

The Post-Traumatic Gazette No 15

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Numbness 3: So what do I do with this feeling now that I've found it? by Patience Mason

Like many people, it has not been easy for me to accept that painful emotions are a part of life. When would everything be wonderful forever? I did a lot of things to avoid feeling bad, but in my experience, when I ran from pain, happiness eluded me. I hated feeling happy because I was always waiting for the other shoe to drop. It hurt too much when it ended. So I stayed numb.

In the natural flow of things, feelings arise as biological responses to what is going on around us, modified by our experience. People who were hit as children have a different feeling when they see someone getting annoyed than people who have never been hit. People who have seen death strike a group of soldiers have a different feeling about being in a group than other people.

Acceptance of whatever you feel is important, but how? What do you do when you have been numb for years? When you are not used to feeling anything except anger or perhaps depression?

First of all, don't rush into this if you are on shaky ground. You need to have a support system and a safe life. It helps to be working a recovery program or in therapy. If feelings throw you into flashbacks or send you back to compulsive behaviors, take time to achieve stability. You are not ready for them yet. Do the footwork so you feel safe and secure, and then you can gradually learn to un-numb.

When I started, I hadn't a clue how to accept, sit with, or tolerate a feeling much less that it would pass. I didn't have names for half the things I felt. The line between annoyance

and rage was blurred. I couldn't tell the difference. I also felt like I would die if I felt certain things. I didn't even give them a name. Today the same feelings I thought would kill me are welcome, if slightly uncomfortable, guests.

I think sitting with feelings is the most valuable skill I have, but it was the hardest to learn because we were all trained to suppress many emotions in childhood. If they burst out anyhow, they were greeted with the words "stop whining." Kids whine when no one is paying attention to them. If I look at my feelings like little kids who haven't had much practice in living because I have been suppressing them all my life, ignoring them is impolite.

My first suggestion is to *treat your feelings with politeness*. Like developing a relationship with a new friend, politeness starts the process that leads to knowing what you feel, accepting it, and using the information to make your life better. When you first meet

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someone, you're both sort of shy, but you make polite conversation starting with *what is your name?*

Naming a feeling is a full acknowledgement of it. When I took Traumatic Incident Reduction training last year, one of the parts of the training was in how to make a full acknowledgement of what someone has just said. The sort of "un-huh, uh-huh," thing we all do when we are not really listening, trying to ignore someone, is a half-acknowledgement, and very ineffective. They never shut up. I used to barely acknowledge my

feelings and, boy, did they keep on bugging me. Giving a full acknowledgement to a feeling may be the most you can do in the rush of everyday living, but it is better than ignoring it.

Just identifying that I'm numb or having an unnamed feeling is a start. If I don't know what I am feeling when I get a sinking feeling in my chest or stomach or notice that I am numb, I ask myself, "What is going on? What has happened?" If self-examination doesn't help, I talk to a good listener—usually Bob or my sponsor (more on listening skills next month) about it till a name comes out of my mouth, or I get out my pen and write until I know what I am feeling. Sometimes I have even read the name of what I am feeling in my morning meditation book! Acknowledging and identifying feelings will probably feel awkward at first. Easy does it. See the last two issues for more suggestions on ways to do it.

Tell me about yourself. During this stage you are not exactly feeling the feeling, but getting comfortable with it and discovering its background. I trace my feelings back, identifying patterns I learned at home and patterns I developed as a result of my experiences. It's interesting, gives me valuable insights, and isn't as painful because it is thinking rather than feeling. I find that if I do research on where and when I have felt some emotion before, it helps me understand the intensity of my emotion. Intensity is often an indication that the same emotion has been suppressed a lot in the past. It's from another time zone.

Whatever I feel is acceptable to me today, even if it seems nuts! Research helps me understand emotions that seem illogical. For example, when I held the first copy of *Recovering From The War* in my hands after four years of work, knowing that it was good, that it was going to help people, and always having wanted to be a writer, I burst into tears. They were not tears of joy, either, but tears of fear. “Who do you think you are?” was a phrase that came into my mind. I realized I was afraid that I would be judged, that I was putting myself forward. If you watched some new LT get a bunch of your friends killed by ordering them to bunch up in the bush in Vietnam, you may get enraged by parties or family gatherings without the least clue about where the rage is coming from. If being treated badly turns you into a doormat, look into your childhood for how many times you really were helpless and had to let grownups mistreat you. Maybe that is where feeling helpless comes from. You were helpless.

My friend, Jan Arnold, wrote me in response to the last issue, “Some feelings are arrows pointing at material to be worked on.” Those arrows lead me to painful incidents and patterns that hurt me in the past or are hurting my relationships in the present, but working on them to change the patterns and mourn the incidents is tolerable. (In 12 step programs they call this another f**king opportunity to grow.)

If I have the time, I do a little work on this material, writing or talking about it. My work on my feelings is always infused with compassion which is very empowering. Compassion is the opposite of self-pity (“Why me?”) which always kept me mired in despair. Compassion says, “things were difficult for you and what you are feeling now is evidence of that.” It teaches me to be good to myself. Compassion changes my sense of myself from “What is

wrong with me?” to “I am human and some things hurt.” Compassion for myself helps me to be kind to others, to be able to see their perspective, to accept that there is more than one perspective. Compassion gives me the power to act in new ways, to call someone and share a little and listen a little. I can also write out a plan of how I can help myself “live” through a feeling, or read how someone else has done it.

I need to pay attention to my automatic response to a feeling, too, because this is evidence about how

Some feelings are arrows pointing at material to be worked on.

I was taught to deal with feelings. It always amuses me that the people who are trumpeting a return to values like civility and Christianity are also the ones who are yelling, “Get over it!” and “No excuses!” Not phrases Jesus ever used. Not even polite. If you were taught to treat your feelings like a Nazi, it will be harder to get to the point where you can sit with them and welcome them.

Some feelings hurt. That is healthy. They move you away from pain. Remember, the feeling is not the source of the pain. The experience (war, abuse) is the source of the pain. The pain is telling you to leave such experiences. Suppressing the pain from them keeps the pain with you long after it is useful. With practice you can feel it and let it go.

I used to do anything to avoid feeling bad. I thought it meant I was a failure because I was always comparing my insides to other people’s outsides. Later on, when I had been in recovery for a while, I kept wondering why I wasn’t “over” having bad feelings. Eventually I came to the realization that everyone has bad feelings as a result of the ups and downs of life. It is okay to feel bad. It isn’t pleasant, but it isn’t the end of human civilization either.

Trauma survivors and veterans

have had terrible experiences. Feeling such pain is hard. I do not think it is wise to push myself to get to my feelings. Of course, when I started, I was in a hurry. Feelings that have been stuffed for years are going to be in the habit of hiding from you. Retraining yourself will take time. This is particularly important for trauma survivors who are often scared right out of therapy by going too fast. Grieving your losses will take time (see the Grief issue for more suggestions and help). Slow steady progress is best. It takes time to learn any new skill, and that is what letting go of numbness and feeling your feelings is, a skill you can master. Might take a bit longer than learning to make pie crust or taking apart an M-16, but that is okay.

Is there anything I can do for you? is another phrase you might use to an honored guest. It is hard to ask for but most of us yearn for acceptance and respect from others. Acceptance and respect are good attitudes to have towards our feelings. I already know the painful and ineffective results of suppressing my feelings because they weren’t what I thought they should be. You may, too.

When I get that old helpless, what’s-the-use feeling, once I acknowledge it and remember where it is from, I use it to motivate new actions. What is this feeling telling me about my circumstances? Is it the result of what is happening today? Helpful concepts:

Feelings motivate action.

Pain motivates healing.

I am not helpless although I am powerless over a lot of things (like what feelings arise in me, or what Bob is feeling, or what the government is going to do next).

I can do my part.

I’m responsible for doing footwork but I can’t control the outcome.

I don’t let my feelings guide my actions in the way that I used to. My feelings were buttons. Push them and I reacted. Today I use a pause button which is

that moment of respect and acceptance and tolerance I give to my feelings. Then I use my feelings to motivate new healthy actions (like saying, "Excuse me, but I prefer that you not speak to me that way.") and to guide me in caring for myself.

I was speaking to a roomful of therapists at the Brecksville VA last month about PTSD and substance abuse, and I mentioned that the military does not teach self-care. One veteran raised his hand and said I was wrong, that the Army taught him how to take care of himself. The training was so good, he survived a war. "So they taught you that when you were tired, you should lie down and take a nap?" I said. He laughed and said "No." That is the kind of self care I am talking about. Am I overwhelmed.? Maybe I could sit down and take it easy. Am I feeling angry and taken for granted? Maybe I could ask for help. Those were new patterns for me. You might find them helpful too, especially if you have been struggling for years to be John Wayne or Susie Sweetness-and-Light.

I'm so glad to see you, is another phrase polite people use. "Welcome back, old friend," is how one of my Vietnam veteran friends greets his rage these days. "Thank you for showing me that something is bothering me." Feelings let you know important information. It is not the only important information in the world, but scientific studies show that people who do not know what they feel because of physical brain damage make terrible decisions.

That is a real practical reason why you shouldn't give your feelings the brushoff. Make a date for later if it isn't the right time to sit with a feeling right now. When you can, take the time to be respectful and interested,, you will get a lot of valuable information out of the effort. If this sounds a little silly, most new actions are awkward. It is okay to be silly.

Some feelings are based in what is going on right now and pretty transi-

tory. Others are deeply seated evidence about what you have learned, how you have survived, and what you are like. Some of them are hard to take. One thing that has always helped me is hearing at meetings that others have these feelings too. I had been comparing my insides to their outsides. I am a fearful person. I was often paralyzed by fear of making a mistake. Today I feel the fear and do things anyhow, like writing this newsletter despite my fears each time that I have nothing to say that is worth your time. Other people have that same feeling!

Most trauma survivors have been through a lot and most of them are not John Wayne. As a matter of fact,

Welcome back, old friend

John Wayne wasn't John Wayne. He wasn't actually being brave, those weren't real bullets, and none of his friends died. He was an actor who never saw combat. Most men are much more sensitive than the characters John Wayne played and have very deep feelings which they have buried in order to meet society's expectations. Welcoming those feelings is hard work, not for sissies. The all-giving, never angry, self-effacing woman role model is just as disrespectful to the genuine feelings of most women. Women are allowed to be angry and selfish and human. Men are allowed to be afraid and not know all the answers. We are all human beings and in this life business together!

It is not easy to welcome painful feelings. Another skill to be learned with practice! Suppose rage comes up. Welcoming it with respect means you give it space instead of trying to force it to behave. Take your temper tantrums away from others just as you would a screaming child. When the rage is over, and you are exhausted and drained, compassionately ask your rage what it was trying to tell you. What is the message in your rage, your pain, your sadness, your fear, your shame, your guilt,

your despair, your grief? I list all those, because often when the anger is gone, you can see that underlying it was one or a combination of those feelings. For example you might be feeling shamed because someone acted disrespectfully and you are afraid to speak up for yourself. Knowing that can help you learn to get your needs met without having to blow up.

Excuse me, but I have to go. Polite people don't sit there stewing when they need to be going. It is okay to set limits for your emotions. You have to live in the real world with people who want you to "get over it."

Feelings tend to come up at inconvenient times. It is okay to put them off. Later you can take the time to visit with them and listen. Remember they do not have to be reasonable nor true. Feelings are based in the body, not the mind. The more primitive parts of the brain are a better-safe-than-sorry system that reacts before thinking. However the emotional parts of your brain have evolved with and are intertwined with the thinking parts. They are interdependent and necessary to each other.

Numbness is still a survival skill today. Being able to move consciously into protective numbing can be very effective. It is called detachment when you do it on purpose. Medical people call it professionalism. Another skill you can develop.

I am kind to my feelings, but I have also learned that I set limits for them. I can detach and do things that are hard, that I don't feel like doing, just as kids can. My feelings no longer control my actions.

People who have been friends for a long time can simply sit and enjoy each other's company without talking.

Practice sitting with your feelings and accepting them. What if you want to jump up and do something? How effective has that been in the past? Urgency is a signal to me not to do what seems so urgent. If I do what

I always did, I will get what I always got. Urgent action may momentarily ease shame or fear or despair, but my painful feelings always used to come back, often stronger.

If you think of your feelings as small kids, can you imagine yourself telling a little kid who's hurting, "Hey, let's go get drunk! Then you'll feel better!" No way! You probably wouldn't punch out a small kid, either. Don't punch out your feelings. It isn't easy to sit with your feelings. Start slowly and persist in small changes and efforts as you go along.

I am currently reading a book about how to do this called *Raising Your Emotional Intelligence* by Jeanne Segal, Ph.D. (Owl Books, 1997). She points out something I hadn't realized, "There is a major difference between experiencing our feelings and thinking about them."

When I've said that it is important for me to feel my feelings without necessarily believing them, that's what I mean. I hadn't distinguished for myself that a lot of the pain I felt wasn't from the feeling but from the associated thoughts. Shame is a good example. It comes up when someone is dominating you. It's meant to get you out of there, away from a person who is obviously having a bad day. But a child who is shamed can't get out of there. When I feel shame it is a burn in my cheeks and a pain in my heart. When I think shame I think 'I'm no good and can never be any good no matter how hard I try. No one will ever love me.' Those thoughts are associated with the feeling by my experiences. The feeling of despair is too because I couldn't leave. I no longer believe those thoughts.

Dr. Segal's program involves three stages, first learning to be aware of your feelings in your body (below the nose, she says), then learning to accept them and to "cut off the intellect when it inevitably tries to intrude and distort the emotional

message you're receiving." That's what is telling you not to cry because you will never be able to stop (which is projecting, not living in the now), it's what tells you you shouldn't have this feeling if you are a real man or a real woman, it is what tells you to "get over it. Other people have had worse," it's what keeps you comparing your insides to other people's outsides. Eventually, in the third stage, you are aware of your feelings all the time and rather than wallowing in them (as your intellect might suggest out of fear and inexperience) you can use them to make healthy decisions for yourself and to understand other people.

Her program takes about three months. I am just starting it. One of the qualities I try to cultivate which I think is absolutely vital to recovery is willingness. I am willing to try something new. Dr. Segal says studies have shown you can only feel as high as you can feel low. I've found that to be true.

Dr. Segal suggests setting a time limit for sitting with feelings. Go back to everyday life. I agree. Don't do it at bedtime and then try to sleep. Do it when you can, but having something distracting or even enjoyable to turn to afterwards is helpful. Set a timer if you like.

I actually never had to set a timer when I started sitting with my feelings. All I could stand was a few seconds. As I got better at it, I also had the experience of surviving the pain which gave me confidence that I could handle whatever came up. I did not push myself.

Whatever method you use to simply sit there and feel, there are a number of things you can say to yourself when your mind starts panicking at the idea of unending pain (which is thinking, not reality). Here are some that I have found helpful. You will find others that work for you (and the Gazette would love to publish them).

"I can feel this just for this minute"

"This too shall pass."

"This is a difficult emotion for anyone to handle, and I haven't had much practice with it or seen anyone else handle it."

"I have more resources today than I did when I was traumatized."

"I can have this feeling without believing that it is true."

"This is a feeling. I am more than my feelings." Helps when they feel overwhelming.

"I can feel what I feel without believing all the painful thoughts that have attached themselves to this feeling." That is a new one based on Dr. Segal's book.

"This is painful. Perhaps this person is having a hard day, but his/her actions have nothing to do with me." I use that a lot with rudeness. It's less effort than getting enraged.

"Ouch! Something about that interchange really hurt! What does it remind me of?" Check out that different time zone.

When you use this kind of self talk, you are learning to be a grown-up. Most trauma survivors feel stuck at certain ages, the ones at which they were traumatized. Real grown-ups, unlike big mean kids who often pass for adults, can tolerate and learn from their pain.

Sitting with a feeling is pretty hard when you first start out. Even good feelings are uncomfortable. The first time I felt serenity (the result I must add of being willing to feel pain) I had to get up and leave the room. Although it was a good feeling it was strange and I could hardly stand it. Last issue I discussed some techniques (mindfulness, writing, talking, meetings) that have helped me get to the point where I could simply sit and feel. That is where I got insights that changed my life. You can too. □

Readers Write

From: RHDDate: Tue, 17 Jun 1997
To: ptg@patiencepress.com
Subject: Coping with PTSD

Hello again: I've just finished reading your home page [http://www.patiencepress.com] and it mentioned you were interested in what helps individuals cope. So I decided to take some time and courage and try to share what works for me. I'm no expert.

As I mentioned earlier to you, I worked in the Danang mortuary, opening body bags and doing the dental I.D. Between that and my childhood, I was sure that I had gone insane. Occasionally, I still think I am.

One thing that helped me, but was very difficult, was to do some research. Because there is hardly any mention about what horrors veterans like myself had to see and do, I needed to find out if it really happened. I know this sounds a bit weird, but I was beginning to doubt myself and was ashamed about what I had done in the war. Aka. you didn't do nothing. You were real safe. What are you so upset about? ["seeing anyone who has recently been seriously injured or killed," is one of the four traumatic stressors identified by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association. Body bagging was traumatic stress with no glory—PM.] Far too many fellow vets have tried to fill my head with those. Even my own family said get on with it.

So I researched the records at the National Archives Bldg. Suitland, Md. The mortuary did exist. Sad,

but somehow it gave me some validation. Going through the time period and the numbers, caused pain and relief. Being one of the two two-man dental teams, I now know I did some several thousand body bags. It helped me understand that anyone would have felt stress and trauma after that and I'm not as crazy as I thought I was. I now look at all that as just one of many painful periods in my life. And that I have many other traumas that have contributed to my PTSD.

The pain sometimes feels
as if it's running
out of my fingers.

Now, ten years into recovery and the rest of my life to work on it, I'm beginning to understand them, and most important, me. When I'm stressed, quiet walks in the park (daylight) and say hello to people, no matter how difficult. Assorted forms of exercise. I bore easily. Painting, many subjects, but my favorites are Indians and clowns—leaning more towards clowns. Can paint from my soul and show what I feel with clowns. Let others try to figure it out. Writing, short stories and my book, which I believe will probably never get finished. But it sure allows me to get a lot of that crap out of my head. This, even more than therapy, I believe has helped me shed the pain and cope. Now have hundreds and still haven't run out. I took a chance and shared some of my paintings and poems in a book called *Incoming: For and About Vietnam Vets*. I'm in the process of trying

to get a copy to send you. I think you and your husband will enjoy them. On occasion I perform with the Memorial Day Writers Project, a small group of Vietnam Vets that performs their poetry under a tent on the mall in Washington, D.C., each Memorial Day and Veterans Day. The first time caused a little stress, but I think that was natural. Now I get a lot of peace from my small performances. We ask each time if there are any vets in the audience that would like to read something. They are more than welcome to come up, and if they feel they can't do so, one of us will volunteer to read it for them.

It's my wish that all vets learn to write their feelings. The pain sometimes feels as if it's running out of my fingers. These are some of the things that help me cope. I hope you share it with others and that maybe it will help at least one other person. Someday, maybe we can all get together and sit and talk. I know that I would enjoy that. If you're ever in Washington, D.C. on either Memorial Day or Veterans Day, please stop in and say hello. We are in an open air tent that faces Constitution Ave, just east of the Wall. Thank you for your time. Keep up your good work. Peace and love to you and yours.

Hugs, Rhorno@AOL

PS: From a vet friend with the handle Hugs who recently passed away: "When will the pain end? When there's enough HUGS." Sometimes, I feel as if Hugs is sitting on the shoulder above my heart guiding me and gives me a gentle kick in the ass when I begin to feel sorry for myself. Please write if I can be of any help or to just say hello.

Readers write

My Long Way Back Home
by Douglas W.

I believed that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was for the weak and off-centered veteran who didn't have the "right stuff" to handle the Vietnam war. One of the lucky ones, or so I thought, I have been blessed with a good marriage since 1971, fair jobs, gotten some sleep, and did not seem to have all those problems that other "screwed up" veterans had. I was only kidding myself. I had become an expert at suppressing the outward manifestations of my PTSD symptoms for thirty years. But there was something wrong that kept nagging at me. Every day I had some memory just "pop into" my head about Vietnam. I blew it off, or self-medicated with liquor to do away with these pesky memories and the feelings they dredged up (again only the weak ones let the war get them down).

I served with the 196th Light Infantry Brigade in many wonderful places, the likes of Happy Valley, Ahn Ke, LZ Baldy, and finally Chu Lai in I Corps, from April 1st, 1968, to April 31, 1969 (Tet messed up my DEROS timetable). I had seen a lot of shit in the infantry and later as a door gunner on a UH-1B/C with the 123d Aviation Battalion based at Chu Lai. What a sweet deal for a former boonie rat—hot meals, a

cot, and we usually only saddled up and went "tear assing" around looking for a fight three times a day. We had a 67% combat loss but didn't have to spend any nights in the field.

I did my duty and shut my mouth for I was raised by the Bob Hope generation (not to be confused with the Road Show)—the early 1960's—you know, do your job and don't complain. John Wayne movies had a big effect on me—especially *The Green Berets*. So when I was called for my physical in August of 1967, I gave in to the inevitable and joined for another year to get the "training of my choice." I chose Warrant Officer Flight School (WOF) since I

Your article on the 12-step program inspired me to go to an AA meeting—I have been "dry" for 16 years but now I am staying "sober" with the help of the group and God.

already had a private pilot's license, a first class medical certificate, and one year of Junior College under my belt. Pretty good for nineteen years old! Little did I know what hell I was in for.

The Army plucked me out of my lower middle class existence and placed my psycho-social development in limbo. They taught me to stand and fight instead of run away or freeze when under attack. Unfortunately, even though I had

an FAA Class I Flight physical the Army felt my eyes were not good enough to fly Hueys and punch off rockets and mini-guns with the "required accuracy necessary." ...So off to the war I went as an infantryman.

I learned to react to situations mechanically and was left to develop my own coping skills—drink yourself to sleep and suppress symptoms of stress.

I survived my year and went back to school. Even though I worked two jobs to pay for school (the GI Bill only gave you \$100 per month), I still found time to drink myself to sleep every night with thoughts of the war dancing in my head. I thought I was weak and crazy. I was on a downward spiral. After getting married, the only good thing that happened to me, my wife finally put her foot down and threatened to leave me if I didn't stop drinking. Luckily I did not have any run-ins with the law while I drank and I quit on my own (willpower stopped my drinking but I was still a drunk). After being sober for sixteen years, I still felt like there was something else wrong. While my health was good, I ran eight miles a day, replacing one habit with another, but natural endorphins were certainly better than demon rum. Unfortunately, a war injury prevented me from running anymore in 1986, and I started to have problems sleeping. Awakening night after night in a cold sweat, heart pounding,

thought I was going crazy, had to hold on. The training I received in the Army was necessary for my survival but I was not given sufficient debriefing on how to act “back in the world.” But since my social skills had been arrested at nineteen and my emotions were still in the jungle, I did not fit in too well. I was living in a gray world reacting as if it were black and white. I managed to stuff these emotions until I hit bottom last December, 1996. I was severely depressed, dreaming of the war every night, had severe survivor's guilt and totally lost my spiritual center—left rudderless, adrift in a sea of puke.

I went to the Vet Center in Sioux City but was told I was too messed up for them and needed professional help. They referred me to the VA Hospital in Omaha where I was given Xanax and Prozac for my immediate symptoms and placed in the PTSD evaluation program. This process, as anyone who has been through it, is extremely painful—everything came back at once (the dump truck unloaded on me!). Reeling from the pain and the shock of receiving a 100% permanent service-connected rating for PTSD (in addition to 80% physical) almost put me over the edge. I can't be that screwed up!

Fifty minute counseling sessions are not enough! That's just long enough to open a festering wound

and leave you hanging until next week. It's like a can of worms—pull on one and all of them wiggle at you. I've never been so sick in my life.

It took two extended stays in the Psychological Intensive Care Unit, PICU, for severe depression and suicidal ideation, to bring me under some fragile form of control. Intellectually I understood what was going on, but my emotions were out of control.

The Long Way Back: I am finally gaining control and securing a safe environment—easier said than done. I am reaching out to others in my PTSD group which is hard since I trust no one but myself—vet supreme! A big break-through happened when I started going to AA & working the program. I did not realize that I was a sober drunk missing what AA has to offer. Now I am starting to get a handle on the coping skills I need to learn to live in “gray” world and face the demon on a daily basis. My motto has always been “Find out what sucks and then don't do that!” Through the process, I believe I have hit on a solution. Pogo was right—“I have met the enemy and he is us.” I still have a long way to go but with God's help and the 12 steps I now have a program that gives me the faith and hope that I will make it. Change comes from within one day at a time.

I'm sure you have seen the the

movie “The Fly.” Just as the doctor was forever altered, Vietnam has done that to me—mixed my molecules to the extent that we (the war and I) can never be separated. I was profoundly changed and must look to those changes as a chance for growth.

Even though I still can't sleep for more than an hour and a half, have night terrors, I am getting better. There is hope—light at the end of the tunnel. Now I must learn the skills I should have been developing at age nineteen at age fifty.

I hate the memories and feelings writing brings up but somehow writing about it helps... Your Gazette really helps me keep my perspective, at least for a time. I read them three or four times initially and re-read them again in a week. I can't tell you how your publication and books (yours and Bob's—sorry I feel as though I know you) have been a God-send. I read them over and over for inspiration to go on when the going is tough, and it's tough most of the time!

Your article on the 12-step program inspired me to go to an AA meeting—I have been “dry” for 16 years but now I am staying “sober” with the help of the group and God.

Readers write

To:
ptg@patiencepress.com
Subject: What helped me

What helped me most was the knowledge that I was not alone and that thousands of other combat veterans had the same symptoms. I thought I was nuts so I numbed out and shut up. Then I read a little pamphlet put out by the DAV called “Readjustment Problems Among Vietnam Veterans.” I thought the author had a pipeline directly into my head and was describing me. Everything fit.

The problem even had a name: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Just giving the thing a name, describing it, and revealing that it is a common occurrence among combat vets were the biggest help for me.

The next biggest help was counselling at the

Boulder Colorado, Vet Center where I ran across your terrific book on PTSD. The counselling—together with your book—provided some practical ways to deal with PTSD while making it clear that I would have to learn to live with it and not to be “cured.”

The most practical device I found for dealing with the fury which sometimes erupts is deep breathing. No kidding. Just simply breathing deeply. I found it impossible to be furious and to breathe deeply at the same time. How simple can it get? There are lots of other tricks, but that one I use all the time, and it helps just as reading your excellent book does.

(Recovering From The War)

One of the most touching and helpful incidents—once I knew about PTSD—was when you wrote to me and said “Welcome home and

thank you.” No one had ever said that to me after my return years and years ago. I was deeply moved. I HAD A GENUINE FEELING..

The counselling was particularly valuable in letting my group of vets tell their stories. When I came back from Korea, to a prosperous country which really did not want to hear about the war, nobody asked me about the bad stuff, and I did not want to offend them by talking about it. It just fermented inside me for a lifetime during which I was divorced twice and jumped from job to job. So talking to other vets and hearing their stories was useful too.

Semper Temper,
Pete