

The Complexity of Loss and Grief

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Abstract

Military culture, which is a slice of contemporary American culture, is a culture familiar with trauma, loss, and grief. Trauma, loss, and grief are complex, deep, and carry the potential to build up or tear down the Soldier, military Family, and the community. Interestingly, the accumulation of a lot of little losses may produce reactions and effects that are commensurate with the overwhelming life-and-death traumas. It is easy to overlook the significance of the accumulation of sustained losses over time. Our conventional wisdom and understanding regarding loss may cause us to become reactive to trauma. We tend to run away from it and ignore it or we tend to become mired and volatile. There is a wise response to trauma that seems counter intuitive to our conventional wisdom: turn toward it, reconnect with those emotionally hurting parts within us that carry the burden of pain from the past, reconnect with others in a healing community, and reconnect with God. While grief work is complex, it need not be feared or avoided. Compassion, courage, and connection are the proven pathways that lead toward resiliency and wholeness.

A Culture of Trauma, Loss, and Grief

The men and women of the American military come from communities like yours. From there, they bring values, beliefs, and culture. As they are indoctrinated and trained, they embrace new values: loyalty, duty, and service to name a few. Service members are well trained and equipped with the best America can provide. They are courageous, intelligent, adaptive, and strong. The modern American military is very resilient. But another quality of military culture must be understood. They are a culture familiar with trauma, loss, and grief. From the beginning of their training, they are separated from family, friends, and all that is familiar. They lose some of their personal rights and freedoms for the greater good and mission. When they move to a new duty station, they leave comrades, brothers and sisters, with whom they served in combat. They go to a new duty station and start building relationships all over again. They train hard and long and leave their families to care for themselves. Service members routinely miss anniversaries, birthdays, holidays, reunions, funerals, weddings, and worship opportunities. When the military deploys into combat, they lose buddies and sometimes leave part of their soul on the battle field.

At a recent retirement ceremony I witnessed a few great Americans receive recognition for faithful service rendered to our nation. Most had 5 or more years of combat service. Many had family and friends who were present to witness the occasion. Each retiree invited family and friends to step forward for a photograph after the retirement award was presented. Most filled the stage for the picture. One retiree spent 10 of his 20 years of military service deployed overseas in combat. Interestingly, he had only one person join him for a photograph- a fellow Soldier from his unit. Where was his family? Where were his friends? Where was his community of support?

Loss of family and friends are familiar to America's warrior class. Military service takes a multidimensional toll on the service member and their family. Most of us can appreciate the obvious

losses of the military- loss of life, injury, and witnessing the horrors of war. We may not have an experience with these things, but we can imagine and we know it is painful. Soldiers understand this as well. They can find compassion and grace for themselves or another who experienced combat related trauma. But most service members do not have a personal experience with being shot, witnessing someone die in combat, or being in a life-and-death situation. Yet about a third of first time combat veterans return from war with diagnosable mental health conditions, such as depression and post traumatic stress. Why are so many hurting when they return from war? Could there be something else injuring the Soldier in addition to or besides combat related trauma? This is a complex issue and perhaps understanding the nature of trauma will bring some clarity.

Typology of Trauma

Author, Dr. Terry Wardle of Ashland Theological Seminary defines at least five types of trauma. We are very familiar with one type: event-oriented trauma. This first type is when a person is exposed to death, potential death, violence or potential violence, or injury. This is combat trauma, the automobile accident, the rape, or the terrorist strike. These are the events that are outside of our normal experience and are markedly stressful for most people. When a person is exposed to such an event, the possibility exists for them to struggle with it. Thoughts go through our mind, "Why did this happen, could I have done something to avoid it, did I deserve this, where was God, etc." We try and make meaning of the event and are often flooded with very intense and uncomfortable emotions. By nature, we don't like those feelings so we try hard to make them go away- sometimes avoiding them, sometimes turning to something to soothe the emotional upheaval and push the pain away. Often, these pain-killing / pain distracting behaviors cause problems in our life. Those problems cause more pain and the proverbial 'snowball rolling down hill' begins to build. When I thought about trauma in times past, I thought about this type. I understood trauma to be limited to this kind of stuff. Dr. Wardle goes on to define four other types of trauma that can produce the same effects associated with event-oriented trauma.

The next two categories of trauma have to do with what happened during the key developmental years, specifically ages 2 to 12. One type of trauma has to do with abuse and the other neglect. When a child gets what they did not need growing up, that is- physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, certain distortions about self and others could easily be introduced into the spirit of that person. They might believe they are bad, defective, unlovable, dirty, or worthless. Believing these lies can generate intense emotional upheaval. Thus the pain-avoidance cycle begins and our life situation begins to suffer. This can last for a lifetime if we do not recognize and find healing for it. The other developmental category of trauma is very similar to abuse, and it stems from not getting what was needed. Indeed, a form of abuse is neglect. If a child was deprived of constant reinforcement of their value, dignity, and worth, they could grow up with many false beliefs. The false beliefs feed the emotional pain. The emotional pain drives one toward dysfunctional behaviors, and the dysfunctional behaviors destroy our life context. Many people would like to simply leave the past in the past and move on. Unfortunately, the emotional memory of the painful past is buried alive and it can 'live on' for a lifetime if unaddressed. I heard a speaker say, "The best thing you can do as a parent for your children is to make sense of your own childhood as an adult." Reconciling and healing developmental wounds frees us from depression and living in constant pain.

The fourth category of trauma has to do with betrayal. When a person close to us or an institution we trust violates our trust, we experience a trauma. It is common to experience confusion, betrayal, and

rage when we are hurt by someone or something close to us. In that moment, we try to make sense of what happened. The human brain is wired to find the shortest path to an answer. Often that shortest path leads to our self. We might think and feel, "I was a fool to trust... I am stupid for opening up... I should have seen this coming... etc." This rationalization puts the burden squarely on us and then the intense feelings come: shame, guilt, anger, rage, betrayal, vengeful, bitter, and perhaps many more. Emotional pain drives the destructive behaviors, the behaviors destroy our marriage, family, job, and community. When I understood these first four categories, I said to myself, "Well, yes, of course. I can see that clearly." If I thought long and hard, I probably could have come up with those. They make sense. But there is another category that I would not have guessed.

Dr. Wardle calls the fifth category of trauma sustained duress. This category of trauma is often overlooked, marginalized, and in terms of effects, underestimated. Sustained duress could be defined as no single event-based trauma exists, but the potential for it happening over a period of time is probable. This is the situation where a lot of little losses takes place over time and the end state is just the same as if one had experienced a significant event-based trauma. One of my colleagues told me, "I did not get shot at, and I didn't get hit with a road-side bomb in Iraq, so why am I having such a hard time?" Upon further dialogue it was discovered this chaplain had been deployed for a total of 36 months in Iraq, non-consecutively. Two of his three combat deployments were intense. Mortars fell on his forward operating base frequently. He was the chaplain of a combat hospital where he ministered to Soldiers who were burned, shot, and who had lost limbs. Some succumbed to their wounds and died in his presence. He lived like this for 12 to 15 months a time. Imagine going to bed at night knowing that every other day for the past two months bombs fell from the sky and some hit the sleeping quarters of other Soldiers. What would go through our minds in that situation? "Will I be alive come morning? Will tonight be the night I get hit?" There was no bomb, there was no personal witness of an attack, but it could very well happen, and it could happen at any moment. With sustained duress, we are exposed to the possibility of death or injury every day. We are conditioned by the potential of trauma to remain hyper vigilant, on edge, and ready for a fight or flight.

Similarly, consider the emotional and spiritual effects of repeated losses of key attachment-figure events due to the vocation of the American military. What would it be like to miss the birth of all of your children or miss the first words or first steps of your baby? What would it be like to miss four of the last five Thanksgiving meals or Christmas celebrations? What effect would there be on a marriage where 10 of the past 20 wedding anniversaries were spent separated? What attachment wounds could be introduced to the young child who has no memory of mom or dad during the first five years of life? What could that do to the Soldier? Is it possible for the Soldier to accumulate intense grief, shame, and guilt as they try to make sense of why their family seems to be falling apart after years of neglect from the military lifestyle? Perhaps there is something profound here worthy of more examination and research. Perhaps the accumulation of lots of little losses and exposure to the possibility of trauma can explain why many struggle with depression, suicide, and stress. It is also important to note that this is not unique to the military. Separation due to work, illness, death, neglect, or divorce can produce the same effects for the civilian population as well. If the theorists are right, the end result of any type of trauma can take a person to the same place: deep wounds, false beliefs, emotional reactivity, harmful behaviors, and a disintegration of our life situation.

Emotional Reactivity: Our Human Response to Loss

When trauma happens and we feel hurt or experience loss, it is common to have those deep feelings reduce to anger. When deep feeling or anger jumps in the driver's seat of our life and takes over control of our behaviors, often things become worse. It is this effect of 'taking over control' that defines emotional reactivity. When we allow emotions to control our behaviors, we have become 'emotional'. By 'emotional' I do not mean crying or any other physiological response to emotion. Crying or other physiological responses to emotions, like shaking, tension, or sweat, are normal and part of our humanity. To be emotional, or emotionally reactive, means to allow emotions to dictate behaviors, especially behaviors directed toward others. There are two broad ways people become emotionally reactive and both are harmful to relationships. The first way is to shutdown or run away (physically and/or emotionally withdraw). This is a typical and familiar Soldier response. The second is to fight or become aggressive (attack). Think of a pendulum. One extreme is flight, the other is fight.

For most people, fight and flight are natural protective postures we experience when we face danger. You can't help but feel what you feel and you can't help the temptation to fight or flight. However, you can learn to choose what behavior you will do regardless of the emotional experience or temptation you have. This is the mark of emotional maturity and this is what resilient people learn to do. The center point of the pendulum is the goal. In between the extremes of fight and flight is a sweet spot: calm, present, compassionate, and engaged. Operating from this place when you are hurt, traumatized, or experience loss provides your best chance for resiliency and life-promoting behaviors. Practicing this insulates you from depression, PTSD, and other disorders. Operating from this centered disposition requires awareness of self, acknowledging the emotion and the temptation to fight or flight, and it requires a choice to not follow the emotion. This is difficult and it feels unnatural. However, if you do what feels natural in that moment of loss, offense, or hurt, you'll probably swing to that familiar place of fight or flight and create more problems.

The pathway to maturity is much like the conditioning of Soldier battle drills. Soldiers learn to recognize the conditions required to take action and then practice healthy reactions to an extreme situation. They practice it over and over again in a safe environment. When the need arises on the battle field, they automatically know what to do. In combat, all Soldiers feel fear. They just don't allow that feeling of fear to control their behaviors. This is courage: choosing to function and behave right even though you're afraid. In relationships, it's the same. We must learn to recognize our style when we become emotionally reactive and come to a place, through practice, of choosing to not follow those emotions and choosing to follow life promoting, Spirit-empowered behaviors.

Reconnecting: A Spiritual Response to Loss

Trauma and loss has the potential to break connections within self, with others, and with God. Jesus said, *"Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens... you will find rest for your souls."* Matthew 11:28 (NIV). In that simple scripture, I see many ingredients for healing those connections: reconnection, recognizing the pain, humility, and a willingness to accept support from others. Reconnecting produces rest and comfort. Through a compassionate, grace-filled community, God invites us to: turn inward, slow down, embrace pain, and accept support. This is the proven pathway for turning a loss into an opportunity for growth and comfort for others.

Turn Inward. Pain tempts us to look outward- to blame, to rationalize, or to avoid. We must learn to look inward at the painful memory from an 'adult' and compassion-filled perspective, rather than blaming others or trying to change our external world. We must recognize, acknowledge, and experience

emotions associated with the pain that we buried deep inside. The burden is on the inside. Turning inward puts our attention where it should be.

Slow Down. The process of inner healing demands a conscious recognition of the triggers of past trauma with a healthy dose of compassion. We must learn to say, “I am not going crazy. Right now I am feeling overwhelmed, threatened, and very nervous. I know I’m safe even though my body is telling me something different. Slow down, breath, and relax...” I cannot help how I feel. But if I choose to slow down, I can make a choice about what to do in light of how I feel.

Embrace Pain. Our temptation is to isolate the pain of our inner world, stuff it down, and run away. Battle drills condition Soldiers to turn toward the enemy. Facing the enemy is our strongest position and best chance for victory. The same applies to the pain of trauma. With courage, we must turn toward the pain and process it. We embrace pain by grieving and mourning. Western culture is uncomfortable with grieving and mourning; those words seem like weakness. They are not signs of weakness. Humans are designed to process pain through grieving and mourning. Examine the many Psalms of lament. They model this and offer a template for us. Failure to embrace the pain will produce many dysfunctions that can destroy our life situation.

Accept Support. Accepting support from others often triggers shame, especially for men. It feels like we are a failure, we are not good enough, or we are incompetent. The fact is we need each other. We cannot process pain alone. A mature leader is surrounded with wise counselors, competency in the areas they are deficient, and men and women who can spur them on toward strength. Similarly, we must connect with others who are on the healing path, who are able to handle pain well, and who have our best interests in mind. Wholeness and resiliency demand reconnecting to a grace-filled community.

Conclusion

While trauma, loss, and grief present differently for everyone, the helping and spiritual professionals should not be afraid to engage people who are hurting. While these issues are complex, they are not impossible. I have found the best way to engage others suffering with grief or loss is to walk the journey of healing myself. This makes sense when one considers the words of Paul to the Christians in Corinth, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God” 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 (NIV). God has designed his comfort and healing to flow from the wounded to the wounded. By my human nature, I want God’s healing to flow miraculously from him to me with our others seeing my pain. But that is not God’s design; that is shame working in me. The ministry we are called to is the same ministry of Jesus Christ. This is the ministry of Jesus Christ: a wounded healer. By His wounds, we are healed. God invites each of us to become little wounded healers. As we invite more of God’s mercy, love, grace, and healing power into our past loss, we experience comfort, strength, and resiliency. As we stay on the journey of vulnerability within a grace-filled spiritual community, where we are truly known by others and free of condemnation and shame, we are able to allow God’s healing to flow from our sacred story into the lives of others.

Connecting with God, others, and the painful parts within each of us, relating to them with compassion, and facing the pain with courage is the pattern we see in the life and ministry of the saints and the Lord Jesus Christ. It is this journey toward intimacy with God and others that is terrifying to our culture, yet incredibly attractive when we witness it working. People need the healing power of God. That healing

power is designed to flow through the community of wounded healers in the Church. As I began to reconnect, relate with compassion, and muster courage to face my combat related trauma and unresolved issues from my past, I was pleasantly surprised. I did not receive rejection and disqualification, as I anticipated. Quite the contrary, ministry marked by transformed lives, grew in front of me. Opportunities to speak into others presented themselves with little effort. Credibility and authority to speak on topics increased. Depth and quality of connections with others developed in ways never experienced before. Renewed intimacy with God and my family developed. Comfort and strength grew inside of me and with others who were also on the journey of inner healing.

The present generation is looking for something real and authentic. Many of them are hurting yet had pretty easy lives, relatively free of event-based trauma. However, they might very well have accumulated significant 'little losses' along the way. This is certainly true for the modern American Soldier and family. They appear more attracted to an authentic relationship than a credential. They might sooner listen to a personal story; a testimony of God's healing work, than a sermon. They will more than likely relate to one who is on the journey themselves than a theory. This presents an opportunity for the Church to connect, show compassion, and model courage for a young adult cohort desperate for something authentic. With calmness and compassion, may we make sense of our past losses and find comfort from God for the sake of those hurting around us!