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DEFINING MOMENTS

An Embodied Inquiry: Listening, Healing and “Supporting our Troops”

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Countless vulnerable moments compose a life—defining moments. The birth of my firstborn was one such moment. Nearly 30 years ago this “moment” launched me into unanticipated realms of growing with and through a new being. It was on this terrain that I began wandering, reconnoitering the borders of what it might mean to listen. I needed to understand how it was that listening might both heal and craft a life and a family. In all this time I have been both confounded and changed, over and again. I have come to understand listening as a vulnerable act, one that requires an uncompromising attention—a reflexive, visceral presence. Such presence, I have found, alters a being.

In 2003, as our country plunged into Iraq, trepidation filled my body; foreboding reverberated through my bones. This infant son turned warrior adult compelled me to draw deep from the well of courage, to dive even deeper into pools of vulnerability, to come to the edge of angst, listen with fear, and to be present through it all. Admittedly such terrains were (more) often met with reluctance. Anticipatory angst triggered my synapses; I got edgy. Yellow ribbon car magnets, a cacophony of flag-bearing/-waving citizenry, and the rhetoric of “supporting our troops” inundated our communities and our country at large. From this landscape, countless narratives of war-related trauma would again percolate and burst anew. Stories that sprouted up between my warrior son and me grew among the many in a long history of family and nation. Here a myriad of narratives pulled from similar pools of diligence, courage, fear, and vulnerability. Narratives, I came to understand, do not merely rest as memories; rather,

they take up space, traveling steep heights and cavernous lows through the topography of our collective bodies-beings.

That cacophony of battle cries compelled a journey of contemplation and inquiry. In 2009 I embarked on a project to discover what it might mean for a person and a country to “support our troops.” As I prepared for my dissertation defense in 2010, potent truths had emerged. Among them was not only that the art of listening would require a *life-long* diligence, but that such diligence would indeed shift a *way of being*. Having interviewed nearly 40 Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) warriors, spouses, parents, and institutional support systems, narratives, I found, traveled through us all. From our bodies those narratives traverse the spheres of our existence, from the intimately personal through the institutionally functional and the myriad of all that exists in the spaces between us. The narratives of our warriors come up from within us all; they emerged as embodied stories traversing the terrain of our mutual bodies. Demanding presence, our warrior’s narratives’ express/ed the cultural corporeality of a collective body politic. Concomitantly these narratives revealed both a need and potential for healing. Committing to a journey that demanded such visceral presence required that I listen with the angst and listen *through* healing. It was here that I came to understand that the practice, presence, and art of inquiry were the very terrain of vulnerable beings.

Deep listening exposed an unanticipated vulnerability: one that crept up on and moved through my bones in unsuspecting moments. My body, I thought, was separate from this project. And yet, treading into territory unknown, moving toward sensemaking, on this quest I came to know of a merging. The storied bodies of these warriors were traversing space, hunkering down and reemerging in my body-being. Narratives were unsuspectingly morphing from the very

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personal to a collective (personal/political) terrain. A concatenation of moments, memories, and stories moved across and through time. Moments, attached to and collected larger stories . . .

A chin resting on a shoulder, an arm draped across the back; I miss my girls. I miss my son. Those hugs, vessels of laughter, anguish, relief—and oh, the holding. I miss the touch. That was one of the some-things I noticed when Levi returned from his first deployment to Afghanistan. It was harder to touch him. And it scared me. There was an unmistakable presence of absences. He came back seemingly laden with silent stories. I heard them in a tighter smile that began back along his clenched jawline. I saw them through broader shoulders bearing stones; others tangled in the arms that crossed his chest and a heart now taut. Countless narratives soundlessly swirled in and around him. I couldn't find a way in. In my quest, I sat with the stories of other warriors and those homefront warriors. Over the course of a life, and more specifically over the course of this inquiry/journey, listening emerged as a way of bridging worlds. My world and my body, I found, have been changed in the practice of deep listening. I came to know, as Rawlins (2003) suggested, that "dedicated listening . . . is a form of surrender, a vulnerability and susceptibility to others" (p. 123, drawing on Levinas, 1991). I was confounded by those body-stories of warriors, speaking through vast bodies, taking up space in my own. The more I surrendered; the more moments e/merged . . .

Summer has a way of making space, rest in our lives. All day and into this warm summer evening I am in a state of contented bliss, frivolously "being" with Ivy. Levi is in Afghanistan, but here, no tensions, demands, or illusions pout between mother-adult-daughter-being. Laughing and hugging, I am reminded how much I have missed our being—bodies, being together in presence, in body-speak. After dinner, we strolled through the shopping center holding hands [my bliss]. I give her momma hugs and kisses with a frequency she tolerates this day/night. In our trailing, we stop to rest, entering a vast array of summer-time families. They, too, had come to linger and play in the heat of a July evening. We sat, she and I, resting on the steps, each in our own bodies-being reverie, intent on those moms and dads, babies and toddlers running, screaming, and laughing through intermittent bursts and blasts. Here, rocketing plumes of water rained over vast colors, sizes, and shapes of body-beings. Arm touching, we interrupt the silence, "See that little girl's hair?" . . . "ohh beautiful" . . . "she's hilarious" . . . "That little guy with his dad . . . precious . . ." We sat, a mingled presence, a social storying-body, the two/all of us.

There was no forewarning, no whistling shriek of alarm. Instead synapses began to trigger angst, my vision melded and then shifted. Sound got blurry then stepped forward. A cry rose, "mamma—I don't wannaaaa gooooo," in a conglomeration of body-beings, space, and time. Laughter, shouts, voices, tottering feet—all of us—sound storying a

presence. Water pelted the brick terrace. Sound. Screaming joy orchestrating comfort, peace and memories—families at rest/play. It was here, in the shifting of sound to story, synapses triggered a terror-laden-stone. Other stories now entered my being in an unfathomable speed of transformation. In another interview, Heath, a retired Army Lt Colonel, described that moment in time that forever changes a life with "the speed of lethality." Here, "a buddy and I are sitting side-by-side . . . Joking" [here were Ivy and I], "I turned and turned back—he was gone." It was a flash-blast, uncomprehending loss in a moment of bliss turned to blur. Here it was. In moments of unwitting surrender, their stories moved in; my body-being was absorbing the knowledge of another's cavernous moment. IEDs (improvised explosive devices), RPGs (rocket propelled grenades), or even a bomb-laden being might enter a [this] crowd, detonating a collective self. With "the speed of lethality" this bliss turned to blur, to imagined horror. Here I came to know I was hearing and perceiving the world through the narratives of warriors that now coursed through my very marrow.

I ducked. Panic-filled, we were both startled staring wide-eyed. Then he laughed. In an interview with Hal, a 24-year-old medic recently returned from Iraq, practice flights for the next day's air show pierced the sky, outside our room but into my heart. An interview with "Wise," a young Marine, was followed by hours of utter silence. My body-being was still. Steep heights and cavernous lows, mountains of angst and pools of hope reverberated, soundlessly swirled in and through me. Wise was remembering how his brother described his tumultuous first months home from Iraq. I was riveted in that moment he looked me in the eye and simply said, "I don't remember any of it." That night I had dreams, profound dreams that lead to avenues of my own past memories. "Troy," another young marine (from the same unit), and I met on a December afternoon. For over two hours we sat creating time and space for the stories he bore. Gray skies poured through windows and framed our presence. It was hard. I was moved to deep sorrow for all his/our losses. Another sphere co-mingled and re/emerged. Both he and Wise conjured up for me fragments of lost truths. From another era, buried angst spoke; time exploded forward in my body-being. In the weeks just before he was due home from Vietnam, my brother stepped on a landmine. In that moment he moved from a living being to a living narrative piercing time. Those weeks, that moment would forever resonate absence and presence in all the narratives that came to be a family's life. Four a.m., the morning after interviewing with Troy, I woke, startled. I was sitting upright when the text buzzed. Troy simply wrote, "I have more to say."

Each warrior with whom I met reminded me of our mutual vulnerability. They reminded me how it is that war pierces us all. "Tad" is an Army Major who served in the Gulf War and fulfilled two tours in Iraq. He told me, "When you asked me [if I would be willing to interview] I knew this subject [would be] somethin' I [would] end up cryin' about . . . but

that's all right. I'm gonna feel better and I'm gonna thank you for it when it's over." Tad had described himself as the "tough, best-Ranger-competition guy. I never thought I was vulnerable enough for it to affect me." Contemplating deeper, "I guess it's guys like me—need to be more vulnerable more often . . . Cause it is healing." Tad's words remind us all that healing does indeed require a "we" that not only honors and witnesses the vulnerabilities of others, but importantly a healing "we" requires willingness (reflexivity) to encounter our very own deepest vulnerabilities as well. As Frank (1995) suggested, "Stories can heal the wounded healer and the wounded storyteller, [they] are not separate, but different aspects of the same figure" (p. xii). Time and again, over the course of this journey, healing emerged in the presence and acknowledgment of our mutual vulnerabilities, in the very midst of our angst. For me, an embodied inquiry suggested that powerful healing lies in presence. More importantly, the powerful healing was in the moving into—moving through that which I did not know. The quest to discover what it might mean to "support our troops" revealed the need for both a personal [individual] and political [collective] reckoning through a visceral presence.

In December 2011 U.S. troops departed Iraq, and it is reported that the Afghanistan war is similarly winding down. Story-laden, our daughters, sons, mothers, fathers, and brothers are homeward bound. A warrior's stories are not merely the stories of one body-being. These are the narratives that emerge from and will merge us all. Where Gonzalez (2003) spoke of listening, I understand an embodied act requiring a visceral presence. Listening she suggested, requires a "willingness to open one's self to see hear, feel, taste, and smell everything about another's experience"; importantly, to "share our own experience without intentional or strategic, fearful distortions that it might also be experienced by those open to community with us" (p. 85). To sit with our warriors is to recognize that the stories of our families and of our communities are the narratives that compose a nation. They require a visceral presence that will ultimately draw

on our mutual vulnerability for healing forward. As a health communication scholar, I felt impelled to seek narrative avenues of healing that might bridge the personal/political crevices and fissures in the aftermath of war. These bridges emerged for me across everyday moments in everyday lives, in listening. In being present.

On this journey I was confronted (confounded) with choices about how I might enter the realm of another. I found that both wisdom and vulnerability reside in our midst, compose our lives. With every warrior I sat with, and every story that came to rest in my body-being, there was no "me" but a we. This was the "we" needed to "support our troops." I found that on healing terrains, we would need to move beyond the tenants of a biomedical model grounded in individualist response. Healing emerged *in the presence and attention of others. Healing e/merged in shared vulnerabilities*. Healing in the aftermath of war will require that we acknowledge both our singular and mutual vulnerabilities—those of which we are aware, and those with which we have yet to grapple. The narratives of warriors meander through us all. They resonate in our midst and they will hover long into our futures. In the topography of countless war-related trauma narratives, how, I wonder, will we collectively re/define these moments of healing?

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