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The Lost Road Home: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and the Psychological Effects of War on Veterans and Their Families

Milly Balzarini

DeForest Press (2008)

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Milly Balzarini has written “The Lost Road Home” to spread awareness of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)—what it is and how veterans can get the help they need if they suffer from it. Included in the book are both stories of veterans and stories of family members who struggle to understand a loved one who suffers from PTSD. Balzarini explains the symptoms of PTSD and the process of being diagnosed with it; suggestions are also included for ways the military can better help soldiers and their families cope with the soldier’s return to civilian life. The book’s easy-to-read style will provide hope and understanding to many families.

Stories abound throughout “The Lost Road Home.” Many books have been written where an individual veteran tells his story, but Balzarini interviewed numerous veterans to write this book. Story after story fills it, making it read like the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous in its number of stories. People suffering from PTSD will gain from it what alcoholics gain from their big book. One of the most effective treatments for PTSD is group therapy where veterans share their war experiences and how those experiences changed them. Reading “The Lost Road Home” was like being granted the privilege of sitting inside such a group to witness those stories and what they meant. I continually admired the veterans’ honesty in recalling their experiences; such honesty was largely possible because, as in a Twelve-Step group, Balzarini provided anonymity for the people she interviewed by only using their first names. One veteran told Balzarini, “I don’t really like to talk about this. It really bothers me. But if this book helps someone else...” Such willingness to share stories helps veterans help each other. By hearing story after story, they learn they are not alone, and they learn how others have dealt with the trauma they are experiencing. Their stories also help loved ones understand what the veteran has experienced and why those experiences have resulted in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Honesty is a great strength of “The Lost Road Home.” Balzarini is completely honest herself in explaining her reason for writing the book. She allows her husband to describe his own Vietnam War experiences. Then she tells her story as the wife of a Vietnam veteran, focusing particularly on her husband’s Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and how she and her children coped with it for thirty years before they realized what caused her husband’s anger and irrational behavior. Many books have been written about PTSD and many veterans have recounted their stories, but Balzarini is the first author I know to tell the story from the family’s point of view; consequently,



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her book will help many families recognize that their loved one suffers from PTSD, and family members will find they are not alone in how the disorder has affected their families.

Beyond telling her own family's story, Balzarini goes two steps farther; she includes not only more than a dozen stories by Vietnam veterans, but she also includes stories of PTSD from veterans of Iraq, Korea, and World War II. Then she includes first-hand accounts from wives, mothers, and children of veterans. Many family members develop secondary PTSD as a result of walking on eggshells around their loved one, never knowing what might set the veteran off. As Balzarini explains, "everything is a crisis with PTSD, whether it is dealing with traffic, opening the mail, or answering a telephone. Somehow it is all connected with the war and survival." Something as simple as startling a veteran can make him go into survival mode and become violent, or he may be irritable over something as small as the noise from something accidentally falling. Family members begin to live in fear of setting off the veteran's anger, which makes them develop secondary PTSD.

Beyond raising awareness of PTSD, Balzarini provides arguments for how to help the situation. Included in the book is the story of Noah, a veteran of the war in Iraq who committed suicide because he suffered from PTSD. Noah's mother is advocating that a "Noah's Clause" be added to military contracts to make it mandatory that all combat infantry troops undergo assessment and be treated for PTSD before they return home. Soldiers would have to agree to this treatment and sign the contract before going into the armed forces. By doing so, soldiers would receive treatment immediately after their service ended, thus saving many families from undergoing such extreme trauma with a returning vet, or losing a brother, husband, son or father to suicide. Balzarini also reveals that the government does not adequately provide funding for its veterans; she discusses the future cost of psychological treatments for veterans returning from Iraq, and how PTSD makes many veterans unable to function, hold down jobs, or keep stable marriages. Every year between 529,000—840,000 veterans are homeless because PTSD makes them unable to cope in society. The cost to the government of providing for the veterans returning from Iraq makes it more difficult for Vietnam Veterans to get the treatment they need. And no government funding exists to provide counseling to family members so they can understand their loved ones' PTSD or cope with their own secondary PTSD. In addition, while World War II veterans may also suffer from PTSD, Balzarini notes several differences between World War II and Vietnam and Iraq veterans, including that World War II soldiers remained with their units for extended periods of time, rather than being rotated in and out of a unit, and they remained together after the war for several months, helping them relieve the tension, while Vietnam veterans individually returned home after a thirteen month tour of duty, meaning they had no one who could relate to them after they served; it was almost as if they had fought the war alone because they returned home alone.

"The Lost Road Home" stands out among books about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder because it is written for both veterans and their families. Anyone who served in a war or who has a loved



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one who served will find it helpful and eye opening. Balzarini has succeeded in opening up communication in families and restoring hope and understanding where before there was confusion and despair. “The Lost Road Home” may help many former soldiers return home at last.

— Tyler R. Tichelaar, Ph.D., author of *The Marquette Trilogy*