

Treatment of Modern Warriors

A Need for Conscience Sensitive Therapy: a clinician's reflections upon reading The Moral treatment of Returning Warriors in Early Medieval and Modern Times

John E. Sullivan, MSW, LCSW

This essay couples excerpts from Professor Bernard J. Verkamp's book, The Moral Treatment of Returning Warriors in Early Medieval and Modern Times, with commentary based on conducting therapy with Veterans of various campaigns at the VAMC in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Conscience Works: Theory, Research and Clinical Applications. 2010.3(2): 1-7.

Dr. Verkamp's discussion of two transformations: 1) In the thinking about the origins and nature of political power and therefore war; 2) The moral treatment of returning warriors from early Medieval to Modern Times, is both enlightening and well-documented. His historical sketch of these cross-currents of change enabled me to understand a third transformation of great import to therapists which is:

...the redefinition of the Greek word for the *soul* which is (ψυχή) *psyche*. Originally referring to soul/mind as in "Doctors of the Soul", *psyche* is now associated with the brain and even brain chemistry. While still denoting mind, the soul, thought by many to be immortal, has found its death in the modern usage of this Greek expression.

The following questions are central:

Where do these transformations leave soldiers, those in the helping profession and society with attempts to reintegrate these men and women back into our communities?

What is required for treatment to be considered holistic?

If someone believes they have betrayed their own values, morals, conscience—their essence (soul), but did so because every one of their so-called "choices" was morally reprehensible and emotionally devastating: Can our current approaches to treatment address the gravity and depth of one's reaction to this perceived self-betrayal?

Note: To distinguish between excerpts from the book and my commentary, the latter appear in *italics*.

History of Transformations —

Dr. Verkamp's book traces the transformation of the treatment of moral pain from the "demise of formal penances" to the "triumph of the therapeutic".

Already by the end of the 11th century, the practice of imposing formal penances on returning warriors was becoming increasingly outmoded...

By the start of the High middle Ages, the rationale for this practice was itself being challenged from a number of directions. [This] started us down the road toward the situation we now find ourselves in where the moral pain of returning soldiers is largely ignored. How then is the therapist to respond when the soldier says, "There are some things that are just wrong"?

He shares Paul Ramsey's explanation of the rationale for undermining the early medieval practice of penitence. ... as church officials themselves began to summon individual soldiers to take up arms in defense of the faith against heretics, they became increasingly less inclined to impose penances upon returning soldiers from any kind of war, lest in doing so they discourage a positive response to their own call to arms for religious purposes.

In summation, Dr. Verkamp states: Neither individually nor cumulatively, can these theories explain adequately how the rationale for imposing penance [came to be] replaced altogether in the modern world by a therapeutic mentality that all but ignores the moral pain of soldiers coming home from war.

To assist us in understanding how this came to be he discusses the role of secularism in these transformations.

The Role of Secularism in these Transformations —

Underpinning these transformations was what the author calls the “phenomenon of secularization.” He notes: ...a process whereby, as James Johnson has pointed out, “ideas and ideals rooted in the spiritual and applied to earthly life began—precisely because of this application—to lose their transcendental connections and to be recast as secular constructions of thought.” (1)

At the heart of this phenomenon was the affirmation of the autonomy of man and the world and few areas of human endeavor were left untouched. [*Dr. Verkamp reminds us that*] the seeds of the secularization of politics had already been sown in Thomas Aquinas’s embrace of the Aristotelian notion of the state as a product of nature.

John of Paris stretched this Christian Aristotelian insistence upon the autonomy of nature and morality to mean that “even without Christ as ruler there is the true and perfect justice which is required for the state, since the state is ordered to living in accordance with acquired moral virtue, to which it is accidental that it be perfected by any further virtues.” (2)

Verkamp's scholarly description of the transformative paths we have traveled enabled this writer to gain insight into the alteration of the original meaning of the Greek word ([ψυχή](#)) "pucho/psyche". Having once denoted soul and mind, its current usage while retaining its reference to the mind is evermore associated with the brain and brain chemistry. As such explanations of human behavior have also been impacted by the “*phenomenon of secularization.*” For example, there is no room for consideration of moral (ought to be) or the role of conscience when explaining behavior. Therefore, "moral pain of the returning soldier is largely ignored." Instead the focus has shifted to neuropathways, habituation and conditioning.

My concern is not the inclusion of the brain and the understanding of its function to our working with clients; it is the exclusion of the soul.

The Triumph of the Therapeutic and a Holistic Approach —

Clearly, the human endeavor of reintegrating returning warriors into society has not been left untouched by the “phenomenon of secularization”.

Professor Verkamp writes: With the “triumph of the therapeutic” modern society has found it difficult to deal with the returning soldier’s pangs of conscience. In the dominant, naturalistic mood of our day, J. Glenn Gray wrote following World War II, psychologists and philosophers generally, “tended to view guilt feelings as the hindrance to the free development of personality and the achievement of life-affirming outlook.” (3)

What then is to be done with feelings of guilt when those treating returning soldiers view this emotion as a persistent, annoying obstacle? Although he does not address this question specifically, I believe the following can be considered a response. By having his guilt traced to the “darker, subconscious levels of the soul,” and its “backward-looking character” contrasted to the “future-directed impulses of the natural man, the individual soldier “is released as far as possible from regret for past deeds and from the hard duty to improve his character.” (4)

Gray added, “Even the simplest soldier suspects that it is unpopular to be burdened with guilt.”(5) “If he brings up feelings that oppress him, Gray noted, “Everyone from his pastor to his doctor is likely...to urge him to ‘forget it.’ ” (6)

This may have been exactly what some had wanted to hear. But others could not forget and those who could not were often diagnosed as “sick,” with their feelings of guilt and shame being associated with a species of illness, which must be cured by psychiatric treatment.” (7)

Guilt and Conscience —

It is clearly a dilemma of immense proportion when those in the helping profession do not give credence to fundamental aspects of human nature. The following excerpts exemplify how treatment issues that were of primary concern (guilt and conscience) to those using formal penances to treat moral pain are no longer part of the treatment plan.

Professor Verkamp writes: There is no recognition of conscience as being part of “human nature,” or of guilt as a “natural” complement to man’s innate knowledge of good and evil. (8) Instead, both conscience and guilt are conceived as “either derived from divine authority or manufactured by a culture and somehow imposed on the individual.” (9)

The transformation (paradigm shift) from psyche meaning soul/mind to the exclusion of terms such as soul, heart and conscience from psychiatric parlance has painted psychiatrists and therapists of all stripes into a corner where moral pain exists, but can neither be acknowledged nor “treated”. Additionally, an understanding of the endowment of the natural disposition within humans by their Creator was replaced with the secular notion of what comprises “human nature”.

It can be argued that if the secular ideas of the “uninhibited natural man” and “human autonomy” are accurate, then so many Veterans from WWII and Vietnam would not continue to seek relief from their symptoms 55 and 40 years respectively after the fact—trauma event(s).

Something is amiss—

Professor Verkamp explains the post-Vietnam commentators were objecting to the tendency of so many therapists to overlook the possibility that “in addition to” the psychic stress soldiers might be feeling, there might also be “a profound moral pain,” or that some soldiers who were without any “clinical symptoms” might nonetheless “be afflicted with a deep moral and spiritual malaise.” (10)

To reduce all the soldiers’ “symptoms to stress,” therefore, was to “empty the vets’ experience of moral content, to defuse and bowdlerize it.” (11)

Professor Verkamp believes it might [make sense] in modern times, notwithstanding protests of the therapists to the contrary, still to think that a soldier’s moral pain might be something other than neurotic and actually have a rational base. This raises the question: Can 21st century therapists think rationally about the role the following non-psychiatric terms might play in the course of treatment?

Non-Psychiatric Terms

Conscience

Moral Pain

Psyche (soul = original meaning)

Contrition

Absolution

Confession

The animation of guilt

Even though these terms are not in the DSM-IV, they will not go away. As we see below, they continue to appear in the writings of post-Vietnam commentators. In my opinion, this is precisely because they are inherent to our natural disposition and even the “phenomenon of secularization” cannot expunge them. For example, Mahedy states:

Because these traditional conventions of warfare [the dictates of a “just-war theory” and assessing past actions “in terms of their irrevocable consequences to others”] “correspond to the common soldier’s intuitions” and seem almost to be “written on the soul,” or “engraved in the soldier’s psyche”, they constitute, Mahedy suggests, “a

crucial backdrop against which to set the [vet's] own personal war story," and to "liberate [him/her] from a narcissistic retreat into the purely private domain of his own feelings." (12) (My emphasis)

Until such an examination of conscience is made, therefore, he concludes that the veteran's journey out of the night" will necessarily remain "unfinished", (13) *i.e. no closure and as such no freedom to move beyond a survival mode to actually living.*

But in examining his or her conscience, the returning soldier might also discover that "*sacred moral norms*" and "deeply held convictions" have indeed been personally violated, with terribly "real and permanent" consequences... (14) (My emphasis)

...the returning soldier with an "*awakened conscience*" might also come to see his or her share in what modern soldiers have variously referred to as "metaphysical guilt," (15) "the wound in the order of being," (16) "the world's pain," (17) "surd evil,"... (18) (My emphasis)

If there is ever to be a truly holistic approach to treatment, the suffering soul and pained conscience necessitates a return to components found in the approach used to treat moral pain discussed in the beginning of this insightful book.

A Rational Discussion of "Non-psychiatric Terms"—

Dr. Verkamp makes clear his position vis-à-vis gleaning from past principles for dealing with contemporary moral dilemmas: It is in the spirit of cumulative efforts to defend human autonomy, even while seeking to preserve the values and principles of another age, that my own suggestions for getting beyond the therapeutic are intended.

Early medieval theologians, treating the moral pain of returning warriors were definitely onto something. Why has it taken us so long, so many wars to realize this? Gai Eaton suggests a reason for this delay when he writes about our paternalistic disdain for the intellect and contributions of our ancestors:

"Western culture is unique in that it has broken completely with its past except as an historical curiosity. Since the 18th century of the Christian era (if not before) people in the West have been incapable of understanding the mindset of their ancestors, incapable of empathizing with those ancestors. There has been a break in continuity that has no parallel elsewhere in the human world. Belief in "progress" has made it possible to ignore and even to despise the men and women who lived as Christians in the European Middle Ages, the "Ages of Faith". They were ignorant. We live by the light of science. They were superstitious, but we know the world as it really is". (19)

Professor Verkamp shares what Post-Vietnam commentators have written regarding these unspeakable "Non-psychiatric Terms.

Far from being an exercise in self-pity or self-torture, contrition, then, was meant to be an expression of regret over the pain that one's deeds have caused others. [A view shared by early medieval theologians, especially Augustine of Hippo]. And if soldiers know that as a result of their own wartime behavior, or because of their complicity in the "sins of the nation and the world," innocent, or even not-so-innocent, lives have been lost, villages destroyed, ecologies ruined, or animal life wasted, why should they not grieve? Unless they are totally preoccupied, as the Nietzschean mind-set seems to be, with the creation, ex nihilo, of one's own self, how can returning soldiers not bewail the terrible toll of their wartime deeds?

...early medieval theologians were not oblivious to such concerns about future behavior. To be genuine, they said, an act of contrition must also include a firm purpose of amendment. (20) In fact, in the early Church the sinner could not even expect to be reconciled until such time as he or she had actually reformed. (21) That eventually changed to allow for the substitution of an intention to reform for actual reform, but it was still thought that the sorrow for sin was insufficient if it did not include the resolution to improve in the future. (22)

Soldiers returning from modern wars and confessing their sins may also have a need for absolution. Therapists see this as a sign of weakness. “Those who assume that they must feel guilty until someone else forgives them,” Walter Kaufmann writes, “are clearly not autonomous.” (23)

...Marin notes in this regard that “it is no more possible to ‘absolve’ oneself of guilt than it is to bring the dead back to life or erase the suffering one has caused.”

Rather than being a magical formula for exonerating sinners of all their past misdeeds, [in Medieval times absolution was] meant to be simply a declaration by those who had been offended that they would not hold it against the penitent. [Surely] individuals who have been wronged have as much right to forgive others as to forgive themselves.

...the whole goal of confession of sins and the animation of guilt is the reintegration or reconciliation of the penitent with the rest of mankind, it would seem quite natural for penitents to seek forgiveness from those against whom they have offended and with whom they want to be at peace.

Conclusion—

Though their [veterans of modern wars] guilt and shame “ought to bring them deeper into the human community,” more often than not it only “isolates them...sets them irrevocably apart, locks them simultaneously into a seriousness and a silence that are as much a cause of pain as are their past actions. They become suffering pariahs not only because of what they have done but because of the *questions it raises for them*—questions that their countrymen do not want to confront, questions for which as a society [*and therapeutic community*] we have no answers.” (24) (My emphasis)

Endnotes

1. Johnson, *Quest for Peace*, 127.
2. Marsilius, *Defender of Peace*, xlvi; see also Ullmann, *History of Political Thought*, 200-204.
3. Gray, *The Warriors*, 174.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Marin, "Modern Therapies," 22
9. Ibid. Marin notes that "morality itself was often treated in Freud's work as a form of social intervention or outside imposition, something fundamentally alien to the individual ego" ("Living in Moral Pain," 74).
10. Mahedy, *Out of the Night*, 95.
11. Marin, "Living in Moral Pain," 72.
12. Mahedy, *Out of the Night*, 114.
13. Ibid.
14. See Marin, "Living in Moral Pain," 74; Mahedy, *Out of the Night*, 103,111,114.
15. Gray, *The Warriors*, 195-97.
16. Buber, "Guilt and Guilt Feelings," 120.
17. Marin, "Living in Moral Pain," 79; Marin, "Modern Therapies," 25 Marin, "Coming to Terms with Vietnam," 50.
18. Lifton, *Home from the War*, 124.
19. Eaton, Gai
20. See *NCE* 11:80
21. See *NCE* 11:80
22. See *NCE* 11:1050.
23. Kaufmann, *Without Guilt and Justice*, 125.
24. Marin, "Living in Moral Pain," 74.

