

Episode 220 – Dr. Clyde Angel, John Sullivan, and Dr. Vincent Starnino: At My Core, I'm Not the Same: Spiritual Injury and Military Trauma (part 1 of 2)

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork. The podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.inSocialWork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of inSocialWork is to engage practitioners and researchers in lifelong learning and promote research to practice and practice to research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:37] Hi from Buffalo. With four seasons and a distinct summer we don't waste terrific weather around here summer especially as a season of festivals as Buffalo celebrates the arts music wildlife food sports and athletics and the largest county fair in the country. There is almost too much to do. Difficult choices. All of them good. I'm Peter Sobota. Frankel's Man's Search for Meaning. Merton's The Seven Story Mountain and James the variety of religious experience are but a few of the works attempting to describe our search for connectedness and meaning in our lives. In part one of a two part podcast our guests Dr. Clyde Angel John Sullivan and Dr. Vincent's Starnino discuss their work helping military veterans who are living with PTSD and trauma by focusing on spirituality and religious impacts on recovery and living. Differentiating between religion and spirituality and their role and meaning making our guess who used the image of shattered spirituality and wounding to emphasize the depth of traumatic experiences experienced by service veterans. Our guests discuss the research and what they're learning about the impact of spiritual risk and protective factors on healing spiritual injury and wounding. Clyde Angel Ph.D. is chief chaplain services at the Richard L. Roudebush V.A. Medical Center. John Sullivan LCSW is retired and formerly an adjunct professor at University of Indiana Purdue University in Indianapolis and the University of Indianapolis. Vincent Starnino Ph.D. is associate professor at the Indiana University School of Social Work. Our guests were interviewed in April 2017 by our own Dr. Thomas Nochajski research professor here at the School of Social Work and a Marine Corps veteran.

[00:02:36] I'm Tom Nochajski I'm a research professor here at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. I am also a disabled combat veteran from the Vietnam era and I am very interested in speaking with a group of individuals who are doing some interesting work around spirituality. So I'll turn it over to you guys and let you guys introduce yourselves.

[00:02:58] Great. Thanks Tom. My name is Vincent Starnino I've conducted a lot of my research around the topic of spirituality and mental health. Some of my earlier research looked at the role spirituality for people with severe mental illness and particularly how they use it as part of their recovery in recent years I started expanding my research interests into the area of trauma trauma informed care. And I looked at trauma and severe mental illness and spirituality. But then about three years ago I met my colleagues that I'm presenting with today Dr. Clyde Angel and John Sullivan. We actually spoke on the same panel at the school social work here at Indiana University. And we were speaking about these intersections between spirituality and mental health and trauma. And so that's how I caught wind of their work and what we'll be talking about today is spirituality and trauma among veterans that are diagnosed with PTSD. So we've been meeting pretty much sometimes by monthly or at least monthly for the past three years. We've already began a few research endeavors and we've created a manual for the intervention that we'll be discussing today. So we've done a lot of activities already during these two years and my role in this is more of a researcher and that kind of the voice that offering to today's podcast. I'll turn it over to Clyde thanks.

[00:04:34] This is Dr. Clyde Angel. I am the chief chaplain at the Indianapolis Medical Center. I am a certified chaplain and also a licensed professional counselor. My work is truly from the politician side of the house. This is a group that really grew out of mind. John sofa's collaboration about seven years ago and what we say more about that. So I'll give John a chance to produce.

[00:05:04] Hello my name is John Sullivan LCSW my first interaction what you might call combination of spirituality and therapy was when I was invited to present a paper in Arabia at the First World Symposium on his lamb and psychology. My last eight years was at the V.A. hospital with the chaplain and that's where I retired from the first thing I would like to say is I am really impressed by the search for meaning.

[00:05:39] Course it looks like it has a lot of great content so I'm hoping that we can cover some of that in this time period. So I guess the first question to address will be what does spirituality and religion have to do with military related PTSD. Clyde I guess you can address that that would be helpful. Thank you.

[00:06:02] Sure. Thank you Tom. I guess my approach comes to this it really comes from the concept of holistic is very much in my own training early on just the thought that a holistic view to being with humans free humans and so I leave very much a psychosocial bio psychosocial or spiritual model of joining up with human beings. My understanding is and I know that this is this is my understanding but I think that as much as there is a physical component to who we are as humans there is a mental emotional component to us as humans. And there is no question a social component to us as human beings. I think there also is a spiritual component that goes along with who we are as human beings and how we perceive and understand the world. Therefore with trauma we know that both physical and psychosocial is affected and there's no question that life work the rituals. There is very much a spiritual component to that. And when you say spiritual that course that can be very broad. So when I talk about it I talk about existential concerns and wounds and this spiritual religion come under that. Based upon the person's own perspective.

[00:07:21] John would you have anything to add.

[00:07:24] Yeah. When we're talking about military PTSD there are so many events that occur that impact us as the patients will say at their core the very essence and their belief systems including their religious belief system. And as the chaplain says often can get compromised and greatly challenge so that many times in the course of working with the patients will get them to or they will get into the realm of trauma. At that very deep level

[00:07:57] The question that would fall from this is given that you mentioned both spirituality patients spiritual peace and also religion. How do you differentiate between spiritual and religion in this type of work.

[00:08:13] Actually that is we right after we go through introductions that's exactly what we launch into is religion versus spirituality. So this is a little bit of how I define it and fairly briefly for the group is that religion is a collection of cultural systems belief systems worldviews. These groups establish symbols that relate humanity to spirituality sometimes moral values and many religions have narratives and symbols and traditions and sacred histories that provide meaning to individuals to groups and they tend to derive these groups their morality or ethics the religious flaws preferred lifestyles etc. but religion is the least of my assets. Religion is always comes from a community aspect. Typically no one has their own religion so religion is more of a community process where I perceive spirituality spirituality as a very personal process. So the aspect of humanity that reefered spirituality is the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose. And often I will say to the group I will say meaning of purpose. I think every human being particularly as we get into our adult years youth led to a very stressful situation will often come to these two deep questions Why am I here. What is it all about. And folks who experienced trauma especially come to that and they say why am I here. Why am I still here. What is this all about. So low meaning and purpose is the stuff called Spirituality and then the way that we

experience our connectedness to the moment to self others to nature to the significant are sacred that becomes our own spiritual path.

[00:10:06] That was really very good and very informative. I liked the way you distinguish between the spirituality aspect and the religious. That's great. Thanks Clyde I got another question for you as well. You use the term shattered soul and spiritual injury. What do you mean by that.

[00:10:25] The Shatterer so I'll explain it the way I do to the group. So the concept is shared so so we began at a very early age beginning our spiritual formation our spiritual formation even in our very tender years our pre-adolescent years were informed by religion if we grow up in a religious family we are informed by the cultural values that were growing up and were informed by parents and grandparents and so forth. So what they did particularly when we hit adolescence and we move over from that concrete to abstract thinking we begin to form even more so what I would call our spiritual formation how we understand and how we make meaning and purpose out of the world. And then that broadens there in our adolescent years because now we've got peers and we're beginning maybe to listen to news and broadcast and we're we're beginning to be informed by a larger world view. And so individuals who go into the military they enter the military with their own spiritual formation their own spiritual perspective how they make sense out the world their core beliefs their values. These all are part of who they are as they enter military service. So what I think happens now and let me say this just a little aside is how well that spiritual formation has developed is very unique and individual and for folks who may have had some childhood trauma in their family maybe from the actions or sexual abuse or violence in the home or poverty or whatever maybe it's less of their spiritual formation may have already have some fracture. But anyway you go into it with your spiritual formation. What I think happens is that they experience a trauma and end in combat often for men and women who are deployed. It is a one trauma. Often there can be multiple tracks fact they just be deployed to combat zones is traumatic in and of itself. But over a series of traumas eventually the trauma becomes greater than this spiritual formation they have. And I think it just shatters. And the analogy that I use is a car windshield. And if you see a car windshield that has been broken it if still intact it just looks like just thousands of little pieces or if it's been totally broken out just a thousand little pieces on the ground. Uniquely when I get to this point and I use this analogy you begin to see the heads move up or down. That's it. I've had that officials who I've shared this with individual sessions just look at me go Chaplain. That's it. That's where I'm at.

[00:13:06] That's the concept of the shelter so that's again very very useful very informative. I like what you've been talking about. Let me ask another question though. You talk about four levels of warning. John can you tell us more about this and how does it happen.

[00:13:25] We refer to levels of wounding to emphasize the depth of trauma impact on individuals. Think of it as someone who's hammering a nail and they miss a nail and hit their thumb. That's trauma. But what if they were to hit their thumb again and again and again. At first we might be talking about flesh wounds. Now we're talking about skeletal damage and eventually nerve damage. The four levels of spiritual wounding we call once again the event but then feedback. Internalisation and identification. So the first level warning is the actual trauma event the second level warning occurs when the traumatized person who actually doesn't want to but they know they need to share and talk about what happened to them. But when they do the feedback they get is not at all helpful sometimes in fact it can be very negative. Someone either through their body language or their actual words communicate well and couldn't really happen did it really happen. Are they all say you know you just really need to suck it up some say just forget about it. Now when the traumatized person gets this kind of feedback they often shut down and begin to isolate. Problem is when they do that they often move to what we call the third level wounding the internalisation person buys into this negative feedback. And so when they isolate they start doing to themselves what other

people were doing to them in the literature. This is called self perpetuating the person will at this level start talking about how everything feels I feel immoral. They might say then what happens is it leads to the fourth level one being when it's a very subtle but powerful shift where the person begins to say this instead of saying I feel incompetent they say I am incompetent I feel inferior to I am inferior. I feel culpable too. I am culpable. And then I feel immoral. I am immoral at this point is when you often hear them say and it can be at other points but definitely at this point I'm beyond help I'm beyond forgiveness. So we just felt that this level of wounding required its own approach which is our program search for me.

[00:16:03] OK. That was again very informative and I like the way you broke that down because again my experience would go along with what you've been talking about here. So that's very very useful from my perspective. All right. So Vincent I'm going to come back to you and ask you about your research and what did you find out about parental injury and the shattering that use.

[00:16:33] Great. So as I said we started meeting about three years ago and that the search for meaning group was already in process. They had had run it by for three or four years already and developed a lot of the ideas that Clyde and John are sharing today. But when we looked at the theory and the literature some of this stuff was mentioned but a lot of it wasn't. So we felt like we want to play a role in developing the theory related to spiritual injury spiritual wounding for military veterans with PTSD. So we applied for a grant to come in and help. That's the health care network. Canadian health care network. And we got awarded that grant. And what that research study was about was we had two purposes. One is we wanted to better understand the experience of spiritual wounding and the intersection of spirituality and trauma and how all that plays out. The other thing we wanted to accomplish is to have an understanding of some of the shifts that veterans experience when they engage in this search for meaning intervention. So we thought a good starting point would be to conduct a qualitative study that way we could get rich stories from the veterans and help us develop our theory. And so we conducted interviews with veterans before they took the search for meaning group and then immediately following the group. And so the interview before the group typically lasted anywhere between 60 and 90 minutes. And it's from that interview that we were able to understand spiritual injury and all this shattering that that Clyde and John had been speaking about. And so we conducted in-depth analysis. I have three research assistants that worked with me on this and we were able to come up with some kind of understanding of the process of how spiritual wounding and all this shattering and everything occurs for veterans. So I'll try to give you a summary version of this because you know with qualitative research you know everything I mentioned I could go into great detail but I'll start off with somewhat of a summary on some of it overlaps are actually a lot of it with Clyde and John already shared. But this is we want to see if it's supported by research and hearing the stories of veterans. So the first thing aligns quite well with what Clyde was saying we titled this theme premier military risks and protective factors and what we looked at. We asked veterans by the way to recount their life history anything related to life stressors trauma and spirituality. And so what we recognize is that for some veterans as Clyde mentioned they had preexisting trauma before the military trauma. And for some of those veterans that trauma already negatively impacted their spirituality maybe they already experience a loss of belief or a disruption in their belief or a sense of disillusionment. So having that history did seem to have an impact on once the military trauma occurred. But what we also noticed is a lot of folks had what seemed to be protective factors. An example would be folks who grew up in a religious family upbringing. They attended church every week. They had a strong belief in God. When we looked at those stories just as the other people all veterans that were part of our study by the way there were 23 veterans that joined us study. All of them experience what Clyde described as this shattering spiritual shattering or shattered world view when the trauma the military trauma or Kurds the difference might have been where those who have experienced previous trauma and already had some shattering of their spiritual worldview perhaps were more likely to further spiritual to be almost completely shattered by the military trauma where others who had protective factors may

have been able to hang on to some aspects of their spirituality. What's the military trauma occurred we looked into this shattering and what really is taking place and we came up with a couple of things. And one of the major things is dissonance occurred and we called this spiritual dissonance. So we know in some of the literature on moral injury they talk about a moral dissonance but what we're talking about even goes beyond it has emotional psychological moral and spiritual implications. So it's more of a broad shattering. And part of the dissonance is and I think Clyde spoke to this and maybe use slightly different language but they had a spiritual or religious worldview going into the military. And what they experience related to the trauma could not hold or cannot explain or they just couldn't make sense of the trauma. It's almost an identifiable moment where their spirituality got shattered. So several veterans said it happened instantly. They believed in God and then they were in the middle of a major combat related trauma and then almost instantly they didn't believe anymore. Some veterans kept their belief if they believed in a higher source but other aspects of their spirituality got shattered. So there's almost an identify a moment or period of time where there's a major shattering. But what we also identified is spiritual wounds that came out of that shattering and deep spiritual wounds seem to last for a long period of time for veterans and so many of the veterans we interviewed they were in combat maybe 30 40 years earlier and they were carrying the spiritual wounds right up until they met with us for that first interview. And I'll briefly describe some of the types of spiritual wounds that we found by analyzing our data and meeting with veterans so we came down to three types and those included internal spiritual wounds compromise of faith and external spiritual wounds. I'll speak very briefly about each. So the internal wounds had to do with guilt and shame and loss of trust and self. And also what John spoke about negative self identity. There was a major shift in how they viewed themselves. The compromise of faith had to do with what I spoke about before that rupture of their relationship with a higher source. For some people that relationship was tested or it just broke off completely. But all of the veterans that we interviewed at the very minimal. There was a distancing in their relationship with their higher source. So their faith was tested other people no longer engage in spiritual religious practices. And that included maybe they would go to church previously in their life and they just had a hard time doing that. Once they were wounded spiritually and then there were a variety of types of external wounds and that mainly had to do with their relationship to others. This is important because the way that we defined spirituality is that it does have to do with connectedness to one's deeper self the greater world a higher source and also other people. What we notice if we look at all the spiritual wounds that people carried with them for long periods of time what seemed to be a common theme throughout all of that was avoidance. And so we know with the PTSD literature avoidance is a major symptom of PTSD. So it's widely acknowledged that avoidance occurs. But what we were able to do is gather some insight into how does avoidance play out when it comes to spirituality and religion and so we saw that there was clear avoidance whether through loss of beliefs and all the things that I just mentioned. And so we're theorizing that a big part of that avoidance has to do with the shattering that occurred around the time of the trauma and the dissonance with their spiritual view and the inability to make sense of what occurred. So when it occurred they had no explanation or spirituality at the time could not find meaning and make sense of it. So what happened and this is theorizing and of course we have to keep developing this kind of theory but because there are no answers. Basically they backed away from their spirituality and religion because any time they would be considering encountering or fear channeling religion or getting closer or maybe are reengaging spiritual practices are starting to reinvigorate their relationship with God. This dissonance would come up front and center. And so the tendency would be to back away and avoid it. It was just too painful. So they had no way of working through the dissonance and so that in my and it's one of the strengths of the search for meaning group. It gives veterans an opportunity to look at all of the spiritual wounding and begin to work through it. So those are some of our main findings and I'll leave it there for now.

[00:26:07] Thanks for listening to Dr. Clyde Angel, John Sullivan, and Dr. Vincent Starnino discuss spiritual injury and military trauma on inSocialWork. Look for part two of this podcast coming

soon.

[00:26:28] Hi I'm Nancy Smyth Professor and Dean of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history or online and on the ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our website at www.SocialWork.buffalo.edu. And while you're there check out our technology and social work research center you'll find that under the Community Resources menu.