survivors grant trust only as an act of courage, after time and tests of trust, one after another, like trials and labors in ancient myth.

Blind trust in authority, position, and credentials is a dangerous luxury of the still innocent. If recovery means return to trusting innocence, recovery is not possible. Recovered survivors of severe trauma adopt their own lives—including their limitations—with passion and existential authority. These veterans can become profoundly valuable human beings, even if their external accomplishments in the world are often very limited.

WE DON’T KNOW IF RECOVERY IS POSSIBLE

Certain dramatic successes of modern medicine have come to seem like paradigms for real healing: A cancer that is discovered early and cut out by a surgeon never recurs; a bacterial double pneumonia, fatal before the antibiotic era, is cured by penicillin. These and many other examples of notable success in medicine share a certain story line: The problem is identified (diagnosis); a treatment is
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administered over a brief period of time by a professional (therapy); the patient returns to his prior relationships, occupation, and pleasures without impairment, without ongoing treatment, and without recurrence of the problem (cure). In the sense of regaining lost innocence, combat PTSD is definitely incurable. In the sense of being permanently free of all specific symptoms of combat PTSD, the honest answer is that we don’t know.

Some of the neurophysiological changes brought about by severe trauma may require maintenance medication, or occasional remedication with a drug that had been discontinued. The same applies to psychological treatments. Entering a new stage of life such as parenthood or retirement, an on-the-job injury, or the death of a spouse may reopen old traumas and require further therapy. Betrayal of themis in life-or-death circumstances has profoundly damaging consequences for the biological makeup of the victim. Restoration of trustworthy community to the survivor will have healthy biological effects, of comparable or greater magnitude than successful medications. Effective psychological therapies change the biological state of the survivor for the better.

We don’t know how much recovery a survivor can expect from psychological, social, and pharmacological therapies during his or her lifetime. We are just discovering some modes of healing, and others need to be rediscovered from the vast experience of many ages and cultures.

YES—RECOVERY IS POSSIBLE

Recovery is possible in many areas of life, perhaps in the most important ones for a fulfilling existence. I have seen it. A small number of veterans in our program have achieved lives of great value to others and satisfaction for themselves. By DSM-III-R standards, however, they remain highly symptomatic. Several had to be hospitalized during the recent Persian Gulf War because of the overwhelming intrusive symptoms it triggered. Their lives include some very sharp limitations; for example, some recovered veterans are still unable to tolerate public places. Because of such limitations, every one of the most fully recovered veterans I know is financially quite poor. Yet their lives flourish with activity that they find satisfying, usually helping other people. One spends his

mornings delivering meals to children with AIDS. Another assists homeless veterans in getting social security and other benefits.

WHAT IS THE BEST TREATMENT?

The essential injuries in combat PTSD are moral and social, and so the central treatment must be moral and social. The best treatment restores control to the survivor and actively encourages communalization of the trauma. Healing is done by survivors, not to survivors.3

The essential first step that a veteran needs to take, which is a precondition of healing, is to establish his own safety, sobriety,4 and self-care. This is often a protracted struggle, and various means of assistance are available to support the veteran in accomplishing these things for himself. A number of medications safely ameliorate one or another symptom of PTSD and assist in the achievement of safety and sobriety by reducing the pressure toward self-medication with alcohol or street drugs and, even more valuably, by reducing explosive rage.5

During the early days of the current era of PTSD treatment, mental health professionals shared the folk belief that simply "getting it all out" would result in safety, sobriety, and self-care. The consequences of these well-intended "combat debriefings" were catastrophic, resulting in many suicides, according to veterans in our program who participated. On this dangerous illusion of instant cathartic cure, Harvard professor of psychiatry Judith Lewis Herman writes:

The patient may imagine a kind of sadomasochistic orgy, in which [he or she] will scream, cry, vomit, bleed, die, and be reborn cleansed of the trauma.6

Combat veterans often hold such an apocalyptic-cathartic idea of healing, but before safety, self-care, and sobriety have been firmly established, active uncovering of trauma history only retraumatizes the survivor. Recovery from severe combat trauma more nearly resembles training to run a marathon than cathartic redemption in faith healing.

Virtually all treatment methods direct the survivor to construct a personal narrative at some time in his or her recovery, although
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there are powerful disagreements about the timing and venue. Homer, who was considered the first tragic poet, told stories. He created narratives that unfolded in time.

WHY AND HOW DOES NARRATIVE HEAL?

Severe trauma explodes the cohesion of consciousness. When a survivor creates fully realized narrative that brings together the shattered knowledge of what happened, the emotions that were aroused by the meanings of the events, and the bodily sensations that the physical events created, the survivor pieces back together the fragmentation of consciousness that trauma has caused. Such narrative often results in the remission of some symptoms, particularly intrusive symptoms, dissociated bodily sensations, affects, and behaviors that inexplicably intrude into the veteran’s life. What I principally want to address, however, is how narrative heals personality changes, how narrative enables the survivor to rebuild the ruins of character. The ancient Greeks revered Homer, the singer of tales, as a doctor of the soul. In the Odyssey, Homer paints a (self-)portrait of the epic singer whose healing art is to tell the stories of Troy with the truth that causes the old soldier, Odysseus, to weep and weep again. (Odyssey 8:78ff)

Narrative heals personality changes only if the survivor finds or creates a trustworthy community of listeners for it. Several traits are required for the audience to be trustworthy.

Some traits relate to strength. The listeners must be strong enough to hear the story without injury. Combat veterans will never trust a therapist whom they see to be “freaked out” by what he or she hears. In a therapy group doing trauma-centered work, the other members of the group must be strong enough to cope with inevitable triggers to their own memories.

The listeners must also be strong enough to hear the story without having to deny the reality of the experience or to blame the victim. We are so trained to deny the soldier’s experience that the normal response to hearing an account of betrayal is to make all the power-holder’s excuses: This is a figment of your fantasy; if you knew all the facts, you’d see it was for the best; you’ve got a hidden agenda in saying this; it never happened; you brought it on yourself; and anyway, it’s twenty years ago, so forget it and don’t create more problems now.

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To be trustworthy, a listener must be ready to experience some of the terror, grief, and rage that the victim did. This is one meaning, after all, of the word compassion. Once the veteran sees that the listener authentically experiences these emotions, even though with less intensity than in combat, the veteran often loses the desire to shout in the listener’s face, “You weren’t there, so shut the fuck up!” A poem by Vietnam combat veteran W. T. Edmonds voices the powerful will to compel others to understand with their heart:

...White-hot anguish stokes the mind, forging words to hammer the emotions and wound the feelings of those who did not go and could not see.

With an adder’s stealth, hidden between the covers, deadly letters lie in wait, innocent in their camouflage of black and white, to strike your mind

and scar your soul.

Without emotion in the listener there is no communalization of the trauma.

To achieve trust, listeners must respect the narrator. The advice that veterans consistently give to trauma therapists is “Listen! Just listen.” Respect, embodied in this kind of listening, is readiness to be changed by the narrator. The change may be small or large. It may be simply learning something not previously known, feeling something, seeing something from a new perspective, or it may be as profound as redirection of the listener’s way of being in the world.

Respect also means refraining from judgment. This is standard training for psychotherapists, but it is often difficult to achieve when the victim of severe trauma has also been a perpetrator. People sometimes imagine that soldiers alone are both victims and perpetrators. But veterans are not unique among survivors of severe trauma. Tyrants in all spheres of life, whether domestic, political, or military, have discovered that the most powerful way to break the will of another person is to coerce participation in the victimization of others. Many victims
of such situations have done terrible things to survive, with devastat

ing consequences for good character. The child singled out for incest may be forced to participate in the sacrifice of younger siblings, a battered woman in the abuse of her children, a prostitute in the kidnapping of a new coerced prostitute, a political prisoner in the torture of another prisoner. This is the ultimate bad moral luck. Cultural training and wishful thinking lead us to believe that our own good character would have stood firm to the point of death, rather than submit to this final degradation. Or we imagine that our intelligence would have seen a way out that the victim did not. These beliefs lead inevitably to the feeling that the person who was broken by coercion has been defective from the start and deserves neither compassion nor treatment. Our laws ever say that under some circumstances a person is culpable for not resisting to the death. If someone who battera woman is convicted of injuring or killing one of her children, the battered mother usually goes to prison, too, for failure to protect, despite proven duress and well-founded terror.

Narrative time—the idea that an event takes place in a temporal context, with other events happening before, during, and after it—is an ancient cultural construction, originating perhaps in the Indo-European epic tradition that Homer inherited and the Athenian tragic theater transformed. Homer did not invent narrative time, nor did God nor Nature. It is a cultural artifact, very, very old but by no means universal. Chinese novels and opera construct time differently. In some “primitive” societies informants will include notable deeds of their ancestors in their own life stories. Although the *tales* of narrative temporality is one of the deepest structures of our culture, severe trauma destroys the capacity to think a future or a past. For many Vietnam combat soldiers, a cramped, eternal present, extending no further than the next C-rations, death, cigarette, or fire flight, smudged out all other temporality.

One of the men in our program, when asked to explain the Larry Burrows photo on the cover of this book, said of the men at the far right, one of whom has his back to the man on the ground:

These guys don’t have a lot to look forward to here, there’s not much to look forward to. Maybe the next smoke or someone’s got

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some extra food. That’s all that’s on their mind. Or dying might be on their mind. Why not die?

The time horizon in the future has shrunk to a few hours and to the timeless shelter of death.

Narrative time is built into the very structure of the family of languages to which English belongs. This may form part of the enormous difficulty that many survivors of severe trauma have in putting their experience into words; their experience is ineffable in a language that insists on “was” and “will be.” The trauma world knows only is.

We see the paradox that narrative temporality can never be completely true to the timeless experience of prolonged, severe trauma. If narrative is a lie, how can it heal? Is it simply another “noble lie” when we encourage a trauma survivor to tell a story in the form of “This was my life before. . . . This is what happened. . . . This is what I became.” The paradox disappears when we look at narration as a step in the survivor’s larger move to communalize the trauma by inducing others who were not there to feel what the victim felt when he or she was going through it. The character damage of a trauma survivor can be understood as a reflection both of his or her radical aloneness and of the continued presence of the perpetrator in the victim’s inner life.

Trauma narrative imparts knowledge to the community that listens and responds to it emotionally. Emotion carries essential cognitive elements; it is not separable from the knowledge. Something quite profound takes place when the trauma survivor sees enlightenment take hold. The narrator now speaks as his or her free self, not as the captive of the perpetrator. The aloneness is broken in a manner that obliterates neither the narrator nor the listener in a reenactment.

Some survivors, having learned the untrustworthiness of words, conclude that the only way to be heard is through action—guerrilla theater. Intimidation, “acting out,” and creating impossible situations sometimes aim at coercing the therapist to feel the fear and helplessness that the survivor felt. This is coercive communalization. It recreates terror and helplessness at work, in the family, on the street, or in the clinic. Like Achilles (1.292f), these survivors have flung the herald’s staff to the ground. Words mean nothing; only actions count. In this coercive communalization the
audience is no longer made up of listeners; the survivor has made them victims. They most assuredly feel the emotions. Aloneness is broken here, too, but the inner presence of the perpetrator has taken over. Healing does not occur.

Peer recognition, which allows survivors of trauma to grasp that they are not freaks and “do not have to go through it alone,” usually leads to communication of experience in words, not action. When a healing community of combat veterans forms, the herald’s staff can be picked up from the dirt, and veterans once again find they can speak without acting. Initially they speak in unison, as it were. In this earliest form of group communication, individual experience seems to be spoken and heard as part of the discourse of mutual affirmation and recognition: We were all grunts, we all went through the same thing.

Major recovery, however, requires that personal narrative be particular, not general. The friends who died in Vietnam were not friends in general but particular human beings. The survivors who lost them are also particular human beings, and they must be given permission by the community to speak without fear that their particularity will rupture the we-all-went-through-the-same-thing support that they have come to rely upon. In a fully realized personal narrative the survivor grips the herald’s staff and speaks as himself.

All who hear should understand that no person’s suffering can be measured against any other person’s suffering. It can be extremely damaging if anyone makes comparisons. Combat veterans frequently doubt that they are worthy of treatment, knowing other vets who are worse off now or went through worse than they did. Many survivors of appalling trauma obstruct their own healing by placing themselves in “hierarchies of suffering,” usually to their own disadvantage.¹⁰

Narrative can transform involuntary reexperiencing of traumatic events into memory of the events, thereby reestablishing authority over memory. Forgetting combat trauma is not a legitimate goal of treatment. Veterans find it morally degrading to forget the dead. To know why this is so, we need only recall what we have seen in the earlier chapters on the existential functions of guilt and rage. The task is to remember—rather than relive and reenact—and to grieve. For combat veterans this means grieving not only the dead but also their own lost innocence in both its meanings, as blamelessness and as unawareness of evil. Also,

many prewar relationships with parents, friends, siblings, and spouses are now gone forever. A secure sense of the goodness of the social order is irretrievably lost and must be mourned. One veteran said,

You’re afraid that once you start to cry you’ll never stop. And once you do start, it seems like it will never stop. I cried for a whole year.

We must all strive to be a trustworthy audience for victims of abuse of power. I like to think that Aristotle had something like this in mind when he made tragedy the centerpiece of education for citizens in a democracy. However, to do this we must overcome all the good reasons why normal adults do not want to hear trauma narratives. If forced to hear them, normal people deny their truth. If forced to accept them as true, they often forget them. Taken together, I call these good reasons the law of forgetting and denial.

THE LAW OF FORGETTING AND DENIAL

The social morality of “what’s right,” what Homer called thémis, is the normal adult’s cloak of safety. The trauma narrative of every person with PTSD and character damage is a challenge to the rightness of the social order, to the trustworthiness of thémis. To hear and believe is to feel unsafe. It is to know the fragility of goodness.

Trauma narratives show us that our own good character is vulnerable to destruction by bad moral luck.

Normal adults recognize the actual power deployments in their own society. To repeat what one has heard from a “loser,” from “damaged goods”—and this is how trauma survivors are often stigmatized—is to risk marginalization, reprisal, or being tainted by the same low status of the trauma survivor. Just as trauma testimony is always a political act, retelling trauma narrative is likewise political. Judith Lewis Herman has persuasively connected the capacity to hear, believe, and retell with a supportive sociopolitical movement.¹¹

Trauma narrative confronts the normal adult with the fragility of the body. These stories bring mortality into view. Trauma narratives cause normal adults to imaginatively identify with one or
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more of the characters in the narrative. The feelings this arouses are almost all unpleasant.

We should not sit in judgment of those who cannot, in the absence of social support, hear the truth of trauma. The reasons to deflect, deny, and forget trauma narrative stem from the social construction of normal human life. They cannot be set aside by wishing them away or by moralizing.13

I have been politicized by this work and now see that treatment must be morally engaged—that trauma work can never be apolitical. I cannot contemplate a “professional,” affectively neutral posture toward trauma work without misgivings, because, as I have argued here, an affectively neutral position will defeat healing. As much as I love what I do and consider it worthwhile, I cannot escape the suspicion that what we do as mental health professionals is not as good as the healing that in other cultures has been rooted in the native soil of the returning soldier’s community. Our culture has been notably deficient in providing for reception of the Furies of war into community. For better or worse, the health care system has been given this role—along with the prisons, where a disproportionate number of men incarcerated since the Vietnam War have been veterans.14

We must create our own new models of healing which emphasize communalization of the trauma. Combat veterans and American citizenry should meet together face to face in daylight, and listen, and watch, and weep, just as citizen-soldiers of ancient Athens did in the theater at the foot of the Acropolis.15 We need a modern equivalent of Athenian tragedy. Tragedy brings us to cherish our mortality, to savor and embrace it. Tragedy inclines us to prefer attachment to fragile mortals whom we love, like Odysseus returning from war to his aging wife, Penelope, and to refuse promised immortality (Odyssey 5:209).

Conclusion

I want that this is the last war in my life.
—Twelve-year-old Bosnian girl in refugee camp

No more fucking wars!
—Four-tour airborne Vietnam veteran

I have written this book because I believe we should care about how soldiers are trained, equipped, led, and welcomed home when they return from war. This is our moral duty toward those we ask to serve on our behalf, and it is in our own self-interest as well. Unhealed combat trauma blights not only the life of the veteran but the life of the family and community. In some instances, such as in the Weimar Republic in Germany after World War I, it can substantially weaken the society as a whole.

Economically, unhealed combat trauma costs, and costs, and costs. Recall that more than 40 percent of Vietnam combat veterans sampled in the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study reported engaging in violent acts three or more times in the preceding year. When violence against others results in injury, society incurs the costs of medical care and lost productivity of the victims of this violence. Between a tenth and a quarter of all males in prison are veterans, and it costs an average of about $25,000 per year to incarcerate each of them. When combat trauma results in domestic violence and pathologic family life, there is an intergenerational transmission of trauma. A number of men in our program have children who are currently in prison.

Unhealed combat trauma diminishes democratic participation and can become a threat to democratic political institutions. Severe psychological injury originates in violation of trust and destroys the capacity for trust. When mistrust spreads widely and deeply, democratic civic discourse becomes impossible.