On Being a Doctor

The Forever War

Nearly 10 years ago, at the age of 25, I crossed the border into Iraq as the commander of an infantry platoon. The silence over the radio was haunting as our vehicles rolled past the final checkpoint in the predawn darkness. The cold, mechanical sound of bullets being chambered suddenly echoed all around. There was time for one last thought of home. No one knew what lay ahead, but we all knew there was no turning back.

Our movement north was delayed by the clearing of IEDs buried along the road. Just outside of Baghdad, on the main highway, we linked up with the unit we were replacing. Their faces were gaunt, their uniforms faded and tattered, and the look in their eyes was one of emptiness. I stepped out of my vehicle and noticed a car burning not 50 meters away. The windshield was peppered with bullet holes, and a charred, bloody figure hung out of the open door. One of the soldiers standing guard said to me, cigarette in his mouth, “They got too close... don’t ever let ‘em get too close.” I had entered a cruel and unforgiving world. That night, our battalion suffered its first casualty.

Over the next 12 months, nearly a quarter of my soldiers were wounded in combat, while a similar number were awarded medals for valor. Despite many near-misses, I emerged unscarred. Others, of course, weren’t so lucky. There was no safety. In those terrifying moments, we fought to survive. Against every instinct, we moved forward into the fire. You did what you had to do to keep your friends, your brothers, alive. We did what we had to do. We killed to stay alive. What began as a hesitant, deeply contemplated action became a reflex and, eventually, a way of life.

At the end of my tour, I took no greater satisfaction than knowing that my soldiers had come home alive. We had survived. At home, however, I was still at war. I felt isolated from friends and family. I avoided crowds. I always kept my back to the wall. Many nights I would wake in a cold sweat struggling to find the pistol that I had kept by my side. Even when I could sleep, my dreams were filled with vivid images of combat. A few months later, I picked up the phone to make an appointment with a counselor, but after a few rings I hung up. That was as close as I came to reaching out.

Not long after, I left the Army. Determined to make a new life, I enrolled in medical school. In many ways, I just wanted to be a student. Certainly I was proud of my service, but I did not want to be defined by it. I rarely spoke of my time in the military, let alone Iraq. No one would understand.

I harbored fears that others might judge me for the things I had done. They might find out that I was a killer. And as my life “normalized,” I increasingly struggled with my place in this strange new world. What was once home was now foreign. The rules were different. My days felt empty and purposeless. I couldn’t reconcile the things I had done with the person I was trying to be.

Meanwhile, the situation in Iraq was getting worse. Restlessly, I would watch the lists of those killed in action scroll across the evening news. I couldn’t bear the sight of those faces, knowing that I was safe at home. I missed the war. Even in its chaos, the war was the only place that made sense. I was an addict. I needed to feel it again. I volunteered to go back. Of course, I told everyone that I had been involuntarily recalled. They would never understand and would probably protest, so the lie made it easier on all of us.

My second tour was very different from the first. By the time I returned, the fires of the civil war had smoldered. I spent most of my days focused on rebuilding infrastructure and livelihoods, work that allowed me to interact with ordinary Iraqis. I witnessed their struggle to survive in the midst of terrible devastation. On occasion, I like to think I provided some measure of relief. In those efforts, I found an element of closure. I had built something. Finally, I could talk about my service without revealing my own scars.

The second homecoming was also different, and the subsequent years witnessed a transformation in my life. I got married, spent a year abroad, and matched into a prestigious residency program. The war was at last behind me. A new future, unshackled by the past, lay before me. Yet, I could not escape the feeling that all of this success was artificial. I was nothing but an impostor. How could I, the killer, be so deserving? At any moment, I would be exposed.

The only way I could protect myself was to keep those secrets hidden away. I concealed the most important moments of my life from those closest to me. Even in suffering, including occasional thoughts of suicide, I held back. I did not want to expose others to the horror I had experienced. I would rather let the poison kill me than infect others. “Don’t ever let ‘em get too close,” I had been told on my first day in Iraq. That philosophy had kept me alive there; certainly it would do the same at home.

By all appearances, I “soldiered on,” but inside, I was wounded. To survive, I became numb. For the uninitiated, numb is a place where there is very little pain but never joy. It is emotionless. Lost in my world of solitude, I drifted away from friends and family. Eventually, I reached a point where the anesthetic lost its effect. Backed into a corner, I had more thoughts of killing myself. As things got worse, the idea seemed more and more sensible. One night, I looked to see which of the belts in my closet might hold my weight. In that moment, I realized the options were to start talking or stop living.
Despite the pain, I consider myself one of the lucky ones. I came back when so many did not. I have been blessed with a supportive family, a world-class education, and stable employment. Yet like so many of my fellow veterans, suicidal thoughts were the presenting symptom. After all, the Army had trained me to disregard my pain and carry on with the mission. Even in the depths of despair, I was high-functioning if not successful. I imagine no one would have ever suspected a thing.

In the decade between my first combat and my first visit to a psychologist, I had dozens of interactions with medical providers. However, few asked about my military service. Few took notice of the immunization history that included smallpox and anthrax. Few noted the scar on my back where a small piece of shrapnel had lodged. And no one ever asked me about my dreams, my isolation, or my guilt. Instead, I was a healthy young man with low cholesterol levels and a resting heart rate in the 50s. Everything was normal.

I’ve often wondered how I would have responded to such questions. I suspect that, most of the time, I would have retreated to the usual lines of defense, making quips to deflect further examination. Yet, there were days where I was hurting and I just might have reached out. There is no way to know. I was never given the chance.

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