

“Tangled”

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Tangled! I don't know what else to call it, the state in which so many veterans of so many wars find themselves. How is it that one returns to some presumed normal after witnessing and being downwind of and actively participating in warfare? Many do not. Thousands, hundreds of thousands of women and men, do not. Steve Mason did not.

How many of you have been to “The Wall” in Constitution Gardens not to the National Mall in our nation's capital? How many of you knew a life behind a name?

It's jarring to bring a name engraved in granite back to life in memory. How jarring it must be for a Vietnam veteran to do so. Jarring is a short distance from traumatic. PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder, has become a commonplace term in our language. It surfaces in the aftermath of an incident of violence, witnessed or experienced. When such incidents are relentless—as in war, as in the events of September 11, 2001 or a mass shooting or a horrific car accident or an acute illness—we're shaken to the core. We are wounded. The term trauma comes from the Greek, “wound.” When a wound doesn't heal, it becomes “a post-wound wound.” The pain experienced assumes a life of its own.

...The eye sees
what the mind believes.

wrote Mason. Again and again the eye sees what the mind is consumed with. The eye sees and is swept up in having no choice but to see and hear and feel the rush of fear and pain over and over.

The power of witnessing the horrific, of experiencing the dreadful, shows itself in tangled psyches long after the initial threat has passed. We sing in this sanctuary about “telling our stories from deep inside.” For some those stories are too unbearable to share. For others the telling is transformative for those who speak and those who listen. Such was surely the case last Sunday, when Kayla Parker, our gifted ministerial intern, was joined by Noah Radcliffe, Michelle Bassett, and Steve Volpini, who shared their stories of transformation following profound challenges to body and soul.

From my own experience of hearing the stories of survivors of the events of September 11, 2001, untangling begins by these survivors telling their stories again and again.

...The values of our society
seem to be distributed in our parks
and find only confusion and sadness.

Strange, I have observed no monuments
to survivors.

wrote Mason. It is the survivors who can still tell the stories that loosen the knots that hold us captive. And it is the survivors whose names are inscribed indelibly on what Mason calls “The Wall Within”—that barrier “between memory and madness,” that place where “no one offers flowers.”

Mason continues:

“I learned of mine that night in the rain
when I spoke at the memorial in Washington.
We all noticed how the wall ran like tears
and every man's name we found
on the polished, black granite face
seemed to have our eyes staring back at us,
crying.”

If we seek to honor military veterans, as we presume to do this coming Wednesday, let's dare to visit that wall that Mason and so many women and men have carried for years. I recall the first time I heard that more American women and men who fought in Viet Nam committed suicide after the war than were killed during it. Estimates reach well over 100,000. I often wonder if the veteran I knew, the one who didn't make it home, would have been in that number.

How many of us know women and men who have been deployed three and four times to Iraq and Afghanistan? We'll know thousands more if we move into ground battles in Syria. Earlier this year the *Los Angeles Times* featured a study that included all of the roughly 1.3 million veterans “who served in active-duty units between 2001 and 2007 and left the military during that period.” The suicide rate was found to be “50% higher than the rate among other civilians with similar demographic characteristics.”

In other words, suicide is far more likely to occur for individuals who have served in active-duty military functions than for individuals from a comparable population among civilians.

In late September, *The New York Times* ran a feature article introduced on page 1: “A Unit Stalked by Suicide, Trying to Save Itself.” Journalist Dave Phillips tells the story of veterans of the Second Battalion, Seventh Marine Regiment serving in Afghanistan. In over eight months of non-stop combat, the unit “suffered more casualties than any other Marine battalion that year.” Returnees, many of them barely into their 20s, were plagued by a high intensity “would've, should've, could've,” regarding fallen comrades. The suicide rate for this group is almost “four times the rate for young male veterans as a whole and 14 times that for all Americans.”

For those we have lost to suicide, the wall within was ironclad. The thickets of trauma were too tangled to forge a way out or allow a flicker of light inside. For this marine battalion, respite is being found not through professional channels, but in connecting with one another over social media and in person. Manny Bojorquez found no respite in conventional sources, but turned increasingly to his battalion buddies—like Noel Guerrero. Last November Manny received a text from Noel that signaled his friend was on the verge of doing what too many of their battalion had already done. Manny hesitated, then called 911. The police arrived just as Noel had swallowed a hand full of pills. Weeks of in-patient treatment for PTSD followed.

A few weeks after Noel returned to his home in San Diego, Manny drove out to visit him. Sitting down together, they shared the stories that haunted them. Manny spoke of his own attempted suicide. Noel spoke of “watching his sergeant’s Humvee explode and being so rattled afterward that he did not care that his cigarette was flecked with blood.” The next morning they headed off on Noel’s favorite run, a five-mile ascent to a mountaintop behind his home. When they reached the summit,

“the two stood side by side catching their breath and looking out at the dawn spreading over the ocean. [Manny] hung his arm over his friend’s shoulder...Noel broke the silence. ‘I’m glad I got to share this with you,’ he told his friend. I wish I could bring the whole battalion up here.”

The words spoken earlier by Megumi echo:

“It is community that provides the essential safety net, protecting each of us in the face of loss and tragedy..”

For those of us who bring war home, that community may need initially to be confined to comrades who have been through the fire.

Steve Mason reminds us that it’s not just veterans of the military who inhabit the wall within.

“One evening when I was in the bush
[my mother] turned on the 6:00 news
and died of a heart attack.

My mother's name is on the Wall Within.”

I recall the onset of a panic attack years ago. All it took was a family member turning on the Huntley-Brinkley report.

The interconnected web of life can get mighty tangled. On this day so close to a holiday that has become more closely linked with the wall than the wall, I turn to the words of the prophet Amos. In the 8th century B.C., amid a time of prosperity in the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, where he lived and preached, Amos decried the hypocrisy of his people:

“I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies... But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Justice? Righteousness? Lest we gloss over these words and assume that we all know exactly what they mean, consider the prophecy embedded in Steve Mason’s poetry, words that speak truth to hypocrisy, truth to power.

To what do we lose the casualties of war? Definitely not to truth spoken, definitely not to stories told from the margins, definitely not to bearing witness to the tangled memories, the relentless flashbacks. Might we transcend the platitudes and receive with all possible grace the truths carried by all whose names are engraved on that other wall.

Is healing possible? What do you think?

Sources:

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“A New Direction”
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A new direction. How many of us, I wonder, have been

“sent off in a new direction, turned
 aside by forces [we] were warned about
 but not prepared for?....”

I surely have, on a number of occasions, each a critical incident with its own set of explosives.

I’ve also discovered that crisis and trauma need not be an endpoint or even a road sign pointing down. Death of a spouse, remarriage and a nearly fatal ectopic pregnancy, a brutal relationship, divorce, a child in the throes of anorexia, watching 9/11 happen, hearing the stories up close and personal, a child in the throes of a bipolar episode, perilous proximity to losing my much-loved husband. Such is my laundry list, grist for throwing rocks at God or the Great Whomever AND for whatever resilience I could muster that came ONLY in the embrace of caring community, you included.

We know from the focus of the past few weeks of worship here that “s..t” happens! Sometimes it comes cataclysmically, like a mudslide. Sometimes it creeps up on us. Who knew that the ground beneath us held what Robbie Walsh calls a “fault line passing underneath [our] living room?” “The great plates slip and the earth shivers” under our feet.

What to do? How to be? Stress is not the heart of what happens when crisis visits or disaster strikes. Stress is adaptation to life in all its variations. Post-traumatic stress disorder speaks to distress. The new direction demanded in the aftermath of trauma need not be one of distress. It is driven by *how we interpret what has happened, how we adapt to the new circumstances.*

Trauma plays with our identity; it shakes up whatever assumptions we dare to have about how life is supposed to work; it jars our notions of a moral universe. No surprise that in the aftermath of trauma, theists who see God as a micro-manager—“Thank you, God, for saving so and so from that tsunami. Thank you, God, that I missed that intersection this morning.”—turn against what I call God-in-a-box when stuff goes haywire.

I understand faith not as the sole province of so-called believers, but as a form of resilience that allows us to be open to the embrace of loving community. Some of us understand that community to include Love Transcendent—aka God. Some of us perceive it as Love we can hear and touch and see—aka Humanism. I believe that loving community has a large wingspan, embracing belief systems beyond the particulars of who populates that community.

In his recently published work on trauma, journalist Jim Rendon hones in on the growth that can follow an experience of trauma. *Upside: The New Science of Post-Traumatic Growth* is his chosen title. Far from a simplistic message of how superheroes just “pulled themselves together,” Rendon lays out story after story of women and men who have known personal crises and public disasters. We/they are veterans, seasoned in the harsh realities of what can happen when the fault line convulses. Transformation in the direction of growth is possible.

However—and it’s a big however—this does not mean that trauma is the reason for growth. I wince when I hear anyone say, “Cancer was a gift; without it I wouldn’t have learned, become, etc.” Or “I’m so grateful for my breakdown; without it I wouldn’t have learned, become, etc.” No, no, and no! It’s not the cancer, not the breakdown, and certainly not the mega-disaster that lie at the heart of transformative growth, but how we interpret what happened, how we speak the truth of what happened, how we discern the impact of what happened, how we untangle as much of the mess as we possibly can, and how we accept support—psychological, spiritual, communal. Trauma happens; finding meaning follows. New ways of being emerge.

We’re called to re-write our narrative. We’re called to pause and engage in intentional reflection that means we “tell our story from deep inside” (hopefully to a really good listener), consider how we’ve been impacted by the fallout from the fault line, identify our support system (“clinicalesque” for loving community), envision moving in an entirely new direction, and take those first few steps that are every bit as scary and exciting as the first steps we ever took.

Healing happens in community even if it’s in a community of two or three. Community—intentionally present, accessible, listening, responsive community—is the cradle of those

...tensile strands of love that bend
and stretch to hold you in the web of life
that’s often torn but always healing. There’s
your strength. The shifting plates, the restive earth,
your room, your precious life, they all proceed
from love, the ground on which we walk together.

So may it be and Amen.

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