

The Gulf War as Adolescent Crisis

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Lloyd deMause has described the Gulf War as a "mental disorder" and has labeled that disorder PTSD or post-traumatic stress disorder. In that article, he makes an interesting argument for the psychological and traumatic origins of war in general and this war in particular and ends by discussing childhood trauma as the source of this recurrent post-traumatic re-enactment of warfare.

As a psychiatrist I find the idea of applying psychological principles to larger systems than the individual intriguing and challenging. As I read deMause's article, I began picturing the United States as a being composed of all its separate parts but greater than the sum of those parts. I imagined a living entity, being born, developing, growing, changing, dying, and transforming into some other living entity. And then I began to wonder about the present stage of this entity's development and the only word that sprung to mind was ADOLESCENCE.

For anyone who has one, or has been one, you know that adolescence is an uncomfortable time, a difficult and demanding time. Adolescents must give up the safety, security, and predictability of childhood and begin to navigate the rocks and shoals of adulthood. In the process of enduring those in-between years, the adolescent must develop a sense of identity in reference to the world, peers, and self. He/she must learn to control emotions without over controlling them, control impulse, learn how to exercise good judgment, and learn how to reason. All of this learning must occur in the midst of a storm of hormones and reason independently, and often the conclusions they arrive at are creative and stunningly insightful.

If this is a description of a reasonably normal adolescent, what happens to adolescents who have been traumatized-abandoned, beaten, molested, neglected, seduced? Unresolved traumatic experiences produce developmental arrests. Victims of trauma often become trapped in time, unable to progress further in their development, constantly fluctuating between denying memories and affect from the past trauma and intensively re-experiencing those same memories and feelings, often in highly disguised and symbolized form.

When trauma is emotionally and/or cognitively overwhelming, we have a built-in defensive system which protects us from emotional paralysis and thus permits us to continue to function. We simply cut off the traumatic experience and its accompanying feelings from the mainstream of our consciousness. This "cut-off" can take different forms. Sometimes we cut it off completely by developing amnesia and forgetting that the trauma even occurred. Sometimes we remember that it occurred, but we cut off any feeling about the trauma. Initially, this defensive cutting off or "dissociation" is highly adaptive and allows us, despite horrific circumstances, to continue to protect ourselves, feed ourselves, clothe ourselves, and protect those around us. It is clearly a survival tactic that successfully emerged in the course of human evolution (2).

However, if the traumatic circumstances are alleviated and life "returns to normal," the dissociated memories and affect frequently remain cut off from the main body of conscious experience. Although the defensive splitting is probably biologically-based, evolution did not provide for a means of spontaneously resolving this split. Left to their own devices, individuals

will frequently retain these inner psychic splits for a lifetime. This can result in severe developmental disturbance and symptom formation.

When these split-off parts of consciousness remain unintegrated, a pressure for reintegration internally occurs. This presents in various ways including intrusive imagery, intrusive and uncomfortable feeling states, and compulsive reenactments of the trauma, often in highly symbolic form. In other cultures and in earlier times, each social group developed ritualized ways of helping victims of trauma integrate these experiences and end the intrusive re-experiencing.

But modern times have seen the virtual demise of meaningful ritual. As a consequence, these symptoms are more likely to be treated with drugs and alcohol, or are simply acted out in the environment. Traumatized adolescents will often engage in extremely self-destructive, self-abusive behavior including self-mutilation, suicide, homicide, violent outbursts, bingeing/purging, excessive dieting, compulsive study habits, promiscuity, running away, truancy, criminal behavior.

When trauma is repeated it often gets transferred from one generation to the next to do so; the mother who was seduced seduces her child or his mate to do so; the mother who was seduced, seduces her child or allows her mate to do so. If traumatized people do not take the trauma out on their children, they re-enact it with someone else or with themselves. Most violent and exploitative crime has at its base the previous exploitation and injury of the perpetrator. People who have been the victims of violence in childhood or adolescence will victimize someone else, even if that someone else is their own body.

People who have been exploited as children or adolescents will often exploit other people. People who have been traumatized while they were still developmentally immature can become developmentally arrested and will have available to them only the resources available when they were hurt. This of course means that the capacity to reason, to assess situations, to assume responsibility for one's actions, to embody a sense of social responsibility, and to make fair and honest moral judgments will all be impaired, or paralyzed.

How do trauma victims integrate and recover from trauma? We are just beginning to understand the process of recovery. So far, however, it is clear that the dissociated memories and feelings must be reincorporated into the main body of conscious experience. In practical terms, this means that the individual must "hold still" long enough and courageously enough to allow himself to remember what happened, remember the pain, remember the humiliation and the helplessness. He must evaluate honestly the role he played in the traumatic experience. He must appreciate his own errors and forgive his own inabilities, helplessness, and dependence.

Most importantly, he must learn to tolerate the bad feelings. He must learn to be angry without being destructive. He must learn to set limits that are firm but not rigid. He must learn to bear grief. This is often the most difficult part of recovery. He must allow himself to feel the hurt, to feel sadness, to experience the reality that what is gone is gone and will never return. Out of the engagement with grief emerges a sadder but wiser human being, no longer victim or victimizer but survivor.

Now how does this brief summary of adolescent development and trauma relate to our present national crisis? For the case I am about to plead, I beg your indulgence. I am a novice historian, and as such I am still able to grossly over generalize and minimize, but sometimes there is some truth in even a beginning trainee's interpretations.

For purposes of discussion, let us pretend that the United States is a very complex individual. Viewing our history in this way, the USA has not had a particularly easy childhood. When the United States was only an infant it was separated from its mother by virtue of several thousand miles and a very long and dangerous sea voyage. Plunged into a hostile environment, the baby country struggled to survive.

From the beginning the mother inadequately nourished the infant and had premature expectations for self-reliance. The mother made it clear that the purpose of the infant was to feed and provide for the mother, a serious reversal in normal infant-mother relations. In addition, the infant had to contend with dangerous survival situations about which the parents had taught it very little.

As a result, the country did whatever it had to do to survive. Some of these things were aggressive and hostile. The country lashed out and murdered many of the peoples who already lived here, but like most infants, its own narcissistic needs took precedence over the rights or needs of anyone else. Deprived of its own empathic mothering experience, it had little empathy for the people or mothers of the land. Lacking much effective parental influence, the nation grew up wild, independent, and undisciplined. Notions of right and wrong, rules of fair play developed out of social necessity. But concepts of social and personal responsibility were open to many interpretations. Conflicts were resolved by just moving to a new place and expanding, rather than by the more arduous process of compromise and negotiation.

In various parts of the country, a strict paternal influence was felt represented by God. But God's rules as interpreted by the Puritans were harsh, repressive and abusive. From the beginning there was open religious conflict, with many religious beliefs so that no one religion took precedence and the nation ended up with a separation of church and state. Practical and tolerant, but leaving us without a father either.

But still, the country grew. The infant learned how to feed itself, and clothe itself, how to walk and talk and run. Most of what it learned it learned from age mates and from experience, not from representatives of established authority or derived wisdom of elders. As a result, the nation had often to reinvent the wheel, but the peer group experience became good practice for a new form of government.

The absentee mother, however, wanted to maintain a relationship with her child mostly to gratify her own needs. The child, now able to take care of itself, resented the depriving parent. While still quite young the child decided that it no longer needed parents or anyone else to tell it what to do. The child rebelled, and through armed combat and much shedding of blood, separated from an unloving mother who did too little, too late.

However, it is very difficult for children to rear themselves. Since there is no authority who can simply pass on knowledge in such a situation, most learning must be done by trial and error. Slowly, the child began to grow up. I went to school and opened up its experience to people from nations all over the world who also wanted more freedom and independence. Of course, it didn't know how to take care of itself yet, so having to deal with many different ideas and customs was very hard for it to understand, but it tried, making some big mistakes along the way.

It learned about strength in numbers and began to learn how to play by rules, just like children in grade school learn. It experimented with many things: all kinds of religious beliefs, monetary systems, gender laws, voting restrictions, boundary disputes, kinds of self-government. It expanded and grew faster than its clothes could accommodate and it frequently got into a great deal of trouble. But it stayed in school, even though sometimes truant, and tried to learn. Every now and then it would have a war with someone else, some people would die, other people would be brave, and mostly it would win whatever it wanted. It became more and more self-confident, but under the surface there were some serious internal splits.

The little nation had to behave as a grown-up long before it was past being a child. To accomplish this, the nation pushed feelings and conflicts underground. There were some glaring and enormous conflicts that were never resolved. The nation looked in the mirror and saw freedom, equality, and justice for all, while blinding itself to human enslavement, racial segregation, gender oppression, and economic discrimination and disparity. On the surface it

was young and brave and brash and proud. But below lay currents of insecurity, guilt jealousy, and rage.

These inner conflicts became so intense and uncomfortable that the nation decided that the only way that things would get better is if it killed the other side of the conflict. This meant a civil war. As children do, each side blamed the other for not understanding and for being evil and wrong. The problems were actually very confusing and everyone was ambivalent about how to solve the problems because the problems originated with some wrong things to begin with. But solving problems by reason, compromise, and mutual sacrifice is a very grown up thing to do, and the nation did what children do-it decided to have a fistfight.

Hardly anyone realized how bad the fight would be, and how much it would hurt. Children never believe that they are vulnerable, nor that death is permanent. Some good things came out of it, but so did many bad things. That conflict had never been entirely resolved. The nation still likes to blame anyone that disagrees with it for its problems. And those deeper conflicts have never gone away. They haunt us. Anyway, after that war, some parts of the nation continued becoming very rich, while other parts became even poorer. But for a while, there was much opportunity for everyone, and people often took care of people in need in all the small towns, all across the nation. The country grew and prospered, and flexed its muscles. Sometime in the twentieth century, the nation entered its adolescence. WWI happened in the early part of this period. The nation had kept to itself to a large extent before this, as children stay within their family. But in adolescence, children begin to leave home and challenge themselves in the world. WWI was horrible, but it was very far away and we entered fairly late. Early adolescence is a very stormy and frightening time, often forgotten by older adolescents and adults. A war was a good distraction, it felt good. It was something we could do to take a place in the world. The national memories of WWI are buried. Now we are in the trenches again.

The paternalistic Puritan conscience asserted itself in the 1920's with Prohibition. But by then, the nation knew a thing or two about rebellion. The nation beat the British by guerrilla warfare and it beat Prohibition the same way. The more repressive the conscience tried to be, the more wild and rebellious this adolescent became. But when the father's law was overturned, the adolescent became seriously depressed.

After all, there was still enormous conflict under the surface. Here was a nation without a mother, and now the father was found to be ineffective and useless. Adolescents test limits and need firm but fair limits within which to define the boundaries of their own existence. The nation was just beginning to sense that it did not yet have a clear identity and that it needed one. But there was so much disagreement about how to get one or what it should be. And there was no one available to help.

It was uncomfortable thinking about all that. The nation began to realize that it wasn't a little kid anymore, that maybe there were things it had to do, lessons to be learned, and no one around to teach it. And of course, with such a history of independence and self-reliance, this nation always believed that we have to have all the answers and we are not allowed to ask for help.

Depression became intolerable. One of the best things to do to get over a depression is to get angry. If you only know one way of getting angry and that is using your first, then it becomes necessary to fight with someone. Fortunately, there was a very bad guy on the scene, a bully, and fighting him made us feel tremendously good. We were strong, and righteous, and idealistic. We were saving the world from totalitarian dictatorships, saving other people from genocide.

But then the nation got a little too big for its britches. We had this great big superbomb and they dared us, didn't they? After all, they hit us first. If you are an adolescent nation you

can't overlook a dare. So we dropped it. Only when it was too late did we find out that it didn't feel so good and that maybe we had gone too far. The nation is still very guilty about that one.

But we are also very good at forgetting unpleasant things that we do and we have a short attention span. So since we had won the war, and since we like to be good sports, we were very generous and gave a lot of time and money to buy new toys for everyone else so we could play with them again. Many people were wounded or maimed in the fighting but they were heroes and everyone was proud. We put aside our big boo-boo, and declared that we were the greatest nation in the world, ever.

We basked in this self-confidence and narcissistic pleasure through the Fifties. Priorities were very clear. Sexual boundaries were well established. Men worked and made money and ran the household; women stayed home and had babies. And everyone was happy. When that old inner conflict began haunting the nation again, there was always the communists to unload it on. McCarthy provided the steam valve we needed so that the voices of our own inner conflict could be effectively silenced at home. It was wonderful.

For many years, we dealt with many problems by blaming the communists for everything. The fact that we were guilty about dropping the nuclear bomb did not produce a sense of responsibility. It produced fear and we became convinced that the Russians were going to drop them on us. We couldn't start a way to distract us from our discomfort-not with the Bomb around-so we fought each other and smothered the conflict. We had done that before.

When the orgy of communist fear ended up in the sordid McCarthy display of paranoid acting-out, we decided that was a little too crazy and primitive. So we turned to television, drugs, alcohol, and sex to take our minds off our internal distress, and when we needed it there still were the communists in the background if we started getting especially guilty or sad.

But when conflict started brewing again in the '60's, the repressed began to return. Part of us wanted to get away from it all and not feel any pain and anger, just love and peace. Part of us wanted to fight against injustice and make the country a perfect place for everyone. Part of us wanted to keep everything exactly as nice as it was in the '50's.

We tend to be very idealistic adolescents, but like all idealists, we also tend to be inconsistent, hypocritical, and intolerant. The long-standing conflicts began to emerge. This was an uncomfortable situation. Everything became very confused. Those clear distinctions of the 1950's gave way to men who had long hair, women who wore jeans. Adolescents have no tolerance for ambivalence. They are only comfortable with black and white. Grey is not allowed. And adolescents are always right. And they will fight to the death to prove it.

These inner conflicts had always existed. We had never come to any resolution about how to treat each other, about what kind of country we really wanted to be. We had learned to rationalize enormous contradictions about democracy and equal rights-but not for women, the poor, ethnic minorities, or children. We believed fervently in equality, but used the euphemism "opportunity" so that we could continue to justify massive discrimination and unequal distribution of power and resources. We had not yet been able to resolve the real and the ideal so we kept them separate, manipulating one against the other, utilizing which ever benefited our immediate purpose.

The nation has a very hard time being honest with itself. Self-honesty requires the capacity to forestall immediate gratification. It requires the capacity for honest and open self-appraisal. It requires thought, self-discipline, and hard work. It also requires enduring emotional pain. Adolescents are not very good at any of those things. Adolescents deal with problems by acting them out, manipulating the environment, externalizing the conflict, blaming others for their difficulties, trying to prove themselves, and acting on impulse with very little thought.

In the '60's the country split into several different warring adolescent gangs, an internal war that ended on the streets of Kent State and the jungles of Vietnam. The Vietnam engagement was a very interesting phenomenon because it was so astoundingly self-destructive. At this point, the nation was becoming increasingly symptomatic. The emotional distress that had been present as background noise for several generations, now became much more apparent and vocal. We began head-banging, wrist-cutting, and drugging and drinking ourselves to death.

We needed a war but we didn't even know why, so we had to fabricate one. Like a multiple personality disordered patient, we dissociated all our bad feelings and put them into our soldiers who became our 'poison containers.]" We blamed them for all our pain and banished them. Scapegoats are always so convenient, but the solution is always a temporary one. Adolescents are notorious for brutally shunning former friends who have trespassed some code of real or imagined conduct.

This strategy worked through the 1970's. Of course, the Vietnam veterans were not the only scapegoats. Children were being beaten and molested regularly as we now know, the economic rift was increasing and the criminal underclass was expanding in leaps and bounds. Even the nation's leaders became criminals. This is not unusual. Angry and hurting adolescents often engage in destructive, violent, and illegal acting-out.

In the Eighties we needed even more scapegoats. The internal conflict was threatening to reach even greater proportions and we needed more repression to prevent us from getting really depressed. The Vietnam war had proven to be very ineffective in quieting the conflicts. There didn't seem to be anyone big enough that we could fight, although Grenada and Panama weren't too bad.

So, the nation went on a huge spending spree. We stopped experimenting with drugs and got addicted to killer drugs. We subscribed to cable TV in droves so that we would always have something to watch and wouldn't be forced to think, read, feel, or talk to each other. We made love to anything that moved, and we continued to shit where we eat, ignoring the ruination of our environment. We became preoccupied with appearances and began to binge, purge and exercise compulsively. We worked incessantly for more money to spend. We even tried to run away to cults and spas and Hollywood. As a nation we have tried every symptom in the troubled adolescent repertoire. These are the strategies that wounded people use to keep from feeling the pain. These are the strategies of a wounded nation, dissociated from its feelings, developmentally arrested, cognitively immature.

For the last several years we have been in serious crisis. Nothing is working for the pain. Drugs and alcohol aren't working anymore. Shopping isn't working. Overeating isn't working. Neither is starving, aerobics, plastic surgery or implants. Television has gotten boring. We have tried every sport, every sensation, traveled everywhere. We have had sex in every position, with man, woman, and beast. We have divorced, remarried, and divorced again. We have aborted, adopted, abandoned, and reproduced. We have dropped in, dropped out, exploited, and fled. We have robbed the poor, abandoned the mentally ill, supplied dictators, and strangulated the working classes. We have tried, at least in the imaginative ruminations of our films, every form of perversion and violent excoriation of the human body and soul.

Through all this the nation knew that if things go really bad enough we still had an enemy we could depend upon to give us direction and purpose and at least a little skirmish if we need it. And then, in October of 1989, disaster struck. We lost our dependable enemy. When the Berlin Wall collapsed we looked through it and saw that the enemy was us. No wonder we began to have fantasies of death, destruction, suicide, and child murder. We almost ran out of scapegoats. And if we don't have anyone else to blame for the pain, we will have to sit still and go through it and *grow up*.

Fortunately, the nation quickly found an enemy. Actually, we had helped create him and had been holding him in the background all along, just in case of such an emergency. Now we are engaged in another distraction. Now we can once again suffer, the pain can be expressed, the grief experienced. We need a little blood-letting to relieve the tension. We need something tangible to cry about, to have nightmares about. Anything is better than that awful feeling of guilt and badness we feel when things are going "well." Traumatized adolescents never feel that they are OK and always believe deep down inside that they deserve the worst.

Only once again, the grief we will feel for killing our children will not touch the grief that needs repair-it will just make it worse. It just gives us something else to feel guilty about. After all, no matter how strenuously the military tries, it is a war and innocent people are being killed and the remnants of an ancient civilization are being destroyed.

For a while, we will eventually feel some relief. We are being very careful not to repeat the mistakes of Vietnam. Times are different; we don't need to blame the troops this time. Shedding blood should be enough. Knowing that we have killed and that we have murdered should be enough for us to ruminate about for quite some time ahead. But until we hold still and feel the pain, until we decide to grow up and become socially responsible, we are just going to have to find another and bigger distraction to keep our minds off what we have done and what we feel. Symptomatic solutions can never work. We need National Therapy. We are becoming increasingly suicidal and we need help desperately. But what kind of therapy will work? What will it take for us to turn away from Rambo and "Fatal Attraction"? How do traumatized individuals heal?

People who are hurt begin healing when they admit that there is something seriously wrong, when they identify the problem and claim it as their own. Once they have admitted they have a problem, they ask for help, they learn everything they can learn about the problem, they create a place of safety for themselves. We are not yet admitting that we have a problem and the worst part of the Gulf War may be that it will be a very long time before Americans can feel safe even traveling in the world again.

After individuals have established safety, they let themselves remember and they let themselves cry. They reconstruct their own traumatic experiences and cognitively restructure them in the present. They look at the lies, deceptions, and betrayals and they cry. If they are always angry, they let themselves feel sad. If they are always sad, they let themselves get angry. They hold others accountable for wrongs done to them; they hold themselves accountable for wrongs they have perpetrated. They make amends where they can.

They learn to love and nurture the hurt child within themselves and learn to honor their survival and integrity. They learn to think carefully before they act and how to use their thinking to understand and channel their feelings. They learn to set limits on other people's intrusiveness with care and regard. When they can learn to feel compassion, respect, and forgiveness for themselves it becomes unnecessary to hate, disrespect, blame, or kill anyone else. It becomes unnecessary to have poison containers.

Can a nation do what an individual does to heal? I don't know-it's never been done. But since a nation can be as crazy and dysfunctional as an individual, could not the corollary be true? I have seen glimmers of hope since the war became imminent. I listened to the Senate discuss entry into the war. I was pleased to see overt and admitted ambivalence on almost everyone's part. I have listened to the newscasters, the commentators, the man and woman on the street, my own friends, patients, and relatives. I have listened to myself. I have heard ambivalence and I have thought. I have never heard the nation think so much before. I have never seen us before make a fairly sophisticated distinction between supporting "The War" and supporting "our troops." Maybe we did at least learn something from Vietnam-if only people didn't have to die to make use of it. At least we are trying, like older adolescents, to learn how to reason.

The presence of ambivalence is an excellent sign. When an adolescent reaches the point, usually after trying everything else, that they are less absolutely sure that they know everything, they become capable of learning from their experience and the experience of others. They become capable of evaluating their performance. It is at this point that they develop a clearer sense of responsibility, duty, and commitment. The ability to tolerate ambivalence means that they are beginning to grow up.

The third important stage in the recovery from traumatic experience is called 'reconnection.'" In this stage the survivor no longer feels compelled to compulsively re-enact traumatic experiences. The alternations of intrusive re-experiencing and psychic numbing have diminished or disappeared. The survivor feels alive again. The memories are available for recall but no longer determine or predict behavior. The survivor becomes capable of love, nurturing, and empathy for others. The survivor's sense of personal empowerment has returned and accompanying it is a profound sense of social responsibility and "survivor mission."

Ideally, it is a time of renewal, a time for establishing new relationships, for finding one's place in the world, for an outpouring of creative endeavor, and growth. Identity becomes secure and therefore not easily threatened by differences or disagreements. In fact, a radical change in consciousness occurs and the survivor becomes deeply aware of the connectedness and value of all life. Trauma is transformed and the survivor ends up with a new purpose, new meaning, and an accretion of wisdom.

We have reached the point as a nation where we have the power to create world chaos. Children carry on their parents' dreams and when an adolescent in the family suicides, the family never truly recovers, they never recapture the dream. We are young enough, and brash enough, and perhaps naive enough that we seem to believe that we can be the "peacekeepers of the world." Perhaps, with the proper education and experience we can.

But to assume such a mantle of power, authority, and responsibility, we are going to have to put away our childish games. All the guns and tanks and bombs we can make are not going to teach us how to deal with hunger, disease, poverty, pollution, and peace. For the we are going to have to learn how to think before we act, how to manage our feelings without repressing them, how to share and care and nurture life.

In other words, we are going to have to reconnect to each other and the world around us. It will take an enormous paradigm shift, a true shift in consciousness in which we understand that our neighbor's pain is our own. Is there any hope? When asked by an interviewer why he had not given up hope when his work was banned, when he was prohibited from writing, and when he suffered imprisonment, Vaclav Havel said that he could not live without hope. All change begins with a dream and since we are still an adolescent nation we can still dare to dream. I have seen many severely traumatized individuals overcome enormous odds and transform their pain into transcendence. Why not a whole country? Consider the alternatives.

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