

★ FOREWORD ★

*An Open Letter to
America's Veterans*

AMERICA SENDS THE flower of its youth abroad to fight its wars. Because of that, America's military is always staffed with the stoutest, finest, most courageous people in the country. If as soldiers we are not that way when we enter the military, the military makes us that way by the time we get out. In the end, the military is still made up of everyday people like you and me. As such, most of us have no special skills to cope with the challenges wartime military service presents. Regular life simply cannot prepare a person for the brutish sensory overload of combat.

Coming back from military service in a time of war, we may be wounded in ways that don't show to the world at large. Some of the deepest wounds we suffer may be inflicted without leaving so much as a scratch. No matter what you are feeling when you come home, no matter how crazy you feel inside, know that you are not mentally ill. As combat veterans, we have been through some of the most traumatic life experiences possible. War is as close to hell on earth as anything ever could be. That does make us different from

our loved ones back home. War marks us all, some more deeply than others.

As veterans, we have paid a price to serve our country. We have suffered. And we may suffer for a lifetime. The soldier never gets to choose his or her war. The wars choose us, and not all are just. I believe the emotional casualties of the misguided wars may be the hardest of all to bear.

The soldier's lot is to be exposed to traumatic, life-threatening events—happenings that take us to places no bodies, minds, or souls should ever visit. It is a journey to the dark places of life—terror, fear, pain, death, wounding, loss, grief, despair, and hopelessness. We have been traumatized physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Some of us cope with exposure to hell better than others. Some are able to think of their combat experiences as but unpleasant vignettes in a long and wonderful life. It is not to those veterans I am speaking. I love them, but I am not afraid for them.

I am speaking to the rest of my brothers and sisters, those who find themselves trapped in the misery of memories as I was for so long.

For them, I am afraid.

To those veterans I say, you are not alone.

Many of us have been overwhelmed by war. Many of us have been unable to cope on our own with what has happened to us or with what we have done. Many of us have been left hopeless, lost, and confused about ourselves and our lives in ways we never thought possible.

That does not make us victims.

It makes us veterans.

As veterans of war, we are vulnerable to the memories of those experiences for the rest of our lives. Movies, the nightly news, the death of a loved one, even simple stress can serve as a trigger that reminds us of the hell we were once in. Just that remembrance can

sometimes be enough to undo all the buckles we used to put ourselves back together when we got home.

Our bodies, minds, and spirits react automatically to these memory triggers. They feel the hurts and fear and horror anew each time. The curse of the soldier is that he never forgets.

Having once felt mortal danger and pure terror, our bodies prepare for it again. That helped us survive on the battlefield. However, what saved us on the battlefield doesn't work very well back here at home. It is impossible to forget our experiences in the military. But it is possible to deal with them positively. It is possible to take control of them.

That's what I've had to do.

I've found in my own life that I had to exude positive energy into the world in order not to be overwhelmed with sadness and grief over what I have lost. My body, my soul, my spirit, and my belief in life itself were stolen from me by the disaster of the Vietnam War. I found solace in attempting to "turn my pain into somebody else's gain" by immersing myself in politics and public service. In particular, I devoted myself to helping my fellow veterans and disabled friends heal. This was a great help to me in my life. But when I lost my reelection bid for the U.S. Senate in 2002, my life fell apart. The staff that had helped me politically and physically so I could keep on running with no legs was gone. The pleasure of having a job worth doing and the money to keep me afloat were gone.

My relationships began to crumble, especially the one with my fiancée.

I went down in my life in every way it is possible to go down. Massive depression took over. I went down with a grief over my losses that I had never known before. I went down thinking that God was not for me anymore. I no longer wanted to live. With the start of the Iraq War, my own post-traumatic stress disorder came roaring back nearly 40 years after I was in combat. I never saw it

coming. Thoughts of war and death simply consumed me. I thought I was past that.

It taught me that none of us are ever past it. But all of us can get past it enough to be happy.

When I went down, my sense of safety, organization, structure, and stability collapsed. My anxiety went sky-high. My brain chemicals, which had helped me stay hopeful and optimistic, dropped through the floor. My brain stopped working. My mind, which I had counted on all my life to pull me through and help clarify challenges, fell into despair. My spirit dropped like a rock as all hope I had for a good life went away. I was totally wounded and wiped out—hopeless and overwhelmed. Just like I had been on that April day in 1968 when the grenade ripped off my legs and my right arm. Emotionally, spiritually, physically, and mentally, I was bleeding and dying. I wound up at Walter Reed Army Medical Center almost 40 years after I had been treated there the first time. This time around, I was in search of being put back together again in my mind, heart, and soul. When I was there the first time, the doctors didn't really treat our hearts and minds, just our broken bodies. Post-traumatic stress disorder didn't officially exist. Neither did counseling for it. What a world of difference several decades make!

Recovery is possible. There are people who can help.

Through weekly counseling, medication for anxiety and depression, and weekly attendance at a spiritual Twelve Step recovery group, I began to heal. My personal recovery and renewal have taken years. I still talk to my PTSD counselor at Walter Reed occasionally when I need to do so. I still take a low dose of antianxiety and antidepressant medication. I still stay in touch with my brothers in my Tuesday night Twelve Step group at the "last house on the block." As a brother in that group, I lean on my fellow attendees, especially my fellow veterans, and feed off their experience, strength, and hope.

Which is why I am writing this open letter especially to those who have suffered what Shakespeare referred to as “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” by getting blown up, shot up, or otherwise wounded in the service of our country. For me, the physical wounds were the first to heal and the easiest to deal with. It is not easy to run for political office or try to run forward in life with no legs. But I’ve been able to do it. The mental and emotional wounds—and a whole suite of spiritual wounds—have been far more difficult to overcome. They are the most subtle of all, and the hardest to heal. From time to time, I am overwhelmed by the sense of meaninglessness I feel regarding the Vietnam War, in which I was a young participant, and the Iraq War Resolution, which I voted for as a U.S. senator. To keep my sanity, I must not dwell on my part in those disastrous episodes in American history. I try not to blame myself too much. I work on my own recovery and renewal knowing that I can’t help anyone else unless I get, as Hemingway put it after his war, “strong at the broken places.”

I try to get enough sleep so my mind can regenerate. I exercise. I still walk with no legs, putting my stumps on pillows and sliding across the floor to get my aerobic workouts. Occasionally I do sit-ups and push-ups and curls with weights. I stay in touch with the members of my group and read literature like the Bible, which guides my prayer and meditation and helps me remember that God is with me, not against me. I work on my physical, spiritual, and mental recovery and renewal every day.

Recovery is possible from even the most grievous wounds of war, politics, and life. But we veterans remain painfully aware of our experiences. As my trauma counselor tells me, it is fine to look in the rearview mirror from time to time to see where you’ve been, but it is much more important to look through the windshield to see where you want to go. We can’t let where we’ve been dominate and control where we are headed. Otherwise, we live an upside-down life.

In addition to trying to muster the courage and the faith to move forward each day, I try to remember that I am blessed to have the grace of God and the help of friends to point the way and help me along my path.

I wish you the same.

*Max Cleland
Atlanta, Georgia
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