

## IN AND OUT OF ARMOR

--by Ray Bacigalupi, MFT

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“IF NOT NOW, WHEN? Helping Our Soldiers, Ourselves, and Our World”

A few years ago I gave a speech in which I invited the audience on my journey which I called “In And Out Of The War Zone.” Today I invite you to accompany me on a continuation of that journey which I am calling “In And Out Of Armor.”

My personal traumas, provoked by my family of origin, the school system and cruel children led me to create an armor which allowed me to disconnect in order to survive. My Vietnam experience reinforced it. During my brief journey today I will try and remove some of my armor as I share my thoughts and experiences with you.

I was nineteen years old in 1966. Despite a traumatic childhood I was completely unprepared for my military experience. First there was the initial shock of being drafted and going through basic training. Then deployment to Vietnam in 1967.

There, assigned to an army personnel carrier, I witnessed atrocities first hand.

- I witnessed an alcoholic sergeant order a private to chop the head off a dead Viet Cong soldier boy with a machete so he could keep the child's skull as a souvenir.
- I watched as a young girl's head was blown off.
- I witnessed local Vietnamese men carrying a pile of dead children in a blanket after a battle was fought in their village.
- I was there when US military spotters gave the wrong coordinates to an army mortar unit and saw seven U. S. soldier boys killed and many more seriously wounded.
- I watched as anti-personnel mines shot out 700 ball bearings that shattered bone and tore through flesh when they were detonated at us from the trees.

In 1968 my tour of duty in Vietnam ended when I was seriously wounded. After receiving the purple heart, I was honorably discharged.

When I returned from Vietnam I was depressed and anxious. Fourth of July events and cars backfiring scared me. I found myself having recurrent nightmares of dying children or being captured by the enemy and tortured or being forced to return to Vietnam to serve again and again. The continuing controversy over the correctness of the war confused me.

When I was 22, I found my way to the VA's mental health clinic where no one asked about my experience in the military or treated me for PTSD. Medications I was given turned me into a zombie and I quickly discarded them. For the next decade I self-medicated with alcohol and street drugs. I ignored politics and world events, kept relationships superficial and avoided commitment. I withdrew within myself, in my familiar armor, although underneath I was desperately needing connection.

I slowly but gradually risked enough to become a husband and a step-dad to young children. I did the work necessary to become a therapist. My life wasn't perfect but it worked well and my armor was unnecessary as long as I didn't venture too far out of my limited world.

Then in 1991 the first Gulf War triggered some anxiety and depression. I quickly re-armored and blocked out world issues.

But 10 years later, 911 and the invasion of Afghanistan started flooding me. By 2003 the shock and awe of our preemptive attack on Iraq broke through my armor and shocked and awed me into tears, confusion, anxiety, and

rage. My limited world of being a loving husband, step dad and compassionate therapist wasn't enough anymore.

For the past four years I have partially returned to 1967 and the horrors of Vietnam. I find myself having anxious feelings about life in general, nightmares, hopelessness, fear, anger and disconnection. I have a strong desire to avoid, deny and hide, to armor myself.

With the armor in place I don't have to concern myself with the 5,000 or so children who die everyday from hunger, thirst and preventable disease, the children as young as seven years old in third world countries who are routinely sold into sex slavery, the billions of humans who live on less than a dollar a day, the political, military, corporate and media lies, racism, genocide, greed and cruelty, pollution of the world's natural resources and needless wars.

These are some of the things I do not want to think of and don't when my armor is in place. There is a lot more I do not want to consider and even more I do not want to find out about.

When I take off my armor, I feel like a sponge that can not hold one more drop. Others have called this compassionate burnout. When I am in this state I call it survival. The constant bombardment overwhelms, confuses and depresses me. Often, I just want to curl up in a fetal position and cry. I want to hide. That is when it is not making me furious and out of control. Then I want to explode and hurt someone.

At the same time, it is unacceptable to me to disconnect or hurt others. I want to be more compassionate and more supportive. Much less armored. It is difficult to stay in this space for long. Even now it is more of a place that I visit with my home being my armor.

As a therapist who helps others cope with difficulties and struggles, I know that to get through this I have to remove enough armor to connect and take action without becoming overly traumatized. Even if I had never been in a war zone, this would be a formidable task.

Some of the ways I have been keeping down my level of trauma while trying to help myself and others have been:

- By practicing staying in the moment.
- By associating with people who share similar values.
- By letting others know I need nurturing and then allowing them to nurture me.
- By expanding my consciousness to include a world full of contradictions.
- By taking positive action to help others.
- By staying connected when I most want to hide behind my armor.
- By sharing my feelings, thoughts and visions. Risking.

I'm not very good at it yet but I am practicing. A moment here, an event there. Such as today, sharing myself with you.

I have a particular perspective on war that led me to help found Therapists for Social Responsibility which recognizes the impact of politics on us personally and therefore advocates for values such as nonviolence, integrity, sustainability and justice. I want to help vets, their families and others while at the same time not be complicit with the culture of war and greed we are living in.

I am shocked at how desensitized we have become to atrocities of all kinds and concerned about what that means for our future. I am also disturbed by our society's ability to deny, avoid and minimize the impact of war on the boys and girls who fight them. I just had nightmares of being forced to return to combat. Today our soldiers have to return in reality.

Current military statistics suggest that fewer than 20% of our soldiers coming back from Afghanistan and Iraq have PTSD. I believe that number is significantly under reported. If vets don't meet the criteria for PTSD, they are not counted even if they have significant problems related to their combat experience. Also, many soldiers see mental stress as a sign of weakness and are reluctant to admit the extent of their pain.

Beyond this, a recent investigation found that military psychiatrists have been intentionally mis-diagnosing soldiers with a pre-existing personality disorder, a diagnosis which strips them of their medical and mental health benefits.

The military doesn't provide the resources to treat those soldiers diagnosed with PTSD let alone those who don't make it into the health care system.

Additionally, there is a mental health crisis in the making worldwide. The Association of Iraqi Psychologists reported in January 2007 that of 2,000 people interviewed throughout Iraq, 92 percent said they feared being killed in an explosion. Sixty percent said the level of violence had caused them to have panic attacks and this prevented them from going outside.

Now the citizens of Iran are faced with the threat that the United States may at any time launch a pre-emptive war against them, possibly using nuclear weapons.

And other countries are also under siege.

Finally, how are we, the citizens of the United States, handling the constant background noise of war and injustice, knowing that it is our government using our tax dollars to kill and wound innocent civilians in other countries as well as our own soldiers. Are we experiencing our own form of PTSD? Are we disconnecting and putting on our armor when we can and feeling depressed and anxious when we can't?

I know I am. The most effective treatment for me has been to take small but persistent steps toward positive change while helping others on their path. If you are also concerned, I hope you will continue to participate in the work for peace and justice.

Thank you for sharing my journey In And Out of Armor.

Ray Bacigalupi, MA, MFT is in private practice in Sacramento, CA and a Vietnam veteran. He is one of the founding members of Therapists for Social Responsibility [www.therapistsforsocialresponsibility.org](http://www.therapistsforsocialresponsibility.org)

Note: This program will be on Media Edge access TV in June, 2007, Sun., 8 to 10 pm, Mon. 12 to 2 and Tues., 4 to 6 pm (Pacific). It can be viewed anywhere on hi speed computer at these times. See [www.tvmedia](http://www.tvmedia) for dates and instructions.