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ABSTRACT. In the first 10 years of my nursing practice with the Department of Veterans Affairs I was unsympathetic to Vietnam Veterans who were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. My reluctance to try to understand these veterans was not unique. This essay presents the narrative of my coming to understand and to appreciate the depth of trauma that many Vietnam Veterans experienced during their tour of duty and the lingering effects of guilt that they hold over their participation in brutality.

KEYWORDS. Vietnam Veterans, guilt, trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, wounded warrior.

A CYNIC

I have worked as a registered nurse and nurse practitioner for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for 25 years. I am embarrassed to say that for the first 10 years of my career, I harbored a prejudice against combat veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Insidiously, a layer of cynicism and judgmentalism had attached itself to my arrogant and egotistical attitude about needing to “fix” veterans. My attitude silently distanced me from certain patients, particularly the younger ones, the ones about my own age, the ones who had served in Vietnam. I was put off by the long hair and tattoos so common among them, as well as the angry

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his chest. He told me I was to keep my charge occupied “over there” because there were others who might still make it that he needed to work on. I kept assuring the sucking chest wound attached to the desperate soldier that we had the best medics anywhere.

For just a moment, I let myself look beyond the gaping and the sucking. He had an all-American face and body. He had to have been my age—maybe even younger. No hair on his chest. Maybe he didn’t even shave every day yet.

The air gurgled in and out more loudly. With renewed determination, I increased my pressure on the bandage. If I pressed hard enough, surely I could make it stop. The gurgling became more muffled but no amount of pressure could muffle his pleas. He called out for his mother; he called out for God. Grabbing my arms, he pleaded, “Please don’t let me die” —not just once... not just twice... but over and over again. Each desperate plea increased my own desperation.

I remember the doctor told me to “just keep him quiet so he doesn’t upset the others too much.” I don’t know (and don’t know if I want to know) whether he died then or just passed out, but they carried him away. Part of me wanted frantically to be carried away too (Tommy Bills, personal communication).

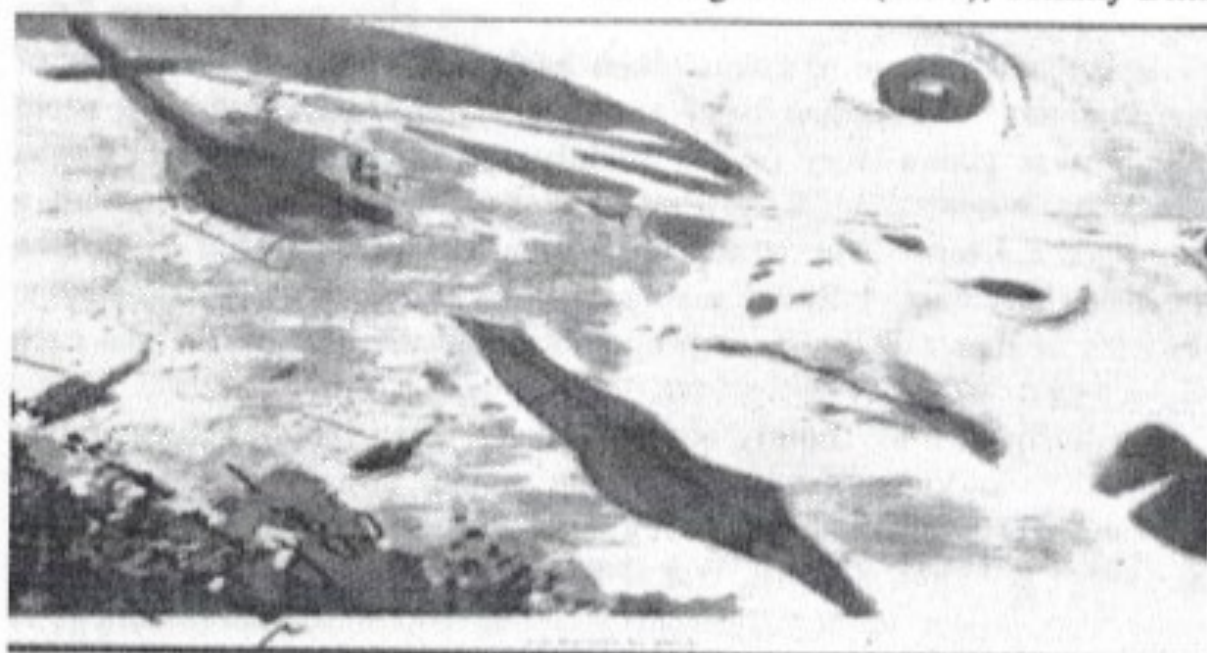
Tommy’s written words provided the context and meaning for understanding his woundedness. I could now see the man behind the soldier. I could see the vulnerable little boy hiding behind the hardened wall. I now understood how the wall numbed and de-vitalized feelings. I had seen that wall in hundreds of veterans. Now, I knew what was behind it.

MEETING THE WOUNDED WARRIOR

With eyes opened, I realized that other VA staff needed to understand the denial, anger, pain, and acting-out behaviors generated by PTSD. So I asked Tommy to create another art display at the medical center for Veteran’s Day. This exhibit would be a one-man show. It also gave Tommy and me an opportunity to meet face to face.



"Burning Vision" (1991), Tommy Bills



"Loss of Innocence" (1990) Tommy Bills

When we saw each other, it seemed as if we had known each other a lifetime. I laughed when I saw his ponytail—how differently I experienced his façade now than I would have a few months earlier! But I was also saddened. How many people had I failed to meet because of the stranglehold of my biases against them, their behaviors, and their "look"? How many other stories had I missed because they were hiding behind ponytails or tattoos or alcohol? How many healing opportunities had I missed because

I did not have the knowledge or courage to confront the stoic walls of silence or anger?

Tommy joined my husband and me for dinner. It was fascinating to hear him speak with such vitality. It was evident that he no longer needed to "put on the face," as he had described his stoic wall in his diary. Rather, the energy of his suppressed wounds was now released, enabling him to live authentically, without denial or silence; he also no longer needed alcohol or drugs.

We were able to learn more about the *Burning Vision* painting that had made such a dramatic impact on me. Tommy had painted it for a Marine veteran in his PTSD support group; this Marine had participated in unnecessarily burning down a village. "His guilt was so consuming that he was just a shell of man," Tommy told us. Tommy said the vet interacted well enough with the group, but whenever the topic of the burned village came up, he fell mute. Tommy had painted the picture to help the Marine express his feelings.

As I listened to him, I was taken back to my own recollections of the Vietnam years. I had been a teenager and Vietnam did not seem real; it was just a story on the nightly news. Then, one night I was struck by a news image showing soldiers carrying the dead out of a rice paddy. I turned the television off and decided I would not watch the news anymore. I found a way to hide, if not deny, the gruesome realities of that war the news programs broadcast into our homes each night.

My husband told Tommy about his pain when his classmates never returned from Vietnam while everyone around him pretended life was unchanged. He talked about feeling guilty for not serving in the military himself. His father, a World War II veteran who annually attended First Armored Division reunions, had insisted that his son remain in college to avoid the draft. The army had been important to his father. While other people bronzed baby shoes, his father's combat boots had been bronzed, as footsteps memorialized on the living room mantle. But he had drawn the line when it came to risking his son witnessing what he had witnessed.

Tommy told us that he had written to Jane Fonda to tell her that he understood why she had protested the war. He sent her his poster *Loss of Innocence*. She wrote back thanking him and telling him how much his letter had helped her.

"Our whole nation needs healing," I had told Tommy and my husband when I heard that Jane Fonda wrote back to Tommy. "War is a loss of innocence for all of us — our whole country."

Listening to Tommy and my husband talking, I began to realize that war is the altar of sacrifice for a nation, an altar often unacknowledged by the civilian public. Soldiers have long had to shoulder the burden of adjusting to civilian life after they leave the military. It is often a long, lonely, and misunderstood journey to come back home. I saw that we needed to do more than just remember our veterans; we needed to re-member veterans into society.

The next day, Tommy and I did a presentation at the medical center. Tommy explained how expressing his feelings through his artwork had helped to heal the trauma he had experienced. I talked about my prejudices and how Tommy's paintings had helped me to get past them.

I did not anticipate the reaction of some of my colleagues. Just out of nursing school in the 1960s, they had cared for the injured as the soldiers returned to the United States a few days after receiving their war injuries. They, too, had blotted out their feelings. "I was just doing my job," most of them told me. But they cried as they said it, letting me see behind their walls. In those shared moments, we allowed ourselves to be the wounded healers that we are to the wounded warriors in our care.

I also felt moved when two patients from the PTSD program made their way to my office the next day.

"You're the lady who spoke with the Vietnam vet aren't you?"

I nodded.

"We want you to have something."

Each unpinned the yellow, green, and red-striped bar they had been given to indicate their service in Vietnam.

"Thank you for giving us a voice. Thank you for wanting to understand."

"Oh no. I can't," I protested. "You don't understand. I've mocked and judged you all these years. I've done nothing to earn this honor."

"You're one of us now," they smiled forgivingly.

I knew how important these bars were to soldiers. Their willingness to relinquish something so precious emphasized how intensely they needed their voices to be heard and their suffering validated. Realizing that my

resistance would ungraciously reject their generous gifts, I let them pin me with their symbol of sacrifice that they were bestowing upon me.

After they left, still stunned, I unpinned them, placing them on my desk. I was unworthy of their gifts. They were the heroes. I was but a witness, and I had been a reluctant one at that.