

ment, numerous social rituals contain and support the mourner through this process. By contrast, no custom or common ritual recognizes the mourning that follows traumatic life events. In the absence of such support, the potential for pathological grief and severe, persistent depression is extremely high.

THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY

Sharing the traumatic experience with others is a precondition for the restitution of a sense of a meaningful world. In this process, the survivor seeks assistance not only from those closest to her but also from the wider community. The response of the community has a powerful influence on the ultimate resolution of the trauma. Restoration of the breach between the traumatized person and the community depends, first, upon public acknowledgment of the traumatic event and, second, upon some form of community action. Once it is publicly recognized that a person has been harmed, the community must take action to assign responsibility for the harm and to repair the injury. These two responses—recognition and restitution—are necessary to rebuild the survivor's sense of order and justice.

Returning soldiers have always been exquisitely sensitive to the degree of support they encounter at home. Returning soldiers look for tangible evidence of public recognition. After every war, soldiers have expressed resentment at the general lack of public awareness, interest, and attention; they fear their sacrifices will be quickly forgotten.⁷⁶ After the First World War, veterans bitterly referred to their war as the "Great Unmentionable."⁷⁷ When veterans' groups organize, their first efforts are to ensure that their ordeals will not disappear from public memory. Hence the insistence on medals, monuments, parades, holidays, and public ceremonies of memorial, as well as individual compensation for injuries. Even congratulatory public ceremonies, however, rarely satisfy the combat veteran's longing for recognition, because of the sentimental distortion of the truth of combat. A Vietnam veteran addresses this universal tendency to deny the horror of war: "If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie."⁷⁸

Beyond recognition, soldiers seek the meaning of their encounter with killing and death in the moral stance of civilian community. They need to

know whether their actions are viewed as heroic or dishonorable, brave or cowardly, necessary and purposeful or meaningless. A realistically accepting climate of community opinion fosters the reintegration of soldiers into civilian life; a rejecting climate of opinion compounds their isolation.

A notorious example of community rejection in recent history involves the war in Vietnam, an undeclared war, fought without formal ratification by the established processes of democratic decision-making. Unable to develop a public consensus for war or to define a realistic military objective, the United States government nevertheless conscripted millions of young men for military service. As casualties mounted, public opposition to the war grew. Attempts to contain the antiwar sentiment led to policy decisions that isolated soldiers both from civilians and from one another. Soldiers were dispatched to Vietnam and returned to their homes as individuals, with no opportunity for organized farewells, for bonding within their units, or for public ceremonies of return. Caught in a political conflict that should have been resolved before their lives were placed at risk, returning soldiers often felt traumatized a second time when they encountered public criticism and rejection of the war they had fought and lost.⁷⁹

Probably the most significant public contribution to the healing of these veterans was the construction of the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. This monument, which records simply by name and date the number of the dead, becomes by means of this acknowledgment a site of common mourning. The "impacted grief" of soldiers is easier to resolve when the community acknowledges the sorrow of its loss. This monument, unlike others that celebrate the heroism of war, has become a sacramental place, a place of pilgrimage. People come to see the names, to touch the wall. They bring offerings and leave notes for the dead—notes of apology and of gratitude. The Vietnam veteran Ken Smith, who now organizes services for other veterans, describes his first visit to the memorial: "I remembered certain guys, I remembered certain smells, I remembered certain times, I remembered the rain, I remembered Christmas eve, I remembered leaving. I'd been in a couple of nasty things there; I remembered those. I remembered faces. I remembered. . . . To some people, it's like a cemetery, but to me it's more like a cathedral. It's more like a religious experience. It's kind of this catharsis. It's a hard thing to explain to somebody: I'm a part of that and I always will be. And because I was able to come to peace with that, I was able to draw the power from it to do what I do."⁸⁰