

VETERANS VOICE

Nietzsche's Abyss: This Veteran's Dilemma

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I have discovered a disconnect in my narrative. I recognize that I had compartmentalized my life: there were my growing up years, my service years in the United States Navy, my college years, and the years of my professional life. I occasionally share anecdotes from those eras but as a cohesive whole there is sparse overlap even in my memory of how one timeframe blends into the next. Close reflection was inspired by a dear friend who challenged me to not be one of the disengaged men that Thoreau describes in *Walden* and yet I find it quite fulfilling to “live life simply” or as unpretentiously as possible. Gandhi’s comment on a passage in Ruskin’s *Unto this Last*, “the good of the individual is contained in the good of all” has shifted my perspective to stop seeing myself as well as my veteran brothers and sisters who have served as damaged goods. To focus on wounds does not allow us the space and time to move past the events that we carry around which weigh heavily on the soul. We deserve to be accepted as wholly human.

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The military is tasked with hunting the monsters who pose an existential threat to the peace all societies seek, but such threats are a matter of perspective. Who is doing the gazing and through what lens will determine the vision? The individuals choosing to fill the ranks of our various service branches do so for a multitude of reasons and visions of their own. Military service is an option for able-bodied people to assure they start adulthood earning a living wage in the hope of building an escape from a financially challenged upbringing. Another aspect that makes military service an option is the many military specialties which have a civilian counterpart; training provided by the military can be a transition into a trade. The best reason for military service is a yearning to be a part of something bigger than oneself, a member of a team that has a greater goal of keeping America a world power and the best instance of encouraging a person to choose a life's path.

We serve our country, be it for a few years or for a career, without much thought given to the time of reentering civilian society or the complex social interactions necessary to reacclimate to a more public life. To focus on this future takes energy away from being a team player. Aboard ship, sailors develop trust that fellow crewmembers are doing their part to maintain the ship's operational status. These tasks range from operating the boiler to make steam that turns propulsion turbines so the ship can respond to needs in far-flung places, to analyzing friend or foe blips on a radar

screen, and even cooking the meals that keep the crew in top form. All these tasks are equally necessary to the success of the mission.

My preteen and early teenage years are filled with memories of Saturday morning cartoons with short programs during commercial breaks under the title of *Schoolhouse Rock!* The first three seasons are strongest in my memory. After that I guess I aged out of their target demographic. Of those episodes, the one that comes to mind, even to this day, is “The Preamble.” I can still recite it from memory but only in the sing-along style of its original presentation. Those phrases and clauses are at the core of my definition of patriotism and set the tone for my reading of the rest of the document, with its effect on my worldview as a beacon of the best to which the human race can aspire. Collectively, they are the foundation for the rest of *The Constitution of the United States of America* that guarantees our society will always be free.

We as a nation currently and historically have struggled with the concepts of the document that was largely influenced by the *Magna Carta*, a line in the sand to the excesses of a government that had lost the consent of the governed. Imbued with these principles, approaching the early stages of adulthood, and seeking direction in my life, I did my part in nurturing the tree of liberty. I joined the United States Navy. Now as a veteran approaching my twilight years, I ask, where is the desire to maintain the spirit and remain the

beacon that is America in the hopes of ensuring our continued existence as stated in the preamble to the Constitution? Of particular interest to my mind, and the very point of military service, is the need to provide for the common defense against enemies, both foreign and domestic.

After recruit training, I received schooling on the fundamentals of a ship's electrical system covering maintain lighting circuits, motor repair and the manner in which electricity is generated for the ship to use in meeting its mission's objectives. After this brief introduction to electricity and its usefulness as well as its dangers, I was assigned as a crewmember of the USS NASSAU (LHA-4), LHA-4 is the hull designation of this ship, a ship's name may be reused but not the hull designation. One of my tasks as an electrician was to understand the operational state of the electrical generators and distribute electricity throughout the ship. The electrical generating capacity of a 40,000-ton ship is equivalent to the electrical requirements of a city with over 50,000 citizens. This system also has backups in the hopes that the ship does not lose electrical power and go dark while underway at its normal cruising speed. The essentialness of my duties came to me full bore during a midnight to 4:00 a.m. watch I stood on the portion of the electrical system in the forward engine room. The ship was steaming in the eastern Mediterranean Sea with one boiler making steam. Something happened to the boiler that forced an immediate shutdown. This meant no steam for propulsion or generating electricity. From my operating station, I was able to get the emergency diesel generator up to speed and online generating electricity with barely a flicker of the lights or any of the other electrical systems on the ship.

After that issue was handled and electrical power restored, the Engineering Officer on that watch said, "Thank you, Greg." This is the only time in the 3 years of his tenure as my Division Officer that he called me by my first name. Usually my first name was an epithet involving the Judeo-Christian deity. Many thanks from the other watch-standers in the fore and aft engine rooms as well as the diesel mechanic indicated approval of my swift action. I have presented this as a case of where I rose to the occasion to keep the ship as operational as possible. My actions were second nature because the crew of a ship drills, functions, and even lives as a 24-hours a day, 7-days a week cohesive unit. Few are the examples of that level of commitment to achieving a goal in civilian life. Often, we do not even know the names of our neighbors. Many are the messages given by our culture regarding the honor of fulfilling a duty to something larger than ourselves, yet, that very culture views service members through a multitude of lenses. In turn, these lenses shape the views of veterans themselves.

Our families see us as children. We veterans are young when we volunteer to serve in the military. We have lived a life fitting, like a puzzle piece, into our families and schools or—like me—we have lived not quite fitting anywhere. We, as puzzle pieces, are then taken into the military and remade into new shapes with new connections and horizons. The

United States Navy accepted a young kid from a rural backwater community in Arkansas, trained him in a manner consistent with his talents, and exposed him to a much broader world. This exposure developed that kid into an adult with a cosmopolitan worldview, who returned to America's province sharing his stories of daring-do and encouraging others to make their lives into similar adventures. The military is the greatest adventure young people can have, and often it is the greatest adventure their lives will offer. My days in the Navy were the most dangerous, exciting times of my life; the memories, good and bad, along with the lessons learned have served me well through the years.

Our military branches see us as malleable. In boot camp I learned the notion of military bearing. In a nutshell, it is to keep your mind and eyes focused on the task at hand. We were lectured on the importance of keeping our ship's business to ourselves, especially when in foreign countries comingling with the natives. The terminology instilled in us was the need to keep all information on a need-to-know basis. Most importantly, we had activities that converted us from self-centered civilians into a well-functioning team with many moving parts that accomplished one goal, our assigned mission.

In the military, young volunteers continue to change and adapt. I entered boot camp 6 weeks after graduating from high school as a 179 pound, fresh-off-the-farm kid whose mother's way of loving her five boys was to make sure that we were well fed. Seven weeks later, I graduated boot camp standing broad-shouldered, slim-waisted, and steely-eyed at 190 pounds. Gone was the nervous, directionless kid who had learned little about life. New was the notion that one could be proud of any accomplishment. A path with many enjoyable twists and turns lay at my feet.

Maturity comes quickly as we grow into new roles with new responsibilities. Reflection over the years of returning home on military leave and noticing the arc of my classmates' and brothers' lives that did not choose military service instills in me the observation that "I chose the road less travelled and that has made all the difference." There were moments that were lonely and troubling, but my service allowed time for my frontal lobes to mature and got me past those times in human development generally devoted to an exploration of individuality. It spared me the episodes of growth that one's hometown never forgets. Back home, my civilian age-peers and their rebellions get played over and over as gossip, reinforcing the good kid or bad kid tropes. Many are the times that the freshman year of college is the last year not due to a lack of ability but a lack of application or fortitude in decision-making. Military service gets a kid away from that safety net making them aware that a sideways step can quickly turn into disaster, physically and/or emotionally.

We sailors keep our rebellions to ourselves, mostly, sharing sea stories on an as-needed basis to illustrate a point of overcoming adversity or for comic relief. Service members become aware of the true meaning and application of words

like these: service, sacrifice, team, tribe, connection, responsibility, fear, courage, safety, loss, guilt, and shame. Civilians may move in a circle of friends of similar interest where some friendships are deeper and more dynamic than others. My experience with military team building is a collection of disparate individuals brought together to complete a task. From that contact, similarities are shared becoming the woof and warp of a team that depends on each member to adapt and overcome the obstacles to maintaining mission readiness.

Dedication to our team means that any event no matter how well we prepare and plan for it, can have a bad outcome, if a moment arises when we survive but another one of our team is injured or does not live to see another day. In those moments of team defeat we feel guilt and shame. We become two people—an outward, public persona and an inward, private identity. One recognizes the need for team cohesiveness regardless of situation; the other desires to understand why circumstances defeated us. We suffer survivor's guilt wondering "why the other guy instead of me?" This becomes a spiral of shame, a sort of detour along a curved path we take because the road ahead is the essence of vulnerability.

In life after the military, we see ourselves as vulnerable. Brené Brown (2012) in *Daring Greatly* writes, "Myth #1: Vulnerability is weakness" (p. 33). The myth of vulnerability as a reason to detour on our life's path erodes away our training, our role in the unit, our confidence in just being a decent human. We keep the shame inside because to show it weakens the sense of pride we gained from our military service. After 4 or 5 years of undergraduate study, a college graduate faces the uncertainty of entering the job market with no work experience. A period of military service, even without reenlistment, gives a young man or woman specialized experience but no college degree and no advisor to provide civilian-career connections. Each path has merit but also boxcar-loads of uncertainty. Each has a slip of paper that indicates training to a high degree. One has gained that training in a calm, stable environment where everyone can close a notebook and leave at the end of a class. The other gets hands-on use of that training with multimillion-dollar equipment that is owned by the American taxpayer. Consequences are high should training be neglected and the equipment becomes no longer useable. One is heavily recruited to employment in a high demand field with mentors that ensure nothing gets broken; the other can flounder with a valuable skill set until a new trustworthy team is found.

As veterans work to re-enter their family dynamics, they must assist parents, siblings, and sometimes spouses to see them as the person they have become while away. They must adjust their views of family members who have grown, married, or divorced. They may have new children to welcome. Extended family may have been adding nieces, nephews, and cousins to the family tree. My half-brothers and stepbrothers completed elementary and secondary school

while I was traveling to exotic locations and interacting with the natives.

Returning home, the attempt to update family stories proved problematic. I learned that the stable life that existed prior to entering the Navy had evaporated and I was less welcome because I represented that vanished stability. Attempting to navigate and restore relationships intensifies the need for a team and the vulnerability of being alone. I turned to education to find that team as do many veterans, but there are others that find comfort from the emotional storms in self-destruction through alcohol, drugs, and, in general, poor living. These are the scenarios I discuss with veterans that choose education at the institution where I am an Assistant Professor of Mathematics. We have a common bond through similar experiences and a history of overcoming the urge to withdraw and avoid vulnerability.

They also understand that their power is much weaker than the strength of being truly connected to others. Yet powering through temptations to avoid vulnerability is the strongest challenge I have had to face yet. It is exponentially tougher than regaining control over addicting habits. No matter how long ago the suffering occurred or how thoroughly one masters the emotional pain, small vestiges of memories creep in from time to time. Memories of weakness may arise from a sound, a smell, a taste, or a lack of any of these. It could be an anniversary that triggers a painful memory. Our vulnerabilities exert themselves from time to time, they are reminders that we are not alone and should not suffer alone. Leaving the military is scary and exciting. Veterans leave the security of the team and face the excitement of going back to reclaim their space in the civilian world. We expect that we will fit exactly back into the space that we left when we volunteered, but we forget that we are no longer the same children we were before we enlisted. Our excitement sometimes turns to disappointment when we discover that we know things others don't know. Their ignorance makes us feel as if we do not belong. We cannot go back to being who we were; we cannot unsee what we have seen, unhear what we have heard, or unknow what we know. And we face a moment of terror that we will never fit in; too often we face it in silence. We do not feel as if we belong and we fall into shame for that, too, as if our maturation in the military were a fault, we had developed rather than a power we grew to take through our lives.

While I am not an expert on the solutions to such problems, I have discovered something helpful—a process of reclaiming my belonging. I know that I cannot go back to being the kid I was. I have had to accept him, but I cannot go back to see the world through the lens of his inexperience. I must move forward and accept the man I became in the military—the good alongside the bad. My experience was not the worst that Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, or Marines have faced. I was an electrician tasked with manning the ship's electrical grid rather than a foot soldier in face-to-face combat, but still my development is marked by my years of military service. I accept those marks, too.

One of the marks on my maturation is October 23, 1983, a day that will live in infamy for me personally. This day was the deadliest day for the United States Marine Corps since the first day of Iwo Jima, likewise, for all United States Armed Forces since the Tet Offensive (Geraghty, p. xv). On February 13, 1984, the USS Nassau deployed from Norfolk, Virginia. From April 10, 1984 to August 24, 1984 it served as a floating barracks off the coast of Beirut, Lebanon, for the 24th Marine Amphibious Unit. This was the same unit that in the previous October had been decimated by an explosive mix of butane and pentaerythritol tetranitrate (PETN) estimated to be the equivalent of 10.5 tons of TNT (Geraghty, pp. 185–186). Though I was only an electrician, knowing the details of this story marks me.

When I returned to civilian life, I found people who could not understand my experiences. They could only see that I had changed and was no longer a part of their community. To reclaim my belonging to a civilian life which they never left, I actively searched for new interests, hobbies, and pastimes. All of these intellectual quests are an effort to connect with others. Woodworking, smithing (gun and black), cooking, training dogs, and various service activities all help me change in new ways. I build on skills I mastered in high school shop class because woodworking brings on a Zen state that engages my creative and mathematical personality. I build items for people to enrich their lives. A punched-tin pantry for my wife, grill caddy for my father, cutting boards for numerous friends, bench swing frame for a colleague, and anvil stumps for local blacksmiths. Many of these items are posted on social media and have helped me connect with veterans seeking a team with which to bond.

Gunsmithing started before my separation from the Navy. I enrolled in a correspondence course and completed it within a couple of months of returning home. That hobby hibernated for a decade and a half until I had the means to develop it further. That development resulted in a rifle I built from collected parts and assistance from a professional gunsmith. It grew into a fine specimen of the art and a collection of memories of hunting on Kodiak Island with a shipmate and blood brother.

Except for my years in service and college, I have always had dogs in my life. One condition that my wife made, when I found our first 8-week-old puppy at the local shelter, was that it had to go through training classes. A local vet and a trainer ran classes in the evenings which led to that dog becoming more of a support to me emotionally than any amount of therapy could be. She gave unconditional love, and received a boat load of it, too. I was holding her as she transitioned 3 months past her 16th birthday. Currently, four dogs share their lives with my wife and I as well as three cats. The two youngest will restart their service-dog training when meeting restrictions due to COVID-19 are relaxed.

Cooking, like woodworking, brings on a Zen state where the meal connects a deep relationship with the primal need to eat to a shared experience with others. Cooking for me is something that ignites a memory of a meal prepared by a

bachelor hoping his dinner guest would see him as worthy of sharing her life. Thirty-three years later, 30 of them married, through a multitude of trials and tribulations, that dinner guest still enjoys my cooking and company.

Blacksmithing is a recent pursuit that supports my wood-working adventures. I really enjoy making my own tools. A local group of like-minded people supports growth of the art. We do demonstrations at area homesteading days and local schools. It is a joy to see a child, timid at first, stride away confidently after taking a step out of a crowd and striking hot metal to end with an item that will be cherished for a lifetime maybe more as it can be passed to the next and subsequent generations.

In service to my community there have been years of volunteering in animal rescue, a local organization that is a conduit for college assistance to single parents, hatching chicks and gifting them so others may increase their food security. I will even soon be serving on the Executive Board of the Arkansas Council of Teachers of Mathematics as the Vice-President for Two-Year Colleges.

Along the way each of these activities has given me opportunities to model for civilian and veteran communities the notion that to whom much is given, much is expected, and that I have been given an enjoyable life. As I continue to change, the puzzle piece that is me changes too. I believe there is danger in getting stuck in the loop of thinking that "I cannot go back," and telling myself that, "I do not fit the way I did before, so I must be damaged." Instead, I see myself as *changed* and *changing*. I embrace the changes and see them as a continuation of changes that have helped me through adjustment as I learned to belong at other times in my life.

I try to see myself as an experienced teacher now. I look for moments of being able to share my knowledge with others, especially my veteran brothers and sisters. My wood-working hobby brings peace to my soul and diminishes the stress of a demanding workplace. I have brought fellow veterans into my workshop. Recently, one (whose wife is a colleague) wanted a table to place in their yard. We used materials from a local big box store to get him out of the house and occupy his mind and hands in a productive activity. Our work filled the space of recurring nightmarish images from multiple combat tours, bringing joy where there once was doubt. A decision to stick around on this planet for another day, I still pray for that choice to be repeated over and over.

Another successful project was a bodger's shavehorse for a veteran who is self-supporting by crafting and selling primitive archery equipment using the various types of Native American and English styles as a guide. Correspondence from him since delivery indicates that his life will be forever changed due to my time and attention. Similar appreciation not just for the table but the interaction that has been shared by my colleague. These two examples of veterans receiving encouraging support is echoed in the way they also supported me and my attempts to be accepted as normal. There is no limit to the potential for good from my investment in

woodworking with a fellow veteran, and I ceaselessly seek further opportunities to use my skills for such good.

While in the shop we share experiences from our lives and connect on a belonging continuum. A few are still reluctant to let most of the world know they are veterans; we are all travelers on, and in different places along that path. I know with every fiber of my being that by sharing experience, knowledge, and ability, I belong. We belong. I look for moments with family and friends when I can feed them, laugh, and embrace a moment of joy. That joy changes me, too. Both I and we belong in the light of that moment.

And how do I face the shame? I know it is not all mine to carry. I know I am not alone. On the really bad days when I see myself as being a cranky, crotchety curmudgeon, I notice a magic in life that saves me. I see the patience in my wife. I see and feel the calming influence of a cat who wants to help whether it is coiled on the shelf, atop my abdomen, or fully stretched alongside my thigh at night. The trials of the day melt away into bliss when she claims my attention. I see my dogs, each one different but no less special, who love me no matter what, and I strive to be worthy of that level of devotion. I get a message from a woodworking acquaintance, a blacksmithing buddy, or a former shipmate reminding me of the wide wake that I am leaving, hopefully a very positive one.

Contact by a student I have helped to resolve a class scheduling issue, attempt to understand financial aid, or clarify a topic from either my class or a different class where I have the knowledge to be of assistance connects me to my world. I see that light of belonging in their eyes and it reinforces my choice to become an educator because the good ones make waves that persist for generations. Instead of focusing on the darkness of shame I focus on these moments. Developing vulnerability to the vagaries of life is both challenging and cathartic. This I have learned from a familiar source: my wife.

She, too, is an educator at a different two-year college in the area. There was a time when she would share challenges from her workday that made me want to flex an amount of uber-machismo and set the offender right. It has taken years of progress for me to understand that she is voicing her struggles enroute to a solution. Her patient advice for me just to listen never faltered and reminds me of the advice Stephen Covey (1989) comments in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood" (p. 69) models the pinnacle of vulnerability. Understanding requires us to step outside of our selfish selves and empathize with another when our ego is demanding to be emotionally fed.

Recognizing this need and subverting it for a time has deepened my insights into my own psyche, in turn allowing

me to envision my need to be understood. We all have this need. It is innate to the human condition. That is to be accepted as a team member, bringing our mix of talents and perspectives to the team in the hopes of snatching the team's victory from the jaws of defeat. And yet, for the team to function successfully requires us to communicate our perception of where that success resides. This can be a potential for conflict in our internal monologue, having an insight pertinent to the team's mission but being unable to share it due to a rejection of a past idea, guilt over a personal interaction with a team member, or not recognizing the opportune moment to offer the idea. These are times to persevere, to be bold a million times if need be, for eventually a harmony will sway the team to your perspective.

This puzzle piece that is me must be metal because it has been through a fire that refines and removes dross. There is a welding rod of faith somewhere in my life. I have faith that we are supposed to learn and change and not stay stagnant in one place. Some of the change hurts. Not fitting where we once did hurts too. Looking forward, seeing ourselves as changing rather than broken or damaged, may be an important step in how we fit. If we act like we don't belong, others feel uncomfortable with us, with what we know, with who we have become. It is in our becoming, our changing, and our acceptance that we find a vision of belonging again.

"No one can build you the bridge on which you, and only you, must cross the river of life" (Nietzsche, 1997/1874, p. 2); however, assistance makes the building easier. We must face our vulnerabilities seeing them for what they are—lenses that enable our vision. They are lenses we can use to see our lives as gifts. Sharing those lenses with others will encourage them to see and develop their talents as well. In gazing into the abyss and finding the others who gaze back into us, we can find a place to belong.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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