

Emotional Healing: Applying a Warrior Discipline to Basic Spiritual Habits

On July 6, 2009, my platoon was conducting mobile operations soon after Operation Khanjari began. We were escorting our battalion commander and other officers to Echo Company's area of operations, which was a highly volatile and violent environment.

Our battalion participated in the largest helicopter assault since Vietnam, where NATO ISAF forces were being inserted behind enemy lines in order to conduct operations to dismantle Taliban networks and prepare the populace in Helmand Province for the upcoming elections.

As we were driving south we passed the last Marine outpost and would be on our own for a while, crossing what was the patrol base line, the imaginary line between NATO forces and the Taliban. The route was said to have been cleared days previously of IEDs.

However, after passing the outpost, everything became too quiet for me. I looked at my platoon sergeant and said, "I don't like this." Then he looked at me and I remember him saying, "What?" Then we both looked forward, and in a moment the lead vehicle exploded in front of us, the sound of the explosion forever etching itself in my memory.

In that moment we had to rely on our training with so many unanswered questions. The MRAP ahead of me was made for this terrain and to withstand explosions, but my friends were in that truck. We called up to our higher command, securing the area in order to get answers about the unknown in the next five minutes. After calling the base on the radio with the Nine Line and situation report, I prayed in the Spirit with my

machine gunner encouraging me to do so as he was raised in a Spirit-filled church.

I became numb as the days passed, doing my job to the best of my ability, sometimes going for days without sleep or rest to make sure we had communications everywhere we went. My truck was a mobile command operation center being my responsibility, as I was the driver and radio operator for our battalion commander.

My platoon was made up of 24 Marines and one sailor, who was our medical corpsman. We escorted dignitaries such as Senator John Kerry, General Petraeus and other high-level personnel who came to our area of operation for a quick visit, and we did infantry patrols and raced through the desert dodging IEDs, completing over 100 missions.

At a certain point on deployment I no longer cared what happened to me; my job was for my friends, so I considered myself dead in order to ensure others survived. More than half of my platoon would be hit by IEDs through the course of our deployment. Each of us made it home, but were never the same.

The day before the Thanksgiving holiday we returned home and I was embraced by my wife, my firstborn son and my twins, who were born 13 days into my deployment. I was ecstatic and elated, loving every moment. I never felt better. But a few months later, I took a turn for the worse and entered a dark and despairing season. The combat thrill was gone and so were my friends as our platoon was dissolved after serving its purpose.

My emotions were like a roller coaster ride and I was on a self-destructive road. I felt alone and abandoned, no longer part of a bigger cause. I tried to push the war aside but it would come back in full force with a vengeance. Working through the scenarios, the things we saw and did while over there and feeling like we gave our best but were never

recognized for it by our commander were all things I had to sort through. Insomnia, depression and adrenal fatigue were all symptoms of deep issues from the war.

After multiple therapy sessions and a number of medications many of us referred to as the “combat cocktail,” I realized I had to go back to the basics of my faith. I knew that no matter what man had to offer, I needed God more. In order to not lose my mind and my family in the process, I decided to rely on the Spirit of God and the basic spiritual habits in order to heal. I had to be proactive taking charge of my mind, will and emotions, taking every thought captive and making them obedient to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5).

I applied a warrior discipline to the basic spiritual habits in order to heal, which were:

Memorization: Taking Romans 12:2 to heart, it says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” I applied Colossians 3:2-3 to my life daily, setting my affections on heavenly things, hiding in the presence of God. The best model of inner healing was applying Scripture.

Meditation: I immersed myself in the Bible, meditating on it daily, reading and studying it. Throughout the course of the day I had to be intentional to focus my energies on Scripture and meditate no matter how I felt. Philippians 4:8 became a daily reality. It says, “Finally, brothers, whatever things are true, whatever things are honest, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue, and if there is any praise, think on these things.” I could not allow the depression and negative thinking to consume me, so I engaged often with Scripture, especially focusing on Jesus reigning on His throne.

Prayer: The secret place of prayer was where I had to discipline my mind again, focusing on Jesus and laying everything at His feet. Every scene, every memory, trauma and fracture of my being had to be handed to Him. I sought His face, needing His presence. It was here that I was restored, returning to my first love and He taught me how to laugh again and love life and be positive, affirming and encouraging. I learned that in His presence comes transformation.

Many veterans are looking for a place to belong again. Many are alone waging battle in their minds against the war they were in. Now, more than ever before, the church should reach out to them with open arms, embracing them with love and teaching them how to apply the basics of the faith and spiritual habits in order to heal because only in Jesus is abundant life (John 10:10). {eoa}

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