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Publisher: Routledge

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Journal of Poetry Therapy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://tandfprod.literatumonline.com/loi/tjpt20>

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Available online: 19 Nov 2010

To cite this article: Anjana Deshpande (2010): Recon Mission: Familiarizing veterans with their changed emotional landscape through poetry therapy, *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 23:4, 239-251

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08893675.2010.528222>

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Recon Mission: Familiarizing veterans with their changed emotional landscape through poetry therapy

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Trauma needs containment and recognition in order to be handled, and this project enabled the soldier to do both through the use of writing and poetry. This paper is based on the qualitative findings of an 18-month long poetry therapy group conducted in a veteran's center, and follows the progress of the veterans as they learned to use writing and poetry to focus on the present and reconnect to a broad spectrum of emotions they had been trained to suppress. The paper describes the theory behind the exercises and their impact on the veterans.

Keywords *Narrative therapy; poetry; PTSD; trauma; veterans; writing*

1. Introduction

The diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was formally recognized for the first time in 1980, when the American Psychiatric Association included it in its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III). Since then, knowledge about trauma has witnessed a tremendous growth, and has resulted in the broadening of the definition of trauma. Van der Kolk (1987) defined trauma as “the result of an exposure to an inescapably stressful event that overwhelms a person’s coping mechanisms” (p. 6). Pearlman and Saakvitne (1995) describe it as a “unique individual experience,” in which the same event evokes different reactions in different people. Rothschild (2000) gave it yet another dimension by naming trauma a “psychophysical” experience, which takes a toll on the mind as well as on the body.

In recent years, a group of trauma experts suggested the addition of another trauma category called “complex trauma,” or Disorders of Extreme Stress Not Otherwise Specified (DESNOS), and a case is being built up for the complex PTSD diagnosis to be added to the DSM-V. Terr (1992) further differentiated between two

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types of trauma: “single blow” or Phase I trauma and “repeated” or Phase II trauma. Single blow traumas are limited to single incidents such as natural disasters, accidents, or acts of criminal violence, while Phase II traumas are prolonged and repetitive traumas, such as sexual abuse, war, and political violence (Classen, Koopman, & Spiegel, 1993). War veterans suffer from Phase II trauma, which is considered to be far harder to bear than Phase I trauma (Giller, n.d).

According to van der Kolk and Courtois (2005), “at the core of traumatic stress is the breakdown in the capacity to regulate internal states” (p. 386). While assessing clients suffering from trauma van der Kolk (1996) looks for the following symptoms: intrusive re-experiencing, autonomic hyperarousal, numbing of responsiveness, intense emotional reactions, learning difficulties, memory disturbances and dissociation, aggression against self and others, and psychosomatic reactions (pp. 420–423). All these symptoms are in fact coping mechanisms that an individual uses in order to deal with extreme stress that trauma creates. The stress is created because trauma strips away a person’s sense of safety and control, and leaves them with a feeling that their life is on a trajectory of disaster, with no hope in sight.

According to Herman (1992), one of the ways to help clients recover from trauma is to restore their sense of power and control (p. 159). Herman (1992) also states that recovery from trauma unfolds in three stages, which, she cautions, may not follow the exact order in each person, as “oscillating and dialectical in nature, the traumatic syndromes defy any attempts to impose such simple minded order” (p. 155). However, according to Gilin and Sullivan (2009) there is a general consensus that recovery takes place in three phases: Phase I involves stabilization, Phase II consists of remembering the details of traumatic memories, and Phase III focuses on Reconnection (p. 595).

Expressive writing is fast emerging as an invaluable tool to assist in the rehabilitation of trauma survivors. Dr. James Pennebaker conducted expressive writing studies in the 1980s, which established that writing had a strong positive impact on the psychological and physiological well being of trauma survivors. According to Soper and von Bergen (2001), expressive writing can be used successfully to confront and reframe traumatic life events (p. 151). The authors attribute the success of expressive writing among trauma survivors to “Disinhibition” (p. 151). Writing can be done in absolute privacy, thus removing the added stress of “how is someone else going to react to my story.” Expressive writing creates a space for truth, without disturbing other areas of the writers life, thus creating the “safety” that is required for Phase I of trauma recovery.

The project “Recon Mission” has harnessed this power of expressive writing and poetry therapy to combat the effects of trauma. As Ford, Courtois, Steele, van der Hart, and Nijenhuis (2005) suggest, this project did not “delve into the details of trauma memories; instead it assisted the client in self regulation” (p. 439). Recon Mission introduced the veterans to the concept of using writing and poetry for healing, and focused on using poetry therapy/writing as a means of exploring the internal landscape of war veterans suffering from long-term PTSD. Most veterans do not fully comprehend the upheaval their emotional landscape has gone through, and

try to get on with their life without adequate processing of wartime events. Project Recon Mission utilized the Literary Arts to help the soldier understand his new territory and gain mastery and control over it. It used military metaphors where applicable and created an atmosphere conducive to “taking action.” Also, tackling issues in a group setting gave the veterans a renewed sense of camaraderie and purpose. Gilin and Sullivan (2009) state that group counseling is a powerful force for recovery as it helps in reducing isolation and normalizes the feelings experienced by trauma survivors (p. 617). For the veterans, this was also an opportunity to work as a team after a gap of several years. This project also explored how the literary arts can be utilized to create an emotional decompression chamber, which would facilitate the process of rehabilitation of those traumatized by war.

The name of the project reflected its mission, which was to provide the veterans a reconnaissance of their present lives, including issues and stresses, and reconnecting the veterans with positive coping skills and internal/external support through a structured poetry/journal therapy group. This was something sorely needed within the community of soldiers who felt like “*broken toy soldiers, now left to gather dust.*”

2. Objectives

This project was based on Phase 1 of trauma recovery. Phase I involves stabilization and skill building (Gilin & Sullivan, 2009, p. 595), which was also the focus of Recon Mission. The project was broken down into three parts as follows.

2.1. *Familiarizing the veteran with his emotional landscape (generating awareness)*

This was done through writing exercises that helped the veterans become more “present” to their everyday lives. The questions these exercises asked were: Who are you today? and How is your life today?

2.2. *Gaining mastery and control over the territory (stabilizing)*

Once they got the “lay of the land,” the Veteran’s task was to identify their main stressors. The exercises in this phase concentrated on helping them to reach within, and to find their own solutions. This was done by asking exploratory questions like “Name ten things that no one knows about you,” and guided imagery exercises.

2.3. *Rebuilding – setting goals and creating an action plan for their realization (skill building)*

In this phase, the veterans were ready to choose their goals for the future. The exercises in this phase of the workshop geared around clarification of personal values, goals, and creating an action plan for achieving them.

The primary objectives of this project were:

- teach the veterans to focus on the present;
- reconnect to a broad spectrum of emotions they had been trained to suppress;
- provide them with a safe outlet for expression of emotions;
- set personal goals and prepare a blueprint for their realization; and
- help them to have a sense of control and being in charge of their lives.

The secondary objectives were fallout of the primary objectives:

- look at themselves and the world from a different perspective;
- make positive changes in their personal lives;
- bond as “civilians,” and not only military personnel;
- increase communication skills; and
- increase confidence and self-understanding.

3. Target audience

Recon Mission was offered to Vietnam War era veterans suffering from PTSD, mood disorders, substance abuse, and other Axis I diagnoses. The sponsoring organization for this project was the US Government’s Department of Veterans Affairs, Readjustment, and Counseling Services. It offers free counseling and referrals to Vietnam era veterans and all other combat veterans, including soldiers and reservists coming back from Iraq. All the groups were held on the premises of the Counseling Center.

The populations that were served by this project were veterans who had already been through some therapy and were ready to go the next level. The clinical staff did the pregroup screening, and the group size was seven, which later came down to five. The group consisted of substance abusers and those suffering from mood disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, adjustment disorder, and other Axis I diagnoses. The veterans chosen to attend Recon Mission had no professional writing experience. Some pursued it as a hobby, but not on a regular basis.

4. Methodology and time frame

The group met for 90 minutes every week, for a total of 39 weeks (58.5 hours).

The sessions began with a warm-up write, followed by a poem, and finally led into the main exercise connected to the poem. At the end of the workshop, the veterans were asked to fill out an open-ended, anonymous questionnaire. The questionnaire was one of the ways in which the workshop was evaluated. It elicited their responses to the effectiveness of the workshop and any behavioral changes they had observed as a result of attending.

At the beginning of the workshop, the veterans were told that there were no “right” or “wrong” answers, and that they would not be judged/critiqued on what they had written. They were also reassured that they did not have to disclose what

they have written, and could choose not to share. They were informed, however, that they could choose to describe how they felt after having written a particular piece.

The group was put through a fast pace in the first four sessions, which focused mainly on written exercises from “The Journal to the Self” (Adams, 1999). This helped them get used to writing and prepared the ground for deeper self-exploration. Once they did the exercises, the veterans were told how these exercises could be useful in different situations and how they could control/contain their emotions by using these writing techniques. In other words, the veterans were being taught how to create what Adams (1999) calls a “79 cent therapist” out of their notebooks.

Once the tone for permission was set, the men were very free in expressing themselves. One of the exercises they were given was “Character sketch of self” where they had to describe themselves through another person’s eyes. One Veteran chose to read out his writing, in which he described himself as an old man, with a quiver in his voice. This resonated with the rest of the group members who said “*It could have been me . . .*” This was significant as none of them had described themselves as who they were “today.” Even when they introduced themselves in the present, the reference point was always Vietnam. This exercise gently brought the members to the present and established that the group was a safe place to express their feelings.

5. Selection of poetry

Since the aim of this project was not to tackle traumatic events directly, none of the selected poems were “war” poems. The poems chosen were reflective of the veterans state of mind today and progressively went on to nudge the men into thinking about the future, in a positive way. The poems chosen had to fulfill the following criteria as outlined by Hynes and Hynes-Berry (1994):

- (1) have a universal experience/emotion that everyone could relate to;
- (2) powerful in content;
- (3) easy to understand; and
- (4) positive.

Poems that were dark or hopeless were avoided, as the whole point of the mission was not to go in the past, but to focus on the here and now. Also, the poems had to be succinct, rhythmic, and clear (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1994).

6. Uniqueness of the project

When soldiers come back home, they often feel a need for “action,” a need to pick up their life where they had left off, and move on. This does not allow for adequate processing of wartime experiences, and results in PTSD and related disorders. Recon Mission made use of this very need for movement to construct an atmosphere of “*action*” where they could take cognizance of their surroundings, set goals, and move

forward with a purpose. This helped them to regain a sense of control over their lives, and using military language automatically set the “pace” of the group.

Using military terminology in the exercises made it easier for the veterans to understand what the exercise was all about. It also added a different energy to the group, and helped to cement the bond that was already forming. For example, an exercise like “*Captured Moment*” (Adams, 1999) was more easily explained as a way to convert “*Hyper vigilance*” into everyday awareness. As Gilin and Sullivan (2009) state, “It is important for clients to love and appreciate the ‘pesky’ hyper vigilance, and dissociative skills that protected them during the trauma” (p. 600), and that is what the exercises aimed to do. The authors also suggest that education of the client leads to greater self-understanding, which ultimately leads to dismantling of inappropriate coping skills, and the development of unique, creative strategies. Naming the workshop “**Recon Mission**” educated the veterans about what we were doing: familiarizing with territory, planning, and moving forward with a purpose. Because of this information, the veterans were able to move deeper into the work, and produce powerful pieces of writing. Some of their writing samples are given below.

7. Writing samples

7.1. A thank you and good bye letter

The veterans were asked to write a letter to something painful in their life and acknowledge it as a “teacher.” They were asked to thank this teacher, acknowledge what they had learnt, and say goodbye to it.

Dear Alcohol,

It really is time to say goodbye. You were useful at times to provide numbness, physical, and emotional. Along the way, I learned a thing or two about human nature. I had some good times too. There is nothing as convivial as a beer shared with a good friend. But you’ve worn me down. It really is time to say goodbye.

J

This exercise has its roots in narrative therapy, a growing body of practices and ideas that stem from the work of Michael White and David Epston. Here, we see J externalizing his problem and having a constructive dialog with it. Externalizing conversations like these, separate a person’s identity from the problem, and this opens channels to see alternate ways of relating to a problem (White & Epston, 1990). According to narrative therapy, by externalizing “alcoholism,” J had removed the problem from his “dominant” story, and was separating it from his identity as an “alcoholic” (Morgan, 2000). By removing the problem from his story, J was able to “create a space for change” for a new story. J eventually joined a recovery program, and has been sober since.

The following exercise “army of emotions” is another example of how the veterans were taught to externalize feelings.

7.2. Army of emotions

In this exercise, the veterans were asked to write down all the emotions they experience and wished to experience. Next they were asked to give the emotions a Military Rank. This led to a spirited discussion about which emotion was leading their “army” and did they want to reassign duties to their emotions. Also, they were asked to write a letter of recommendation to the last emotion on the list. They were told to acknowledge the work this emotion had done for them and respect the fact that it was probably this emotion that helped them survive. This experience led to the understanding that every emotion had a place, and no emotion was good or bad. This also told them that they could be aware of and control their emotions to their advantage. Here we can see that the men were discussing “emotions” and actually having fun doing it.

Letter of Recommendation for Private Hate

Dear Sir,

I recommend Private Hate because he can be counted on when you need him. He is ready in a moment's notice. He will be with you as long as you need him, and will overcome mostly any obstacle. He will stay focused on the task at hand, needs no vacation and will work around the clock. Please consider him a strong person.

Thank You,

V

P.S Please do not bunk him with Sgt Love.

7.3. Operation salvage

The veterans were given a chart that had ages from birth to 85 years, in blocks of 5 years each. They were asked to fill each block by writing down what was “good” or worth salvaging from this period in their life. Most veterans wrote down the names of the people who had stood by them. One Veteran commented that God spoke through people, and had been speaking to him all his life through his friends; he just hadn't realized it. This exercise also helped them to see that their life was not as dark and hopeless as they had pictured it to be and also brought back some welcome memories from their life. It also reinforced what was valuable in their life. Pennebaker (2004) states that “the tricky aspects of negative emotions is that they need to be

acknowledged, but not dwelt upon” (p. 55). Pennebaker (2004) also states that writing loses its therapeutic value if it is used to reiterate the negative aspects of life. Through “Operation Salvage,” the group learned that they could choose to look at the destruction that the trauma had wrecked on the landscape of their lives, or focus on what was still intact and could be used for rebuilding.

7.4. *Re-story*

The veterans were also taught how to create a fictional account of an unpleasant experience in their life. They had to write down about their experience for 15 minutes, condense it to a one sentence declaration, and create a fictitious character with the same strengths but not necessarily the same weaknesses as themselves (Adams, 2004, pp. 95–96). The exercise was modified for the veterans who now had to pick another group members’ story, and complete it. The aim of the exercise was to help them cut through their cycle of self-absorption, worry, and anxiety. While the members may not have agreed with the outcome that the others chose for them, the exercise sowed the seeds of an alternate possibility. It also expanded their creativity and helped them to reach across to their group members. They could also express their own experiences more safely by identifying vicariously with another’s.

Morgan (2000, p. 13) talks about “thick” and “thin” descriptions, and the importance of creating an alternate story. She describes “thin descriptions” as those “reached in the face of adversity,” and those often created by others – those with power (i.e., society). Thus the veterans’ “thin” descriptions of themselves would be labels that society had created for them: homeless, alcoholic, or simply Vietnam Vet. The Re-story exercise helped them to step out of a “problem-saturated story” and create an alternative story. This new story allowed them to break from the stranglehold of the experienced problem and create what Morgan (2000) calls a “space for change.” Freedman and Combs (1996) suggest that clients should be helped to develop stories that do not sustain problems, and as people begin to inhabit new stories, the results are “beyond solving problems” (p. 16).

One of the Veterans B, wrote a story called the “Red Tape Knight,” which described the difficulties he was having with bureaucracy, and how all his attempts to get his dues were met with failure. In his story, his sword had rusted, his army had been disbanded, and he had lost all hope. However, when another Veteran completed the story, he made the main character sharpen his sword, and cut through the red tape with this sword and a few trusted men who also wanted to tackle bureaucracy. This small band of men went about the countryside, like Robin Hood, distributing grain among poor people. B could not visualize an ending like this as he had been living with the problem for long. While he was too jaded to believe it, he could still absorb the hope and support generated by the group. Another Veteran kept working on his story after the workshop was over. He wrote about a ship that he kept losing to pirates, fires, and storms. Finally, he realized that the ship was a metaphor for his troubled marriage, and that realization prompted him to make changes in his relationship.

8. Impact of poems

Once the veterans were engaging deeply with the material, they were introduced to poetry. Since they were already dealing with emotions, they could enter the poems with ease. Mazza (2003) describes the poetry therapy model as having three components: The receptive/prescriptive component, The expressive/creative component, and the symbolic/ceremonial component (p. 17). Recon made use of all three of the components.

Mazza (2003) states that “Poetry can be utilized to elicit here and now reactions while extending both backwards and forwards in time” (p. 24). This feature is extremely helpful for trauma survivors as it can create bridges between the past, present, and future and give them continuity, direction, and ultimately a sense of control over their lives.

The first poem chosen for Recon was from the receptive/prescriptive component, which involves the introduction of existing literature into therapy. Here the therapist invites reaction to the material that is introduced in the session. The poem chosen was “At the US National Monument along the Canadian Border” by Stafford (1997). It was a war poem, but from an entirely different perspective. The veterans were invited to give their responses to the poem, and their reaction was: “*This has all the elements of a war, but has a feeling of peace!*” – veterans.

This helped the veterans to read the poems “emotionally” rather than intellectually, and they responded beautifully to all the poems that were chosen. Some of the poems used are given below.

The poem “Directions to the Armorer,” by Olson (1958) is an example of the symbolic/ceremonial component and is also a humorous look at the veterans personal defense system. The symbolic/ceremonial component involves the use of metaphors, rituals, and storytelling. The poem is about asking an armorer to build a cardboard sword with an eraser on the handle, as the poet is always “clobbering the wrong guy.”

This poem was chosen because they could easily understand and identify with the imagery. The issues they currently face were woven in this poem through familiar metaphors and it also touched upon subjects that they had trouble expressing: rage and self-sabotage. The men saw themselves reflected in this poem and went on to name what they used as their “sword,” “*my tongue: I am always ripping people to pieces with it.*” It also gave them a chance to describe the shield they were using:

“It weighs a thousand tons.”

“It is made up of impervious metal.”

“It is a tight cylinder that envelopes me.”

Through the metaphoric description of “shield” they were able to understand how isolated they had become and how much weight they were carrying at any given moment. The exercise at the end of this poem was to design a new shield using the latest technology available. This was a very revealing exercise, as the veterans now changed their shields to:

*Light, but tough material
It allows certain individuals in after a "scan"
It is not constraining or heavy
Shield is also a weapon.*

Thus the veterans were able to understand that they could keep their shields for safety, but they did not have to isolate themselves completely. The discussion questions around this poem were:

- (1) In which situations do they need a shield?
- (2) Are there any times when they self-sabotage a situation, due to their preconceived notions?

The veterans were also invited to observe their "shield" for a whole week and see how they interacted with people.

Halfway through the workshop, the poem "Tree House" by Silverstein (1974) brought about a much needed playfulness in sessions that had become very intense. Rothschild (2000) recommends creating "oases" during treatment, as many clients suffering from trauma benefit from engaging in activities that give them a break from trauma (p. 92). Rothschild (2000) further states that the "oasis" helps by reducing hyperarousal and quieting internal dialog (p. 93). Using paints and crayons to draw a "tree house" complemented the child like nature of the poem, and allowed the veterans to hold a crayon/marker after a long time. This sparked a feeling response and ordinary objects took on a new meaning when handled in the context of this group. The men immediately sat down on the floor and drew a tree house (in one case, a fort), made up the rules (beer and girls allowed). This was yet another "emotional risk" that they took and it increased their comfort levels a notch. Occasions like these helped them crack the shell of older emotions and experience new ones in a safe atmosphere.

The expressive/creative component involves the use of client writing in therapy. The containment and structure of the Haiku lent itself very well to the purposes of Recon. The group did not adhere to the technical aspects of Haiku, instead, they wrote "three-line" poems, which were called "Haikus." One of the veterans wrote the following Haiku:

*After years of heaven
and hell
I am perceiving Mother Earth.*

K

Recon ended with an "Alpha poem" (Adams, 1993). The veterans wrote a poem using the words "Always Remember." They expressed what they would like to take

home from the workshop, and these poems became the parting gift, as well as the discussion topic for that session.

9. Methods of evaluation

The group was evaluated in the following ways:

- (1) Post-group questionnaire: a questionnaire was administered at the end of the project and it showed that the veterans felt they could handle their emotions better due to Recon.
- (2) Evaluations by the clinical staff at the Veterans Center showed an overall improvement in functioning.
- (3) Informal evaluations were made by observing the following:
 - steady attendance;
 - increase in socialization;
 - establishment of trust; and
 - support.

The men showed remarkable camaraderie and bonding. They attended the funeral of a group member's relative and visited a member who had checked into an alcohol rehabilitation center. This was not suggested by the counselors, but was something that the veterans decided on their own, and as such was extremely significant. As Gilin and Sullivan (2009) state "for clients who have been harmed repeatedly by others, building a trusting and collaborative relationship may take a long time, and may, in fact, prove to be the most beneficial 'intervention' to help clients regain feelings of trust in others and in the world" (p. 597). This level of bonding was unprecedented and happened because the veterans were bonding as civilians, discussing their everyday "real" lives and not their military past.

10. How "Recon Mission" helped

When asked specifically how this group helped them, certain themes became evident. The men stated better control of emotions, broader view of the world, and acceptance of self as the result of attending the workshop.

"I will look at things one day at a time. I was given a lot of food for thought. It made me appreciate what I already have."

*"I realized that I am a good person, who has faced things ordinary people never have. My reference point of view is different, but not **wrong**."*

"I am better able to control my anger; I have diffused situations that six months ago would have ended badly."

“I have learnt that I have the power to control my feelings . . . I now believe that I will be better able to deal with my emotions.”

11. Discussion

It has been stressed that reaction to trauma is as unique as the individual. Therefore, introducing exercises similar to the ones mentioned in this paper could prove to be useful interventions as they adapt to the pace of individual recovery, and give voice to individual narratives. The results of this 18-month long group demonstrate that poetry and writing can be invaluable tools to assist veterans in their recovery from trauma. Writing is an affordable and accessible way for soldiers to cope with the stresses and struggles they face during the course of their duty. In fact, soldiers have an emotional connection to the written word as they wait for letters from home, and re-read them. Recon built upon this connection, and gave them a coping skill, which was a natural extension of their existing abilities. Working in a group setting was a definite advantage for the veterans as it helped them break through their isolation, and rebuild the trust that had eroded over the years.

It has also been stated that most people affected by a traumatic event tend not seek therapy, but continue to cope with the aftermath of the event as best as they can. Perhaps introduction to principles of organized writing and narrative therapy could be looked at as a part of preincidence preparedness training for soldiers, as it would lead to a more aware and organized processing of wartime events and allow for greater mental health upon return.

Acknowledgements

“Recon Mission” was made possible by the funding from “**Poetry Alive Grant**,” through the National Association for Poetry Therapy Foundation (NAPTF). This paper is a text version of an invited presentation for the National Association for Poetry Therapy Annual Conference, April 2009.

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