WAR AND THE SOUL

Healing Our Nation's Veterans from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

Edward Tick, Ph.D.
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Praise for Edward Tick’s

War and the Soul

Ed Tick not only provides a fascinating look into the minds and souls of veterans affected by post-traumatic stress disorder, but he also illustrates how healing the ailment can be achieved.

—Gary Ackerman, US Congressman

War and the Soul is a healing book that rises from the battle for the heart of this culture. Veterans’ souls utter the anguish of wounds for which there is no medication. Ed Tick weaves the mythic background that alone can create understanding of these living tragedies. He offers both ancient and contemporary practices that can treat the loss of soul and the traumatic legacies of war and terror.

—Michael J. Meade, author, Men and the Water of Life; Director, Mosaic Multicultural Foundation

This is no ordinary brilliant book. It is a document that leads us to the possibility of healing from the wars that devastate so entirely that no one is safe. This book can save our lives.

—Deena Metzger, author, Entering the Ghost River: Meditations on the Theory and Practice of Healing

Ed Tick has been my teacher for twenty-some years. Since the Vietnam War, he has been bringing his knowledge of healing cultures to bear on PTSD. These days the focus is too often on the strictly clinical, but Dr. Tick dares to bring in soul. If you are treating those suffering from deep trauma, or if you are a relative, a friend, or just an interested, caring person, you owe it to yourself and to your client or loved one to read this book.


As the world hangs in the balance, Ed Tick illuminates the path that could pull humanity back from the brink.

—Kenny Ausubel, Founder, Bioneers Foundation; author, Seeds of Change; editor, Ecological Medicine
Dr. Tick brings to the task a deep compassion for the worldwide legion of war victims. Beyond that, he brings a scholar’s sense of history, a visionary’s gaze into the heart of darkness, and a poet’s grace to make these poignant stories of personal agony somehow affirmative of the human spirit.

—STEPHEN LARSEN, Ph.D., Psychology Professor Emeritus, SUNY; author, The Shaman’s Doorway and The Mythic Imagination

Americans need to understand the message from our men and women in uniform whom we have sent in harm’s way. They are speaking to us in this pioneering book, War and the Soul.

—LOUISE CARUS MAHDI, Jungian analyst; author, Betwixt and Between, Crossroads, and The Real St. Nicholas

Silence perpetrates war and its consequences. Ed Tick pierces the silence around PTSD. With this book, the healing begins.

—LOUIE FREE, Founder, Free Radio Limited; radio host, WASN 1500 AM (northeast Ohio / western Pennsylvania)

Ed Tick shows us how war tears away at the soul of soldiers and how it impacts the collective soul of the world. If we all read this book it would change the face of war in our world and inspire us to find peaceful ways to create change.

—SANDRA INGERMAN, author, Soul Retrieval

Walking through hell with his heart wide open, Ed Tick takes us on a journey of transformative power. Using history, mythology, psychology, story, and insight born of years of helping veterans, Tick allows us to bear witness to the agony as well as the healing of those who have endured the horrors of war. It is a journey from darkness through shadow and, patiently, tirelessly, into the light.

—RICHARD GELDARD, Ph.D., author, The Traveler’s Key to Ancient Greece and The Essential Transcendentalists
Introduction

The mortars have stopped falling. The tracers have stopped screaming. The mountains, jungles, and villages have stopped smoldering. But years later, veterans still have nightmares and flashbacks in which the old battles still rage. They still watch for threats and stand poised for danger. Their hearts respond to everyday situations as though they were vicious attacks and to ordinary relationships as though they were with long-gone comrades and enemies.

Though hostilities cease and life moves on, and though loved ones yearn for their healing, veterans often remain drenched in the imagery and emotion of war for decades and sometimes for their entire lives. For these survivors, every vital human characteristic that we attribute to the soul may be fundamentally reshaped. These traits include how we perceive; how our minds are organized and function; how we love and relate; what we believe, expect, and value; what we feel and refuse to feel; and what we judge as good or evil, right or wrong. Though the affliction that today we call post-traumatic stress disorder has had many names over the centuries, it is always the result of the way war invades, wounds, and transforms our spirit.

I have been working as a psychotherapist with war veterans and survivors for over a quarter of a century. I began in
1979, just a few years after the end of the Vietnam War. PTSD was not yet a recognized diagnostic category. Veterans my own age—some had survived combat, others had avoided it—were asking for help.

I sat with men whose souls seemed damaged and whose young lives seemed ruined. Scott, a helicopter door gunner, abandoned at night in the jungle, had killed in hand-to-hand combat. I had not seen him since we had played softball together in high school. Two hundred miles from our teenage neighborhood, he stumbled into my office stunned and wired, his life in shambles. I could not tolerate the idea that my old playmate and others like him would remain lost and without health, hope, or purpose.

For several years, I treated post-traumatic stress disorder in Vietnam combat veterans and in noncombatants and resisters. I spent four of those years directing a remote program for vets who could not reenter urban America even for a day. Over the ensuing decades, I learned of the prevalence and persistence of old war pain. My work expanded to include survivors of World War II, the Holocaust, the Korean War, the Gulf War, and the wars in Lebanon, Panama, El Salvador, and Ireland. I also treated Bosnian refugees from Serbian concentration camps, Iraq War veterans, and terminally ill veterans and their families from all wars. These struggling souls helped me learn that the traumatic impact of war and violence inflicts wounds so deep we need to address them with extraordinary attention, resources, and methods. Conventional models of medical and psychological functioning and therapeutics are not adequate to explain or treat such wounds. Veterans and their afflictions try to tell us so.

After a decade of the best psychotherapy I could offer, I went in search of more effective methods for healing our
veterans. Through study, travel, interviews, and immersion in other cultures, I investigated warrior traditions worldwide and searched for holistic, experiential, and psychospiritual methods to use in healing vets today. These were my guiding questions: Does the wound we call PTSD result from violent combat in all times and places? Or is it unique to the Vietnam War and wars since? Does it result from American ways of fighting or of treating veterans? Does it result from modern technological warfare? Is it caused or exacerbated by the ways societies treat veterans upon return? Did other cultures, past and present, have effective ways of helping their wounded veterans heal and reintegrate?

One of the first things I learned is that we do not even know how to think about war. To be sure, the politics, economics, and history of particular conflicts are extensively documented. And it is true, as Abraham Lincoln said, that “we cannot escape history.” But we can also become lost in it. In order to help our veterans, we need to go beyond the particular and understand what war is and how it works in all times and places.

Though people have not always fought for the same purposes or in the same ways, war is indeed universally traumatizing. Because of this inevitable trauma, our ancestors conducted war with far greater preparation, guidance, and restraint than we do today. Traditional societies required life-threatening service as a warrior of nearly all young males, but the potential destructiveness of that service was limited. One of the primary purposes of war was as a rite of passage into adulthood. Unlike our veterans today, warriors were reintegrated into civilian life with elaborate rituals that involved the whole community and imparted transformative spiritual wisdom. Though modern society has made such ancient beliefs and practices anachronistic, we are still ruled by and try to
replicate them. And we are ruled by the mythic attraction to war itself.

History, anthropology, psychology, political science, mythology, world spiritual traditions—indeed, all lenses through which we peer—reveal that warrior classes and traditions are nearly universal aspects of human experience. As I discuss later, depth psychology calls a universal pattern innate to the human mind an archetype. Archetypes are inborn potentials for behavior and response. The presence of gods of war in all our root traditions—Jehovah in the Old Testament, Odin among the Norse, Ares and other combatting deities in Greek mythology, the holy war and end-of-world stories in Christianity and other world religions—all demonstrate this universality.

Once we understand that war is a living archetype inherent to the psyche, we see that we will never end it through purely political or historical means. We are forced to ask then: is war inevitable? As long as we remain unconscious of the archetypal elements that drive us, we will not be able to escape from their pull. Our only chance for dissipating the archetypal force of war in our lives is to become conscious of how it works through us so that we do not remain possessed by it but rather can labor responsibly to direct its powers. Because of the ultimate nature of the effort, this labor is fundamentally a matter of soul.

*War and the Soul* reveals the universal substratum of all war as well as the universal dimensions of veterans’ wounding and healing.

Part 1 establishes the traditional context of war in history, mythology, and religious and spiritual traditions. It examines what has happened to that context as civilizations developed more sophisticated weaponry and as during our modern era we have shifted to the practice of technological
warfare. As we shall see, the more destructive war has become, the more one of its original functions as a rite of passage has been compromised, which is a major factor in the prevalence of PTSD among vets today.

Part 2 concerns the effects of war in terms of the symptoms that make up what we know as post-traumatic stress disorder, but with an important distinction: In my extensive work with vets, another thing I learned is that PTSD is not best understood or treated as a stress disorder, as it is now characterized. Rather, it is best understood as an identity disorder and soul wound, affecting the personality at the deepest levels. Traditional societies and some modern pioneers have held similar convictions. Part 2 describes in depth the aspects of understanding PTSD in terms of identity issues. We see why veterans’ healing is so difficult to achieve and why conventional modalities often fall short. It took me decades to learn to negotiate the inner world of war survivors. One of my goals became to map this inner world so that veterans could find their ways through it and so that healers and loved ones could have an effective guide for facilitating veterans’ homecoming.

Immersing in the universal dimensions of war also reveals wisdom that gives us hope for healing PTSD. Part 3 presents some of the ways I have practiced that can enable a disturbed vet to heal. Some of my sources for such practices are found in shamanic, ancient Greek, Native American, Vietnamese, and other traditions. Some are indicated in world mythological and spiritual records. Some are revealed when we listen deeply to what PTSD is asking of us rather than imposing our conventional ideas upon it. Specific techniques include purification, storytelling, healing journeys, grieving rituals, meetings with former enemies, soul retrieval, initiation ceremonies, and the creation and nurturing of a warrior class. I conduct retreats for men, for the Vietnam War generation,
and for others whose generational experience was defined by any war. I conduct journeys for veterans, families, and communities across generations and internationally. These journeys help heal the rifts between vets and nonvets and between former enemies. They facilitate initiation as men and warriors and offer understanding, acceptance, and honor. All such efforts must be guided by principles consistent with our understanding of identity development and soul work.

This healing work means, in part, taking difficult action in the world and giving new meaning to old myths. For example, we still act according to the ancient belief in taking “an eye for an eye,” seeking punishment and revenge on those who have hurt us. This ancient strategy continues the world’s wounding in an endless recycling of violence. Instead, we can give new meaning to “an eye for an eye” by returning what we have taken and exchanging understanding and forgiveness. This is a necessary moral step even in “good wars,” even if we believe we did no wrong. The work of restoration rebalances and heals the moral trauma at the heart of PTSD. Part 3 demonstrates how this works.

War teaches hard lessons. What we lose, we lose. After war or other traumatic loss, we are different forever. We can neither get the old self back nor return to a state of innocence. We have been through a psychospiritual death.

But like the mythological phoenix, from death we may attain a rebirth. When we reconstruct a survivor’s identity from veteran to warrior, we open up dimensions of soul that modern society ignores, including those most painful and usually excluded from everyday life. Though conventional medicine and psychotherapy strive to be value neutral, in these healing efforts we must deal with our moral and spiritual dimensions. This is because warriorhood is not a role but a psychospiritual identity, an achieved condition of a mature,
wise, and experienced soul. By modeling warrior traditions worldwide in ways that are relevant and adapted to modern life, we can grow a new identity strong and compassionate enough to carry the wound and heal the soul.

*War and the Soul* holds forth the possibility that we can regrow the war-wounded soul in both individuals and cultures to nurture and educate a positive and affirming identity that surrounds the war experience with love, compassion, meaning, and forgiveness. When the survivor can accomplish this work, post-traumatic stress disorder as a soul wound evaporates. The survivor can truly come home and serve the causes of peace, justice, and healing. When nations can accomplish this work, in the words of the old gospel song, “We ain’t gonna study war no more.”