

What is a Warrior?

An excerpt from "War and the Soul" By Edward Tick, Ph.D.

A Warrior is not just one who has been to war and returned. Warrior has been recognized as a social role that has occurred since the beginning of time. Becoming a warrior is an achievement of character. Veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can use the ideal of warriorhood as a guide for healing.

What are the characteristics of the Warrior? The ideal Warrior is assertive, active and energized. He or she is clear-minded, strategic, and alert. A warrior uses both body and mind in harmony and cooperation. A warrior is disciplined. A warrior assesses both his own skills and resources and those of his opponent. A warrior is a servant of civilization and its future - guiding, protecting, and passing on information and wisdom. A warrior is devoted to causes he judges to be more important than himself or any personal relationships or gain. Having confronted death, a warrior knows how precious life is and does not abuse or profane it.

Each of these traits has shadow dimensions as well, which can emerge when the warrior is imbalanced, inadequately trained, or traumatized. Shadow traits may include aggression, vengefulness, or cruelty. Instead of exercising discipline and control, the warrior may show wildness, emotional explosiveness, and impulsivity. He may be hypersexual and compulsive. At his shadowy worst, the warrior becomes masochistic or sadistic. These traits they are commonly unleashed during warfare. But they do not embody the ideal Warrior's virtue.

The Warrior ideal needs specific conditions to be realized successfully. Initiates need to experience a complete process from training through proving. The process begins early with children listening to warrior stories from their families and culture and then playing warrior games. Later, through formal and informal means, elders guide young people in developing the skills and awareness of warriorhood. Initiates are tested in numerous ways. Their ultimate test traditionally comes in battle. If they survive, the test must be repeated as long as they are required or able to serve. Through that survival and successful service, they prove themselves worthy of being deemed one of their culture's warriors.

The proper training of a warrior must be not just the physical and intellectual dimensions of military performance but also the values and traditions of warriorhood. This education must be achieved in an environment that fosters dignity and honor. In addition, guidance must be highly personal. The initiate must feel that his or her survival matters to concerned elders and that the transformation he or she is undergoing is critical to the culture's preservation.

A warrior knows what he is fighting to preserve. Like a bull buffalo flanking his herd to protect it from predators, a warrior knows he is essential to his people's survival. He knows he belongs. He receives honor from his community for the service he willingly provides and he in turn gives his community his devotion and willingness to sacrifice his life, if necessary, for its well-being.

Sitting Bull and his Warriors, and other bands from innumerable traditional cultures, were never plagued with self-doubt about the value of their mission, as many of our soldiers are today. Sitting Bull sang:

Young men, help me, do help me!
I love my country so;
That is why I am fighting.

In order to do battle with a whole heart, the danger to one's home must be real, and the people must experience it as immediate and threatening their existence. They and their warriors must be in unity. Their cause and need to fight must be absolute - in the sense that there is really nothing else they can do to preserve their food, families, and culture.

Ideally, the testing and proving of a warrior is limited in its destructiveness. Rites of passage often present the possibility of death, and in some cultures they are not considered a warrior until the initiate takes another life. But not numbers of lives, and never the slaughter or the destruction of an entire people. Threats and losses must not be arbitrary, impersonal, or overwhelming.

Warriors are meant to play major roles in the lives of their communities. They provide help in times of need and also restrain rather than encourage violence. They need guidance from others who have been through similar experiences, and they need to pass their values, wisdom, and experiences on to younger initiates.

We need warriors. A society cannot be healthy without its warriors. And societies with a class of mature warriors to remind the leadership and the people of the realities of war are healthier, stronger, and less prone to violence. The call to veterans, and a way to heal post-traumatic stress disorder, is to follow the path of the honorable returned Warrior.