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Expectations

“I’m fucking tired of looking at war! First it was our war, then Kosovo and now anytime something bloody happens, we have to be there!” Eldar said. He set his heavy Associated Press TV camera down on the floor, took off his cap, plopped down on a swivel chair and rubbed his aching shoulder. My husband, Sasha, walked in after him and sat down. He and Eldar, along with Amer, our TV producer; Degi and Sava, our two photographers; and our driver, Eso, had just returned from covering a landmine explosion. Two children had been killed.

“It never stops,” Sasha said, shaking his head and downing a Coke. Their ashen faces and hollow eyes betrayed what they had just witnessed. The war had been over for more than five years, but people still died by landmines. I knew what I saw in my colleagues’ eyes was not the horror of fresh death; but the fresh flashback of three years of having escaped death surrounded by blood pools and body parts.

I stirred the frothy pot of Bosnian coffee and poured it into espresso cups. The head of our office, Aida, and I had written the short news story and sent it to the editing office in Vienna.

She took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes. She’d cried as we’d gathered the facts about the two children whose bodies had been ripped in half.

“I’m tired of this, too. But what else can we do? This is all we know,” Aida said.

The room fell silent.

War was all they knew, *now*. It was hard to remember what had come before. Aida had been a German translator who could write in English—during the war she’d been separated from her toddler, balancing her son’s safety with her own chance for survival. AP had hired her early on to work in their war-time office. Eldar was a cinematographer. A five-hundred pound rocket had sent shrapnel slicing into him; he’d survived the attack and continued covering the war. Amer had been a college kid studying English when he’d landed a job as a producer for APTV. He’d been eighteen when a grenade killed his mom. Degi had been a war prisoner and dodged death; Sava had taken innumerable risks to capture poignant images the world didn’t want to see and Eso had honed survival skills that had saved our crew more than once.

Sasha had been a journalist before the war. As an editor and on-the-ground reporter for Bosnian State news, he’d plowed through every day of Sarajevo’s 1992-95 siege while heading up a crew of journalists. He’d dodged snipers, mortars and starvation. AP snatched him up toward the end of the conflict that had pitched the country’s three ethnic groups—Serbs, Croats and Muslims—against each other in a bitter battle for independence from Yugoslavia.

They were survivors. Some might call them victims, but “survivors” is a more accurate term.

Aida went back to her desk to take a call. Eldar left for the day to pick up his son at school. Sasha and I sat at the table, coffee gone.

“How did I get this life?” he muttered, shaking his head. Beads of sweat still traced his hairline. His cell phone rang.

“Vienna?” I asked, having followed his side of the English conversation.

“They want more details.”

How did I get this life? My husband wondered. It wasn't what he—or any of them—had expected.

War ends. Fighting stops. People stop being soldiers and start being moms and dads and teachers and mechanics and computer analysts again, right? Your spouse welcomes you with open arms, your kids hug you, your boss seems pleased that you're back. Life is supposed to move on. You're supposed to put the war behind you. Get on with things. Forget about it.

No. War ends. Fighting stops. One day you're killing insurgents, the next you're sitting at home wondering if you'll ever get rid of images of severed heads and the charred bodies of kids with birds picking out their guts. Your spouse seems uncomfortable around you. Your kids are thrilled to see you, but you don't recognize them after a year or more away. Since you've been gone, your employees have slacked off. Finances are worrying you, and yet, how the fuck can money matter now? You're supposed to feel lucky, right? After all, you survived. You made it home. You did your duty. You thought the whole country was behind you. Now it looks like life here at home went on pretty much the same as if the war had never happened. In fact, no one seems to pay much attention to the war at all. And your buddies are still back there getting shot at. People keep asking you how you are. You say it's tough. Some listen, most don't really want to know. You learn to say you're fine.

This isn't what you expected. How did you get this life?

Life after war is not what we expect. *Life after war doesn't return to what it was before.*

I had no idea how pervasive war was until I'd lived in Bosnia for a few months. Nothing had been left untouched. From the currency in my wallet to not walking on mined grass to analyzing which stories we'd cover each day—the war remained in everything. It saturated me with every account of mothers having had their sons executed, children being uncovered in mass graves and the constant ache I felt for the people around me. How could they live with such pain? As the years wore on, the pain crept over me until I couldn't see anything else. I felt my soul slipping away as I lost grip on everything that had once been my identity. The things I had firmly believed about life, God, goodness, the meaning of suffering—slipped off like burning flesh. They were, simply, gone. My instinct was to try to hold on to remnants of self, to retrieve the lost parts of me. But what I didn't know then was that there is no going back.

After war touches your life you can never be the same. War isn't an event, it's an experience. You may or may not feel this right away. And, depending on your role and personal experience, your reactions may not be as intense as others'. But don't try to convince yourself that you managed to escape your tour without it affecting who you are. It's simply not possible.

Families find this hard to accept. You want your loved one to be the same; to be okay, to not be changed. But assuming that he or she is the same is a mistake. When I fell in love with Sasha, I knew there were places in him I could never go. Parts of him I would never understand. I could love him as he was now, the man I knew. In fact, loving him meant I accepted that there were parts of him created by the war. It wasn't my place to change or heal that.

What we expect of ourselves after war—and what we expect of our loved ones is never the same as what really is. I had arrived in Bosnia full of compassion, Christian ideals, wanting to put my arms around a whole country, hold them close until their pain disappeared. I assumed I was stronger than war. I wasn't.

Instead, I was immersed in a city that could not see beyond the horror that still kept people silent on trams, eyes locked on the floor, afraid of looking up to see someone they had hurt or who had hurt them. People were in shock, unable to believe what they'd been through; how they'd destroyed their best friend's grandmother's house; locked up former classmates in freight-car torture cells and were powerless to stop snipers from playing cat-and-mouse as citizens weaved their way through allies, doorways, and behind cars at night to fill a few gallons of drinking water.

I listened. I lived with and worked with people from all sides. Every one was in incredible pain; most were in denial, steeped in grief and numbness. Stories abounded; tears free-flowed; the people I knew discussed the war. They reminisced, only to fall silent when it came to the hardest parts. The parts words would make too real.

I soaked it all inside.

You may hate the person war has chiseled you into—heart beating with rage, anger, bitter, cynical, tense, over-emotional, empty, blank, cold, a lit fuse ready to go off at the lightest sound, touch, memory. Someone who knows too much. Or you may be dismayed because you seem to be just fine and you're not sure if that's okay.

Life after war mires you into a complicated web of relationships, self-identity issues and questions about healing. Your entire world—everything you believed to be true and real and solid—is shattered. You're left to try to recognize the pieces and figure out a way to put them together. All the while, you're expected to look, act and relate—normally.

Oh, Just Get Over It!

"John just isn't himself. I knew Iraq would be hard—what he's been through and everything, but I had no idea it would be this hard," Michelle said.

"What did you think it would be like?"

"I guess I thought he would have nightmares and stuff, but I didn't expect him to be so—different. He's like a ghost. It's like he's not here at all."

"Maybe he's not."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean maybe he's still in Iraq."

Michelle looked confused and shook her head.

"I don't know. Maybe he is. But the man living in my house isn't the man I married."

Michelle didn't know that I'd seen John back at his job at the bank.

"How's it going?" I'd asked. John looked at me, a blank expression on his face. He'd let stubble grow in.

"Not very good," he said quietly, glancing around. His eyes settled on my hands.

"Michelle thinks everything should be back to normal. But I just can't get stuff out of my head. She just doesn't understand." He surveyed the bank lobby again. I followed his gaze.

"I don't know. Everyone thinks I should just "get over it"—they tell me it's going to take time, but then they act like I should be as interested in their golf game as they are. Golf! All I can think about is what's going on over there. The guys I left behind."

Contrary to our society's beliefs, returning soldiers do not just jump back into the swing of things. When they try—and most of them do because bills have to be paid—they end up shoving their own needs aside and settling into a routine that may no longer fit.

Guard troops, in particular, go back to jobs they had before, living out routines that keep them physically moving, filling in time during the day, but do not give them the place they need to heal. By going back to work immediately, survivors are able to convince those around them that they are more okay than they really are. Wounds get ignored, the pain is masked better, everything you are feeling or not feeling gets shoved under the rug as you “role-play” the life you had. While this offers some comfort, in the end, it only puts off healing.

America has never been good at dealing with pain, death, or trauma. We prefer to pretend it doesn't exist and expect our veterans to simply pick up life at home where they left off. A little welcome home celebration, a few rounds of drinks and an occasional ‘how you doing?’—and we think we've supported our troops. Veterans are left for the most part to themselves, alone with their devastating experience and pain. Instead of having support systems where returning troops would have months to rest and heal, most are expected to be back at their jobs or reassigned duties within days.

As a survivor, you may have these same expectations. Going home is often equated with going back to the life you left behind. After all, you want so much for things to be as you've imagined. Images of making love with your partner and seeing children smile and remembering how good it feels to chat with a friend is what got you through months of separation. Distanced, you fell more in love with your spouse; in your dreams he or she became more attractive, the little things that used to bug the heck out of you no longer matter. The only goal you had over there was to survive another day and another night, to get home, to get back to that lover, to rekindle and express the deep love and passion that's built up and kept you going.

Then you arrive home to realize that while your partner is crying tears of joy to have you back, there seems to be an unsettling gap between you. You e-mailed, talked on the phone, wrote letters, sent and received packages, but the glaring reality sets in: life went on. Your partner at home is, amazingly, okay. Beautiful, strong, exhausted, but okay. Your kids have grown and have a new way of talking, new friends, new attitudes. Do they still need you? After two weeks of having you back, it doesn't matter much that you were gone to war. Since you're home, their lives are fine. But yours isn't.

You can't sleep. You have nightmares. Your body is still poised to fight. You see ghosts and the faces of those you've killed. You thought peace and quiet would be good, but now it's too quiet. Something must be up. Then you remember you're in your backyard and not Fallujah.

The person you were is missing.

What you know for sure is that you're not going to ‘get over it’ anytime soon. Realize and grab onto the fact that who you are now, after war, is *normal*. It's normal to feel dead inside, to not feel anything, to think and tell everyone you're fine, or to be angry, full of rage and terrified. It's normal to be scared that you're never going to get your life back. It's normal to be worried that your partner is going to lose patience and leave you for someone else who ‘has it together.’ Or that your kids will be disappointed. Or that you may never be okay again.

Stop, take a deep breath and consider this:

You have been through the most devastating circumstances that a human being can experience. You have come out of it alive. Realize what strength this took. It wasn't just chance or luck (though we often believe those are why we're spared), no, it took an inner, tenacious resiliency to crawl through every day, every mission, every hell-filled night and survive.

Underneath the rage and powerlessness and fear is a quivering spirit that has held on to life with all its might. It has held on to your courage, your hope, your innate compassion. It has

held on when you believed it was over. It has held on as you washed the flesh and dried blood of your buddies off your trembling hands. It has held on and not given up and it's not going to give up on you now.

This core is your survivorship. It has allowed your body, your mind and soul to do whatever they had to do *to get you through*. If that means that your soul has up and left, and your body is strung-out, and your mind cannot focus, that's okay. *Because you are still here*. You may not know why or even be happy that you are, but you are still here.

There's a reason for it.

Too Tired? What? Come on, You're Fine!

Whether or not you were physically wounded in battle, *you are wounded*. Deeply. And your wounds are real. It may take some time for you to become aware of it. In fact, war wounds are often buried deep inside. That's where that inner sense of being shattered comes from. That's why the fear exists that you're not really quite as okay as everyone thinks you are.

You expect to live normally in peaceful conditions at home, while your soul and body are still enmeshed in war. Your system has adapted to spending time in combat and survivor mode. It feels almost normal to you now if for no other reason than that's what your body has been used to. Remember, though, that war—despite our system's amazing ability to adapt and become conditioned to it—is *not* a normal state of being.

In Bosnia, I spent my days putting victims and survivors excruciating stories into English words. I grew accustomed to writing about atrocities, body counts, groups of fathers, sons, and husbands shoved alive off five hundred foot ravines. I became so familiar with the existence of genocide, concentration camps and mass rapes that the words rolled lifeless off my tongue.

Along with my blindness to the fact that the situation I was living in was not “normal,” came a deep fatigue. I wrote it off as culture shock and just kept moving forward. Without a second thought, I expected my body, mind and soul to perform perfectly and lost sight of the fact that being wounded—emotionally and spiritually—under such circumstances was normal. What my body and spirit needed was compassion and understanding, recognition that I was *appropriately* hurting. Not a rap on the head and a “what's wrong with you?!” crack.

Your body is no longer a machine or a weapon. Take a moment and think about that.

Your body *is* you. Your cells constantly reflect every stress and emotion within. Your body, mind and spirit have imbedded wounds. You are depleted. Your muscles have soaked up more stress than they can carry, your nervous system rails from extreme overdrive, pumping Adrenaline and Cortisol through inflamed arteries; your skin has taken a beating, your eyes are worn out, acid has eaten away your guts, your cells have suffered from lack of true nutrition, your lungs have been cramped, your ears damaged. And if you have been physically wounded, you have added pain and suffering.

Imagine a child you love having been through what you've been through. Would you expect that child to simply arrive home after months in such conditions, change clothes, take a bath, sleep for a couple of days and go back to school? No. Would you expect this child to never cry, break down or show sadness? No. You would know that your child needs rest, deep rest, and you would not expect him to simply ‘get on with it.’ You would know deep within that your child needs everything possible—every ounce of nurturing and love and tenderness and compassion to have the best chance to heal from such a horrific ordeal. You would make sure

your child has the best food, rest, medicine, a soft place to sleep and the freedom to cry in your arms.

You are somebody's child. And you deserve just as much compassion—from others and from yourself. Give yourself permission to be gentle with your body. Lower your expectations and demands. Don't berate yourself if you find simple things drain you. Your body needs time to recover and it may take years before you are physically restored or adapt to permanent wounds.

Don't expect your body to act as if everything is fine just because you're home. The damage has been done. This goes for your sex life, too. It's normal to not have the drive you once did or experience dysfunction. It's also normal to be on sexual overdrive. The point is that we need to recognize that our bodies need time, gentleness, rest, and the chance to adjust without the expectation that it will happen fast.

Loving partners and families need to realize this, too. Even though a survivor may seem fine, war stress has impacted his or her body. Understand that it is going to take a long time to physically recover or adapt. We know war survivors endure trauma and so we tend to focus on the psychological impact. We forget that this stress is carried, literally, in the body. Wounds to the spirit also manifest in the body, so it's not just injury or physical exhaustion that we're dealing with. If your loved one says he doesn't have the energy for something, believe him. *He doesn't have the energy.* The body needs nutrition, rest, massage, exercise, sexual release and affection. It needs to be deeply and tenderly nurtured.

What Do You Mean: You Don't Know Who You Are?

Re-defining who you are after war can seem like an elusive process. We don't know where to look or who to turn to for answers. Pieces are missing, beliefs have shifted. Survivors often simply feel broken inside. Confused. Uncertain. Alone.

You can be sure, though, that the core essence of who you are—the deepest parts of your spirit—are still buried underneath. Those parts of you will resurface when they feel safe enough to do so. They may be hiding to survive. Tender, loving, compassionate emotions, belief in good, in humanity, in life having meaning—the ability to trust, to have faith of any sort, the ability to feel connected—to others, to nature, to aspects of ourselves that we once counted on—all of this hides in order to allow the parts of ourselves that know how to survive death and violence take over.

This is a gut-wrenching fact to deal with because we often desperately want to be the person we were before. We *liked* who we were—loving partners, affectionate parents, faith-filled church-goers, people who felt connected to Spirit, nature, our work, our purpose, what we wanted in life. When we look at ourselves and feel disconnected—it's devastating. And yet, when we strip it down, everything we *believed* we were, is not who we actually are. Beliefs change, but we still exist.

When we don't know how to define ourselves or what we believe—it scares us. It also scares our families. We have the comfort of knowing how we got this way. They don't. They sent you off with tears and paralyzed hearts and the next time they saw you, they were again embracing you with tears and hearts bursting with relief. You are to them, in every sense, the same person as when they last saw you. Except, you're not. What you know inside about how you feel, they can only guess at: watching you, looking for 'signs', hoping beyond hope that you are okay.

Your family can't see inside you. Thank god, you say. But hold on, that's not necessarily good. They can't see inside you, and that means they have no clue as to what you are going through. They have no reference point for the realities of war. Spouses are especially left in the dark. Most of us define a personal, close relationship with *how well we know another*. When there's this gaping hole in shared experience in our lives together, coupled with the fact that life has simply changed as time has passed, we feel alienated; misunderstandings are inevitable. It's like if you give two actors different scripts but don't tell them, they come on stage thinking they are both working from the same one. The result? Confusion and misunderstanding. You are working from your war script; your spouse is working from the script you had together before the war. Don't blame each other. You are simply living from the only place you know how—your last reference point.

When we don't feel as if we really know someone anymore, we can start to worry about whether or not the relationship will survive. It takes a ton of commitment to make an intimate relationship work after war. One partner may feel this heavier than the other. As a survivor, you may be in too much pain to be objective enough to see how your pain is impacting the relationship. Spouses may worry they're no longer desirable or have the values and goals in common that first pulled you together and kept the relationship alive. You start to wonder if this can still work. Fear sets in. Words get slung.

Stop. Take a breath. The essence of who you are is still within you. The person you fell in love with is still there. Changed, yes, but still there. You both need time to find out if your relationship can endure despite the changes. Remember, you have *both* changed, grown, and endured intense fear and stress.

What begins now is a journey to *become*, not to recover. To find out who you both will be. Hold on and don't let go too early. This is not the time to give up on a relationship that is in its essence loving, supportive, and nurturing. (It is time to make sure you are safe, however, and if you feel physically threatened, you need to get help immediately.) Assuming that you're safe, though, you're going to have to find a way to be as mutually supportive of the relationship as possible. If that means you sleep in separate beds or separate houses in order to show genuine affection and acceptance during the time you are together, then do it. Do whatever it takes. But don't give up. Not yet.

So, Why Don't You Want to Pray Anymore?

Religion is one of the major issues war challenges and often changes. Loving families grow alarmed when a survivor returns and doesn't want to attend services or no longer prays. It's especially hard if the family has held on to their faith as a key source of their strength.

Families need to realize that a survivor has had every tenant of faith challenged every single day by the act of killing, the breath of death and the blatant suffering of children and civilians. What he or she experienced was much worse and far more damaging than you will ever know. It's hard for families to understand that what may be their source of spiritual strength may be a survivor's deepest source of anger. This is the reality for thousands.

I was a very religious person prior to living in Bosnia. One day in Sarajevo, as I sat in a new church listening to a visiting American pastor preach about not being afraid and tell the congregation, quite sincerely, that God didn't want them to be afraid of public speaking anymore, I lost it. *How about being afraid your neighbor is going to rape you again? Or that you*

won't have enough food for tomorrow? Real concerns of people in the room. I soon learned that the comforts of American Christianity simply do not deal with the realities of war.

War survivors need acceptance, not pressure, preaching, or convincing. If your loved one doesn't seem interested in religion, do not press him. He or she will eventually find their own spiritual path and, for many, conventional religion will never be part of their lives again. Don't let your own spiritual convictions prevent you from giving your survivor the open acceptance she needs right now.

Families may also experience just the opposite. A survivor may have 'found religion' on the battlefield and all of a sudden your secular family is faced with religious passion that you do not understand or believe. Be patient. *Know that whatever spiritual status a survivor is in is the only place he or she can be at this time.*

After All, It's Been Six Months, You Should Be Healed By Now

Your life can seem pretty good on most fronts except for the big gap called war. You may not feel that much different and what I'm saying about being shattered and not knowing who you are may not seem like it applies to you. If that's the case, I want you to take some time alone to really ask yourself if you are letting yourself feel the impact. Who have you lost? What scared you the most? What has been hardest for you back home? Denial is a powerful protector—a tool for survival. It may take years before your mind lets you unwrap war's effects.

In our culture, we have little patience for wounds we cannot see, and far too little acceptance for the wounds we do see. Because of the lingering taboo over being wounded, survivors often try to hide, ignore, or deny that their wounds exist.

Yet *every* war survivor comes back with mental, emotional, spiritual and, many times, physical wounds. As I write this, nearly 30,000 men and women have been sent home from Iraq and Afghanistan physically wounded. Like in most wars everywhere, they seem to exist in the shadows; silent sufferers left to endure months and years of healing and adaptation to bodies they don't recognize. Quite frankly, the public doesn't want to see them. We don't want to be reminded; we wouldn't know what to say.

So we leave them to fend for themselves. That's the reality. There is very little true support for veterans—with a historically broken VA system crippled by Congress who fails to allocate the funds our troops and healing practitioners need, and a public who cringes at the thought of having to be reminded of what war does—veterans and their families are left having to fight battle after battle to get the care and acceptance that they need and deserve. Unfortunately, this probably isn't going to change anytime soon. And as a survivor, you're going to have to realize that this is just the way things are. Your healing journey is a warrior's journey—and it's going to take every ounce of strength and the support of your fellow comrades to stay on it.

Many veterans wonder if healing is actually possible? If you define healing as a return to who you were before—as if the war never happened—then, no, you can never fully heal. You cannot erase war. But healing is possible if you find a way to accept your wounds and give them a place in your life.

We live in the era of the instantaneous. We want instant cures, instant fixes, instant healing. There is no such thing as instant healing. Healing takes time. It is a process. It is, in itself, a state of being. It can't be forced or rushed—not a comfort when you are hurting and

desperate to find something that will give you relief. Because our culture does not actively reach out and support a survivor's healing, survivors often end up reaching for the only 'medicine' available: alcohol, drugs and other addictive behaviors that temporarily numb the pain. Anyone in pain seeks relief. Families sometimes see a survivor's drinking or drug use as a moral issue, when the reality is, survivors are trying to find any way to ease the pain and cope. If you are a survivor drinking or using, you are not alone. But without addressing your pain in ways that actually treat the wounds and not just the symptom, your healing will be delayed and the pain will come back stronger each time you've temporarily numbed it. You have to go to the source. And you have to accept the fact that it's okay to live in a state of woundedness while healing is happening.

Sadly, the spiritual and emotional wounds that survivors carry are for the most part never seen or acknowledged. War inflicts images, scents, sounds, and feelings that sear themselves into memory. These are the remnants that contort into nightmares. These are the flashes that appear at random. These are the things that haunt you. Survivors often expect to carry these wounds inside for the rest of their lives. Our belief that it's a sign of weakness to show our wounds is a tragic one. *There is no shame in being wounded. You cannot survive war without it.*

Why War Buddies Matter So Much

In Iraq and Bosnia, everyone left alive is a survivor. Everyone has nightmares; everyone knows the scent of blood rising from the ground, the sounds of mortars, the echo of gunfire. In America, survivors come home to communities who do not know what they have been through. You are isolated, trapped between trying to "get over it", wanting to reconnect to loved ones and yet probably feel a much stronger bond with the buddies you left behind. The fact is that no one knows what you have been through unless they have experienced it.

Your combat buddies know you more intimately now than anyone else in your life. The fact that you feel connected to men and women who had your back and fought beside you and lost the same friends you lost, is good. Shared danger bonds people more intimately than love. For months—more than a year most likely—the troops in your unit have been your family. It's okay to feel close to them and it's okay to miss them. They are a vital part of who you are and your connection with them will most likely last a lifetime. That connection—staying in touch, having reunions, emailing each other—can be a vital part of your healing journey. These people matter.

Ironically, this is something that many spouses simply do not get. Why and how could a bunch of strangers thrown together in combat mean more to your spouse than the ten years of your marriage? How is it possible that he can be so rude and heartless to you now and get all teary when he talks about his buddies? It doesn't make sense. And yet, it does. If you stop to realize that it's not the individuals themselves that he's so sensitive about (though he truly does love them); it's *why* he loves them that matters. These people know what he's been through. It's that plain and simple. They were there. You were not.

I learned to accept this early on in my marriage. I was the outsider, coming into my husband's life and the lives of our colleagues and friends as someone untouched by war. They had a bond, one that I could not fully embrace and one that I would never truly be part of. They had inside jokes, memories they shared of survival: I could only listen and imagine. My husband

loves me completely; but there are people in his life who have a place in him that I do not own. And that's okay. There is space in his heart for me, for the war and for his close friends. Who says we have to own all of someone's heart to be fully theirs?

Another expectation civilians may have is that you hate the people from the country where you fought. The truth is that many survivors feel quite attached to the people, culture, and land where they served. Soldiers fighting in a foreign country become a part of that country—it's memory and legacy. Whether as invaders or freedom fighters, soldiers enter a culture and live there. They get to know the way the sun rises on the landscape and how the weather patterns develop. They pick up some of the local language and begin to understand some of the customs, habits, and mannerisms of the culture. They may even fall in love or become intimate with a local who is also surviving the war. Troops begin to identify with the people who live in their area and develop a heart for what the local civilian population is suffering. The "locals" and war buddies are important people in a war survivor's life. And most often, always will be.

That said, it's easy for loving families to assume that with all the horror a survivor has experienced, he would just want to leave it all behind. Don't be jealous of your survivor's relationship with the land and people where he fought or the *men and women who helped keep him alive*. Give thanks for these people. They carried your spouse and are a part of him now. Don't compare your relationship to your survivor with his relationship to his buddies. He doesn't love these people more than he loves you or your family, but he does love them. It's just a different kind of love and different type of relationship. And yes, it is emotionally intimate. War does that. He's going to think about them, he's going to worry about them; he's going to feel at times much closer to them than he does to you.

Make room in your heart for these people—the war buddies. Allow them in. They can help you know how to relate to your survivor now. They can fill in gaps. They can help you understand just how resilient and human your loved one is.

Of course, it's understandable that as a spouse you want to be everything your survivor needs. You want to draw closer, to become a part of that world, to have your love be enough. And that's an expectation loving spouses often have—that their love is, or should be, enough to heal. No doubt, your love is a vital, vital part; but it is not enough.

One of the most important gifts you need to give to yourself right now is to let go of the weight you carry for your survivor's recovery. *You cannot heal your war survivor*. He or she has the resiliency, the inner strength, that will eventually knit scar tissue over the wounds and lessen the pain. Your gift is acceptance. Acceptance is one of the most crucial healing factors a war survivor needs. By accepting the fact that you are not responsible to heal war wounds and that you are not *able* to heal war wounds, you will open up loving space that will encompass your survivor, help him or her to feel safe to be who they are and face an uncertain future.

Expectations abound about life after war. People assume how things will be, and while they mean well, much of their assumptions are based on their own fear of facing change. People want war survivors and their families to be the same as they were. We don't want to face the reality that people we send to war come back different, and those who are left behind, change. We don't want to deal with the uncertainty and the insecurity that comes from the unknown. We're scared of losing what is familiar—and losing the familiar in a loved one is one of the scariest things to face.

Nevertheless, we have to let go of the expectation that those impacted by war will someday be the same as they were before war. This is part of what families and societies lose in

war, and it's a deep loss. War takes parts of our loved ones away from us. It takes time from our lives, robs children of their parents, and leaves families to survive through incredible fear and suspense. With the focus on survivors, it's easy to overlook the family's need to grieve its losses. But it's important to understand that a family's pain is just as valid as the survivor's. And as a family, you need time to heal.

War is not an event that can be experienced and forgotten. It changes who people are and it becomes a part of you. War will be a part of your lives for the rest of your life.