

An Epiphany from Several Nights of Not Being Able to Sleep

—Christopher Gilbert



I will start by saying that I currently feel like I have found myself—my sense of balance, chi, or whatever it is you want to call it—and have reached a point where I feel comfortable again. I feel this way, partly, because of the new sense of accomplishment I got after starting school this semester. It has been like achieving a long sought after goals. For me, those goals just so happened to be attending an accredited institution of higher education like

Eastern Kentucky University. It's exciting to think about what I am doing and how it will affect my future. I am transitioning from being a service member to becoming a successful leader in the civilian world. I am accompanied by a new drive to do better in life.

Until recently, it felt like I had lost something in Iraq. It felt like I had lost *who I used to be* before entering the military. When I look back, I see myself as a young man who was kind, nice to others, mellow, reserved, carefree and someone who could always see the good in any given situation. Now, when I look in the mirror I see someone totally different; the old me is somehow *gone*. I feel like a central piece of that young man from my past is missing. For some time, this made me feel lost and confused. Things seemed hopeless. I had no sense of direction after leaving the military.

I felt this way until recently when I had an epiphany after not able to sleep. It just came to me. So I sat down and wrote it onto paper. Fear and stress caused by the constant little voices in my head saying, “look out” or “wake up” or “someone is standing by the bed” have made it very hard to sleep. I still find myself on “high-alert” all the time. And, most of the time, I don’t even realize it. Have you heard of the fight or flight syndrome? That’s me all the time. After long periods without sleep, I find myself tired and drained. I cannot concentrate on simple tasks like reading a magazine or writing a short story. I doze off at the most inopportune times, like when I am in the middle of class.

The feeling is even stronger now that I have become a husband and father. I have taken on the responsibility of role model and leader. Some of you might think that it is only natural to be a little worried. I mean, with the never ending stories on the news of violence and crime sprees, what kind of father would not be worried? You might find it unusual, though, when this pattern continues for weeks on end. The pattern becomes even more unusual when dealing with the new stress that accompanies performing simple tasks that I used to love.

Now things like working on my car, house, and home only make me mad. Here is an example: I used to love to work on automobiles; but now I no longer have the patience to even try. At least, I cannot undertake repair work calmly or without damaging something around me or on the vehicle. I have anger outbursts. These outbursts can start with something as simple as trying to put a nut on a bolt. After a few minutes of failing to get the bolt to go where it should, I feel the stress, tension, and anger build up inside of me. It is like a tea kettle about to blow its lid. My shoulder blades, neck, arms and head get increasingly tense until I finally transform into a miniature hulk, cursing, smashing, throwing, and hitting everything around me.

After it is over I always wish that I had not let myself lose myself control. My regret is also exacerbated by finding that I have something else to fix because of my outburst. I used to contain myself and never get mad at anything (except

someone trying to put their hands on me or my family). When the anger comes, I feel like a stick of dynamite with a short fuse: any little thing can set me off. This is the primary reason why I have so much trouble going to sleep. I constantly worry about what will set me off next. I always feel like someone is after me. It is like having a radio with tuning dials that pick up all kinds of static. The static represents my worries. Sometimes the static makes sense and other times you just do not know what you are hearing.

At times, I have felt lost and angry. When I try to sleep I hear stuff like strange noises and sounds in addition to the constant ringing in my ears. I hear footsteps, people talking, and movement in a room when I am the only one there. I hear the sounds from ghost stories but, at the same time, I can assure you there is nothing there. I am well aware that it is just my imagination and anxiety running wild.

I am not saying it is the boogiemán or anything. I've never been one to believe in that stuff. Still, I just cannot keep my mind from racing. After listening to a sound in my head and clearly thinking about what the sound was, I will realize that the footsteps are my boys turning in their beds while sleeping or the dogs moving about. The other sounds are my cats playing or the plastic over the window catching the cold air from outside.

This anxiety makes it hard to keep a job. I am usually fine for the first couple of weeks. Then it seems as if my supervisors decide to forget that I am a human being and that I am a paid worker. It is about respect: If I don't talk to you like you are a child, don't talk to me like one. I can't handle people trying to yell at me or raising their voice. Not anymore. If you raise your voice or yell at me, be prepared to get the same. I can't let people think they can walk over me or that I will keep doing all their work. No, civilian employees bitch about so much more than veterans. We know things can get much, much worse and that tomorrow could be our last day.

Still, supervisors and other employees continuously fail to understand that the pissed off look on my face is more than just me making a face. In reality, this look is me fighting the urge to rip their heads off and shove them down their throats. I don't want to create any confusion about my previous work record: I have taken the high road and quit these jobs. I don't want to hurt anyone and get myself in trouble. I certainly don't want to work for minimum wage for the rest of my life. I learned to deal with some of my anxiety and anger by stepping outside and getting fresh air. I also try to look at whatever it is that is bothering me from other perspectives to get a better understanding of why I feel the way I do at a particular moment. Also, I have started working out to relieve the built up stress and tension I feel inside. Talking with my family members who are veterans helps tremendously.

Leaving the military was a drastic change for me. There are no entry level jobs in the civilian world that pay anything close to what the military pays. Most civilian employers have no clue about the kinds of training and experiences soldiers have. When I think about all the training I have no longer being useful, I just get more stressed and, again, find it hard to sleep. I cannot find jobs where my knowledge of MOUT (Military Operations in Urban Terrain) training and tactical combat training are useful.

I stay up all night to listen for sounds and fear someone or something might be trying to break into my house. It got worse for a while. Before, I only had to worry about me. Now I have to add my family to the equation. Then, I had an epiphany after not being able to sleep: the only thing I really need to fear is fear itself. I need to forget about the bullshit society throws at me every day and worry about what is important: life, family, and love.

Honestly, I am not sure I would call it an epiphany. It is really a realization of what life should truly be about. I realize now that I should only worry about what I can change, not the things I cannot change. I feel like I found the little

something from my youth I lost and that I now have the opportunity in school to make a better future for me and my family.

I know I still need help with the issues that I have been ignoring until now. Even at the request of my mom, dad, brother, sister, wife and friends I ignored what was plainly in front of me. It took me fifteen months to realize I had a problem. I have finally decided to get help for these things so that I may succeed in life and graduate college. Now it is time for me to start the next chapter in my life after being a soldier.