

STILL THE MONKEY, WHAT HAPPENS TO WARRIORS AFTER WAR
COMPANION GUIDE TO DISCUSSION ON PTSD

Welcome Friends:

Thank you for joining me for this important discussion. Today I will share with you my experiences while writing the novel *Still the Monkey, What Happens to Warriors after War*, information on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder that I learned while researching my follow-up article “What Every Veteran’s Family and Friend Need to Know about Post-Traumatic Stress and PTSD,” and research based on interviews with experts in the field of post-traumatic study.

Still the Monkey is a work of historical fiction that depicts the relationship between a Vietnam veteran, still struggling with cycles of PTSD for nearly forty years, and a young Marine undergoing rehabilitation at Walter Reed Medical Center. It is a story of re-birth, death, and renewal; and ultimately the cathartic journey of transforming pain into healing that honors the Marine code of conduct: *Never leave anyone behind.*

Of the estimated 25 million veterans living in this country today, 30 percent of those who served in Vietnam have reported symptoms of PTSD, and an estimated one in six veterans returning home from Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom are reporting disabilities attributed to this anxiety-based disorder. Combatants who serve in multiple tours of duty have a 50 percent increased risk in developing PTSD. This is a very telling statistic, as a large number of our current service members are serving in two, three, even fourth tours of duty. It is important for us then, as a society to have awareness, understanding and compassion for mental health disorders, such as PTSD, in effort to remove the stigma often attached.

My goals as a writer and as a civilian are three-fold. First, to become a facilitator for discussion and for this novel to become a vehicle of raising awareness on PTSD and the far-ranging implications it may have on this generation. Secondly, for this work and my subsequent article to become a resource for veterans, their friends and families, and healthcare professionals who provide critical treatment and counseling, who wish to deepen their understanding of how veterans may change physically, emotionally, and spiritually after the experience of war. And thirdly, to support the troops of today and the troops of tomorrow – our veterans, by advocating the importance of a strong mental health care system.

“The life I touch for good or ill will touch another life, and that in turn another, until who knows where the trembling stops or in what far place my touch will be felt.” – Frederick Buechner

Thank you all for your time; and May peace be with you all.

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STILL THE MONKEY COMPANION GUIDE

PTSD

The clinical definition of PTSD, first classified as a mental disorder in 1980 by the American Psychiatric Association, is an anxiety-based disorder that occurs after a person has been through or witnessed a traumatic event. *Still the Monkey* depicts combat-related or warrior PTSD, which often times is the result of an accumulation of traumatic experiences.

As Dr. Casagrande, Chief Psychologist at the Wilkes-Barre, PA VAMC, explains, “the cumulative experiences of war-zone trauma, over and over, day after day, month after month heavily impacts conditioning responses and by nature are difficult to treat.” He refers to PTSD as a memory-disorder: “Not in the sense that the veterans have lost their memory or are forgetting something – rather, they’re remembering things they wish they could forget.”

Still the Monkey, depicts a nine-teen year old Marine, whom as his traumatic experiences begin to accumulate, his innocence, former self, and identity diminishes. In-country for a period of nine months, the same amount of time it takes a woman to give birth to a child, the character of Dennis Michaels is re-born a warrior, his former self along with his best friend dies, and after forty years of waging a battle for his sanity, begins a journey mentoring a wounded Marine undergoing rehabilitation that will ultimately lead to his renewal.

The title of the book derives from Eastern-based philosophy that mind is like a monkey that, if not kept still, will swing from branch to branch – from the branch of the past to the branch of the future without ever being still to live in the present moment.

Dr. Katz, Deputy Chief Patient Care Services offer for Mental Health, Dept. of VA, notes that PTSD is cyclical in nature. In *Still the Monkey*, the main character’s manifestations of PTSD pervade his daily life in varying degrees in what seem to be twelve years cycles, beginning in 1968 the year of his return when his anger, frustration, Survivor’s Guilt, and his ability to ‘Body-Bag’ people, living and dead, put him on a collision course that results in divorce from his spouse, lack of intimacy with his family and children, and psycho-somatic symptoms of stress impacting his health until 2004, the year he begins mentoring the fictional character of Andy Taylor at Walter Reed Medical Center. Ironically, these twelve year cycles in the Vietnamese zodiac based on their lunar calendar, are called “Year of the Monkey.”

The correlation between PTSD, which is never static nor the same from one person to the next, and the loss of innocence, emotions, and former ‘normalcy’ become a parallel for Andy Taylor’s experiences of ‘Phantom Pain,’ the surreal feeling that he can still feel his lower limbs even though they have been amputated from the result of an IED explosion while serving in Iraq. Dennis can ‘sense’ his former emotions, but like Andy’s legs, they’re really not there.

Corresponding Chapters on PTSD:

- PTSD p. 220-224
- *Still the Monkey*, p. 244
- Year of the Monkey, p. 247
- Divine Providence, p. 250

- Bleeding Out, p. 194
- The Schoolyard, p. 296

THE THREE COMMON METHODS OF SELF-TREATMENTS:

Dr. Casagrande, Chief Psychologist at the Wilkes-Barre, PA VAMC encourages friends and families of veterans to recognize and understand the main strategies veterans often use to “self-treat” post-traumatic stress and PTSD.

1. Alcohol. “Alcohol consumption goes back to the beginning of warriors. Why used? Because of its calming effects on the central nervous system. The truth is, alcohol is not bad medicine, it’s been used for medicinal purposes for centuries – *but*, it’s hard to get the dosage right and is difficult to manage.”
2. Work. “Often veterans throw themselves into work or projects and become work-aholics. Why? It is effectively distracting the central nervous system by focusing on a goal or achievement, thereby calming the stress center.”
3. Isolation. “Isolation is effective because it restricts the number and the intensity of stimuli in the environment that can potentially trigger reactions.”

“This is fairly predictable behavior, with two or more self-treatment strategies often working in tandem. For example, workaholics come home in the evening, and then isolate themselves for the rest of the night. The reality is - this is how we work as human beings. These self-treatments are to be expected to some extent, but can become a problem when abuse or over-use or over-reliance on these strategies is apparent.” For example, if alcohol use is persistent, Dr. Casagrande recommends opening dialogue by saying, “If you’re drinking because it helps you sleep at night, that’s okay in the short-term, but we need to agree that this is not a long-term solution.” Many veterans are reticent of going to the VA for treatment, often rejecting the notion of going to group therapy as not macho, or likening it to the “blind leading the blind.” But Dr. Casagrande encourages at least one group treatment. “Universally, the results of just one group therapy are often remarkable, as for many, just being in the presence of other veterans and experiencing the realization of ‘I’m not alone’ is truly profound.”

Corresponding Excerpt from Chapter “PTSD” p 224

“Look Dennis, it’s not a matter of how you treat Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Like I said, there is no cure. It’s a matter of how you live your life with it.”

That conversation proved to be a turning point in Dennis’ life. Before that, hell was his own existence, in which he aimlessly wandered. He had no real sense of time, as most people know it, because he couldn’t remember timeframes to reference.

Jerry referred him to a doctor for treatment, but Dennis never went to his appointment; instead, Jerry became a friend and confidant. Over the next few years, they expanded their informal group to include Sgt. Tom, and a young Army Airborne veteran who served in Grenada named John. They didn’t meet at the VA; they met at restaurants and diners. They were each other’s support group. They were all guys who made it, and each had their own form of survivors’ guilt. Work was their anesthetic of choice to numb the pain. Compulsive work filled the void of time. *Go, go, go. Move, move, move. Don’t stop.* Dinners, drinks, and conversations went well into the night. Exposing the dark corners of their minds, they talked about the things that never quite seemed to go away.

Never leave anyone behind.

THE BODY-BAG SYNDROME

The Body-Bag Syndrome as referenced in *Still the Monkey* is a morbid detachment from emotions. It is a numbing apathetic to insulate the character's sanity after the gradual and sometimes spontaneous destruction of emotions takes place. This void is filled by the mantra "When They're Gone, they're gone. It's Just a Thing. Ain't Nothing But a Thing," that was a source of strength, used to protect him from 'feeling' the death of friends and comrades while he in combat. But it became a liability and weakness in his post-combat life, as he found that he no longer had control or ability to flick the switch 'off', rather it was an automatic response, and subsequently would turn off his emotions or 'body-bag' people, living and dead long after combat was over.

Story of the 'switch' in first-responders, when dealing with a traumatic accident, or event, such as 9/11, they flip the switch on. The biggest fear, that is unspoken and never shared, is what if, one day the switch doesn't turn on? Or worse, what if it doesn't turn off?

EXCERPT CHAPTER: "BROTHER JOHN" p. 239

But it didn't take long for John to find that there was much more to Dennis than what appeared on the surface, and John found that Dennis epitomized the old saying "your greatest strength is also your greatest weakness." And Dennis' greatest asset and liability was his ability to "bodybag" someone, to turn himself away from humanity, and shield himself from emotions. And John has the suspicious feeling that Dennis is doing that very thing right now, only this time John is the living corpse.

SURVIVORS GUILT

Survivor's Guilt plays a significant role in the main character's life following the death of his best friend, and another close comrade. Feelings of 'why did I make it, and not them?' and feelings as if "dues" must be paid for surviving weighs heavily on Dennis' life.

The book begins with a re-occurring nightmare in which the character finds himself standing over his best friends' grave – a grave he has never visited. In the dream, he realizes that he is in possession of his best friends' camera, dangling like a noose around his neck, and that he has lost his right arm.

In the chapter "The Angels Are Crying" Dennis attends a funeral for a fallen Marine, the following is a depiction not only of how Survivor's Guilt seeps into this experience, but also the symbolism of Survivors' Guilt in his re-occurring nightmare.

EXCERPT CHAPTER: "THE ANGELS ARE CRYING" p. 151

Dennis watches the cold rain crush the autumn leaves into the soggy earth as the service ends. *Today is the perfect day for a funeral.* He remembers what his mother used to tell him as a boy, that when it rains it means the angels are crying; and he wonders if the guys from 1/9 are up there crying now.

One of the marines in attendance at the service, a lance corporal, walks up to Mrs. Haydon. "I operated with Ryan in Iraq," he tells her, then explains that his tour is over and he's now stationed at Quantico. Margaret clasps his hands and gives him a hug. "Ryan was a good marine," he tells her. "One of the best. He and I were close friends." Tears streak down her face as she hugs him even more tightly.

"Thank you," she whispers.

Dennis feels like he's an intruder standing in another world that is being superimposed on his own. *Another Harry being buried*. It has hit him hard today—the guilt, that is. The same strain he felt when Harry died; the same pit in his stomach when he held Dave in his arms, the same sickness that came over him at Con Thien when he looked down out of that chopper and saw the guys still under siege. Dennis wonders if this marine standing stoically before him with Margaret Haydon's face buried in his chest, feels the same way. *Does he ask himself everyday why he made it, too?*

Dennis didn't accompany Harry's body home, nor did he take a short leave and go to the funeral as was customary. It just wasn't something he was capable of doing at the time. Shortly after Harry's death, his foster father, Mr. Nelson, sent Dennis a package containing Harry's camera. Dennis knew that Mr. Nelson had also sent a letter addressed to his mother, Mrs. Michaels, thanking her for her condolences and asking that she encourage Dennis to come visit when he returned home. The nightmares of standing over Harry's grave began the night he received the package.

Years later, he would come to understand that the nightmare really represented his survivor's guilt. Harry was his best friend—his right arm, gone forever—and the camera, the albatross of survivors' guilt. Mr. Nelson wanted to know how Harry died. Dennis recoiled at the thought then, as he does now. *What was he going to tell the old man, that Harry died because he was trying to prove he was brave?* He never did visit Mr. Nelson, and to this day, has never been to Harry's grave in Trenton—something that weighs on his conscience today just as heavily as the camera always did in his dream.

HOME, IDENTITY OF SELF, AND MASTER OF THE HOUSE

One of the most dominant themes in the novel is the concept of "home." For many veterans, the emotional "home" of their minds and their emotions has changed so drastically that they don't feel comfortable in their own physical home upon returning home, much less are they comfortable in their own skin. For the character of Dennis, he feels like a stranger in his own skin. He no longer knows himself, trusts himself, or feels comfortable with himself – and there are not many feelings worse than that.

This theme is parlayed in several instances; specifically in the chapter "Master of the House" as well as in the chapter "The Schoolyard."

EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER "THE SCHOOLYARD" p 296

By the time the red Golden Gate Bridge appears in the distance, Dennis legs are cramped and sore, his bum right knee throbs in pain. The stewardess announces over the intercom that the plane will soon pass over Alcatraz, the federal penitentiary famous for confining Al Capone. Dennis looks down over the rocky island that once was inhabited only by the pelicans. *Alcatraz*. It is ironic, he muses, that at this very moment, he can identify more with those prisoners down there than he can the passengers sit-ting next to him. The prisoners are locked up, incarcerated, and so is he—in the jail of his own mind, of his own existence.

Excerpt from Chapter "Home" p. 112

Home. Home was the last place Dennis wanted to go when he got back from Vietnam.

He remembers a speech he gave several years ago at one of the VAs, telling the audience of veterans, "I could deal with dying, and thought I would die over there. But I had a hell of a time coming home. I was afraid of home, afraid of the notion of it. And I resisted it." Dennis then told them that, upon returning to the States, he went so far as to fly into New York City instead of the Newark airport, just to take some extra time before seeing his family.

"I just wasn't ready. I didn't know myself or even trust myself. I was afraid of the things I might do, things I might say. I was a stranger. And there are not many feelings worse than feeling like a stranger in your own skin."

Several veterans in the audience had nodded their heads. What he said resonated with them; he had spoken true. Later a middle-aged veteran pulled him aside and said, "Maybe the great parable for all veterans is this: If it is true for you, then it is true." He further explained his philosophy. "If you feel it, if you experience it, if you've seen it—then that is what becomes your truth."

Dennis liked that veteran's definition of truth. He knew first hand that the hard part, for many, was reconciling the old truth with the new. It was a daily struggle, a constant fight that often left him wondering if he really saw the things he saw; if he really did the things he did; if things happened the way he remembered; or if his experiences were such a violent break from reality that it distorted his perception and his memory. But what he has found is that truth does not and cannot exist in bold-faced lies. It can however, exist in different perspectives—which at its core means that truth depends on the trinity of viewer, space, and time. That viewpoint, however, did not reduce the hardship of finding the proper place—or home—for the internal changes that resulted from old and new realities, or, rather, his past and present truths, colliding. But right now, home is a place Dennis merely frequents for brief spells in the morning and at night, and sometimes the occasional dinner, usually frozen chicken or a potato thrown in the microwave. More often than not, he'll fall asleep on the couch watching TV.

And that's exactly where he finds himself the next morning.

Home as the Identity of Oneself

The other notion of 'home' is as the identity of oneself. Who am I? If one knows that, they feel at home wherever they are, because they feel identified with a belonging, a purpose.

Excerpt from Chapter "Still the Monkey" p. 244

It is often said that people perpetually live in the moments in which they felt most fully alive. It is the mind's natural tendency to gravitate toward those moments and stay there, as if by the sheer proximity of thoughts, the moment will be recreated and can be re-lived. For Dennis, the early days he spent in Vietnam with Harry were the happiest of his life. It seems strange, because Vietnam is also where Harry died and his trauma lives. But the truth is, at one time he was happy being in Vietnam—happy that he was independent, happy that he had found a true friend, and happy that his life existed only in the here and now. Those early months defined the epic period of his life that radiated the true Dennis—his hopes, his dreams, his essence. Nothing in the past mattered; nothing in the future was guaranteed. The monkey was still.

And Dennis' mind has been stuck, paralyzed in the past, and in Vietnam, likely a consequence of the fact that he has never once been able to identify himself since. His mind has always been constantly barraged with questions such as: "Who am I? What am I doing? Why am I even here?" Astronauts who have ever left the Earth's atmosphere understand; those finite moments when they peered into the infinite space are what they think about at night, what they think about when they daydream, what they think about when they identify themselves. So it is for warriors. Warriors think about their time in war. When it comes down to it, every veteran will forever "live" in the moments they were warriors, in moments where nothing else existed.

CONCLUSION: THE MENTALITY OF A WARRIOR

Excerpt 3, Chapter "Striations of Love and Hate" (p. 299, Part X)

"The biggest paradox is that as I felt innocence leaving me, I began to crave those high levels of adrenaline, the fear, the excitement, living in the present moments of battle, unfiltered by anything else. And I could feel that as my innocence waned, my passion for that kind of existence grew. But we'll never know those levels again. And you'll miss it, you'll spend the entire rest of your life searching for it. I think that's why they say, you begin to die the moment you are born," Dennis confides in Andy, as they walk around the park area.

Andy knows first hand what Dennis is describing, as he has searched to find something that has a meaning or purpose, to replace the void of passion in his life since he returned from Iraq. In war, everyone has a job, a purpose; and on the battlefield, you are a warrior. *But what are you when you come home?* Andy does not yet know the answers, but he is thankful he has Dennis in his life to help sort it out.

Dennis stops walking and looks directly at Andy. "That passion, is love and hate. You can never love unless you've hated. And when the hate is gone, you're scared the love is gone, too." Dennis pauses and thinks about his next words carefully; it is something he has pondered for nearly forty years. "Some veterans," Dennis says slowly, "are always looking to hate. But, really, they're looking for the hate so they can find the love again."

