

MEMORIAL DAY KEYNOTE ADDRESS
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There was once a time that Memorial Day signified something, a day set aside to memorialize the fallen; those who gave their lives in service of their country. Too many of us are moved only by a three-day weekend off for grilling in the back yard and what amounts to the next day's hangover. This is a day to put aside our anguish and the apathy we veterans face on the home front, the continued insults of those who dare to demean our military service when asking how we feel about the wasted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, or when Fallujah and Ramadi fall to ISIS, or when even the educated public assaults us with comments like, "just get over it" when we jerk and lurch at the first sound of fireworks, or when the largely uninformed insist that there were no weapons of mass destruction in the desert sands of Iraq that I saw with my own eyes, or when the president continues to insist that the Fort Hood Massacre was an act of workplace violence committed by a disgruntled employee. I know. I was there during the massacre. I lost 5 of my friends on that fateful day, with 13 more wounded, witnessing the largest bloodbath on any U.S. military installation in history. Instead, we must seize the opportunity as Americans to come together to pay homage and demonstrate reverence and regard for the enormous cost of serving this great nation. For many, military service and sacrifices have been rendered meaningless to the populace at large. There is a wide divide between the citizenry of America and the warrior class charged with protecting them (Zucchini, 2015). Most of our country has been largely unaffected by the longest era of war in US history. Those of us who wear or have ever worn the uniform have had our lives toppled and overturned countless times by repeated deployments into the combat zone, watched our brothers and sisters in arms killed and horribly wounded, both physically and psychologically; the latter, festering wounds that do not bleed. We are the pit bulls of war who return to a nation that remains clueless and detached from our indescribable plight and knows only the war they view on television. Reintegration into our society is yet a battle to be won. Your presence at today's ceremony injects new worthiness to the significance of untold sacrifices paid in blood and inclusion of the opportunity for remembrances that all gave some and some gave all. But there is so much more to the story of service and sacrifice that never reaches the consciousness of Americans. And so it is ours to tell the tale in honor of the spirit that underlies Memorial Day.

It is the Warrior Ethos that takes on profound meaning in the wartime theater of operations, becoming an all-consuming force that supersedes race, gender, ethnicity, and even military rank structure. There are few comparable driving forces" (Platoni,

2008). And yet so few will ever come to appreciate what gives rise to the unequalled meaning of the selflessness of country, not ourselves. It is this element that cements the bonds between and among us who born to serve humanity. We are the special class of less than one percent of the American populace who are humbled by the privilege to sign on the dotted line where we testify that we will die for you.

THE MORAL INJURIES OF WAR

The toll of war and military service is staggering. It is the taking of lives and the killing of souls that follows that have become the other signature wounds of war. It comes in the form of nightmares and flashbacks and intrusive memories, as we are forced to bear the burdens of reliving the sights and sounds and smells of the bodies of children piling up in the streets of remote villages, soaked in excrement and carpeted with burned tires, all because they fired upon American troops and you had no choice but to “take them out” to spare the lives or your own. It is an “us versus them” kind of thing. Dreadful, horrible things happen in the fog of war. They erupt in the most unexpected of moments and it is those of us who have worn the uniform who are forced to live with the recklessness of war, cast upon us without any say in the matter, only because we swore to protect and defend. Scores of the 2.6 million of us who have served in the combat theaters of Iraq and Afghanistan are now returning home, profoundly impacted by the mind deafening quagmire of an adrenalin rich and rapturous frenzy, pride for having served and made it home alive and with a couple of medals to prove it, and a steaming brew of moral confusion, survivor guilt, and a mind that has failed to be bulletproof to the experiences of war that live in the shadows and the darkest recesses of our minds. This is what fractures our moral grounding and forces us to confront a horde of vague and uncertain moral and ethical dilemmas that may never be reconciled (Wood, 2014).

And just exactly who is it that we hold accountable for this? Is it the all-volunteer Army that was borne of the end of the draft in 1973 that resulted in the excusal from 99 percent of all Americans from military service and guaranteed that the fewer of 1 percent of us remaining poor suckers would have to carry the load. There is a virtual guarantee that the remaining skeleton force will be forced to bear the highest human toll, deploying over and over again until their initial euphoria about joining up and going off to war has turned to dust.

It is the moral outrage and revulsion that slams us back into the ground when we sweat and toil and bleed in 130-degree heat, exposed to UCMJ action if we fire upon the enemy implanting IED's in the ground if they are not facing us, the Rules of Engagement designed to protect those we are trained to kill and to instead, spill our entrails in the sand. And the final assault is when high ranking officers receive far less than a hand slap for the crimes of adultery and repetitive sexual assault against

subordinates, another stellar example of the moral degradation of the military, broken trust, and a laughable mockery of military justice that is grossly out of proportion to the offenses committed. They might as well have pinned another medal on the bastards for getting away with felony offenses against humanity.

Appalling things happen in war. These are not just the distinguishing and traumatic war wounds that become the curse that haunts the spirit and the soul: the traumatic amputations, traumatic brain injuries, and Post-Traumatic Stress Injuries; the latter ripe with a revival of horrors and the endless nightmares and years of sleepless nights and the reliving of all things vile and repulsive in living color, right down your best friends' death at the hands of the enemy and his or her blood curdling screams as they lay dying; the rush of adrenalin that ignites in firefights and ambushes on the battlefields of urban warfare, the exaggerated hyperstartle response set in motion in response to any unexpected sounds, by crowds, by bright lights, by any degree of surprise, by arguments, by any unsettling event; the uncontrollable anxiety and anger and rage that detonate in the face of a home and a land that we no longer trust. In reality, the situation is far worse than that. It is the massive ignorance we face when we come marching home from war that not only diminishes what our country has asked us to do for them, but the terrible shame that this has brought upon us for having done so (Wood, 2014). What percentage of the American populace is unaware of the fact that we were at war for 13 years? Perhaps what we need to consider is that the most injurious wounds of war are not those suffered on the battlefield, but at the hands of a society and a culture devoid of any interest in the subject matter or any degree of compassion or awareness (Wood, 2014). It's this simple; if it doesn't affect us directly, it doesn't exist. When the flag waving has ceased and the ticker tape has been swept up, what's left? A carbon footprint? We return to a homeland that too often, demonstrates complete disregard, disdain, and disrespect for and towards our military service and the psychological injuries that we carry home in our duffel bags and ruck sacks. To have served has come to be discounted. Come home to homelessness and joblessness and assault and battery on the psyche by the very establishment that sent us headlong into combat by presidential call up in the first place. The onslaught of grief that invades our every breath for losing comrades and for failing to save them despite mortal wounds, not to mention the wrath for the unsound decision making that placed troops in the wrong place at the wrong time, is just the beginning of the rationale for rage and loss of faith in humanity. The toll of such unconscionable treatment is immeasurable, as it evokes an inability to trust and to react without anger and outrage, as the ethics and moral belief systems that we took to war collide directly with the revolting realities of not only war, by the battleground of the home front that rejects us, dismisses us, and ultimately, forgets us (Scurfield, 2006). We swore to protect and defend, but apparently, this courtesy has not been extended to us. This is a toxic stew that simmers with the maiming and dismemberment of the psyche and the soul with survivor guilt, with moral outrage and indignation, with grief of unequalled proportions for those we

couldn't save, and for witnessing and perpetuation of evil of that we are powerless to prevent. Fellow countrymen and women of all ages, do not allow this to become the totality of our military service.

And then there are the Women of War, those who both give life and live viscerally with the taking of lives (Hoffman, 2014). Being trained to kill in time of war is gender neutral. We are the same trained killing machines as our brethren. And for this, we are insulted with probing questions about our husbands' and brothers' combat experiences or met with curiosity about what life was like behind front lines in wartime theaters where there are no front lines. Everywhere is the front line. Too often overlooked and unacknowledged, we have become a new class of the invisible. My OIF and OEF combat veteran bumper stickers could only mean that I'm driving my husband's vehicle. Women deployed alongside men to the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan as the lionesses of war, nearly 300,000 strong since 2001. Our lives are no less torn apart than those of our male counterparts, made worse by the shocking epidemic of violence in the form of military sexual assaults. There is a terrible burden of emptiness that women carry home from war, as in the minds of many, our wartime service simply did not exist. It is long past due time to lift up our sisters in arms and to celebrate their countless and rich contributions for the cause and cost of freedom.

EPILOGUE

There is a circle of belongingness that becomes the sacred trust, surpassing all else" (Platoni, 2008). "Stated simply, it is about what you would sacrifice and surrender for your uniformed brothers and sisters, a unity and camaraderie to which one would gladly adhere, generating bonds forged for a lifetime. There is nothing so momentous, so significant as becoming part of that company of unsung heroes; those willing to lay down their lives for brother and sister Soldier, Airman, Marine, Sailor, or Coastguardsman, without reconsideration, and in the face of total madness. At some point in the lunatic folly of war, one becomes molded or transformed into that collective persona, where accountability for lives outside of one's own becomes the all-encompassing reason for being. This is the pure and unadulterated antithesis of man's inhumanity to man. Their lives in your hands become significantly more vital, far more consequential than your own. "Plainly, what you would do is ingrained in the soul, as you would forsake all else to accomplish the most unselfish of deeds. In the face of mortal danger, nothing else matters but who has become your next of kin. It is in the heat of battle, where the frontlines are indistinguishable from the rear echelon, where there is no embarrassment for the breadth and depth of bonding among boots on the ground and the unshakable expressions of love for one another, which almost always surpasses race, ethnicity, age, and oftentimes, gender. It is in the heat of battle, where the front line is indistinguishable from the rear echelon, there is little embarrassment for

the degree of bonding among members of a unit and the unshakable expressions of love for one another, which almost always traverses all else" (Platoni, 2008).

"For multitudes of hundreds and thousands of Service Members, they will spend much of their lives consumed with sorrow for being unable to save their buddies in time from any number of North Vietnamese, insurgent, Taliban, al Qaeda, and ISIS killing machines. Even more heartbreaking is the likelihood that they will never come to appreciate that there was such greatness in their vain efforts. These foreign lands, so dismal and unforgiving that death often seems like a desirable escape, offers little respite from what long ago became a cesspool of violence. Early on in the process, one comes to recognize that there is no choice but to be resilient in the face of such unceasing horror. You give up and let go . . . you die, others die" (Platoni, 2008).

Nevertheless, we survive because it is our sacred trust to do so for those who count upon us" (Platoni, 2008), but it is under this extreme duress that true character is often revealed. Deplorable and unmerciful conditions certainly make for the most remarkable of human laboratories and bear witness to the nature of interpersonal relationships that transcend the shackles of self-interest (Krauss, 1989).

"We don't go to war for our country and the cause of freedom nearly as much as we go to safeguard the lives of our friends. It is these ties that unite us in times of unparalleled suffering and catastrophe and which forge relationships that will endure for our lifetimes, often exceeding the closeness of family. Departing this and attempting to replace it on the home front becomes the new struggle, as those willing to lay down their lives are among life's most treasured keepsakes, unlikely to be replaced elsewhere else. Leaving this behind is easily an immense loss. If nothing else, it is ours to grasp all that can be gathered in regard to survivorship in the face of human tragedy and that the interconnectedness of those flung together under the most cataclysmic of life circumstances, make life more worthwhile than one might ever envision. It is in one another that the will and determination to survive the unfathomable is fueled and from which resilience thrives. And so it is in the aftermath of these events that we must hang together so that our souls do not perish in the pangs of an emotionally amputated life. What we must prevent at all costs is the disintegration of these imperatives on the home front. We must seek every opportunity to perpetuate the lessons that remain pure sustenance, to celebrate the invincibility of the human spirit. Admittedly, there are more than a few of us who would not seek to repeat these death-defying experiences, to do this wartime thing all over again, to render ourselves vulnerable to an early demise just for the opportunity to re-experience the camaraderie, the closeness of kinship that once sustained us and that is pivotal to our emotional survival in war's aftermath. But it is in this endeavor, we might surely die for the opportunity" (Platoni, 2008). We are among that exclusive class of warriors who would rather die FOR something than FROM something.

Kathy Platoni, Psy.D., DAAPM, FAIS
COL (RET), US Army
COL/Ohio Military Reserve/State Defense Forces

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