It was an honor and pleasure to speak to such an august company. Old warriors are not merely veterans because they have served in the armed forces. They are veterans who are now the cultural guardians and spiritual elders of our society. Societies with a class of elder warriors, who have a sense of their place in the wider culture, are less prone to violence both internally and externally. The elders know the dreadful waste that is war, and they know just how easy it is to tear the fabric of the human order to shreds, leaving room for chaos, evil, and a degree of trauma that can then run through the generations. In our own recent history, it was noticeable how the old warriors who urged caution were brushed aside by relative youngsters, none of whom had seen combat, and they unleashed forces they never imagined.

A second function of warrior elders is to serve as role models and mentors to the young men and women who return from our current wars. The mistake that so many of these returning veterans make is to attempt to forget the trauma of the war zone by hurling themselves back into civilian life, as though they can become merely civilians again. Much of what we call combat post-traumatic stress disorder can be understood as the insistence of memory and accountability, which will not go away until it is faced with responsibility and purpose. These young veterans now belong to a story that is larger than them; they are the carriers of an inheritance that must be understood, honored in some way—even in various ways—and passed on to the next generation.

The truth is that combat experience marks one and changes one forever. There is never a day in the life of a combat veteran when that combat experience is not recalled, however fleetingly. It is like the background sound of an air conditioner, which is always there and

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"Roger Brooke, Professor of Psychology at Duquesne University and Director of the University’s Military Psychological Services which offers free services to veterans and their families, addressed the Pittsburgh Chapter on psychological trauma and the combat veteran. Thousands of returning combat veterans and family members suffer emotional problems upon returning to civilian life. The chapter was so favorably impressed by Dr. Brooke’s presentation that we urged him to prepare this brief extract of his remarks for the Officer Review® magazine."

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Companion COL Robert L. Reese, USA (Ret)
Pittsburgh Chapter, PA
can be heard with just a shift in attention. The psychological question, therefore, is how to stitch the torn fabric of the world back together again, and how to live a life that can embrace one’s experience and the lessons learned. It is partly a question of how to affirm the preciousness of life and the value of things after it has all been torn to shreds.

My colleague and friend, Dr. Ed Tick, is an authority on warrior cultures around the world and through history. He has counted over eighty languages which name what we have come to call PTSD. It is clear that PTSD is a universal human experience. As Jonathan Shay has documented, combat trauma and the degradation of character are the central themes of the Iliad and the Odyssey. By the time Odysseus managed to return home from the Trojan wars, ten years had gone by, during which time he had betrayed his friends, done drugs, and generally behaved like a criminal. Ring a bell anyone?

What our society has not done well is to integrate returning warriors back into the fold of our honor, respect, and loving care. Traditional cultures were much better at that. The South African Xhosa and Zulus, for instance, or the Plains Indians, had strikingly similar rituals of purification, storytelling, remembrance, and communal integration. These rituals included making peace with the dead and even honoring the enemy dead, so that their souls could be released. The Xhosa and Zulu were clear that their warriors had to undergo these rituals in order for their own souls to be returned to them from the battle fields where they had been left behind. The community’s task was to listen to the details of what happened, no matter how painful it was to do so.

One lesson we can learn from traditional cultures is that, when we send our best young men and women to do terrible violence on our behalf, then we need to carry the psychological and material consequences of that violence as our own burden and responsibility as well. In this context, however dedicated and helpful our psychiatric and mental health colleagues might be, the social construction of the psychological wounds of war as a psychiatric condition, an individual’s personal psychopathology, seems to us to be profoundly misguided.

Professor Roger Brooke, Ph.D., ABPP, was born in South Africa and educated at the Universities of Cape Town (BA), Witwatersrand (MA Clinic Psych) and Rhodes (Ph.D.). He moved to the United States in 1994 and joined Duquesne University as Professor of Psychology and was Director of Training in Clinical Psychology from 1994-2007. He is Board Certified in Clinical Psychology, and was recently recognized with a service award from the American Board of Clinical Psychology. He is a member of the Board of Directors and Secretary of the American Academy of Clinical Psychology and an Affiliate Member of the Inter-Regional Society of Jungian Analysts. In addition to his private practice he is a consultant Clinical Psychologist for LifeCare Hospital. His writings include “Jung and Phenomenology” (Routledge 1991; Trivium 2009) and “Pathways into the Jungian World” (Routledge 1999). He is a veteran of South Africa’s 1 Parachute Battalion, and his oldest son is with the 82nd Airborne Division and a veteran of three tours in Iraq.