



NATIONAL VIETNAM VETERANS
Art Museum

Teacher Packet

Trauma & Metamorphosis II

Art and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

“It is through painting that Vietnam is giving me and many others a new life. It is through art that we fight back, and it is through the eyes and hands of veterans that the truth is told.”

John Plunkett, NVVAM Artist

The National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum would like for your class visit to be as enlightening and as effective as possible, and we are pleased to offer you our Teacher Packets to aid and prepare your class for their visit. This material is designed to be used both before and after your visit, and we hope it will maximize the impact of your class' experience here. We welcome any feedback or suggestions you may have on how to improve this teacher packet. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to be a part of your educational process. We look forward to your visit.

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Viewing the Vietnam War and war experience in general through art helps forge a link between the student, soldier, art and history. The students participate in multi-dimensional learning that focuses on analyzing how art relates to historical themes and issues, interpreting and understanding art as a tool of communication, synthesizing and assimilating information from different disciplines into demonstrated comprehension, and further developing abstract and critical thinking that can be applied throughout the learning process. The Vietnam War and its impact on those who fought in it on both sides are brought to the immediate grasp of each student as they become true first-hand witnesses to the war experience.

What PTSD Is

“A psychiatric disorder that can occur following the experience or witnessing of life-threatening events such as military combat, natural disasters, terrorist incidents, serious accidents, abuse (sexual, physical, emotional, ritual), and violent personal assaults like rape.”

It is estimated that 7.8% of Americans will experience PTSD. Approximately 30% of people who been in war zones will

experience PTSD, with 20-25% having partial PTSD. As many as 8% of Gulf war veterans may be suffering from PTSD as well.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder is NOT something only men who were in wars can develop—any person, male or female, child or adult, can develop PTSD (though not everyone who experiences trauma will do so).

History of PTSD

There is documentation of PTSD in medical literature of the American Civil War (a similar disorder was called “Da Costa’s Syndrome”). Soldiers in our Civil War who developed PTSD were said to have “soldier’s heart” or “nostalgia.” Freud’s pupil Kardiner was the first to describe the symptoms that came to be known as PTSD in the scientific community. But the first to “specifically diagnose mental disease as a result of war stress and try to treat it” were the Russians during the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-1905.

In World War I, PTSD was called shell shock. It was named by medical officer Charles Myers, as it was initially believed to be a physical injury to the nerves due to close proximity to bombs, etc. The symptoms included sympathy pains (seeing/inflicting a gruesome face injury resulted in a person developing tics in their own faces, for example).

During World War II it came to be known as battle fatigue. Throughout both world wars, developing knowledge of the condition, its causes and treatments was slight at best and

fraught with misunderstanding. Both the military command and medical professionals were highly skeptical of it, to put it mildly. Military leaders felt that a soldier’s first battle should “steel the combatants against any ‘future stresses’”. Civilians, leaders and doctors could neither understand nor sympathize with those suffering, and believed combat stress reaction (the military’s term for PTSD) was due to the sufferer’s weakness and/or cowardice.

PTSD was brought to the world’s attention as a legitimate disorder only after Vietnam veterans vocally insisted on the condition’s recognition. The veterans’ success can mostly be seen in the disorder’s addition to the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)...and the reason that PTSD is mostly associated with them. For years, it was actually called “Post-Vietnam Syndrome.” It is this inclusion in the American Psychiatric Association’s DSM that brought the research and recognition of medical professionals that allows them to successfully diagnose and help treat those suffering from PTSD.

Whom to Contact For Help or More Information

These lists are by no means exhaustive. You can find more local resources in the Yellow Pages under:

- counseling
- hospitals
- mental health
- psychologists
- psychotherapists
- social and human services
- social workers

and in the Government sections as well.

National

Sidran Foundation at 410.825.8888 or online:

www.sidran.org

Anxiety Disorders Association of America at 800.964.2000 or online: www.adaa.org

NAMI at 800.950.6264 or online: www.nami.org

National Center for PTSD: www.ncptsd.va.gov

The PTSD Alliance at 877.507.PTSD or online:

www.ptsdalliance.org or via email: info@ptsdalliance.org

American Psychiatric Association at 703.907.7300 or online:

www.psych.org or via email: apa@psych.org

American Psychological Association at 800.374.2721 or

online: www.apa.org

National Center for Victims of Crime at 703.276.2880 or

online: www.nvc.org

Local

Community Mental Health; 3 locations

South: 877.976.7700

West: 773.863.9749

East: 773.863.4954

Com Psych: 312.595.4000

Community Counseling Center: 773.765.0653

Diversified Behavioral Comprehensive Care: 773.239.9700

Healing Center of Chicago: 773.784.0339

Illinois Psychiatric Society: 312.263.7391

Institute for Behavioral Health: 773.561.4161

Institute for Psychoanalysis: 312.922.7474 or online:

www.chicagoanalysis.org

Midwest Center for Youth and Families: 888.629.3471

Preventative Mental Healthcare Services: 312.782.8247

Counseling Center of Lake View: 773.549.5886

St. James Counseling Center: 773.373.6276

Veterans

The US Veterans Center: 773.684.5500

VA Health Benefits Services: 877.222.VETS

Jesse Brown VA Medical Center: 312.569.8387

Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital (Hines, IL): 708.202.8387

North Chicago VA Medical Center: 847.688.1900

For Further Reading

From the National Center for PTSD and veterans:

A. *Trauma and the Vietnam War Generation* by Richard A. Kulka. Published by Brunner/Routledge, 1990.

B. *Coping with Trauma: A Guide to Self-Understanding* by Jon G. Allen. Published by the American Psychiatric Press, 1995.

C. *I Can't Get Over It: A Handbook for Trauma Survivors, 2nd Edition* by Aphrodite Matsakis. Published by New Harbinger Publications, 1996.

D. *Vietnam Wives: Facing the Challenges of Life with Vietnam Veteran Suffering Post-Traumatic Stress* by Aphrodite Matsakis. Published by Sidran Press, 1996.

E. *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*, Edited by Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, and Lars Weisaeth. Published by Guilford Publications, Inc., 1996.

F. *Achilles in Vietnam: Traumatic Stress and the Undoing of Character* by Jonathon Shay (ed: Lee Goerner). Published by Simon & Schuster, 1994.

Gallery Activities

ACTIVITY 1

Locate *Honorable Discharge* by Scott Niestadt and *Jar of Mars* by Mike Helbing, which are exhibited together. Notice the use of the food imagery metaphor used in each piece. Why do you suppose both of these artists chose to communicate their messages in this way? Do you think the artists/soldiers feel they are meat, or does society seem to view those in the military that way? Think of what it is about meat that people could relate to people in the military specifically. Can you understand or even agree with this metaphor? Why or why not? Other things to consider:

a.) Do you think the artists are making different statements with these two pieces, or are they saying the same thing?

b.) Mike Helbing had this to say about *Jar of Mars*:
[It] encapsulates my feeling of being trapped in a world out of my control. The little green plastic soldiers of my youth are inter-spaced with a rope of pickled bologna in an upside-down jar under the control of Mars, the god of war. Like the Cyclops, Mars will reach in when hungry and pick one of us....Licking his lips, Mars will march on until the urge strikes again. We in the jar can do nothing but wait and hope he passes by.

Is the kernel of this statement echoed in *Honorable Discharge*?

Think in terms of the group of soldiers in the jar and the individual in Niestadt's piece.

c.) Helbing's statement references randomness and luck. Do these concepts seem applicable to *Honorable Discharge* as well?

Related research/writing topic: Read passages in mythological texts (such as Homer's *The Odyssey*, *The Iliad*, or a Greek/Roman mythology book) on Mars and/or the Cyclops. Analyze the embodiment of war and all it entails in the individual god Mars: what type of personality must he have? what powers and traits must he have or lack to precisely and completely personify war? What is his relationship with man like, i.e., can one negotiate with Mars, or strike a deal with him that Mars could keep?

For the Cyclops: the concept of luck versus wit and strategy to stay alive is one that many veterans say is often due more

to the former than the latter. In this respect, the Cyclops is a very appropriate symbol for random violence and good or bad luck. What about his one eye—what can this say about the Cyclops' personality, and about war, i.e. limitations, brute strength? The Cyclops tend to sheep, which often symbolize innocence, or a blind group mentality. Explore the relative safety the sheep have with the Cyclops—why are they safe from the Cyclops' brutality? What does this say about the Cyclops? civilians' innocence of war? Can you find any significance or symbolism behind the combat-wearied men using the sheep to hide their escape?

ACTIVITY 2

Frank Dahmer, *Crossing*: Besides possibly being marked for death, for what other reasons could the artist have singled-out the red soldier? Keep in mind the name of the piece—it is not "THE Crossing"—it is an action that is being played-out-- the soldiers are in the process of crossing, rather than being at a crossing. Think of the phrase "crossing over," or any other expressions that leap to mind. How else can these phrases or this action be applied to the piece?

ACTIVITY 3

Look around the exhibit's galleries and note the images of landscapes and foliage in the artwork. For example, in *Payback at A-3 1967* by Don Usey, the background consists of a pattern, the repetition of leaf shapes and the less-defined denseness of the foliage. In *Goodbye* by David Knight, however, there is a certain amount of individualized detail, the foliage is lacy in appearance, and each leaf has had special attention given to it by the artist. Why might the artists have used more or less detail in their works? Is the background an important part of the pieces you selected, or not?

ACTIVITY 4

Contrast the terrain and conditions the Vietnam Veterans fought in with those the soldiers in Iraq are fighting in. If you wish, list the words that would be accurate descriptions of each of the countries' differences in terms of climate, terrain, and what they could mean in terms of fighting tactics, etc. An example: being in the jungles nurtured ideal conditions for ambushes.

The landscape will really shape not only how one fights in a war; it can also shape how one remembers the country and the battles they fought there.

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"Encyclopedia: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder." www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Posttraumatic-stress-disorder (7-1-05)

Helbing, Michael. *Jar of Mars*. 2003. National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum, Chicago, IL.

Knight, David. *Goodbye*. Undated. National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum, Chicago, IL.

Niestadt, Scott. *Honorable Discharge*. 1981. National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum, Chicago, IL.

www.psych.org/public_info/ptsd.cfm (5-18-05)

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Spiller, Roger J. "Reader's Companion to Military History." college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/mil/html/mh_005800_battlefatigue.htm. (6-8-05)

Usey, Don. *Payback at A-3 1967*. Undated. National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum, Chicago, IL.

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Some veterans who have PTSD would prefer that their condition be distinguished from posttraumatic stress disorder and called by its military name "combat stress reaction" because they feel that combat trauma is different from all other traumas in its effects and nature; additionally, these veterans are responsible for the medical community's recognizing that people who experience violent trauma can be so greatly altered by it.