Life Narratives, War Trauma, and Well-being: Adult Learning and the Returning Veteran

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A true war story . . . does not instruct.

-Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*

Too high a price is asked for harmony; it’s beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it.

-Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

The epidemic of suicides occurring among U.S. soldiers and veterans is now of such daunting proportions that even the Pentagon cannot ignore it. Early responses to this confusing spate of deaths included a variety of pronouncements blaming financial difficulties, ‘Dear John’ or ‘Dear Jane’ emails from disloyal sweethearts, and ‘underdeveloped life coping skills’ (Coleman 2007). These, however, have given way to a new spin on the perennial search for what has been called the bullet-proof mind. A $125 million program known as Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) is attempting to use positive psychology\(^1\) to teach ‘resiliency’ and ‘learned optimism’ to troops so that, in the words of CSF director Brigadier General Rhonda Cornum, they ‘look at more optimistic and realistic choices, rather than falling into negative thought processes’ (Coleman, 2009).

In the new terminology of war psychiatry, posttraumatic stress disorder has been replaced in some circles by ‘posttraumatic growth,’ defined loosely as ‘a significant beneficial change in cognitive and emotional life’ following crisis (Tedeschi *et al.*, 2009, p. 3). The claim that such a phenomenon exists rests on the inspiring but

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\(^1\) Positive psychology is in many ways a deeply American phenomenon, although it is echoed in changing cultural expectations in Europe and elsewhere in the new global economy. Drawing on the tradition of capitalist boosterism as personified in such writers as Norman Vincent Peale and Dale Carnegie (Ehrenreich, 2009), positive psychology promotes the ‘building blocks’ of a positive ways of being as optimism, gratitude, mindfulness, hope, and spirituality (Max, 2007). For an introduction to positive psychology, see Seligman (2012). For a critique of positive psychology, see Ehrenreich (2009). For materials supporting the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness, see the Army website on CSF: [http://csf.army.mil/index.html](http://csf.army.mil/index.html). For a critique of CSF, see Leopold (2011) and Coleman (2009).
unsurprising observation that some people are changed for the better by traumatic events. The evidence that convinced the Pentagon includes a study claiming that 61% of the American aviators imprisoned and tortured by the North Vietnamese reported their experiences as having led to ‘favorable changes in their personalities’ (Ibid, p. 20). Similar claims are made concerning the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; one of the consultants to the program, Dr. Richard Tedeschi, told the arch-conservative American Enterprise Institute in 2009 that even veterans who had lost limbs or been otherwise devastatingly wounded had found their new lives so much more meaningful that ‘they were glad the events happened to them’ (Coleman, 2009).

There is, of course, ample evidence that the human spirit can triumph over horror, inhumanity, and degradation. There is also ample evidence that the military prefers not to acknowledge the real human costs of war. But the veterans of current wars have become our students, and I would like to use their presence as an occasion to consider what kind of relationship we have as adult educators to the implicit and explicit assumptions behind ‘posttraumatic growth’ and ‘positive psychology.’ I want to suggest, first, that many of our students, not only veterans but asylum seekers and refugees, survivors of domestic and sexual violence, and those displaced by economic and demographic upheaval, are the survivors of what Shoshana Felman names a ‘posttraumatic century’ (1995, p. 13); and, second, that in thinking about notions of well-being, we need engage the issue of wide-spread personal and historical trauma. In this paper, I would like to uncover what I believe are undertheorized notions of how adult learning contributes to well-being, specifically through practices of autobiographical writing, experiential learning, and what is generally called critical self-reflection on experience.

**Narrative as Therapy and Pedagogy**

In my recent scholarship, I have focused on autobiographical practices in adult learning, taking a critical stance toward what I read as a rather single-minded insistence on learners finding uplifting interpretations of the events of their lives.

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2 In recent years, the literature on narrative in adult learning has become replete with the message of positive psychology. See, for example, Sandlin (2006).
I have argued that, however much we stress the uniqueness of our students’ stories, we privilege one specific narrative, that of finding coherence and meaning in what appeared to be the chaotic happenstance of life. In focusing on veterans and their problematic relationship to such a narrative, I do not mean to value their experience over that of other survivors of acts of inhumanity. They are, however, a helpful case in point of the ways in which the therapeutic schematics of adult education impose an ideological frame that negates politics and history.

As a starting point, I will use a series of questions posed by Shoshana Felman: After a century that has survived unthinkable historical catastrophes, is there anything that we have learned or that we should learn about education that we did not know before? Can trauma instruct pedagogy? What, specifically, Felman asks, can be discovered about the relationships among the historical, the narrative, the clinical, and the pedagogical? If, as Elie Wiesel has claimed, testimony is the literary genre of our time (Felman 1995), what is the relationship of that genre to the ways in which the practices of adult learning construct notions of well-being and, to use what has become a conventional usage, “restorying” a life?

I want to suggest that, in the literature on adult learning as in the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program, well-being is seen to arise from a highly internalized, individualized rewriting of one’s own personal history. This approach holds that the goal of adult education is to create possibilities for personal transformation based on discovering the meaning of one’s experience. It understands narrative as the way in which human beings make experience coherent and sees personal transformation as a narrative act.

Every day we are bombarded by a dizzying variety of experiences and we make sense of those by storying them, by constructing narratives that make things cohere . . . [by] constructing a narrative for ourselves that enables us to deal with an experience. An example here would be responding to an illness by constructing a narrative of restoration and hope as opposed to a narrative of victimization, struggle, or loss. (Clark and Rossiter, 2008, p. 62)

Such a perspective implies that the person in transition is “a victim not of her history but of the story in which she [has] put that history” (Hillman, 1989, p.
- a victim not of her existence but of her experience. It is not the person that needs doctoring, but the story. (Randall, 2004, pp. 239-40)

Seen through the frame of Felman’s categories, there is a strong connection in the above quotations between the pedagogical, the narrative, and the clinical. That connection is made even stronger by the weakness of connection to her fourth category, history, which is explicitly represented as more dependent on rendition than on accuracy or analysis. The historical record is just one more palimpsest: “Though the events of the past can clearly not be changed, our perception of them can. The remembered past – the past, not as it happened but as we have internalized it, textualized it, stored it in memory… is anything but fixed. Rather, it admits of endless reworking, endless restorying” (Randall, 2010, p. 30). Thus, personal healing and well-being become the substitute for history; the narrative is structured as an internal journey from encumbrance to freedom and from dis-ease to well-being in which the instrument of liberation is the individual will. There is a kind of trans-Atlantic irony in this in that it unites the cliché of the British reluctance to have feelings with the cliché of the American refusal to have much of anything else: the stiff upper lip meets the insistence that a good attitude is the cure for most bad things.

**Bad Faith and Good Intentions**

In an interesting though, I think, wrong-headed discussion of narrative and personal transformation, Craib (2000) uses Sartre’s notion of bad faith to describe narratives that deny personal agency: ‘I couldn’t have a career because I had to look after the children; I can’t spend time with my family because I have to work long hours to bring in the money’ (pp. 65-6; italics in original). Bad faith narratives, in other words, are those that refuse to acknowledge that, no matter what the circumstances, one always has a choice. I would argue that the opposite is at least equally true -- that bad faith narratives are also those that overemphasize individual choice as a way to deny the necessary constraints of history and, in the process, deny any collective responsibility for the events of which that history is made.

The question of bad faith is a difficult one, of course. There is enormous good will in the efforts of adult educators to use autobiography and related processes to promote. . . the recognition of transformative learning experiences arising from key
events in personal, professional, and community life’ (Dominice, 2000, xvi). Indeed, the reinterpretation of experience is seen as foundational to learning; according to Mezirow, for example, learning ‘may be defined as the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience’ (1990, p. 1). In the process of looking back on one’s life, ‘anomalies and dilemmas of which old ways of knowing cannot make sense become catalysts or “trigger events” that precipitate critical reflection and transformation’ (p. 14).

To be sure, Mezirow does not intend to remove students from their own historical embeddedness: he acknowledges that his theory of transformational learning ‘is derived from culturally specific conditions associated with democratic societies and . . . a liberal tradition that depends ultimately on faith in informed, free human choice, and social justice (2000, p. xvi). The problem, however, is that the theory cannot account for experiences that make a mockery of such things. It thus serves as yet another layer of erasure for people whose experiences are not amenable to the discovery of meaning and who cannot achieve well-being through self-knowledge and reflection on the past.

To pursue the poetics of learning pulls us into a territory . . . where learning itself is a lifelong adventure, where no incident is ‘unusable’ in illustrating, indeed building, our character (Sarton, 1980), no event inherently meaningless; and no situation devoid of some clue to our particular destiny, to our unique message, to the ‘meaning’ of our life. (Randall, 2004, p. 247) ‘Isn’t it pretty to think so,’ as Ernest Hemingway once said (2006/1926, p. 251).

Veterans and the Politics of Well-being

Well-being is one of the places in which the personal is most political, if only because we negotiate the terms of well-being as a society and as a society are answerable for the ways in which horror and trauma are acknowledged or erased. Claude Lanzmann, creator of the Holocaust documentary Shoah, has said that the very attempt to find meaning in truly horrific events is an obscenity. Such events, he argues, constitute an ‘affront to understanding,’ and ‘active resistance to the platitudes of knowledge’ is the only viable human response (1995, p. 154). That sentiment is echoed in what, for my generation of progressive Americans, is the iconic narrative of war, Tim O’Brien’s The Things They Carried. I have taken the first
epigram for this paper from O’Brien’s condemnation of any effort to re-story war into a tale of uplift, acceptance, or reconciliation.

A true war story . . . does not instruct . . . If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. (O’Brien, 2009/1990p. 65)

I have taken the second epigram, of course, from the “Rebellion” chapter of The Brothers Karamazov in which Ivan Karamazov famously refuses to be reconciled to the suffering of the innocent in the name of the greater good.

I don’t want harmony. From love for humanity, I don’t want it. I would rather be left with the unavenged suffering . . . and unsatisfied indignation, even if I were wrong. Besides, too high a price is asked for harmony; it’s beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it. And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket. (Dostoyevsky, 1880/1955, p 291)

There is a great deal of space between The Things They Carried and The Brothers Karamazov, but what they have in common is Ivan’s gesture: to respectfully return the ticket rather than trade in one’s personal responsibility to history for whatever the market will bear.

How, then, might we understand the use of narrative with students who have witnessed, undergone, and perhaps even perpetrated horror? There are few discussions of veterans in the literature on adult learning, but the few that I have found stress the greater well-being that comes from reconfiguring the past. In recounting the story of Ben, a Vietnam veteran, Cohen and Piper (2000) assert that, before Ben’s return to formal education, ‘life seemed like a series of accidents, unconnected fragments without a shape’ (p. 220). In revisiting his war experience through autobiographical writing, Ben begins “connecting the pieces of his own history. What had seemed like a random series of events now began to take shape, revealing new interpretations” (p. 219). While some of the dysfunctional patterns in Ben’s life remain, in the end, ‘the protagonist of his narrative is a softer, more reflective man’ (p. 225).

More recently, Karpiak (2010) skirts over the difficulties of army service and moves directly to the efficacy of positive thinking: A student named Angela, for example, uses a more positive attitude to overcome her initial despair and terror.
As I started to warm up to the place things started to work out. I began to realize that [the Fort] was really not a bad place and there were some good things about it. Yes I hated running five days a week but looking on the bright side it kept me in great physical condition. I hated taking orders but the more accepting and less challenging I became military life just got better. I began seeing myself more like a soldier. (2010, p. 19)

Another women soldier, Rhonda frames her autobiography as a story about the inner resolve of a learner, a person who never thought she would ever be worth anything. A person who believed she was a loser but found hope to rise above hopelessness and become a winner. (2010, p. 19)

Given the current statistics concerning rape, sexual harassment, and military sexual trauma among American servicewomen, it is arguable that Angela and Rhonda have less transformed their understanding of the past than they have, to use an apt metaphor, dodged a bullet (Saltsburg, 2011). Certainly, this rendition of their experience grapples neither with the realities of gender and power or with those of violence, trauma, and war.

Testimony: The Return of History

In the tradition of life narrative inaugurated by European Romanticism, a distinct difference exists between autobiography and bearing witness: while the latter provides testimony concerning collective experience, the former focuses on the uniqueness of an individual life. According to the prototype of this tradition of autobiography, the Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau:

I have entered upon a performance which is without example, whose accomplishment will have no imitator... I know my heart, and have studied mankind; I am not like anyone I have been acquainted with, perhaps like no one in existence; if not better, I at least claim originality. (2010/1782, p. 7)

This stress on the uniqueness of the individual does not exist in other traditions of life writing; in African American autobiography, for example, the self `is not an individual with a private career, but a soldier in a long, historic march towards Canaan’ (Cudjoe, cited in Fox-Genovese 1988, p. 70). The story of the individual is worth telling, not because it differs from that of others, but because it is the same.

According to scholars who work with survivors of trauma, it is this collectivization of
trauma, and not the focus on individual reinterpretation, that is restorative and healing. Robert Jay Lifton, for example, maintains that bearing witness does indeed create agency, but it is the agency that comes from responsibility to history, not that of individual choice (Caruth, 1995a, p.138).

I have been very aware in writing this of my own historical location, that of an American educator whose students are more likely to be military veterans than the civilians whose traumas are the collateral damage of war. I am aware of having to walk a line between sympathy and outrage, and between anti-war activism and the conviction that `volunteering' to serve in the military is a deeply overdetermined choice. I wonder how best to use students’ narratives, as Caruth suggests, to `access . . . our own historical experience’ (1995, pp. 5-6). And I wonder how much of our impulse to `re-story’ our students’ lives reflects our own horror at those aspects of recent history with which we feel complicit or that defy our ability to accept or comprehend.

Folding the experience of war into the meta-narrative of revisiting experience, finding meaning, and thus achieving greater well-being is necessarily an ideologically laden act of political containment that draws attention to the experience of individuals rather than on war as collective act and public policy. I suggest rather that we balance the practice of autobiography with the practice of bearing witness and ask students to narrate the events of their lives in a way that embeds their stories in the broader historical and social fabric. We should encourage them to tell their stories, not as instruments of overcoming the past, but because their stories matter and because those stories situate us in history.

Works cited:


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