

Special Guest Introduction

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My brain learns from everything that it experiences. That's what neurologists call a "plastic" brain.

If I lose my eyesight, my brain shifts those neurons to my other senses; I may end up with more acute hearing or the ability to smell a hot chocolate-chip cookie from half a mile away. It's a remarkable way of diverting neurological resources to where they are needed most.

But God designed us to love, not to fight, so war traumatizes our brains. We end up with images seared into it that we can't forget, can't escape.

Hundreds of thousands of America's warriors live tortured lives. But you can't really see the scars. Our warriors came home with all their arms and legs. They came home without any obvious wounds. Their psyches were scarred, however, and their brains have learned from that searing experience.

That's why they walk down a small-town street, scanning the rooftops and windows for bad guys with guns, or why they hide out on the Fourth of July, trying to escape the firecrackers and mortars that make them relive past terrors.

That's why they drink to drown the guilt that comes from breaking every rule they were taught as Boy Scouts or in church ... or perhaps the guilt that comes from surviving when everyone else died that day.

Listen, for instance, to Lee Ballinger in his upcoming book, *Love and War*:

Twenty years ago when I moved to California
I went to Wells Fargo to open a bank account
The teller was young, beautiful, Vietnamese

My first thought was

"You know, I might have fucked your mama"

My second thought was

"You know, I might have killed your mama"

I took my receipt

Went outside

And threw up on the sidewalk

And you wonder why I have trouble sleeping?

You wonder why I broke the lamp and punched a hole in the wall?

You wonder why road rage makes me feel so good?

My body came back but not my mind

I will always be ten thousand miles away.

This edition is primarily about the voices of America's warriors and the emotional chaos that they brought back from one or another of America's innumerable wars in the last fifty years, a string of conflicts that stretches back almost unendingly to Vietnam. It's also about how to continue to live after combat.

Neuroplasticity suggests there ought to be a way to get back to where we used to be. There ought to be a way to reboot our brains after trauma to escape the hyper-vigilance, the depression, the night terrors and the flashbacks.

Those flashbacks, incidentally, are hellish. They're like a movie in your mind that you can't turn off. One friend was driving down a busy street when he glanced down at a pothole and looked up to find himself in the middle of a convoy racing through Iraq. He knew where he really was (within a few miles of his home in Montana), but he couldn't see it—so he stopped his car in the middle of a busy road until the flashback ended.

Obviously, we don't know how to fix our brains after we've subjected them to the trauma of war.

But we need to develop a cure. The Rand Corporation released a study a few years ago suggesting that one in three soldiers returning from conflict would suffer emotional damage that would require treatment, either temporarily or permanently.

New statistics from the Veterans Administration show that study was right on the money. Traumatized vets are overloading our treatment centers.

Two points seem critical.

First, we shouldn't be sending our boys into conflict except when our country is actually attacked, and we shouldn't be sending our girls into conflict ever. When we need to mobilize, let's draft everyone, rich and poor alike.

Second, let's make a policy to put one dollar in the recovery effort for every dollar we put into the war machine. Let's begin to find ways to help combat vets live peacefully with who they are now, not who they used to be.

Former Army Chaplain Hardie Higgins argues that combat strips away the belief system that soldiers grew up with, leaving them empty. "The key to recovery for victims of PTSD, I believe, to assist them in discovering the redemptive meaning of their suffering and how to use that suffering to add meaning to their future life," he asserts.

Ed Tick, a psychotherapist who founded the nonprofit group Soldier's Heart, insists that atonement is critical for healing. Creating a new post-warrior identity for themselves and sharing it with their community can lead to acceptance and spiritual peace again, while suppressing their combat experience can lead to nightmares and flashbacks. "Holistic medicine looks for true healing, not just symptom management," says Tick.

These are concepts our society needs to explore to help our veterans fit back into the world they left behind to go to war.