

**ISSUES & ANSWERS: “POST TRAUMATIC STRESS SYNDROME: VIETNAM TO IRAQ TO KATRINA”**      **October 25, 2007, Gulfport, MS**

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I am a veteran who served on an Army psychiatric team in Vietnam in 1968-69 and provided mental health services to well over a thousand war veterans during my 4-year military service and 25-year career with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Also, like most of you in the audience here tonight, I am a Mississippi Gulf Coast resident who survived Hurricane Katrina. And, I have been the post-traumatic stress counselor for the University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Coast campus since three weeks after Katrina. It is an honor to have this opportunity to speak with you today about the impact of both war and Katrina from my experiences as a war and Katrina survivor, and a mental health provider and educator.

One prevailing myth about the impact of being exposed to war or a disaster such as Hurricane Katrina, is that heroes as well as “normal” or “healthy” people do *not* continue to have problems for very long after being exposed to a trauma. If they do, the myth is that they *already had* problems and were “pre-disposed” to having such problems anyhow. This myth contends that “the trauma was merely a trigger.” In contrast, the reality is that combat, war, natural disasters and other traumatic experiences *always* have a significant impact on all who experience them, both shorter-term impact and longer-term impact that may persist over years and even decades.

This does not mean that the impact of a war or of Katrina is necessarily a *psychiatrically disordered* response, but there *always* is an impact.

- Over a year after returning from deployment in Iraq, an Iraq war veteran said: “My body’s here, but my mind is there (in Iraq).”
- A Katrina survivor. “I can’t stop the memories of what happened during Katrina from coming back. It doesn’t take too much for me to remember all over again how terrifying it was and what I lost.”

Indeed: there is compelling evidence that the more anyone is exposed to traumatic stressors, such as war, the greater the likelihood that you will eventually develop post-traumatic stress or post-traumatic stress disorder. And so, for example, the longer you are deployed in a war-zone and the more you are repeatedly redeployed back to the war zone, the risk will be *increasingly higher* that you will ultimately develop PTSD. This is the risk of being willing to repeatedly put yourself into harm’s way.

And a number of people who were traumatized during or following Katrina are having exaggerated anxiety or panic reactions when another tropical storm is forming out in the Atlantic and there is a chance that it will be coming our way. For example, in early August, 2007, I was presenting at a conference in St. Louis when I received a phone call from a colleague at Southern Miss. She was calling because three employees were having serious anxiety reactions as a tropical storm was being projected in some forecasts to possibly hit the Mississippi Gulf Coast. And I am absolutely certain that whenever the next severe hurricane *does* make landfall, severe anxiety and other Katrina-related issues *will* resurface and profoundly impact many Gulf Coast residents—among both those of us who stay and among those who evacuate.

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<sup>1</sup> The easiest way to access my university Web site is to do a search on my name, “Ray Scurfield”. One of the first hits will be “University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Coast.” Click on that and you will go directly to my university Web site.

I want to emphasize that I am acutely aware that it is quite difficult to discuss *either* of these topics—the impact of war *or* the impact of Hurricane Katrina---without being criticized. The criticism is usually one of the following:

- the presentation is *too optimistic* and over-emphasizes the positives that have occurred while downplaying the negative impact; or,
- the presentation is *too critical*, unduly emphasizes the negatives and downplays the positives that have occurred.

[I will do my best to give a balanced yet realistic presentation.]

Such criticism is understandable when considering the extremely powerful personal and societal dynamics that are involved in both war and Katrina. *Anyone* who has survived any war, and *anyone* who has survived a natural disaster as destructive as Hurricane Katrina, as well as anyone who has had family or close friends deeply impacted by war or Katrina, *will*, indeed, have *very* strong convictions about the subject.

These include convictions about what happened, what the impacts were and are, what should be done for the survivors and their families, who needs to do it—and who might be to blame for what happened and for what is *not* being provided afterwards to the survivors. And each such war or Katrina survivor certainly has earned the right to their own perceptions and opinions, and the right to express their opinions—as different or contrary as they might be to mine or to yours. <sup>2</sup>

## How Bad or Good is the *Real* Impact of the War and Katrina?

**The Impact of War:** Intertwined with one's personal survival experiences are deeply held *political* convictions that are infused in our *personal* convictions about war, natural disaster, the true impact and what to do about it. My position is that the issues that are being discussed here this evening regarding the impact of war are *very real and profound* --- no matter if you are:

- adamantly *pro*-the-Iraq War and pro why our country is fighting this war and fully support our President's policy of "staying the course" until the job is finished no matter how costly and how long that may take
- *or*, conversely, if you are adamantly *against* this war, want our troops home yesterday and believe that this is the biggest foreign policy blunder that our country has ever made that will have tragic consequences worldwide for decades to come
- *or*, if you are somewhere in-between these two positions.

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<sup>2</sup> Such convictions are about:

- what the true and full *impact* of war and Katrina has been---both shorter- and longer-term
- what *should be done* about the impact, now and later
- what responsibility *each of us* has personally for ultimate recovery from war or disaster *versus* what responsibility *should be shared* with or is the responsibility of our community and our country,
- *who*, if anyone, *is to blame* for *exaggerating* or *minimizing* the *impact* of the war or Katrina on those who have survived, and on the *resulting shortcomings* in *adequately recognizing, admitting* and *responding* to the *full extent* of shorter and longer-term problems and needs that have resulted from the war or Katrina
- *who* if anyone *is to blame* for *what actually happened in the first place*—from blaming our veterans themselves to blaming our politicians and our country for what happens to them in war, and from blaming our Gulf Coast residents themselves if they haven't recovered from Katrina or blaming us for living in a hurricane-prone area in the first place.

*And since almost no survivors of trauma believe that trauma is a random event, if no one else can be blamed, a significant number of survivors blame God or a higher power for "having allowed" this terrible tragedy to happen in the first place and/or for not "being there" for the survivors afterwards.*

Regardless of your political beliefs, serious concern is warranted over the documented substantial impact of deployment to Iraq and Afghanistan on the mental health of returning military personnel. This includes the very sobering recent report by the Department of Veterans Affairs that there has been a jump of almost 70% in the 12 months ending June 30, 2007, in the number of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans seeking for PTSD.<sup>3</sup> What makes these figures of even greater concern is that “troops tend to ignore, hide or fail to recognize their mental health wounds until after their military service. PTSD cases often surface long after troops leave combat.” (Zoroya, 2007).<sup>4</sup> For example, in 1988, which was 13 years after the last U.S. troops left Vietnam, 31% of the male Vietnam veterans had a life-time diagnosis of PTSD at some time post-Vietnam.

If that figure holds for Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans—and there is no reason to think otherwise based on various military studies of current psychiatric casualties---that means that some 450,000 of the over 1.5 million troops who have been deployed to date will eventually have war-related PTSD. And this number is if no more troops are deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan!<sup>5</sup>

**The Impact of Katrina:** There are many significant indicators of strong economic recovery in South Mississippi, to include numerous condominium and other housing projects, unemployment rates over two points below pre-Katrina levels, annual retail sales that have increased 61% since 2004 and a casino industry that has surpassed pre-Katrina profits (Gulf Coast Business Council, 2007).<sup>6</sup> And many have described *how resilient* the people of south Mississippi are and credit such resilience with how well we are doing in contrast to other areas hit by Katrina.

Conversely, our south Mississippi communities continue to be described as having *serious* post-Katrina-related problems. These include the appalling lack of affordable housing, a suicide rate in FEMA trailer parks that is 79 times higher than the national average and major depression seven times the national rate (Spiegel, 2007),<sup>7</sup> overall mental illness that is double the pre-storm levels (Elias, 2007a)<sup>8</sup> and a survey that found one-half of parents saying that their children had developed emotional or behavior problems after Katrina. “What’s unique about Katrina is how much children have lost . . . So many have lost virtually everything: their homes, their neighborhoods, closed extended families that are often scattered, their friends and churches.” (Elias, 2007b).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, more than 100,580 Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans have been diagnosed with mental health problems as of July 2007, to include 48,559 with PTSD. (Zoroya, 2007). And these numbers do not include thousands of veterans who are treated at over 200 storefront Vet Centers, nor do they include active-duty personnel diagnosed with PTSD or former service members who have not gone for VA services.

<sup>4</sup> Zoroya, Gregg. (2007, October 19, 2A). “Veteran stress cases up sharply. Mental illness is now No. 2 injury.” *USA Today*.

<sup>5</sup> By the way, in addition to Vietnam and Iraq veterans, oftentimes I have been asked, “Well, what about W II veterans, or Korean War veterans? They don’t seem to have had anywhere near the post-war problems that Vietnam vets had. Why did they do so well?” This is an extremely important question—because, you see, the reality is that there is absolutely no factual evidence whatsoever as to the national prevalence of post-traumatic stress or combat stress or mental health problems among WW II vets following WWII, nor of Korean War veterans. Indeed, there is factual evidence concerning the national prevalence rates of PTSD or mental health problems among only *one* era of veterans—Vietnam.

I wish I had a nickel for every time I have given a presentation on Vietnam (or later) wars and describing combat stress and PTSD, how many time afterwards someone would come up to me and say one of two things: (1) “You just described exactly my father (or my uncle, or my brother) who served in WW II or in Korea;” or (2) “My father (or uncle or brother WW II or Korean War vet) only started talking about having serious troubling memories from his war experience in the last years of his life . . .”

As a side-note, a common lay-person’s expression to describe a number of WW II vets after the war was “nervous from the service.”

<sup>6</sup> Gulf Coast Business Council (2007). “*The Mississippi Gulf Coast. Two Years After Katrina.*” (August 21).

<sup>7</sup> Spiegel, Alix. “Stuck and suicidal in a post-Katrina trailer park.” National Public Radio (*NPR.org*, August 8, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Elias, Marilyn (2007a). “Katrina victims struggle mentally. Post-traumatic stress still rising, study shows.” *USA Today*, August 16, 1A.

<sup>9</sup> Elias, Marilyn (2007b). “Trauma shapes Katrina’s kids. The youngest find it hard to bounce back 2 years after their lives were disrupted.” *USA Today*, August 16, 1D.

[Video excerpt (survivors' sharing only) From the video, "Katrina, South Mississippi's Storm," by WLOX-13, Biloxi, MS, 2006]

Two days after Katrina when I found my university office and building for our department destroyed, with ruined contents scattered everywhere, I just had to sit on my colleague's small couch that was perched in the middle of the debris, pick up a water-logged book, and look studious, as my wife and daughter took a photograph of the sight. I have found humor to be one of the most important post-war and post-Katrina coping attributes to have. If I had not spontaneously posed for that photograph in the midst of the debris, I probably would have broken down sobbing at the irretrievable loss of 30 years of my professional life's records, data from three research studies, et al. And my loss paled in comparison to so many others.<sup>10</sup>

Similar to the clinical experiences described at the Gulf Coast Mental Health Center, I have not been seeing practically any full-blown PTSD in my counseling activities. However, there sure are a lot of *stress-related* difficulties, heightened anxiety, mood problems and daily living concerns exacerbated by such factors as people who were poor or near-poor prior to Katrina being at a double disadvantage post-Katrina, those still displaced and living in crowded conditions with other family members or in sub-standard housing, financial difficulties exacerbated by storm related losses, skyrocketing home insurance premiums, etc. I am *very* concerned that there is an ever-increasing gap between those who have been able to move ahead and those who have not.

## **The Trauma of the Iraq War: Inside the Surge**

Especially for those of you who have never been in a war zone, I will show an 10minute video, *Inside the Surge* by British photojournalist Sean Smith, who was embedded with a U.S. military unit in Iraq for two months.<sup>11</sup> This film contains graphic visual scenes—it is, after all, a realistic slice of what our troops face day after day after day in the war zone. Also, there are some "political" statements made in the last couple of minutes of this documentary, statements that some may not appreciate. However, it is impossible to completely separate this war--indeed any war--and politics. Military personnel in war *do* have extremely strong opinions pro and con about the war they are fighting, what the political aspects are, and what the country back home is saying and doing in support of or in opposition to the war and to our troops and to their families.

There is a timeless line in the movie, *Ulysses*. His best friend says to Achilles, who is agonizing over the many already dead and more to follow in the next day's battle, while the Senate many miles away back home continues to deliberate about the war. "*War is young men dying, and old men talking. It has always been that way.*"

[Video: *Inside the surge*]

What you just saw is a small sample of what so many U.S. troops, *and* an exponentially larger number of Iraqi civilians, *live and die with* on a daily basis. Please note that *there is one distinctive element* intrinsic to war that is illustrated quite well in this video. This is in contrast to almost any other trauma, be it the trauma of hurricanes, other natural disasters or other human-induced trauma.

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<sup>10</sup> Unlike many of my colleagues and community residents, I was fortunate to still have a home that was habitable (although it took about 18 months to find a reliable contractor and get the damages repaired—a common story in south Mississippi). And the ongoing battles with the insurance companies as to what damage was caused by wind and rain versus storm-surge water are and have remained extremely contentious—with disastrous financial consequences. And many renters and those who had no or inadequate insurance feel that they have been almost totally left out of recovery assistance and support.

<sup>11</sup> Inside the Surge. Journeyman Pictures. [www.journeyman.tv](http://www.journeyman.tv); 16 July 2007

*Military personnel are uniquely sanctioned by our country to go into harm's way to be perpetrators of violence against others, and to be willing to risk injury or death, and to risk the lives and health of one's comrades-in-arms, in service to our country.*

Being a “licensed perpetrator” of death carries with it a remarkably potent legacy of impact that may be the most enduring and problematic outcome of being a combatant, to include guilt, shame and rage---and has enormous, distinctive consequences and implications about what is needed for post-war healing.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, both as a Vietnam War veteran and Katrina survivor, I am acutely aware of the convergence of major parallel experiences and reactions post-war and post-Katrina:

## **Connections Between War and Hurricane Katrina**

For us south Mississippians, the physical and psychiatric casualties of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan overlay and are inherently infused with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Indeed, in the Afterword of my third book, *War Trauma. Lessons Unlearned From Vietnam to Iraq*, I wrote my initial thoughts about some of the parallels and nexus between the Iraq War and Katrina. As a Vietnam veteran and Katrina survivor, I am acutely aware that there are significant parallel experiences and reactions post-war and post-Katrina that triggered war-related symptoms and issues among a number of active duty personnel and veterans (Scurfield, 2006a,<sup>13</sup> b,<sup>14</sup> c<sup>15</sup>)—and are now a traumatic legacy for legions of Katrina survivors. These include:

- **The physical devastation**—markedly similar to what one might have seen in a war zone. Indeed, one combat vet described Katrina’s destruction as “just like a war zone, except there was no gunfire.”
- **The overwhelming smells**—from gasoline and generators to the terrible stench from the debris, storm surge muck and rotting organic materials strewn over miles.
- **The marked heat and humidity**—oppressive and omnipresent---reminders of many war zones in World War II, Vietnam and today in Iraq and Afghanistan.
- **The very visible presence of uniformed National Guard and Reservists** standing guard duty for months, mile after mile along the railroad tracks that run parallel to the gulf and separated much of the worst hit areas closest to the beaches from less devastated areas further inland. Military humvees, deuce and a half military trucks full of soldiers, helicopters — *everywhere*. Concertina (razor) wire stretched in double rows alongside the railroad tracks, mile after mile after mile, interspersed by checkpoints manned by armed military personnel. Meals Ready to Eat (MREs) and water trucks. [And uniformed National Guardsmen still are on patrol in New Orleans.]

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<sup>12</sup> Scurfield, R.M. *A Vietnam Trilogy. Veterans and Post Traumatic Stress, 1968, 1989 & 2000* (2004); *Healing Journeys. Study Abroad With Vietnam Veterans* (2006); and *War Trauma. Lessons Unlearned From Vietnam to Iraq* (2006). [All published by Algora Publishing]

<sup>13</sup> Scurfield, R.M. (2006a). “Social work interventions at a Mississippi university devastated by Hurricane Katrina,” *Social Work Today Online January 2006 E-Newsletter*.

<sup>14</sup> Scurfield, R.M. (2006b). “Post-Katrina aftermath and helpful interventions on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.” *Traumatology, Vol. 12* (2), Summer, 2006, 104-120.

<sup>15</sup> Scurfield, R.M. (2006c). *WarTrauma. Lessons Unlearned From Vietnam to Iraq*.

- **The very strong sense of disorientation when coming home;** coming “home” from a war, and coming “home” from a Katrina, to a world that was now *unfamiliar*. *Over the first year* post-Katrina, whenever I would go down Highway 90 next to the Gulf of Mexico, I would have to pay extremely careful attention so as not to miss a turn. The obliteration of almost all that was familiar, mile after mile after mile was mind-numbing. It began to blend together in a desolate landscape, shattered, of seemingly never-ending palates of grey and grime and ruin. It was devoid of what used to be grand, colorful and vibrant ante bellum homes, restaurants, piers and marinas.

Even now, *over two years* post-Katrina, the destruction of familiar landmarks is so extensive that I *still* find myself driving by “unfamiliar” roads that I *had known intimately* from years of commuting and pleasure-driving. I don’t think I am the only one who still gets lost and misses turns driving down Highway 90 due to the destruction of almost all familiar landmarks—or has occasional surges of sadness over what is no more.

- **Being forgotten**—the powerful and painful reminder of how forgotten many war veterans have felt and feel is now intertwined post-Katrina with how many Mississippians (as well as Louisiana survivors of Hurricane Rita) have discovered how forgotten we seem to have become—versus, for example, the media coverage of New Orleans—and we should not begrudge New Orleans receiving all the attention and assistance possible as the destruction there also is extraordinary.

Is “out-of-sight” now “out-of-mind” for much of the rest of the country and our national officials? Oh, yes, too many of our nation’s war veterans and their families know *exactly* how that feels—as our country seems to have selective amnesia following each war about how prevalent and enduring the impact of war is on its combatants and their families. And now Camille survivors and their families, not to mention Florida survivors of past Hurricanes such as Andrew, perceive that public awareness regarding the storms that they all survived has been swept away in the wake of Katrina.

Such “forgotten survivors” of war and natural disasters oftentimes react with anger, dismay, bitterness, which is a problem *on top of* any specific issues they might have from their own traumatic war or disaster.

- **Deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan—or home on the Gulf Coast?** There were a number of letters and e-mails in *The Sun Herald* about the anguish and agony of various Mississippi active duty personnel being deployed to or who were overseas *at the same time* that their own families and communities were suffering terribly from Katrina. Also, there is concern that much of our National Guard units and their equipment and their energy have been depleted by being overseas, as well as reserve units. Has this compromised their ability to be able to respond adequately to a new natural disaster that might befall the United States? Can our military units really do justice to serving the OEF/OIF mission and their historic missions back home?
- **The financial costs of the Iraq War versus post-disaster recovery.** Is it really possible to adequately fund and wage a war overseas and rebuild an entire nation while concurrently doing justice to our own citizens in Katrina-ravaged Mississippi and Louisiana (and in Alabama and Texas)---not to mention the recent devastating fires in southern California and other post-Katrina disasters?

*Protesting the war but not the troops and protesting the lack of funding to finance the massive costs of recovery on the Gulf Coast without criticizing the amount of funding being spent on the Iraq War are inextricably intertwined issues.* Are not the enormous costs and manpower required to sustain both our very large military presence overseas and the rebuilding of an entire nation (Iraq) detrimental to our ability to do right by our own people here in the U.S.? In the words of one protestor from Louisiana, “Make levees, not

war.” Once again, veterans are seeing how politics and policies proclaim that the nation must fully fund and provide for the current massive war effort — and seemingly at the expense of programs for the sick, the elderly, children without health insurance, Katrina survivors — and at the expense of programs for veterans and their families.

- **Trauma is unforgettable.** Many of us know all too well that war is unforgettable and that the memories and the impact—both the good and the bad—are life-long, be it from World War II, Korea, Vietnam, or Iraq and Afghanistan. And survivors of Hurricane Camille and of Hurricane Andrew in Florida will attest to the same dynamic applying long term to disaster survivors.
- **The bungled response of the federal government.** Firstly, there is the troubled legacy of the Department of Defense medical facilities and the Department of Veterans Affairs e.g., the VA, and the post-Katrina federal response. While there are many wonderful individual DOD and VA providers, the DOD and the VA as medical and benefits’ systems continue to have programs and services that are under-funded, inefficient and/or error-prone, and certainly not enough medical and regional office sites that could be called anything approaching state-of-the art medical and benefits system for our veterans and their families. Significant groups of war veterans and their families are very resentful and bitter *over what are perceived as the government’s broken promises and failed commitments* to veterans and their families, and resentment towards the rest of society that seems to have forgotten what we all went through.<sup>16</sup>

And too many survivors of Katrina have felt that the federal government has fallen through on promises made in the aftermath of Katrina—such as to do what was and is necessary to help our region recover, hold insurance companies accountable to their policy holders, live up to federal responsibilities to repair and improve a woefully inadequate levee system in Louisiana, and insure that FEMA would make necessary changes so that what didn’t happen after Katrina also will not happen after the next disaster. [Some of you may have seen the many t-shirts that came out after Katrina announcing what the FEMA evacuation plan was. I will clean up the language and only use the letters “MF” for what was written out: “FEMA evacuation plan. Run, m-f, run.”]

Yes, both veterans and Katrina survivors have observed the saga post-Katrina of an incredibly inept disaster response by the federal government — that in turn was obfuscated by denial and buck-passing at various agency and governmental levels.

- **Profound losses.** Many war veterans describe how they have felt that “I lost a part of me” in the war, to include their youth, their innocence, their naiveté. One vet who went back with us to Vietnam in 2000 on our Study Abroad History course<sup>17</sup> said “I went over to Vietnam as a blue-eyed, 21 year old kid from Minnesota—and I returned an old man.”

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<sup>16</sup> Too many veterans and their families have experienced (1) our country as not adequately recognizing their sacrifices to our country and (2) the federal government as having reneged on promises to take care of our military personnel who went into harm’s way to serve their country. See Ben Stein’s new book, *The Real Stars. America’s True Heroes*, New Beginnings Press, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Scurfield, R.M., Scurfield, R.M., Root, L., Wiest, A., Coiro, FN, Sartin, HJ, Jones, CL & Fanugao, MB. (2003, Fall). History lived and learned: Students and Vietnam veterans in an integrative study abroad course. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, Vol. IX, 111-138.

Others lost limbs, bodily functions, their physical and/or their mental and spiritual health. Still others describe a loss of faith in our government or in our society at how they were treated during or following the war. And still others describe a loss of faith in God or in a higher power. “I reached out to God to help me when I was in the war and he didn’t answer me. He left me alone with all this friggin’ weight on my shoulders to deal with on my own.” And others describe returning to a world that now was unfamiliar and somewhat alien to them. “Home” would never be the same again after the impact of what they had been through.

All of the above losses have their variants among various Katrina survivors. [*Video excerpt: before and after, from “Katrina. South Mississippi’s Storm,” by WLOX-13, Biloxi, MS, 2006*]

No matter how wonderful the economic news about south Mississippi, no matter how accurate may be the repeated descriptions of how resilient the people of south Mississippi are:

- Tens of thousands of Katrina survivors in Mississippi have been and many still are experiencing an overwhelming sense of loss, grief and malaise over the destruction of places of employment, small and large businesses, churches, schools, neighborhoods, recreational facilities, historic sites and even entire communities — the loss of so much about life that was familiar and cherished along the entire Mississippi Gulf Coast
- Others have lost, as mentioned earlier, trust in our government because of broken promises, an inept and overwhelmed disaster relief assistance response and repeated denials by government officials of serious health problems being reported by residents of formaldehyde-laden FEMA trailers
- Others have lost their emotional, their physical and/or their financial health
- Still others have lost their faith and blamed God for the terrible “natural disaster” that happened or for their continuing plight afterwards. “Why did you let this happen, God?” “Why are you letting me suffer so?”

## Clinical Parallels between War and Disasters

The clinical parallels between healing from war and from disasters like Katrina are profound. Due to time limitations, I will only briefly mention five in the form of myths and realities: <sup>18</sup>

**Myth: Time heals all wounds.**

**Reality:** Not necessarily. *If this were true, old folks like me would be paragons of mental health.* ☺ The reality is that post-traumatic symptoms not only do not necessarily disappear over time, but in a significant sub-group the symptoms have become worse, probably exacerbated by the aging process, i.e., greater likelihood of exposure to deaths of significant others as one grows older, age-related losses of job, career, health, and increased realization of one’s mortality. <sup>19</sup>

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**Myth: My trauma was not as bad as what others suffered, so I should not be feeling as badly as I do. Or, I should feel guilty because I was spared what others suffered.**

**Reality:** Too many survivors unfairly *compare* their trauma with those of others; this is a no-win proposition. “My trauma was not as bad as that suffered by others, so I feel guilty even mentioning what happened to me.” No: your trauma is your trauma, and what is its impact on you? Some survivors continue to deny or minimize the very

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<sup>18</sup> Scurfield, R.M. *Myths & Realities About War and Disasters*. Accessible on my web site. Also in: Scurfield, R.M. (2004). *A Vietnam Trilogy. Veterans and Post Traumatic Stress, 1968, 1989 & 2000* (New York: Algora Publishing).

<sup>19</sup> See discussion in Raymond Scurfield, *A Vietnam Trilogy, Veterans & Post Traumatic Stress, 1968, 1989 & 2000* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2004).

real impact of their trauma experience. They must be *willing to face the truth* about how the trauma impacted them--or it will always have a grip on them.

Conversely, there are survivors who continually bemoan their situation and have little empathy for others, or indeed are very bitter at their situation and resent attention paid to others. This even includes reactions at the community level. For example, many from Louisiana are sharply critical of Mississippi “getting more than their fair share” of post-Katrina money, Conversely, many from Mississippi are very critical of how most of the national media attention is focused on New Orleans and that Mississippi is a media afterthought at best.

Unfortunately, it is too easy to become stuck in resentment about what others are getting and what we are not—rather than focusing on the bottom line: there is more than enough tragedy and devastation to overcome all along the Gulf Coast. The rebuilding and recovery tasks that remain are enormous and seemingly beyond the resources that are being directed our way. This is especially so for those with financial difficulties who can ill afford an economy in which affordable housing seems to be an afterthought and “not in my backyard” an attitude evidenced in several communities.

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***Myth:* My trauma (be it war, Katrina or . . .) is the cause of all of my problems that I am having. Or: I’m behaving or feeling this way just because of Iraq or Katrina . . .**

***Reality:* No one was a “blank tablet” before being deployed to Iraq *or* before Katrina. We all were persons with strengths and weaknesses, positives and negatives. You may be having problems now that existed before Katrina, or that are worse in the aftermath of Katrina. If this is so, you must be truthful with yourself as to the cause(s) of your current problems or you will put blame and responsibility where it does not belong and you will not address what truly needs addressed.**

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***Myth:* I did okay during the trauma and for awhile afterwards, so I shouldn’t be having all of these negative feelings and reactions now . . .**

***Reality:* People seldom “break down” psychologically or have emotions that overwhelm and incapacitate them while in the midst of an emergency or trauma like war or Katrina or in its immediate aftermath. Rather, most survivors suppress or “bury” painful feelings and thoughts and learn how to “detach” from one’s own emotions in order to survive and not be overwhelmed. Typically, there is a delay in the onset of problematic emotions and thoughts until sometime after the danger has passed--hours, days or weeks later; in a number of cases months, years or decades later.**

One colleague told me about eight months after Katrina: “I am having much more difficulty now, eight months later, than during the immediate aftermath of Katrina [when I was on survival mode]. I find myself more overwhelmed by competing demands on me—house, job, parents, other family members—than at anytime in the immediate aftermath of the storm . . . delayed response is harder for me than the immediate aftermath . . .” I might note that I have written a six-stage post-disaster phases handout that is available on my university Web site that includes a “delayed” sub-phase that can occur at any time during five of the six phases.

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***Myth:* If I fully remember and re-experience aspects of my original trauma (through talking about it, thinking about it, focusing on it), I will lose control and either become sucked back into the vortex of that memory and never be able to come back out again—or I will go crazy, or start crying and not be able to stop crying, or become so enraged that I will hurt someone or myself.**

**Reality:** Trauma survivors do not go crazy from remembering and talking about their trauma. But they may go ‘crazy’ trying so desperately to deny the undeniable—that the trauma happened, that it hurt then and it hurts now, that it has not gone away, and that it needs to be dealt with.

## **The *Other Side of the Story: Positives in the Wake of Trauma***

It is essential to emphasize that the story that follows in the wake of war and natural disasters is *not* all about pain, loss, hurt, tragedy. There may well be either or both significant “positive” and/or “negative” outcomes or impact, both while in the midst of the traumatic events and afterwards. This impact may be evident immediately, later or after a very long period of time has elapsed. [Of course, even having many positive war experiences or positive survival experiences from other trauma will not necessarily resolve or ameliorate the grief, hurt, fear or loss that was suffered or witnessed.]

Most vets and survivors of hurricanes and other trauma ultimately do experience important *positives* along with the pain and loss. For example, most vets feel that, overall, their military experiences were more positive than negative, to include increased personal strength and ability to function under severe duress, increased pride and enhanced appreciation of the freedoms that many take for granted. [Conversely, a substantial minority, perhaps as many as one-third, have serious issues that may be unresolved for months, years or decades.]<sup>20 21</sup>

Also, there are the sustained and extensive contributions by volunteers and private organizations both to military personnel and their families and to Katrina survivors. Thousands of volunteers who belong to grass-roots organizations have provided critically needed services to our nation’s military and their families—needs that are not being met by governmental programs. Such organizations include the Wounded Warrior Project, Blue Star Mothers, The Fisher House, National Veterans Foundation, Home Front Support Web, Support4MilitaryWives, Quilts for Soldiers, Soldiers Angels and so many more.

In turn, tens of thousands of volunteers from throughout the country have come to south Mississippi to help with debris removal and recovery efforts. This includes the remarkable efforts of the Navy Seabees and other military volunteers. The positive side of such humanitarianism cannot be overstated.

The following letter printed in *The Sun Herald* expresses beautifully the essence of the good that can come shining through and reaffirming what is really important in the aftermath of disasters such as Katrina.

*“Five days after the storm . . . I decided to venture out and see who I could help. I have a young lady friend who lost everything and she decided to join me . . . We then proceeded to a low-income neighborhood in D’Iberville that was hit hard. Almost every family we went to said ‘they didn’t need anything, but the people down the street did.’ In this little community, they were looking out for each other. They were doing the best they could to spread the resources out amongst all of them. And my young friend was shaking hands, giving out meals, smiling and laughing. I watched her as she interacted with everyone and I realized that even through her loss, she found a way to give. She gave hope and joy and love. That is the greatest lesson I*

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<sup>20</sup> Card, J. (1983). *Lives After Vietnam. The Personal Impact of Military Service*. Washington, DC: Lexington Books.

<sup>21</sup> Major negatives from war, and in the aftermath of natural disasters from those who feel abandoned or forgotten, can include: loss of civic pride, loss of faith in America; cynicism; inability to make friends; and experiences of grief at death, suffering and other losses such as loss of homes, possessions and even communities. See also: Scurfield, *War Trauma. Lessons Unlearned From Vietnam to Iraq*, 2006.

*learned: through it all, our spirit and lives are what live on. Thank you, my young friend, for the lesson. I will always remember it.”*<sup>22</sup>

The resilient people of the Mississippi Gulf Coast have not only survived, many have been enriched — and continue to enrich others. Personally, I am blessed to have a renewed and enhanced appreciation of how special it is to be living here on the Gulf Coast and the importance of my relationship with my wife and daughter (we experienced together the harrowing onslaught of Katrina) and with our sons who were in California, and with our extended family. And so many friends and relatives cared and reached out across the miles. And that kind of outreach helps to mitigate even the painful devastation of a Katrina — or of war.

Yes, a remarkable and palpable spirit of caring and resolve persists that we will not let our nation’s worst natural disaster keep us down. I find people here are more sensitive and reaching out to others than before Katrina (and this always has been a friendly place). And tens of thousands of volunteers continue to offer assistance and caring, many with faith-based organizations, uniquely filling a desperate need that exceeds the inability of cumbersome federal programs to provide.

### **Lest We Forget---Again**

Should not this powerful post-Katrina spirit of appreciation and responsiveness to the inter-connectedness among us all, further illustrated by the massive national response to the mass murders at Virginia Tech, be channeled similarly into paying proper homage, respect and attention, not just now but for decades to come, to our nation’s finest who are suffering the price of having served in harm’s way, many with life-long disabilities and hurt?

And yet, soon after the end of this ever lengthening war, the metallic ribbons and bumper stickers will be gone, the war casualties increasingly distant from the front pages. Similarly, Katrina (other than New Orleans-related news) is seldom mentioned now, Rita is a non-existent afterthought and to most of the country Georges, Andrew and Camille are simply people’s names . . . Are we moving along, inexorably, to have collective amnesia again about yet another era of veterans and their families, abandoning them to struggle with their personal demons resulting from having served in harm’s way? This is similar to how too often we forget about or dismiss the hurt and challenges that continue to face many survivors of devastating hurricanes like Katrina, Rita, Andrew or, yes, Camille---or from a new war yet to be waged or a new hurricane yet to be named.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Iraq War Hits Close to Home**<sup>24</sup> [Optional: if time permits]

In closing: many of us I am sure personally know military personnel who have been or are deployed to Iraq and/or know their families. Yes, it is one thing to read the latest casualty reports in the local newspaper of names that are not familiar to the reader, and perhaps pause for a moment in reaction to yet another death or injury. It is quite another thing to have someone you know be in that report.

Around Christmastime, 2004, the husband and father of a mother (a former MSW student) and young daughter who I know was just such a casualty, killed-in-action in Iraq. And this tragedy also illustrated the

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<sup>22</sup> Hafford, L. (2005, September 22). One who lost everything still had much to give. *The Sun Herald*, p. B-4.

<sup>23</sup> Scurfield, R.M. (2007, September 9). “Surviving the shards of war and hurricanes.” Opinion-editorial commentary issued as a press release by the University of Southern Mississippi.

<sup>24</sup> Scurfield, *War Trauma. Lessons Unlearned From Vietnam to Iraq*.

wonderful support provided through the military's casualty assistance program and from both the military and civilian community in honoring a fallen hero and assisting the surviving family members.<sup>25</sup>

I found myself worrying about how both mother and daughter would handle this tragedy, both short- and longer-term. In particular, I thought about the daughter and how the Christmas season would always be bitter-sweet---infused with the memories of the traumatic death of her father (and his "broken promise" that he would return safely to her); and, yet, hopefully, over time, she also would cherish her treasured memories of him and the remarkable person that he was.

And I wondered, if I were the one who had to talk initially to a child whose parent had just been killed, how would I respond if she (he) were asking, "Daddy, when are you coming home again?", or if a Dad or Mom had promised that he or she would return---but did so in a coffin. And, while mere words are never adequate at such a time, the lyrics from a song by LoneStar, "I'm already there," kept singing in my head, as they seemed to offer words and a message that might be fitting:

This is what your Daddy would have wanted to say to you if he could have, and I am sure that he is thinking it right now, up in Heaven.

'I'm already there. Take a look around.  
I'm the sunshine in your hair. I'm the shadow on the ground.  
I'm the whisper in the wind. I'm your imaginary friend.  
And I know I'm in your prayers. I'm already there . . .

I'm the beat in your heart. I'm the moonlight shining down.  
I'm the whisper in the wind. And I'll be there to the end.  
Can you feel the love that we share? I'm already there.  
I'm already there.' <sup>26</sup>

I thank you for your time and your caring.

**END**

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<sup>25</sup> Scurfield, R.M. *War Trauma. Lessons Unlearned From Vietnam to Iraq.*

<sup>26</sup> "I'm Already There," by Lonestar.