

Strong-Hearts

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More than forty years after combat and warzone peace-building, the authors helped form a group that is creating space and place for healing from war wounds to the soul. The organizing leaders called the group Touchstone Veterans Outreach. They talked and mused and connected with others that were interested in the mystery of war healing. In short, they did not turn away but towards the pain wrapped and sealed within the bodies and souls of veterans.

War is the ultimate mission of the American military. The military stands to protect. We realize as a nation that protection is warranted. However, as a nation we tend to believe that protection is the soldier's, sailor's, marine's, or airmen's job. We also tend to not state the specific actions that "tip of the spear" military personnel practice and perform. Those actions are killing and destruction. These actions are necessary and expected in war. However, it is only the military that recruits, trains and deploys people to kill and destroy.

When we speak to civilian groups about the invisible wounds of war, we often hear, "Well, isn't it their job to fight?" True enough, but that comment is utterly detached from the reality of a nation going to war. For example, the United States has been in two wars for twenty years. How has that affected your life? Is any part of your job affected by war? Are we into war as a nation or is it a job for the military to do alone? Does your job require you to go against every moral fiber of your being? Are you aware that you are also responsible because you are paying for these wars with your taxes?

As civilians we do not consistently or often reckon with the impact of our nation's constant war-making or open ourselves to the aftermath of war fighting. Hence, the realities and aftermath of war are seared into the bones of the men and women who serve but are hardly mentioned and certainly not broadcast into the general population. Many Americans do not even know a military man or woman. Fewer and fewer families have sons and daughters serving.

If you have not been in a warzone, it is difficult to find a space in your heart to emphasize with those that have been *shot at, hated, loved, attacked, honored, grieved, and killed*. Touchstone Veterans Outreach and their partners found a group of folks that did want to listen and learn. Their role as listener was bestowed with the title of "strong-

heart.” This came from our friends at Warrior’s Journey Home, an Ohio-based program, who referred to the civilians in their program as “people of strong heart”.

The strong-hearts had either read some books or articles about veterans and realized there was much to learn about war trauma. Other potential strong-hearts attended churches where there were sermons and workshops about war trauma. In some way they were touched. Strong-hearts are fundamental to war healing because they do not know the stories of veterans and they have realized it. Living within a society that shuns speaking the truth about war has subjugated healing practices to clinicians and the distances inherent in clinical settings. Conversely, the role of Strong-hearts is to bring heart and soul as well as mind into the healing process.

Why do strong hearts commit to meeting with veterans once a month eager and longing to hear stories of pain, survival, killing, remorse, guilt, and betrayal that many veterans have never shared with anyone? We discover that the strong-hearts can empathize. They can become one with the veteran in their pain because they have felt similar pain in their own hearts. Some, we assume, began to empathize using their own trauma to relate to veterans’ war trauma. So, certainly empathy for trauma seems to be a magnet of sorts. One Strong-heart has trauma from a difficult child birth and special needs child-rearing. Another has lived with and loves the combat veteran author in this article. She brings her empathy from birthing twins and then hemorrhaging. She testified to a near death experience. With that experience she can indeed relate to war veterans. They in turn can relate to her. Others have had family and loved ones who are veterans and in whom they have witnessed struggle.

We call our healing circles meetings COMPASS (Circles Offering Mindful Participation and Safe Spaces). COMPASS is territory for developing relationships. Strong-hearts connect with veterans and vice-versa. This connection is the stuff of community. It is not group therapy. However, community-building is relationship-building. Since veterans only make up seven percent of our United States society there are few natural forming communities that come together to share the trauma of war. COMPASS, on the other hand, seeks to establish a community of veterans and Strong hearts. This simple architecture is sturdy for a truthful and compassionate community. It provides a space for healing through truth telling stories.

COMPASS is territory set apart, a gathering meant to provide a place of sanctuary, deep listening, building of trust, and an emerging common path forward. Meetings have a structure that encourages truthful storytelling among and between participants. Music, ritual and composition frame and inform the circle. Principles of restorative

justice and Circle Process are engaged. A talking piece is circulated; the one holding it is the only one with authority to speak. We learn deep listening, resisting the temptation to formulate responses while others are speaking. Veterans and Strong-hearts learn how to listen while suspending judgment. Facilitators guide the process but primarily “keep” the Circle. Prompts draw out responses about war wounds both physical and spiritual. Prompts use words about homecoming, betrayal, shame, exhilaration, pride, doubt, wrath and honor. Poems and quotes tend to the mutual but idiosyncratic interpretation of the prompts. Participants call on their own experiences to respond with their truth. The monthly conversations are filled with truth telling. It is not unusual for a veteran to tell a story that he or she has not told for thirty, forty, or fifty years to anyone. Only a community can hold, learn, and gain wisdom from this storytelling. In fact, one of the most basic commitments made by a Strong-heart is to remain in the Circle, physically and emotionally, while hearing truths that can make one want to flee.

Important and necessary to this healing process of COMPASS is empathy. The word empathy is derived from the ancient Greek *empathia*. *Pathos* and *empathia* join into the English word empathy. Joan Halifax in *Standing at the Edge* says that “empathy, literally taken, is feeling into another.” She continues stating: “Interpersonal empathy describes the capacity that nearly all of us have to include another being into our awareness in a way that enables us to sense what they might be experiencing physically, emotionally and cognitively” (57). Souls have the unique opportunity to connect through empathy while in COMPASS.

We have witnessed the phenomenon of soul connection many times. Our witness is that during a lifetime most people experience some level of trauma. When stories are told in circle, trauma often becomes part if not all of the tale. Listening with a compassionate heart becomes part of the healing, while in the telling the veteran remembers moments and actions that led to his or her own wounds of the soul. Sharing then continues on a theme of suffering and pain that most can interpret as shared trauma. Again, this is the stuff of a community. Combat veterans share war experiences with their blood brothers because they know they can empathize. In circle, there is a difference. Veterans share traumatic experiences within the community that sent them to war. With empathy the strong-hearts carry part of the burden which in turn allows the veteran to lighten their load.

While empathy is the source of healing from various wounds; truth-telling is a necessary ingredient within the circle. Truth telling becomes more and more evident as

the process continues and the veterans accept their own destiny. An indispensable step in Edward Tick's Necessary Steps of Warrior Return is Acceptance of Warrior Destiny. We think that acceptance is embracing the wounds of war so that reality becomes wisdom through truth-telling.

Tick writes: "This second step constitutes both *the inner and public acceptance of one's destiny no matter how difficult, and it affirms that he or she is on a lifelong path.*" Talking about this step, he adds: "We agree deep inside *to accept and work with our lots rather than live a life of angry protest and denial!*" (*Warrior's Return*, 208). Each of the subsequent steps depends on this one. We have been discovering its pivotal nature. It is the honest claiming of one's entire experience, and the assertion that wherever one goes, it will be from *here*. This requires considerable risk and courage, and development of trust (in a process, in covenanted others, in God). It is a journey inward and outward. We have talked about its resonance with the territory of forgiveness, received and offered.

It strikes us that the Strong-hearts enter into a similar "agreement" – perhaps from the outset, but more likely in the midst of the revelation and shared pain of veteran testimony in the Circle.

It is in the crucible of Circle that a Strong-heart realizes that veteran and civilian share a **common lot**. It is a profound step if and when they recognize that they *always* have shared the common lot, though societal and personal denial have previously obscured this. The Strong-heart is not there to "help" but to share the journey as fully as possible. This new acknowledgment of the Social Contract and its shared responsibilities – and for people of Christian faith, embodying our covenantal relationship – is a movement of repentance. Therefore, "Acceptance of Strong-heart Destiny" will be life-changing.

Trauma healing involves reconstructing one's story. This story telling is sacred and nourishing while in circle. In the words of Judith Herman: "The narrative includes not only the event, but the survivor's response to it and the responses of important people in her life" (*Trauma and Recovery*, 177). What if the civilians are, in this case, "**important people**", whether we have realized it or not? What if the Strong-hearts represent previously "missing pieces" in the veterans' stories? To take our place in the veteran narrative will also require considerable risk and courage and the development of trust. When a Strong-heart undertakes this, it is very humbling and daunting. A lot of acceptance and hard work will be necessary – also the embracing of a "lifelong path!"

Storytelling becomes confession in the sacred circle. Veterans and strong-hearts tell stories that form connection and often stimulate a forgotten story to come forth from the depths of memory. Storytelling and story-listening are sacramental. Tick says, “stories release emotion, reveal secrets, educate, organize our lives into coherent narratives, point toward meaning.”

The last two elements are particularly essential for trauma healing. The priority of veteran testimony is key to both (1) Strong-heart discipline and (2) Strong-heart repentance. This reverses the cultural order (veterans protect civilians) and prioritizes veteran healing journeys, over time establishing a “right-side-up” environment. Additionally, it is veteran testimony that helps Strong-hearts to recognize ourselves and ourselves in the midst of the larger story!

This larger story includes that the entire nation is at war somewhere all the time. It has an effect on how we all live. War dramatically shifts money from schools and infrastructure. It is the big story that is *not* told across the United States. COMPASS, in very personal terms, lifts up this national story for those willing to listen and embrace their own role. Again, Strong-hearts play a role of inculcating the experiences of war into the larger society. The inclusion of Strong-hearts makes the circle a microcosm of the United States. The veterans are from different wars; Iraq and Afghanistan back to Viet Nam. Different missions, different warzones, different roles provide diverse and rich experiences to lift up and hold. We do this for each other so the reality of war is not put on a shelf or stored in a closet. War’s realities changes souls. COMPASS is designed to help us embrace war’s realities and learn from those experiences. Perhaps accepting the truth of war is a step into a world where we all can seek and relish peace. Strong-hearts have opened up themselves to share and empathize. Their role is essential for healing the invisible wounds of war.

References

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