

On Becoming a Veteran

by Everett Cox¹

2010 is when I began to become a veteran. It was more than 40 years after I had returned to the United States from Viet Nam. Forty years of madness, nightmares, drug abuse, suicide attempts. 2010 is when I began to speak about it. And write about it. And cry. 40 years of tears coming out all at once. I am still becoming a vet. My first piece of writing as I started to embrace my identity as a veteran, that I share here, was an open letter to my brothers and sisters of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Though the numbers given derive from the original writing in 2010, my message and warning are still relevant to any warriors from any country and war struggling to return home after experiencing the horrors of combat and many difficulties of return.

Dear Brothers & Sisters of the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq,

Please don't kill yourselves. Don't do it. The suicide rate for vets is five times the numbers that die in war, now about one an hour or 24 a day. Time heals. Give yourself time. Avoid impulsiveness. Impulsiveness gives no time. Get the guns out of the house. If you have a noose ready, get rid of it, a stash of pills, get rid of them, a stripped electric line? Get rid of the readiness. When you hear that train a comin', it ain't your train. Stay off the tracks. No bridge has your name on it. No bridge. When you are suicidal, you are distraught. Distraught does not make for clear thinking. Impulsiveness compounds the problem, leads to mistakes. Mistakes may be worse than death.

You need time, more time, much more time, maybe a lifetime. Post-traumatic Stress speeds things up. You need to slow down. One of the best ways to give yourself more time is to give your time away. Start with your family. Little children can really slow you down. Their presence to the moment, their curiosity, their imagination, their

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playfulness can all rub off on you if you slow down with them. Learn to identify ten trees in your neighborhood with your children and their friends. Learn the names of ten birds, ten insects. Then learn ten more of each. Pick some wild grapes and make jelly. Gather some hickory nuts and make cookies. Learn the natural world with them.

Men, learn to cook. Learn to feed yourself and your family. Your children would love to work with you in the kitchen. It will strengthen your marriage. Nurture your partner. Learn good nutrition. Bake bread. It's great fun punching down the dough. Sit with your family at the table. Just for the fun of it, chew each mouthful 25 times. Slow down. Feed friends and neighbors. It's healing. Go to Farmers Markets. Visit their farms. Grow something. Grow herbs and some flowers. Your children would love to grow something with you. Grow it and eat it. I learned how to make a simple red pasta sauce in Viet Nam. Do it from scratch. It's simple and it builds confidence. Then do variations. Don't eat standing up, out of the pot. Slow down.

Volunteer your time. Help a neighbor, cut grass, rake leaves, shovel snow. Help the elderly. Visit a shut-in. Helping others helps you. It can help get you out of your – self and getting out of your – self helps. SELF can be toxic. Being concerned about others helps. Self needs time to heal. The healing is up to you but taking care of others heals you. The trauma in Post-Traumatic Stress begins with violence, war, rape. Military sexual trauma – rape – currently affects 2/3 – 3/4 of all women. The trauma begins with horrible violence. Life wants to live. It is as simple as that. Life wants to live. Violence can pervert that very simple truth. It can twist it, create doubt, create ambivalence. There can be only two responses to violence. One is to return the violence. The other is to return love. Love is a long, slow, hard, painful path. No one coming out of war or rape is prepared to be loving but PTS is a sign that you can love. PTS is a sign of the love in you.

Post-Traumatic Stress is not a “disorder”. It is a natural response to what you have been through. It is a response to a terribly unnatural and unhealthy trauma. It is a sign that deep inside you understand that life wants to live. That is the starting point for your new life, the post-trauma life. It is a gift and a blessing if you let it be.