After War, a Failure of the Imagination

By PHIL KLAY
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“I COULD never imagine what you’ve been through,” she said.
As a former Marine who served in Iraq, I’d heard the sentiment before — it’s the civilian counterpart to the veteran’s “You wouldn’t know, you weren’t there.” But this time it struck an especially discordant note. This woman was a friend. She’d read something I’d written about Iraq — about the shocked numbness I’d felt looking at the victims of a suicide bombing — and it had resonated. As a survivor of child abuse, she knew feelings of shocked numbness far better than I did. And yet, midway through recounting some of what happened to her as a young girl, she said it again: “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to compare my experience to yours. I could never imagine what you’ve been through.”

It felt inappropriate to respond, “Sure you could.” I’d had a mild deployment. She’d mainly have to imagine long hours at a cheap plywood desk in a cheap plywood hut in the middle of a desert. True, there were a handful of alarming but anti-climactic mortar attacks on my forward operating base, and the wounded and damaged bodies I saw at the trauma center, but that was all. Her childhood, though, was full of experiences I couldn’t have handled as an adult, let alone as a child. And what was particularly bewildering was that, even as my friend was insisting that what I’d been through was beyond the limits of imagination, she never once told me, “You aren’t a victim of child abuse. You couldn’t understand.” She wanted me to understand. At the very least, she wanted me to try.

I know an airman who suffered a traumatic brain injury during training just a few years after being in a car accident where he watched his twin brother die. When he tells people about the T.B.I. and the accident and his service, he invariably gets the “I could never imagine” line. “It makes me angry,” he told me. Sure, he wants to say, you don’t think you could understand, but what if I want you to?

It’s a difficult spot to be in, for both. The civilian wants to respect what the veteran has gone through. The veteran wants to protect memories that are painful and sacred to him from outside judgment. But the result is the same: the veteran in a corner by himself, able to proclaim about war but not discuss it, and the civilian shut out from a conversation about one of the most morally fraught activities our nation engages in — war.
The notion that war forever separates veterans from the rest of mankind has been long embedded in our collective consciousness. After World War I, the poet and veteran Siegfried Sassoon wrote, “the man who really endured the war at its worst was everlastingly differentiated from everyone except his fellow soldiers.” During World War II, Hemingway called combat “that thing which no one knows about who has not done it.” After Vietnam, Tim O’Brien claimed that a true war story can’t even be told, because “sometimes it’s just beyond telling.” Given the way American history, unlike Iraqi or Afghan history, allows for a neat division between soldiers who see war and civilians who don’t, it’s not surprising that the idea has taken root.

When I returned from Iraq, people often asked me what it was like, usually followed by, “How are we doing over there?” And I’d tell them. I’d explain in bold, confident terms about the surge and the Sunni Awakening. The Iraq I returned from was, in my mind, a fairly simple place. By which I mean it had little relationship to reality. It’s only with time and the help of smart, empathetic friends willing to pull through many serious conversations that I’ve been able to learn more about what I witnessed. And many of those conversations were with friends who’d never served.

We pay political consequences when civilians are excused or excluded from discussion of war. After all, veterans are no more or less trustworthy than any other group of fallible human beings. Southern veterans of the Civil War claimed the Confederacy was a noble lost cause. Nazi leaders who had served in World War I claimed that the German troops had all but won the war, only to be stabbed in the back by civilians in thrall to Jewish interests. The notion that the veteran is an unassailable authority on the experience of war shuts down conversation. But in a democracy, no one, not even a veteran, should have the last word.

The problem is compounded on a personal level. If we fetishize trauma as incommunicable then survivors are trapped — unable to feel truly known by their nonmilitary friends and family. At a recent Veterans Day performance put on by Arts in the Armed Forces, Adam Driver, the organization’s founder, a former Marine turned actor, spoke of his feelings of alienation after leaving the corps. “Not
being able to express the anger, confusion and loneliness I felt was challenging,” he said, until theater exposed him “to playwrights and characters and plays that had nothing to do with the military, that were articulating experiences I had in the military, that before to me were indescribable.”

It’s a powerful moment, when you discover a vocabulary exists for something you’d thought incommunicably unique. Personally, I felt it reading Joseph Conrad’s “Lord Jim.” I have friends who’ve found themselves described in everything from science fiction to detective novels. This self-recognition through others is not simply a by-product of art — it’s the whole point. Hegel once wrote, “The nature of humanity is to drive men to agreement with one another, and humanity’s existence lies only in the commonality of consciousness that has been brought about.”

To enter into that commonality of consciousness, though, veterans need an audience that is both receptive and critical. Believing war is beyond words is an abrogation of responsibility — it lets civilians off the hook from trying to understand, and veterans off the hook from needing to explain. You don’t honor someone by telling them, “I can never imagine what you’ve been through.” Instead, listen to their story and try to imagine being in it, no matter how hard or uncomfortable that feels. If the past 10 years have taught us anything, it’s that in the age of an all-volunteer military, it is far too easy for Americans to send soldiers on deployment after deployment without making a serious effort to imagine what that means. We can do better.

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EDITORIAL

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CHARLES M. BLOW

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