

THE WOUNDS WITHIN

**A VETERAN, A PTSD THERAPIST,
AND A NATION UNPREPARED**

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chapter 1

SAFE BUT NOT SOUND— RETURNING FROM WAR

JULY 14, 2003, was a beautiful, sunny day in New Haven, Connecticut. Down by the beach on Long Island Sound, hundreds of people filled a large parking lot at old Fort Nathan Hale, a colonial-era fort that had fallen into disrepair over the decades, found new life as a small museum, and now also served as a base for the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve and the Army National Guard.

The crowd had come to meet the members of the Marine Reserve 6th Motor Transport Battalion, Light Company, returning from Iraq. Many waved American flags and flags with the USMC logo in gold against a maroon background. Many carried balloons. Most were dressed informally, in shorts and skirts, tank tops and T-shirts. The colors sparkled in the sunshine.

One Mylar balloon with red and white stripes said simply, WELCOME HOME. One man's hat was made of red, white, and blue balloons that rose two feet above his head. A woman's top was fashioned like the American flag. Stars sat on her right shoulder; red and white stripes extended down her left side. A young child sat on her father's shoulder to get a better view. Every family seemed to have a camera, and many videotaped the festivities.

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The scene was reminiscent of the old Civil War song, “When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again,” written by conductor Patrick Gilmore for his sister Annie to comfort her while her fiancé was away with the Union Army. “The men will cheer and the boys will shout; the ladies they will all turn out.” It is a timeless scene, repeated after most of America’s wars. Since that day in New Haven early in the Iraq War, it has been repeated countless more times as two and a half million Americans have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan.

At these homecomings, a feeling of hopefulness and relief enlivens the air. The civilians desperately want to believe that all is well, that order is restored. They want to “fill with joy the warrior’s heart,” as the song says, and to put war firmly behind them. But often the warriors themselves harbor ambivalence about such celebrations. While away, they have craved this homecoming and imagined it a certain way, yet when it actually happens, it feels different. In war they have seen, and perhaps done, terrible things—things that the happy men and ladies of the iconic song might never understand and, worse, might not really *want* to know about. Yes, the vets are home, but likely as not they have changed. The faces of their parents, siblings, lovers, and friends are familiar, but will these people understand or connect with the veterans? On the outside, of course, the returning heroes are all strength and smiles.

On that July day in New Haven, one particular family waited expectantly for their “Johnny.” Their guy was Lance Corporal Jeffrey Lucey. His parents, Joyce and Kevin, were there to greet him, along with his sisters Debbie and Kelly, his girlfriend Julie, and family friends. Jeff’s mother, Joyce, still recovering from a stroke she suffered while Jeff was away, was tired but eager. She had birthed this boy, raised him, seen him off to war, and couldn’t wait to get him back. As the arrival was delayed, the family paced around the parking lot, looking at the ocean and waiting.

Jeff’s father, Kevin, looked around and remembered how different the mood had felt the last time they were there. It had been a night of

gloom and fear as Jeff's unit had slipped into the darkness at 4:00 AM to an uncertain war in a distant land. On this summer day, however, the moment was festive and bright. People laughed and chatted with glee, making instant friends with those around them.

The suspense continued as the buses were late. Word came that they had missed the exit but had turned around and were on their way back. Amidst the excitement, Kevin peered over the ocean and thought, "My God, everything looks so wonderful, peaceful, and beautiful. The world is coming back to us again."

Finally, there was a stirring in the crowd. The faint sound of sirens grew louder until everyone saw the police escort turn in with its lights flashing and sirens trumpeting. Then the first glimpse of the buses sparked a wave of excitement. The buses slowly pushed alongside the crowd, but the mob wouldn't allow them to go any further, and the Marines hurriedly disembarked. The crowd surged forward, clapping, cheering, and yelling. Everyone was looking for their Marine, and the Luceys found theirs.

Jeff looked great—tan, slender, smiling. He seemed surprised that so many people had come. Jeff said later that none of the Marines had expected the welcome home and the greeting that they received. Jeff was dressed in Marine fatigue camos, mostly sand-colored with swooshes of brown and green. LUCEY was printed on his right pocket and US MARINES on his left.

Jeff's girlfriend, Julie, carried an American flag and a bouquet of yellow and red flowers. They embraced, kissed, and then just gazed at each other, their noses touching, with the brim of Jeff's hat resting on Julie's head.

Kevin had been video recording the greetings. Now it was his turn, and he passed off the camera to his wife. Father and son embraced each other heartily. Jeff leaned his chin into his father's shoulder, holding on with his right hand squarely on his father's back. For several seconds, Kevin held his son firmly with both arms, his chin over Jeff's shoulder. Kevin was overwhelmed with joy and relief. He choked up as he whispered, "Welcome home, Jeff. Thank God, you are safe and sound."

A CALL FOR HELP

Nine months later, on April 29, 2004, I received a voicemail message at my psychotherapy practice, in the town of Amherst in western Massachusetts. I had been providing individual and family therapy in the community for many years and had helped many people address a broad range of issues that cause people to seek therapy.

The voicemail was from Joyce Lucey. “I think you probably remember my son, Jeffrey. You saw him when he was a teenager,” it began. “We’re wondering if you would be willing to see Jeffrey. He’s really not doing very well, and he won’t talk about it, but I think he’s willing to see you.” Jeff was living with his parents in the small town of Belchertown, Massachusetts, next to Amherst.

Joyce went on to explain that Jeff had served in Iraq, and on his return he seemed OK but had gotten “worse and worse” over the last few months. She and Kevin were “really worried about him.” But they couldn’t convince him to talk to anybody connected to the military. He was afraid it would only make his life worse if anyone in the military found out how much he was struggling.

Since I was a private therapist, our confidential sessions would not show up on his military service record. Joyce added, “He said he liked you when he saw you before and said he would see you again, but I’m not sure we can really get him to go.”

I remembered Jeff pretty well. I had seen him about a dozen times when he was sixteen years old, eight years earlier. At that time, his grades had dropped, he was getting into mischief, and his parents had insisted he see a therapist. When we met for the first time, he agreed he wasn’t taking his life very seriously. He continued to come in voluntarily, and we met periodically for about a year. He stayed out of any serious trouble, improved his grades, and seemed to be moving in a better direction.

This time around, his mother’s brief message had an unmistakably anxious tone. I remembered her as a parent who loved her kids very much but tended to worry. Her words “not doing very well” didn’t reveal much. Who is doing well when they call a therapist? I really didn’t know what to expect, nor did I need to. As a seasoned therapist,

I like to think I am prepared to deal with whatever circumstances might come through my office door. For most therapists, it is gratifying to be able to assist someone effectively. It's especially satisfying when someone you've seen as a child or teenager remembers a strong enough positive connection to seek you out when he or she needs help years later. Even so, I wasn't sure if Jeff actually wanted to come in and talk with me or if he had just nodded his head when his parents said, "You've got to talk to somebody."

I called Joyce back. She offered a bit more detail, but I was hesitant to engage her in much conversation. I wanted to talk with Jeff directly, but he wasn't home. At the same time, I could sense her desperation, and I gave her a chance to share some of her concerns. Joyce sketched out Jeff's story for me. He had enlisted in the Marine Reserve, been called up for active duty and was part of the first wave of Marines that entered Iraq from Kuwait at the start of the war. He completed a six-month tour of duty and had seemed fine upon his return home the previous July. He had completed a semester at college that fall, even making the honor roll. He'd been living at home and, in his mother's words, didn't really do much other than go to school, but they figured he deserved the rest. Since Christmas, however, things had gone downhill. Joyce and Kevin didn't know what to do. They tried to get him to go to the VA hospital, but he wouldn't.

Normally I would ask that an adult "client" call me directly to set up the appointment, but in this case I heeded Joyce's words when she said, "I think we better just set a time, and then we'll try to get him to come to it." We scheduled for the next Monday. I was beginning to sense the depth of the Luceys' concerns and the hope they were placing in me that I might help their son.

That conversation signaled something atypical and compelling about what was to follow. Perhaps it was because Jeff and his family echoed back to an earlier phase in my career, and I was glad they valued me as a resource. Perhaps it was because I knew Kevin as a probation officer who had worked with some of my adolescent clients. Or perhaps it was because I sensed Joyce's urgency. But I also realized, as I prepared to see Jeff again, that this would be my first real contact

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with anyone returning from the Iraq War. The war was being fought by a thin slice of the American population, and the rest of us had little insight into what was going on over there.

That Monday morning, before the scheduled appointment, I decided to call the house to see if the appointment was still on. Jeff picked up the phone. “Hi Jeff, it’s Mark Nickerson. I just thought I’d check to see if we are still on for 2:00.”

“Oh,” he responded. I could tell I had caught him off guard. “Oh, I meant to call you. Can we move the appointment to Friday? I’m really sorry. I meant to call you.”

“OK, we can do that,” I said, but as I hung up I wondered if I’d ever see Jeff. I resisted the temptation to call him during the week and was already imagining a conversation with Joyce about what they could do if he wouldn’t come in. I was surprised when he showed up on time for the Friday appointment.

Initially, I was struck by how familiar Jeff seemed. Physically, he had filled out. As a teen, he had been a good-looking kid with an athletic body that he carried with a confident swagger. Now he was a bigger version of the same: chiseled features, square jaw, deep brown eyes, a friendly hello, and a solid handshake.

I smiled, invited him into my office from the waiting room, and we both sat down.