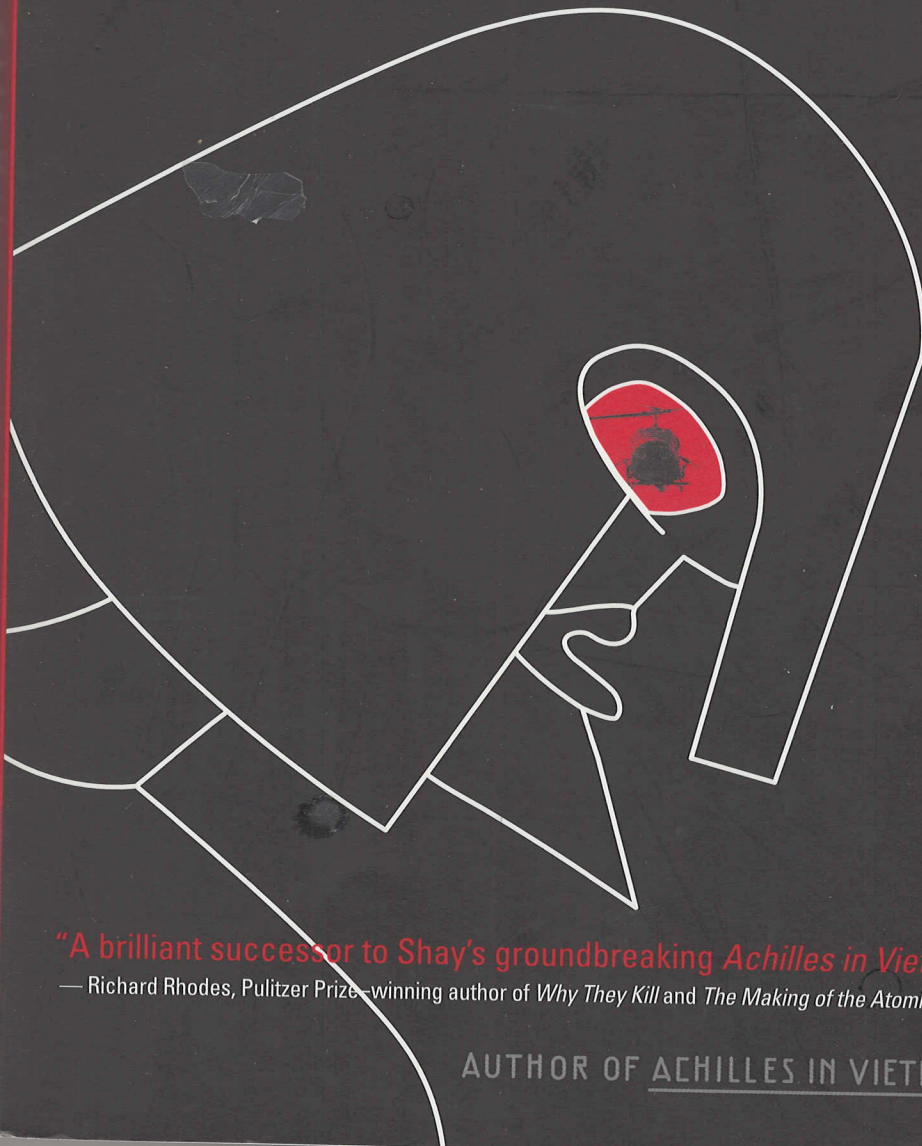


ODYSSEUS IN AMERICA

COMBAT TRAUMA AND THE TRIALS OF HOMECOMING

JONATHAN SHAY, M.D., PH.D. FOREWORD BY SENATORS
JOHN MCCAIN AND MAX CLELAND



"A brilliant successor to Shay's groundbreaking *Achilles in Vietnam*."

— Richard Rhodes, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Why They Kill* and *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*

AUTHOR OF ACHILLES IN VIETNAM

Introduction¹

Odysseus has shown us how *not* to return home from war. It's been a grim picture with all the worst elements of the prejudiced Vietnam veteran stereotype. In this part of the book I will introduce two pictures of how those veterans who have been psychologically injured in combat can recover from those injuries.

The symptoms caused by psychological injury that the American Psychiatric Association calls PTSD² in its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) can be understood in one clear and simple concept: persistence of *valid adaptations to danger* into a time of safety afterward. Reexperiencing symptoms of PTSD are varied outcomes of the capacity to learn about danger, so as to be able to anticipate it, to prepare for it, or to avoid it. The mobilization of the mind and body to meet danger, *and* the shutting down of mental and bodily functions not required to survive in mortal danger, become harmful and dysfunctional if they persist long after danger has passed. I invite the reader to look up this list of symptoms in the light of the simple concept I offer here, to see for themselves that these represent the persistence of no longer needed adaptations. Almost all of them fit this simple concept.

Despite our proud boast to be at the top of the animal kingdom, we are not the only species that has ever responded to great danger and then failed to unlearn those responses after the danger has passed. Our vulnerability to being injured in this way goes very far back into evolutionary history. What the APA calls PTSD (and I shall call "simple PTSD") is probably rooted in an array of changes in the physiology and anatomy of the central nervous system³—and may be irreversible. An injury, not a disorder! As with any injury, the symptoms can range from mild to devastating, depending on the severity of the wound, the robustness of health at the time of the injury, and the conditions—especially nutrition—under which recovery occurred. In the case of a physical wound what counts is physi-

cal nutrition; in the case of a psychological injury what counts is *social* nutrition.

Like physical injuries, simple PTSD can lead to specific disabilities. For example, an infantryman may learn from horrible experience that any bunching up or dense gathering of soldiers, particularly in the open, offers a too tempting target to enemy mortarmen and snipers. Later, in peacetime, this same infantryman may have an unshakable and non-negotiable fear of crowds and open spaces. In civilian life this is a disability. It interferes with various social, economic, and political functions that the veteran may want to take part in. The collision between the old combat adaptation, such as fear of crowds, and the requirements of a current civilian activity, may cause him to engage in *further* adaptations to his disability that allow him to salvage something. For example, in order to avoid crowds, but still be able cast his vote in elections, this infantry vet may show up at the polls before they open in the morning, may urgently insist on being the first one in the door, and be almost frenzied, possibly rude in his haste to be out again. His family and the poll workers probably view his behavior as annoying or even deranged. However, the resiliency, energy, and will he puts into such adaptations are of the same species as the amputee puts into playing ice hockey.

We all know or know of people with physical injuries who nonetheless have been able to make a flourishing human life, despite their specific disabilities. There are many famous heroic examples of this, such as Helen Keller. I have the privilege of knowing United States Senator Max Cleland of Georgia, an Army veteran who lost two legs and one arm from a Vietnam War grenade explosion. My impression is that, despite his specific disabilities, he has a flourishing life. We can only guess at and admire the personal strength, resiliency, and struggle that enabled him to achieve this, and do not fault others with similarly terrible injuries who have been laid low by them. Not everyone is a Helen Keller or Max Cleland, nor should we require them to be.

Depending on their severity and the resources and resiliency of the survivor, simple PTSD injuries can be disabling in the same sense that physical injuries are. But they do not *necessarily* blight the whole life of the person that bears them. Some combat veterans shrug off their nightmares, startle reactions, avoidances, and so forth as things to adapt to and live with, again akin to physical injuries. Their life is changed, to be sure, and often limited in specific ways, but the possibility of it being a good human life is not destroyed.

However, when the injury invades character, and the capacity for

social trust is destroyed, all possibility of a flourishing human life is lost. I (and many others) call this "complex PTSD."⁴ Social trust is the *expectation that power will be used in accordance with "what's right."* When social trust is destroyed, it is not replaced by a vacuum, but rather by a perpetual mobilization to fend off attack, humiliation, or exploitation, and to figure out other people's trickery. Veterans with complex PTSD see the civilian world in the same two dimensions as Homer's warriors saw warfare, *biē*, violent force, and *mētis*, cunning. Civil society, the world of the civilian at peace, is founded in a third dimension of trust that power will be used in accordance with "what's right." In actuality, both *biē* and *mētis* play significant roles in the modern state. However, no *legitimate* government anywhere in the world or in any historical era has ruled purely by armed might and deceit alone. Trust that power will be used in accordance with "what's right," however locally understood, is a key component of state legitimacy. This third dimension is invisible to veterans with complex PTSD, or they deny its existence. Claims of trustworthiness by any institutions of power—whether governments, employers, economic or educational institutions—seem to these veterans to be a deceptive veneer hiding a violent and exploitive reality.

Complex PTSD veterans usually suffer this along with their adaptations to war, so complex PTSD usually includes simple PTSD. At least this is true of the veterans we see in the VA clinic. Possibly a veteran like Odysseus with no simple PTSD, only injuries to good character, would never come to the VA. In *Achilles in Vietnam*, I observed that the World Health Organization (ICD-9/10) diagnosis "Enduring Personality Change After Catastrophic Experience" yields complex PTSD when added to the DSM diagnosis of (simple) PTSD. However, I was baffled by the WHO assertion that "Enduring Personality Change After Catastrophic Experience" *excludes* PTSD. This diagnosis fits Homer's Odysseus quite well, but in our clinical experience, symptoms of simple PTSD are present even in the most Odyssean veterans we work with.

Lying and deceit are valuable military skills, for which Odysseus boasted, "Men hold me formidable for guile."⁵ In war, "they"—the enemy—really are out to kill you. The modern soldier's own military organization propels the soldier into the presence of that enemy and holds him captive in the war zone. This happens in all modern wars. Added to that in the Vietnam era were multiple violations of good military practice and betrayals of "what's right." After such experience, any friendliness and cooperation may only look like manipulations to trick innocents into a position where they can be exploited or hurt. One often hears vet-

erans describe themselves as "paranoid" when speaking of their vigilance against harm, humiliation, or exploitation. Mental health professionals frequently agree with this label, although I believe that nothing is added to our knowledge about the veteran by using this psychiatric jargon, and much is lost in prejudicial stigmatization. It suffices to say that a given veteran does not trust anyone.

AVERSION TO RETURNING VETERANS IS AN OLD STORY

Acts of war generate a profound gulf between the combatant and the community he left behind. The veteran carries the taint of a killer, of blood pollution (perhaps what Dennis Spector described above as a need for rebirth) that many cultures respond to with purification rituals. Our culture today denies the need for purification and provides none, even though in the past it has done so. Both the veteran and his community may question the wisdom of return. The community worries about the veteran's self-control. The veteran, knowing what he is capable of, may also fear losing control. He may fear that if people knew what he has done, they would reject him or lock him up in a prison or mental hospital. Both the veteran and the community collude in the belief that he is "no longer one of us." Many Vietnam combat veterans with complex PTSD express the feeling that they died in Vietnam and should not have returned.

The anguish of guilt drives some away from life with others, but some, like former Senator Bob Kerrey, seem motivated by it to devote their lives to the service of others. The next chapter presents a good deal about what might be called medical-psychological therapies. They often help manage guilt, but they are not, and should not be, the only therapies available for moral pain. Religious and cultural therapies are not only possible, but may well be superior to what mental health professionals conventionally offer.

In the medieval Christian church, everyone who shed blood in war had to do penance. If you committed atrocities, you had to do more penance, but even if you wore a white hat and were a perfect model of proper conduct, you had to do penance. Most warrior societies, as well as many not dominated by warfare, have historically had communal rites of purification of the returning fighter after battle—the purifications in Numbers 31:19ff, for example, in the Hebrew Bible.⁶

The performances of the Athenian tragic theater—which was a theater of combat veterans, by combat veterans, and for combat veterans—

offered cultural therapy, including purification. Aristotle famously said that tragedy provides "*katharsis*." Scholars tell us that three meanings of *katharsis* circulated in Aristotle's time and were used by him at various places in his work: (1) religious purification of a ritual taint and expiation of a religious sin; (2) medicinal purgation of something unhealthy, poisonous, or impure; (3) mental clarification, removing obstacles to understanding, the psychological equivalent of producing clear water from muddy.⁷ The ancient Athenians had a distinctive therapy of purification, healing, and reintegration of returning soldiers that was undertaken as a whole political community. Sacred theater was one of its primary means of reintegrating the returning veteran into the social sphere as "citizen."

The early Romans had a ceremony of purification for returning armies, the details of which we know little. It apparently involved passing under a beam erected across a street, with head covered, as well as other ceremonies, purifications, and sacrifices. The French scholar Georges Dumézil writes,

The legend of Horace—victorious, furious, criminal, and purified—served as myth at the annual ceremony which marked the end of the military season, in which the warriors of primitive Rome passed over from the domain of Mars [the Roman god of war] unleashed to that of "*Mars qui praest pacem*" [Mars who is in charge of peace] thus . . . thereby desacralizing themselves, and also cleansing themselves for their acts of violence in battle which, if not "involuntary," were at least necessary.⁸

One of my patients, a Vietnam vet, was greeted by his father, who was torpedoed in the World War II Merchant Marine, with a \$50 bill on his return from Vietnam and the words, "Here. Get drunk. Get laid. And I want you at the union hall on Monday morning." *That* is not purification after battle.

Over the years, I have said to my patients (who are almost entirely Roman Catholic because of the demography of the local veteran population), "If the Church's ideas on sin, penitence, forgiveness of sin, and redemption are about anything, they're about the real stuff. What the Church offers is about cruelty, violence, murder—not just the sins you confessed in parochial school." My clinical team has encouraged many of the veterans we work with to avail themselves of the sacrament of penance. When a veteran does not already know a priest he trusts to hear his confession, we have suggested priests who understand enough about combat neither to deny that he has anything to feel guilty about nor to

recoil in revulsion and send him away without the sacrament. We also recommend service to others and the doing (not simply passive consumption) of the arts as ways of living with guilt.

Have we learned nothing about the importance of judging separately a war and the people who fight it? Yes, the Nuremberg Principles on war crimes are crucial. But do we condemn the inexperienced young Navy lieutenant Bob Kerrey for not refusing an order because it *could* lead him into the illegal act of killing unarmed women and children if the mission failed in some specific way, but not if it went off as conceived?³⁹

While it is true that rapid social changes took place while many Vietnam veterans were in the military and away in Vietnam, I have pointed out repeatedly that this gulf between veteran and civilian is generic, and was experienced by returning combat veterans of prior wars. It is historically typical for returning American war veterans throughout our history to be ignored by the communities they returned to, rather than to be celebrated and cherished by them.⁴⁰ The experience of the World War II veterans—the fathers of the Vietnam veterans—is the historical *anomaly*. Toward the end of World War II, politicians with fresh memories of the Bonus Army of World War I veterans worried about so many returning soldiers looking for jobs. Willard Waller, the World War I veteran whom I have quoted so many times in this book, did his best to see that they *were* worried, warning of the social and political nitroglycerine that millions of returning veterans could present to civilian society. Congress appropriated unprecedented benefits.

Farmers from the Revolutionary War returned to find banks foreclosing their farms because the money the government gave them was no good. These first American veterans encountered a Platonic/Stoic/Puritan view that yes, what they had done in the Continental Army was virtuous, but virtue itself is sufficient to well-being⁴¹—so why are they asking for money? Implicit in this philosophic position is the reasoning that if the veteran does *not* have well-being, his virtue is somehow defective. Therefore, logically, misery and disability must be his own fault, his own deficiency of virtue, and therefore unworthy of compassion.

Sound familiar?

Only in the period after the War of 1812 did the nation awaken to its duty toward the veterans of the War of Independence. In his 1999 book, *Suffering Soldiers*, historian John Resch examined wealth and number of children for all the men of a single New Hampshire town from 1792 to 1823. He found that on the average, those who never served, or who joined the short-service militia, held their own economically, and had sta-

ble economic success and that the reproductive success of the two groups was similar. However, during the same period, the long-service Continental Army veterans got poorer. On average, the long-service veterans had started out the beginning of the period 11 percent poorer than the militia vets or never-served, but ended up a startling 66 percent poorer than the other groups thirty years later.⁴² The number of living children in the household, which in that era was strongly influenced by the quality of year-round nutrition, and thus dependent on wealth, shows an average of 6.5 children for Continental Army veterans, 7.5 for militia veterans, and 9.4 for those who never served.

Civil War veterans had trouble finding employment and were accused of being drug addicts. Our word “hobo” supposedly comes from homeless Civil War veterans—called “hoe boys”—who roamed the lanes of rural America with hoes on their shoulders, looking for work. World War I Bonus Army veterans marched on Washington in 1932, the summer before FDR’s election, and camped on the Mall. They demanded that they be paid the bonus that Congress had voted them in 1924. President Hoover had them driven out with tanks and bayonets and their camp burned. Korean War veterans were accused of being too weak to win. In that era of McCarthyism, repatriated POWs were suspected of Communist sympathies from brainwashing.

With increasing polarization over the Vietnam War, veterans returned home to protesters who accused them of being torturers, perpetrators of atrocities, and baby killers. For every returning veteran who encountered this personally, there were many more who saw scenes selected for their dramatic and/or outrageous qualities in the TV news or heard *nth*-hand stories. The media presented a barrage of images portraying the Vietnam veteran as crazy, drug-addicted, and violent. For many veterans who had joined up because they thought it was their duty as citizens, who had grown up on John Wayne and Audie Murphy, rejection by the community was infuriating. And then in their fathers’ VFW and Legion posts, some were greeted with derision even more devastating than taunts by war protesters: “We won our war. What the fuck’s wrong with you?”

Those Vietnam-era civilians inclined to show honor to returning veterans ran afoul of deep divisions over the wisdom of making this war at all (e.g., if Chinese expansionism was the threat, wouldn’t Ho and the Viet Minh be our natural allies?), and over the justice of how it was prosecuted (e.g., “free fire zones”), making it appear that honoring the veterans endorsed both. From the hawks on the political right to the doves on the political left, the nation as a whole lost sight of the fundamental impor-

tance of social esteem in rebuilding the capacity for social trust within a person who has come home from war. Social esteem is embodied no less in private gestures of respect than in public rituals of honor and recognition. Vietnam veterans often received neither.

DAMAGE TO CHARACTER—INJURED THUMOS

Professor Amélie Rorty of Brandeis defines the Homeric word *thumos* as “the energy of spirited honor.”¹³ It is closely allied to the English word “character,” but adds some important extra dimensions. I want to put *thumos* back into current use, and am not alone in this. As Professor Francis Fukuyama, an economic historian has pointed out, modern democracies often fail to recognize honor and the desire for recognition as part of the *universal and normal* makeup of humans, noticing it only in its pathological and deformed states.¹⁴

According to the German Idealist philosopher Hegel, all human warfare originates in a fight to the death over honor, a fight for unconditional recognition and acknowledgment by an equal, which only one combatant can win. Hegel says that there are two ways to lose: death with honor, or the all-encompassing dishonor—the social death—of enslavement.¹⁵ Honor is a social phenomenon; its interior psychic mirror is *thumos*. Current psychiatric terminology calls *thumos* “narcissism.” “Narcissism” is simply a new word for an old concept: “*thumos*” from Homer; “*thumoeides*” from Plato; “pride or vainglory” from Hobbes; “*amour-propre*” from Rousseau; “desire for recognition (*Anerkennung*)” from Hegel; “narcissism”¹⁶ from psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut, who developed and modified Freud’s ideas. I much prefer Homer’s term *thumos* to the modern psychojargon, narcissism, because of the ways the latter term has been pathologized and turned into a general-purpose blame word. These thinkers, over thousands of years from Homer to Kohut, have seen this feature of mental life as normal and universal, even if it can develop dangerous excesses, deficiencies, or deformities. I believe that *thumos* is a human universal that evolved out of war in our ancestral evolutionary past and still explodes in killing rage, when violated.¹⁷ Many cultural, legal, and social changes have removed these reactions from the *individual* realm, so we no longer teach our children that a man of honor must kill someone who makes a joke at his expense, or who steals food from his freezer, but such reactions are very much alive at the *collective* level.

The normal adult’s cloak of safety and guarantor of his or her narcissistic stability is the society’s image of “what’s right” and the implementation of

“what’s right” by power holders, along with concrete social support of a face-to-face community to whom one is attached. Narcissism, allegedly the most “primitive” of psychological phenomena, is much entwined with the body, but it is just as deeply enmeshed in the social, moral, and political worlds.

The features of the normal adult world that control thumotic emotions and moods are *attachments*, *ideals*, and *ambitions*. Their good-enough realization in the world is the foundation of ordinary self-respect and of the sense of self-worth that we expect in the normal adult. *Thumos*, then, can be practically defined as

- The historically and socioculturally constructed *content* embodied in ideals, ambitions, and attachments.
- The intensity with which these are energized.
- The emotions aroused by cognitive appraisal of their condition (particularly improvement or deterioration) in the world.

Thumos is thus a container for the English word “character.” Character exists in dynamic relation to the ecology of social power, modeled and remodeled throughout life by how well or badly those who hold power fulfill the culture’s moral order. The shattering impact on character of mortal-stakes misuse of power was a major theme of my previous book, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*.

Aristotle’s explanation of *thumos* in the *Politics* (VII.6.1327b39ff.) surprises the modern mind. He starts by picking an argument with his teacher, Plato, over the character of the “Guardians” of the state:

For as to what [Plato] said . . . about the character that should belong to . . . Guardians—they should be affectionate to their friends but fierce toward strangers—it is [*thumos*] that causes affectionateness, for [*thumos*] is the capacity of the soul whereby we love. A sign of this is that [*thumos*] is more roused against associates and friends than against strangers, when it thinks itself slighted. . . . Moreover it is from this faculty that power to command and love of freedom are in all cases derived, for [*thumos*] is a commanding and indomitable element. But it is a mistake to describe the Guardians as cruel toward strangers; it is not right to be cruel towards anybody, and men of great-souled nature [*megaloψυχοι*] are not fierce, except against wrongdoers, and their anger is still fiercer against their companions if they think that these are wronging them . . . Hence the saying “For brothers’ wars are cruel.”

(VII.6.1327b39ff., Rackham, trans.)

This passage is remarkable for the way it draws together these apparently different threads: killing rage, love, the capacity to command, and feeling for freedom. This is exactly the kind of freight the concept of "character" should carry. It must have energy. It must be passionate. It must connect with other people and have an active commitment to right and wrong in the world, however right and wrong are locally constructed. Aristotle's account focuses on people and social groups to whom we are attached, on *philo*i (plural of *philos*). He explains compactly: a *philos* is "another myself." "The excellent person is related to his [*philos*] in the same way as he is related to himself, since a [*philos*] is another himself."¹⁸ Obviously, there is the altruistic impulse of wishing the *philos* well, but there is also an element of narcissism here that I want to bring into the foreground and use in a positive way.

Attachment implicates us in the acts and fate of a *philos*, influencing mood and emotion and touching our sense of our own value. When a *philos* does something magnificent, we feel pride; when he does something vicious, we feel shame. If I am depressed because my daughter is doing badly in school, it is not because I have made a utilitarian calculation of how this will affect her lifetime earnings and ability to support me in my old age. No, it will be because of my attachment to her, her quality as "another myself." Threat to a *philos* arouses fear and rage, and the death or injury of a *philos* hurts and grieves us. The loving recognition and attachment by a *philos* sustains and nourishes.

Attachment to *philo*i inspires altruistic readiness to take risks and to resort to violence on their behalf against outsiders, both defensively and offensively. Betrayal of trust or a breach of "what's right" among *philo*i can wreck *thumos*. At the least, it results in withdrawal of emotional commitment and energy. But it may also produce anger and violence within the group, either directed against those *philo*i responsible for the betrayal-breach, or in more extreme cases directed against all *philo*i, against the entire community.

In *Achilles in Vietnam* (pp. 40–41) I wrote the following about the *philia* that arises between combat comrades:

Modern American English makes soldiers' love for special comrades into a problem, because the word "love" evokes sexual and romantic associations. But "friendship" seems too bland for the passion of care that arises between soldiers in combat. Achilles laments to his mother [the goddess Thetis] that his *philos*, his "greatest friend is gone" (18.89f). Much ink has been spilled over whether this word (and the abstract noun *philia*) and all

its linguistic relatives should be translated under the rubric of "friend, friendship," etc. or of "love, beloved," etc. However, the difficulty of finding the right word reflects differences between ancient Greek and modern American culture that need to be made clear. "*Philia* includes many relationships that would not be classified as friendships. The love of mother and child is a paradigmatic case of *philia*; all close family relations, including the relation of husband and wife, are so characterized. Furthermore, our [word] 'friendship' can suggest a relationship that is weak in affect . . . as in the expression 'just friends.' . . . [*Philia*] includes the very strongest affective relationships that human beings form . . . [including, but not limited to] relationships that have a passionate sexual component. For both these reasons, English 'love' seems more appropriately wide-ranging. . . . [The] emphasis of *philia* is less on intensely passionate longing than on . . . benefit, sharing, and mutuality. . . ."¹⁹ Many individuals who experience friendship as one of the central goods in their lives find that their employers will not recognize *philia* between people whose relationship is not familial. Veterans have lost their jobs because they left work to aid another veteran, in circumstances where the same absence would have been "understandable" and charged against sick or vacation time—had the other been a spouse, parent, or child. The social relationship of steady, paid employment was virtually unknown in ancient Greece. This relationship has come to so dominate our modern consciousness that many people view friendship purely as a leisure activity, or a sweetener that with luck arises among co-workers, neighbors, or members of a voluntary association such as a church or club, but will be put aside if it gives rise to any conflicting claims at work. Many veterans have also alienated their spouses, because they would leave home to rescue fellow veterans. The ancient Greeks, perhaps because their societies were so highly militarized (every male citizen was also a soldier), simply assumed the centrality of *philia*.

The formula that *philos* is "another myself" is the key to most socially organized human violence. In the modern world, the nation-state has appropriated the status of *philos*, along with other groups such as armies, religions, and professions. Today, except in our deteriorated inner cities, we no longer fight to the death in the streets for recognition as individuals, but nations continue to compel deference with violence, to demand acknowledgment with violence. If your *philos* is threatened or demeaned it arouses killing rage. Witness the primal rage of Americans after September 11, 2001.

As Aristotle pointed out in the passage above, *thumos* or narcissism is

not exclusively an infantile or pathological phenomenon, but infuses essential elements in human flourishing. Narcissism is a part of the psychic economy of the healthy adult that is intimately bound up *with the moral and social world that the adult inhabits*.

The social conditions that cause complex PTSD—persistent human betrayal and rupture of community in mortal-stakes situations of captivity—destroy *thumos*, destroy normal narcissism, and undo character. Modern battle is a condition of captivity (even when it has been entered voluntarily), a fact that has escaped notice because the captives move about in the open carrying powerful weapons, and because the role of captor is cooperatively shared by the two enemy military organizations—which are presumed to cooperate in nothing.²⁰ “Primitive” warfare, of which Iliadic warfare is an example, is and was voluntary—Achilles really could say, “I quit.” Modern combat is a condition of enslavement and torture. I am not demonizing the U.S. Armed Services when I say that. Modern war itself makes it so. Until we end the practice of war itself, this will continue.

What happens to normal adult narcissism—or *thumos* or character—when it is damaged? The list that follows is a spectrum of manifestations of injury to *thumos*. While they cannot all happen at the same time, we often see them succeeding each other over time in the same veteran, sometime cyclically.

- Demoralization (*athumia*), death to the world, apathy, ennui, and *aboulia* (no will), *anhedonia* (no pleasure),²¹ and in its most extreme form: literally fatal collapse of self-care, as in military “nostalgia” and concentration camp “Musselman.”²²
- Self-loathing, a sense of unworthiness.
- Loss of self-respect and initiative.
- Pervasive “raw” vulnerability and feeling conspicuous.
- Social withdrawal, irritability.
- Hypochondriacal preoccupations, alternating with neglect of real ill health and injuries.
- Suggestibility and blind obedience, which may turn into a fanatical “mission.”
- Mortal risk taking to divine the status of one’s “luck.”
- Danger seeking, fight seeking.
- Claims to having been players in the single most important event in human history.
- Grandiosity and entitlement.

- Coercive demands for respect, honor, acknowledgment.
- Rage at small slights, disappointment, lapses.
- Coercive attempts to establish power dominance.
- “Global” destructiveness of their fantasies, wishes, and, occasionally, behavior.
- Apocalyptic ecstasy.

Mental health professionals who have casually encountered combat veterans with complex PTSD often react negatively to the second half of this list and call it “narcissism.” They are frustrated and offended by such veterans’ insistence that they will deal only with “the head of the snake,” e.g., chief of service or medical center director. When clinicians use the term “narcissistic” to damn veterans who present themselves this way, it is as though the clinicians have utterly forgotten the importance of narcissism in any good life. The first half of the list is no less involved with narcissism (its deflation) than the second half (its inflation), but deflated narcissism generally draws more sympathetic labels, such as depression.

Does Homer’s Odysseus give us a portrait of a pure form of post-traumatic character damage that is neither simple PTSD nor complex PTSD? Some political tyrants, some criminals, some artists, some religious leaders, appear to have only a giant *thumos*, with no symptoms of PTSD. Trauma can crush *thumos* or inflame it and cause it to swell into giant, tyrannical *thumos*. In the same person, deflated and inflated *thumos* can alternate, giving the appearance, descriptively, of bipolar affective disorder. In a fixed inflated state, giant *thumos* can produce a ranting megalomaniac such as Adolf Hitler or a quiet megalomaniac such as Osama bin Laden.²³

The earliest inventors of democratic politics invented equal citizen honor—*isothumos*—as the necessary psychological and social substructure for democracy.²⁴ With it they built laws into their *polis* to provide trustworthy restraints on *bīē* and *meētis*, violence and fraud. The former was restrained by the law on *hubris*, and the latter by the strict accountability of magistrates, which made deceptive speech in public office very costly.²⁵ Either extreme, *thumos* too weak to imagine a future, or bloated, violently or deceptively subjugating all to its concept of the future, is destructive to the democratic process. Severe trauma can produce both extremes. Severe trauma destroys democratic *isothumos*.

Descriptively, the phenomena of damaged *thumos* draw in symptoms of many diagnoses in the DSM.²⁶ The symptoms of PTSD have been called

"protean." Menelaus' battle with the god Proteus, as told in the *Odyssey*, is an excellent metaphor for the veteran's struggle with the symptoms of PTSD:

But [Proteus']
tricks were not knocked out of him; far from it.
First he took on a whiskered lion's shape,
a serpent then; a leopard; a great boar;
then sousing water; then a tall green tree.
Still we hung on, by hook or crook, through everything,
until . . . [Proteus] saw defeat,
(4.485ff, Fitzgerald)

ARISTOTLE AGAIN—HUMAN IS *POLITIKON ZŌON*

The human being is a bio-psycho-socio-cultural whole *at every moment*. This restates Aristotle's zoological observation (*Politics* 1:1:1252a3) that the human is the *animal* of the political community. Body, mind, society, culture are not separate "realities," even less are they hierarchical "levels." Our physical brains are biologically evolved to make us culture bearers and users; it is our biological nature to live in relation to culturally constructed moral codes; our social lives remodel our brains; cognitive assessments and their related emotional states influence bodily health; and so on. The very fact that we speak in terms of body, mind, society, and culture is only a reflection of the methodological and institutional history of the Western world. These terms are temporary guides to perception and communication. They are throwaways, not eternal realities existing beyond the Platonic veil. What I do at this moment of writing and what you do at this moment of reading is at one and the same instant, physiological, psychological, social, and cultural.

Restoration of *thumos* and of the capacity for social trust happens only in community.

This simple and seemingly innocent statement is actually quite subversive, because it casts doubt upon a great deal of what mental health professionals do (following the cultural and economic model of medicine), how they find their value in the world, how the mental health workplace is organized, and how power is used there. In fact, the overall effect of this simple statement is to push mental health professionals off of center stage in the drama of recovery from trauma, and to place them in the wings as stagehands.

The next two chapters take us to two apparently unconnected settings: to the Department of Veterans Affairs outpatient clinic where I and my colleagues do our work, and to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington—known to many as the Vietnam Wall, or simply the Wall. We arrive at the Wall twice—once physically with the veterans in our program and once electronically via an Internet discussion group of Vietnam veterans and others as they communalize the shock of Lewis Puller's suicide.