

ARE WE ALL VETERANS OF WAR?

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Several friends realized last month was the 40th anniversary of their return from the Vietnam War. A return that was met by silence, sometimes spat on in airports - abandoned by us, their communities. A silence that has continued for 40 years.

We were young, and inexperienced with issues as powerful and abnormal as this. We were exhausted by civil rights and anti-war struggles at home and the murders of our leaders. We didn't do what might have been done, what was needed to be done, what remains to be done. Maybe innocently, maybe willingly, America ignored the truth of our aggressions, and the impacts on our culture and our lives. We are still learning, but the time has come to act.

In the intervening years, we've learned the depth of wounds that warriors bring home. And the wounds that fester and grow in a community and nation that accepts and promotes war for other than extreme needs of defense. Forty years ago, would anyone believe our leaders defending torture as American policy?

During Vietnam, approximately one million American *teenagers*, average age 19, saw combat. Half were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by 1978. By the late 1980s, 60,000 VietVets had committed suicide. More than were killed during the entire war. By some estimates, twenty-five percent of our Vietnam veterans live homeless on our streets. Ravaged by nightmares, substance abuse, depression, visits from the dead, memories of atrocities. Even idealistic soldiers, trapped into fighting for false or distorted political agendas, experience far deeper psychic wounds than those merely protecting their families and homes from invaders. Many VietVets refuse to march in parades that have become mere consumption holidays or celebration of war. Few feel that war or their service in it was correct, moral, justified, or honorable.

War tears open and destroys all ordinary categories of existence. It wounds every function ever attributed to the soul. The survivors of its supernatural intensity have mythic memories of positive achievement - and recurring terrors of the aberrant behavior that all too often occurs.

We know more, now, of the atrocities that occur along with the courage and heroism. My Lai or Abu Ghraib are part of all wars. The human shadow that is unchained under conditions of madness, fear, exhaustion and power over others. Judgment of what occurred in those conditions is hardly relevant. Healing, reconciliation, reuniting our souls, understanding the true costs of war is what is needed. Our communities and our culture need to lift the burden of what occurred in untenable situations, and relieve responsibility for what happened. We need to hold and remember the stories and memories of what was done in our name.

War is not always unjustified, but we have waged war of aggression incessantly since Europeans landed on this continent. Korea, Vietnam, Wounded Knee, East Timor, Palestine, Iraq, and now the guns pointing at North Korea, to name a few.

In order to pursue war, governmental leaders suppress information, deny the suffering, and refuse responsibility. What leaders today acknowledge the effects of depleted uranium on Iraqi civilians, or Agent Orange on our veterans? The deaths on all sides, effects on their families? Post World War II generosity to veterans has proven an anomaly to a government that puts exploitive profiteering by "defense contractors"

ahead of even providing soldiers the armor and equipment they need. The needs of our veterans are not being met.

PTSD is a sickness of the soul and a spiritual disorder of society. It is not easily healed by chemical drugs or conventional therapy. Other cultures - Egyptians, Greeks, Native Americans, Buddhists, Zulu or Vietnamese - achieved healing by shamanic acts, spirit journeys, or sweat lodges before a warrior returned to the community. Processes that touch the soul, empty out the detritus of war, bring peace and reconciliation between the living and the dead. If not, the wounds of thinking, feeling, morality, respect, intimacy and concentration become epidemic through families, generations, and community.

Many of our veterans have become exceptional treasures to our communities, through their gentle and selfless gifts to others continuing their willingness when young, to serve as warriors when called. They, and all returning warriors, need to be honored.

We, in the Nehalem Bay area, are going to take a first step at grappling with these issues, to try to begin healing the wounds in our warriors and our communities. A single event cannot bring our lives back into true from war, but the journey has to begin.

We may wonder why acknowledging these issues has waited until now. We had no knowledge of PTSD back then, or the cultural healing needed to resolve it. Perhaps we've needed the evidence of Iraq and the Bush administration. We may have needed to be ready to change ourselves and let go of the spoils of war. Perhaps the time has just come.

Join us to hear and learn; to thank and finally welcome home our veterans; and help begin the healing. Come to Pine Grove Community House in Manzanita, 7pm on July 2.