

## Reflections on War

Contributed by Gary Bachman, MSSW, LSCSW

Eleven years ago, in my first semester as an "adjunct" university faculty, I was invited to participate in a workshop for new classroom instructors. In our second session, one of the new faculty, a Ph.D. student, requested guidance on how to deal with a challenging student in her practice class. Asked to describe the student, she offered, "He's a Vietnam Veteran type." I, embracing all the calm and control I could muster, calmly asked for further clarification. {mosgoogle right}

"Oh, you know, baby killer, murderer, rapist. Scary like." Inside my chest, something fragile cracked. But I let it pass. The mentor nodded, and a discussion of classroom dynamics ensued. Reaching out to our mentor a couple of days later, I was offered assurance, "I'm sure she didn't mean anything." And, "Besides, the student is a veteran." On reflection, it occurred to me that my characterizing someone as a "homo type" or "street prostitute type" would not have been so comfortably tolerated in this otherwise liberal university setting.

"There's somethin' happenin' here. What it is, ain't exactly clear..."

As a child, like many boys of my generation, I was fascinated with tales of war and the reenactment of slaughter on the grandest of scale. In the seventh grade, I purchased a book with a red cover emblazoned with a white circle and black swastika. Written by Miklos Nyiszli, the title was simple enough: Auschwitz. I don't need to relate the story as we've all heard it. (But were we all listening?) Its telling at this time in my young life changed this life. That single book was a seed for what has become my life's passion, as well as my professional practice. How could anyone have known at the time? Mrs. Hagen, my favorite teacher, might have had some inkling. She was remarkable about such stuff. But certainly no one else suspected. Sadly, frighteningly, what I recognized in that book and the thousands of others that have followed was that in each of us is the potential for unfathomable intolerance and cruelty. Right along with the capacity for as-yet-realized compassion, understanding, growth, and peace. It is indeed about the choices we make—choices molded by the obstacles as well as advantages encountered along the way.

"I'm gonna lay down that sword and shield, down by the riverside..."

Peculiarly, I am still fascinated by the words of warriors and those who chronicle their deeds. And I will, in spite of the song we sang in church this past Sunday, continue to study those words with vigor. As the sword and shield rust to nothingness in the mud, I know that there are plenty more where they came from.

Just a year before my discovering the story of Auschwitz, my father had died in a veteran's hospital. As an adult, I have wondered what he thought of my unbridled enthusiasm for war. A third generation cattleman, his uniform was that of a Stetson hat, Hyer's boots, and a tooled leather ranger belt with silver and gold buckle from old Mexico. I never imagined him in that plain seaman's uniform he wore in the picture on my grandmother's nightstand. And I never heard his stories of New Guinea, Guam, Iwo Jima, Ie Shima, or Okinawa. My father was no warrior, as he told no stories to fill my impressionable mind. In the war, he was just a "hospital corpsman." And everyone knows that hospitals are safe. Perhaps his silence spoke volumes that I didn't understand. Certainly, his frequent acts of kindness and compassion for friends and strangers alike spoke volumes that I would only come to recognize in their later absence.

James Bradley, the son of another navy corpsman, wrote a book titled *Flags of Our Fathers*. He tells of uncovering the story that his father had refused to give voice to. But the son did give voice to that truthful and terrifying story with words of horror, pain, grief, loss, hate, and finally rebirth and hope. It is a painful accounting of the ignorance and fear and hate that drove young men to mercilessly slaughter one another a half century ago. Honorable Japanese men and idealistic American men, boys really. Not unlike us still today, driven to do the unimaginable through a limited understanding of a diverse world that is subject to manipulation and exploitation by political and religious ideologists. In a world full of fear, hate, intolerance and ignorance, where poverty and disease beg for a culprit, rigid ideology and efficient weaponry offer the invisible a recognizable image, and the unheard a loud resounding voice.

"When Johnny comes marching home again..."

The current volume and distribution of personnel returning from overseas duty, back into their families, civilian employment and expectations, in rural as well as urban environments, virtually demands that all social workers must be prepared to recognize and professionally respond to emerging needs. This preparation must include baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral level students, generalists and clinical alike. Complicating this response is the practice of the uniformed services and the VA system to employ, with few exceptions, only clinicians with the MSW or similar advanced "clinical" training. Similarly, student internships through the VA are largely restricted to master's level students in clinical tracks. All of this is in spite of the established reality that much of the burden of our current "global war" is being leveled on the backs of men and women, reservists and national guard, from largely rural communities. Beyond the VA system, it will often be baccalaureate prepared social workers who are typically employed in the variety of direct service/case management roles in the area of community mental health, homelessness, child protection, domestic violence, foster care, public schools, acute care hospitals, physical rehabilitation/skilled nursing facilities, and nonprofit as well as state social welfare services, that will most often be

stepping into the gap to confront this surge.

"We gotta get outta this place..."

Similarly, although the past eight years have been marked by a decline in the number of individuals and families seeking shelter in the United States as refugees, we are just beginning to experience the increasing volume of refugee "resettlements" expected to occur in coming years. What have these families suffered? The U.S. is just one nation confronting war and terrorism, and American educated social workers will be confronting such issues across the globe and at home. In many such presentations, these new neighbors will have been exposed to the same or greater threats as our returning troops, and they will in many ways be dealing with similar challenges compounded by language or cultural differences. Generalist social workers, prepared to recognize those similarities as well as the unique differences, and thus respond appropriately, will be in great and valued demand.

"Last night I had the strangest dream I've ever had before..."

We must also acknowledge the reality that social work education has long been characterized as a "liberal" bastion of anti-war sentiment. Jane Addams was expelled from the "Daughters of the American Revolution" in response to her outspoken opposition to the United States entry into World War I. And the only dissenting vote in either the Senate or Congress to our entry into World War II came from a social worker who was the first woman elected to Congress, Jeanette Rankin. The current demographic profile of social work educators reveals that the majority of current faculty came "of age" in the midst of the unpopular American war in Vietnam. Contributing to our historic rejection of war as well as warriors is an awareness that around the world, "the military" has readily been wielded as a lethal political instrument. A student in class recently described "soldiers" dragging her sister from the family tent in a refugee camp. Neither identified as government or rebel, they were simply the anonymous amalgam of people with guns: soldiers. Social work educators must be sensitive to, but cautious of, such generalizations.

We must be aware of perpetuating injustice when we ourselves fail to discern the differences. What measure of brutalization is perhaps prolonged when a helping profession avoids or denies the unique vulnerabilities and needs of any population? What becomes of our dear pursuit of justice when compassion and access to skilled professional care is denied as a consequence of ignorance, organizational denial, or political persuasion?

We must also be cautious in our reaching out and advocacy, so as not to presume or perpetuate such stereotypes as the characters in *The Deer Hunter* or *Taxi Driver*. Even the sympathetic portrayal of young guardsmen in last year's *Stop Loss* compromises the recognition of truth when it stands in for our conversations with real, everyday neighbors.

Acknowledging a conveniently obscure reality, many of our older social work schools and programs were founded and initially funded specifically to address the pressing needs of returning troops from both the first and second world wars. Today we face another reality: the combined duration of the United States "declared" commitments in two "world wars" alone only amounted to 65 months. Since our initial incursion into Afghanistan in 2001, our citizen soldiers (at the time of this writing in April 2009) have been in continued armed conflict for 92 months. And there is no clear end in sight.

America, where are you now? We can't fight alone against the monster...

We cannot afford to avoid the growing populations of men, women, and children whose well being has been, or might reasonably be expected to be, profoundly affected by the consequences of what is officially described as a "global war on terrorism." Individuals, families, and communities are today facing unfamiliar and often overwhelming challenges only compounded by widespread economic woes. Whereas many of the challenges are remarkably similar to those that social workers have long been successfully helping others confront and overcome through such pursuits as advocacy, crisis intervention, resource finding, case management, brokerage of services, education, and counseling, there are new and confounding challenges that demand a measure of focused preparation and sensitivity.

On the surface, "military social work" may represent something we have been taught to despise. Is that cause enough to turn away? Perhaps it's cause enough to embrace. The armed forces of the United States are actively recruiting social workers for civilian support positions, as well as appointments as commissioned officers. And they are also offering graduate scholarships for baccalaureate graduates in exchange for commitments to serve. The unfortunate reality is that we and our students will all be dealing with issues related to military service in the "Global War on Terror" for the duration of our professional careers. As responsible educators and practitioners, we cannot and must not turn away from that reality. Think of it as your mandatory service. The Council on Social Work Education recently convened a task force on veterans' affairs. It is this group's charge to identify issues and means by which social workers might better serve this significant population. Representing the Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors (BPD) on this task force, I in turn reached out through multiple venues, seeking to learn from social workers already practicing in this environment. In turn, I've heard from hundreds of social work educators and practitioners, veterans of earlier as well as the current conflict, active duty personnel, parents, grandparents, spouses and partners, siblings, and neighbors. And many colleges and universities are developing courses and special sequences to prepare social workers to respond to these needs.

We have much before us. "Come on people now. Smile on your brother...."

## Credits

Auschwitz, A Doctor's Eyewitness Account, by Dr. Miklos Nyiszli, 1960.

Flags of our Fathers, by James Bradley, 1998.

"For What It's Worth," words by Stephen Stills, recorded by Buffalo Springfield, 1967.

"Down by the River Side," in the public domain.

"When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again," by Henry Tolman, 1863, public domain.

"Monster," by Steppenwolf, words and music by John Kay, Jerry Edmonton, Nick St. Nicholas, & Larry Byrom, © Copyright MCA Music (BMI), 1970.

"Smile on Your Brother," by the Youngbloods, 1967.

"We Gotta Get Out of This Place," by Eric Burden, 1965.

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