

WAR, TRAUMA, AND BRINGING THEM ALL HOME ...

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Ed Tick is a psychotherapist who has been working with veterans for some 30 years. He is also an authority on Greek healing rituals and warrior cultures, including the Greeks and Romans, Zulus, Celts, Norse, and especially, the American Plains Indians. He is an ordained interfaith minister and a recognised healer by traditional Native Americans on the northern plains. Tick writes with a deep understanding of the calling to be a warrior and love for the men and women who respond to that call, even as he has been a peace activist all his adult life. This tension – love for the warrior and peace activism – is one of the moving strengths of the book.

The term “*warrior*” might be somewhat awkward for many readers, who would prefer the simpler term “*soldier*”. Yet, whereas “*soldiering*” is solidly implicated in the term, “*warrior*” casts a wider net. It links the call to service, the experience of combat, and the need for ritualised healing and return to a universal cultural tradition. It also links the call to service and the soldier’s path to its archetypal roots. Another awkwardness is the use of the masculine pronoun. The fact that warrior cultures and classes have traditionally been all male is part justification, but this is less the case in the current military world, and our language perhaps should reflect that.

Tick suggests that the call to warriorhood is an archetypal and universal call to serve one’s people. It has always been a basic ideal and an honoured social role: “*Like a bull buffalo flanking his herd to protect it from predators, a warrior knows he is essential to his people’s survival. He knows he belongs. He receives honor and blessing from his community for the service he willingly provides, and he in turn blesses his community with his devotion and willingness to sacrifice his life, if necessary, for its well-being*” (Tick, 2009: 179).

Becoming a warrior, for Tick, is less about a soldier’s competent functioning than an achievement of character, the significance of which extends beyond the battlefield and back into society. “*Warriorhood is not an outer role but an inner spiritual achievement*” (Tick, 2009: 199). It includes insight into the sanctity, preciousness, and fragility of life, self-knowledge, self-discipline, and a life dedicated to transcendent goals rather than to

self-aggrandisement. Tick speaks eloquently about the reciprocal and intimate relation between the community and its warriors, about blessings, honour, sacrifice, and he points out that a central function of warrior elders in traditional societies was to restrain hot-blooded young men and discourage violence (Tick, 2009: 181). We might recall that, when Bush and his close circle rushed into the Iraq War, the only member of that inner circle who cautioned restraint was the old warrior, General Colin Powell, but he was brushed aside by people who had never seen the confusion and horror they were about to unleash.

Of course, it is also true that this calling to warriorhood can be corrupted in all sorts of ways by misguided or unscrupulous politicians and some military leaders, and much of the trauma of contemporary war is the sense of meaninglessness that many returning warriors face. Nevertheless, for Tick, the archetypal calling of warriorhood is one that is ever present and can give structure, meaning and healing to the experience of traumatised veterans.

War and the soul is centrally about war-related post traumatic stress disorder and about healing. Tick reports that he has collected over 80 names from around the world for combat trauma. In Western culture the experience was described some 2 500 years ago in the **Iliad** and the **Odyssey**, which can be read as accounts of combat trauma and its sequelae (Shay, 1995, 2002). Central to Tick's book is the argument that the contemporary construction of combat trauma as a psychiatric condition is iatrogenic – it is the psychiatric construction of PTSD that itself turns combat trauma into a chronic condition, and burdens the individual veteran with the consequences of political decisions to go to war. By jettisoning communal responsibility, it exacerbates the veteran's sense of communal alienation and personal dehumanisation, and it leaves him or her with the shame of being *weak*. As such, it pathologises a universal human experience, failing to give it the dignity and spiritual meaning that is due. Psychiatric diagnosis (in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) defines posttraumatic stress disorder as an anxiety disorder, which is seriously inadequate to its phenomenology. As an anxiety disorder, PTSD is relatively trivial; its devastation is that PTSD is a "*soul wound*", a "*Post-Traumatic Soul Distress*". This is not theology. Soldiers themselves say that they lost their souls. Many can describe the moment it happened: a moment of profound depersonalisation from which they have never recovered. PTSD involves injury to the sustaining ground of one's being in the world: the soldier's aesthetics, values, sense of the world's moral fabric, the experience of the lovely mystery of others, and the spiritual foundations of a meaningful life. Given then that PTSD is a "*soul wound*", universally known and ritually healed, Tick argues that it is incumbent on the soldiers' community and the wider society to take responsibility for the violence and suffering that its warriors have endured on its behalf, and for bringing them home with appreciation, respect and love.

The calling to be a warrior, the experience of war as trauma, and its healing through the ritual reintegration of the returning warrior back into the community are described in detail with numerous examples. Central to the healing process in traditional warrior societies is a series of cleansing and purification rituals, conducted either before the warriors' return home or as an aspect of the process of communal reintegration. A common feature of these rituals is a process in which the warrior makes peace with the dead. It is common knowledge, for instance, that the Plains Indians ritually took responsibility for the souls of the animals that they had killed in a hunt. They would

honour the dead buffalo for its bravery and strength, apologise for taking its life, and thank it for the gifts of life and warmth that it would provide them through the coming winter. They would then use the whole animal for their needs. What is less well known is that there was this same degree of responsibility for the souls of the dead enemy.

It seems to be a universal aspect of combat PTSD that the sufferers cannot forget the faces of the dead: dead buddies, dead civilians, and dead enemies. Even those who were not in combat, but who participated in the war machine, imagine the dead and often suffer the same haunting guilt and psychological wounds as their combat brothers and sisters in arms. The dead haunt the soldiers' memories and dreams. For Tick, making peace with the dead is crucial if one is to enter life fully again. This means honouring the dead enemy as warriors like oneself, committing oneself to a life that is worthy of their deaths, as well as one's dead comrades, and mourning. For many veterans (but certainly not all) it means asking the dead for forgiveness in prayer or supplication. Tick's accounts of these rituals are moving: of warriors telling their stories, praying, and being blessed by the dead.

Given South Africa's violent and war-ravaged past, there is much benefit to a close reading of Tick's book. I am, for example, immediately struck by a somewhat personal and ironic observation, that the only public recognition of the extraordinary bravery and honour of many of the SWAPO dead at Cassinga, Angola – men who took up positions on heavy weaponry in the face of certain death – is each year when South African paratroopers remember them with respect on *Cassinga Day*. Political leaders who tried to paint that battle as a massacre of refugees profoundly dishonour *their* own dead, as well as the living who fought, saw their comrades killed, then finally surrendered when the battle was clearly lost (and were left, disarmed, on the parade ground when the paratroopers left).

Furthermore, by Tick's argument, combat trauma and ritual healing is universal, and one could look to this tradition in Southern Africa as well. My colleague, Dr Sipho Mbuqe, notes that in Xhosa, the term *Kanene* refers to the returning warrior's insight into the depth and burden of guilt that he carries. "*It follows you like a shadow that always reminds you of what you have done*" (personal communication, 2010). It is a moral pain that cannot be undone until the sufferer has been forgiven by both the living and the dead. *Ukubula* is the confessional telling to the community of all that happened, and the community's obligatory role is to tolerate the pain of listening, no matter how difficult that may be. We might be reminded of Bishop Tutu and others at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, who stuck to it, despite the overwhelming trauma that it involved. The warrior is then forgiven, peace is made with the ancestors, and souls are returned to the dead. Significantly, in these processes, souls are also returned to the surviving warriors, who had lost their own souls through the killing of others. Mbuqe's account fits with Tick's like a glove, evidencing the book's universal address. Mbuqe also notes that his grandfather, in the aftermath to World War II, was distressed that there were, even then, no rituals to heal the returning Xhosa soldiers and to bring them home.

Yet, there are significant differences between South African experiences in the border war and American experiences in Vietnam: the scale of the carnage, in particular. But there are some similarities, and Tick's book poses an invitation and a challenge for us in South Africa. Both American draftees and South African National Servicemen – and

women – were in a war that was all but invisible *back home*. This could also often be said of the opposing number, whether in SWAPO or Umkhonto we Sizwe, for example. In South Africa, it was often denied that national service personnel were even there, apart from brief counter-insurgency campaigns. Both draftees and national service personnel lacked adequate home support. Both came home to a civilian life with no healing rituals and nobody to talk to. Both had military leaders who failed to teach their young men and women how to return to the civilian world, or who even seemed to care at all about them. Perhaps worst of all, both groups of young veterans looked back wondering what possible meaning to take from all that sacrifice, especially when history does not look favourably on them. The sense of alienation runs deep, as all that energy and suffering often seems so pointless in retrospect.

For the past dozen years or so, Tick has been taking American veterans back to Vietnam. He describes men who have been unable to sleep for decades, haunted nightly by legions of the dead: innocent civilians they killed, dead enemies who stood and fought, dead comrades. With great anxiety they visit the places in which they dropped into hell and lost their souls. What they find are communities of forgiving and friendly people, ageing men who had fought against them, widows, children and grandchildren of the dead. They build small schools, weep, make atonements, enjoy communal food, and find themselves released. Many veterans say that they have slept through the night for the first time in over 30 years and that their souls have returned. Tick's accounts of these healing journeys are compelling. They invite us to meditate more deeply on the misery of war, the toll it takes on all of us, and on the way we abuse those heroic young men and women who entrust their lives to our good judgement.

Many former national servicemen simply saw their *service* as a wasted year or two out of their lives. For those who seldom think about their national service, it is unlikely that Tick's book will speak to them. Nevertheless, for those who were operational and who saw combat, especially for those who participated in the major battles of the Angolan border war, Tick's book addresses issues and raises questions that one senses are increasingly in the air. His book will also speak to the Permanent Force members of that era: people who were dedicated warriors, committed to the protection of their people – however they understood that, and however politically misguided many readers of this journal, and history, will have judged them to be. It may also speak to many in the so-called (Coloured) Cape Corps, at least some of whom responded to the call to service, even if this calling was masked by the less exalted economic need to find a secure job. Finally, it might speak to the former members of Umkhonto we Sizwe, some of whom now make up the South African National Defence Force. To all of us interested in war, combat trauma, communal healing and spiritual redemption, **War and the soul** is one of the most moving meditations available.

Here are some questions that Tick's book raised for me, with particular reference to the South African context:

- 1) How many South African soldiers on both sides of the conflict from the 1970s and 80s suffer from combat trauma? Do we have carefully researched numbers?
- 2) How many are in need of the kind of redemption that Tick outlines? More and more veterans have been travelling to Angola to visit old battlegrounds and, it seems, to pay their respects and to seek a certain peace.

- 3) Is there any possibility of recognition and respect, even redemption, across the lines of former enemies? Some white veterans simply feel the enemy won, and their bitterness has not shifted at all, but there are instances at an individual level where reconciliation has happened. I know one paratrooper who became a close friend with a work colleague who had been on opposite sides of the same operations in the bush war. Their sense of shared experience far outweighed their history of having tried to kill each other. They drank a beer to each other for having both survived.
- 4) How many veterans feel betrayed by our politicians, both then and now? The sense of betrayal might be a surprisingly shared experience across great ideological differences: white Afrikaner professional soldiers who feel their leaders sold out, and/or who feel unappreciated for their continued support for the military in the *new* South Africa; national servicemen who feel that their sacrifice and continued psychological distress were meaningless; former Angolan 32 Battalion soldiers who swore allegiance to South Africa, and who were promised in return, the benefits of South African military retirees; Umkhonto we Sizwe fighters who politically won the war in South Africa, yet who may feel their political leaders are abandoning them and their communities. There needs to be some cultural room for the narratives of sacrifice and betrayal so that lessons may be learned. J H Thompson's book, **An unpopular war** (2006), is a beginning.
- 5) Can our current political leaders follow the example set by Nelson Mandela and other statesmen, which is to honour those soldiers who fought on the *wrong* side of history, but who were nevertheless defending South Africa in the terms they understood? That is to say, how can we recognise and honour those veterans who were confused by the old Nationalist propaganda, which deliberately and cynically conflated defence of South Africa with defence of Afrikaner Nationalism and apartheid?
- 6) Can we as a society find room in our cultural and political discourse for the lessons learned by our old soldiers across the political spectrum? According to Tick, we shall be better off if we do.

In conclusion, Tick's book is a compelling and moving account of a universal warrior's narrative, of our modern military and social cultures' failures to bring them home, and about the lessons that can be learned from ancient warrior traditions in the processes of healing, both individually and culturally. If his book opens a space for our own country's reflections and narratives, then it will also have served us well.

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