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January 10, 2011

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Author, 'Gated Grief: The Daughter of a G.I. Concentration Camp Liberator Discovers a Legacy of Trauma'

Posted: January 7, 2011 08:56 AM

The War That Comes Home: How PTSD Affects Our Children

This year, all our troops that have been deployed in Iraq will return home. Record numbers of the ones who have already returned -- about one-third -- have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. An unprecedented number of them have committed suicide, and it's quickly becoming clear that our society cannot afford to ignore their invisible wounds -- especially the way we ignored those of our older veterans, namely World War II soldiers.

What words would you use to describe the World War II combat veterans you have known? Humble? Hard-working? Dedicated to their families? Silent about their war experiences?

I'll bet that almost all of us -- especially we children of those veterans -- would agree to the last choice. Our fathers never talked about what they did in the war.

My father's silence spilled beyond the topic of his war years to engulf my childhood home. As we sat down for dinner, he would place Barbara Streisand and Yale Whiffenpoof albums on the stereo, their doleful songs substituting for conversation. On Sundays, he took my family for drives to a Holiday Inn where we ate dinner before driving back home. The whirring of the tires lulled me to sleep in both directions.

At his office, he was a different person. There he smiled, nodded as he listened to his patients, wrapped his arm around their shoulders. There, his eyes twinkled -- even at me. That is where I went to tell him I wanted to drop out of law school, that I needed therapy, that I couldn't bear my depression any longer -- because at his office, there was a chance that he would answer.

After my father's death, however, I discovered what his silence concealed.

I found his army trunk in his office basement. It contained a box of photographs that he had taken during World War II, beginning with crossing the English Channel en route to Utah Beach for D-Day, across France, then Belgium where he tended the wounded at the Battle of the Bulge, into Germany.

Photos labeled "Nordhausen Concentration Camp, April 11, 1945" showed countless skeletal bodies. An aunt explained that he had treated survivors for two weeks before suffering a mental breakdown.

This information astounded me, and I set out to meet other World War II veterans who had liberated the concentration camps. I found that veteran after veteran has never talked about it with their children, and that they have told very little to their spouses. Veteran after veteran choked up as they began describing what they witnessed in the camps. Many could not continue to talk. Many told me that they would have nightmares that night.

"I was never the same; I was never the same," a liberator of Dachau said.

"Did I ever change back?" a liberator of Ohrduf asked himself.

"I never spoke of it because there were no words," said a doctor who treated Dachau's survivors.

"I could not talk about it. Literally, could not talk," explained a liberator of Buchenwald.

"When I saw the crematorium, the shock was complete and total."

The over 70 men and one woman I met are still traumatized, 65 years later. The grip of the trauma is unyielding, even for those who have turned to art and writing for healing.

Could these people have post-traumatic stress disorder? I asked myself. They showed no rage, no signs of alcoholism, no nervousness or numbness. There were no indications of domestic problems -- all the indicators of what the media has presented as the hallmarks of PTSD.

Since the invasion of Iraq, we have finally begun to pay attention to combat PTSD. But the media's reporting of it has skewed our understanding of how PTSD can manifest itself. Yes, it often shows up in outbursts of rage, in substance abuse and violence. But as I learned in my travels across the country interviewing World War II veterans, the much more common face of combat PTSD is one of depression, melancholy, silence, distance, avoidance of the memories.

Our veterans desperately want to shield their families from the horrors of war, and so they turn to silence, knowing no other way to keep the awful memories from polluting their homes. They don't tell us about their awful nightmares (though many children remember being awakened by their fathers' moans or cries during the night), and they don't speak of any negative emotion, as to open oneself to sadness or grief would open the flood gates.

And the effect of the trauma -- a distortion of perception -- keeps them from perceiving how this silence shapes their children.

Children are sponges, absorbing whatever emotion and behavior they observe. They take on their parents' attributes, and so I inherited my father's depression, his emotional distancing. I inherited his war.

Children of Vietnam veterans recognize the connection between their emotional lives and their fathers's war, but children of World War II veterans still resist making similar connections. Perhaps this is because we, the generation that made Prozac and therapy household terms, still need to idealize World War II as "the good war" and our fathers as the "Greatest Generation." But I believe that that label has burdened them, made it more difficult for them to admit their pain and find help. Delayed onset of PTSD among World War II veterans has not received much attention from the media, despite the significant increase of diagnosis of PTSD among World War II veterans in just the last 10 years.

Our misperceptions of what PTSD looks like not only keeps World War II veterans from getting the

help they need, but it will affect the level of support available to our soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. It is time to realize that there is no good war, and there is no victor. Everyone returns from war wounded, bringing their war home into the hearts of their families. That is the cruelest aspect of going to war, that the veteran isn't able to protect that which he or she holds most dear: his or her family.

Our responsibility is to mitigate that harm as much as we are able. We must support our veterans, not with a bumper sticker but with heartfelt commitment and engagement. We must do all we can to help them heal and know peace.