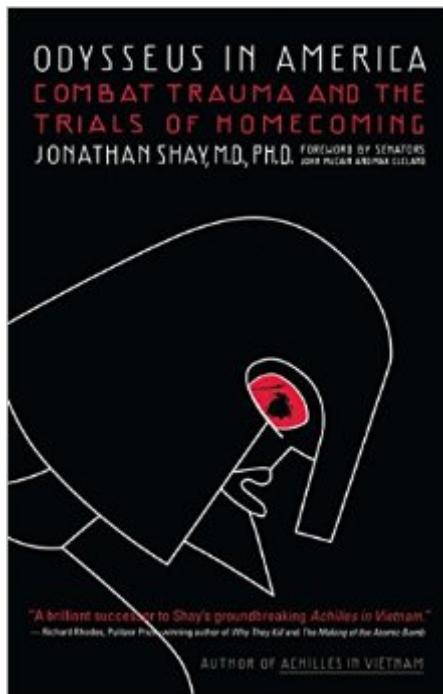


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Odysseus In America: Combat Trauma And The Trials Of Homecoming



Synopsis

In this ambitious follow-up to *Achilles in Vietnam*, Dr. Jonathan Shay uses the *Odyssey*, the story of a soldier's homecoming, to illuminate the pitfalls that trap many veterans on the road back to civilian life. Seamlessly combining important psychological work and brilliant literary interpretation with an impassioned plea to renovate American military institutions, Shay deepens our understanding of both the combat veteran's experience and one of the world's greatest classics.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

READ THIS BOOK, because no movie or book has ever captured as vividly and realistically the combat veterans painful re-entry into normal civilian life as Jonathan Shay's "Odysseus in America". READ THIS BOOK and learn that Homer's "Iliad" and "Odyssey" are true stories of combat veterans. This will surprise and delight anyone who enjoys the classics or war stories. READ THIS BOOK and understand what the American combat veteran experiences on his return home. Anyone involved in the helping professions will enjoy and benefit. Anybody who has a combat veteran in their family will learn and be better for it. READ THIS BOOK and you will understand the great sin that we all commit against our veterans; especially Vietnam vets. Every woman who has a son will want to read this. READ THIS BOOK and you will finally understand Homer. Dr. Jonathan Shay has shown that it is as true today as it was thousands of years ago that warfare makes men different. He is a psychiatrist who works with veterans in the Boston VA. In his first book "Achilles in Vietnam" he explained the cycle of trauma and pain that is inflicted by combat. This sequence is --betrayal of

what's right by commanders (a common Vietnam story), a soldier's rage at this injustice, their withdrawal into a circle of the closest comrades, then the loss of these comrades with accompanying deep guilt and the growing feeling of being already dead, and then the ice cold berserker state and loss of fear in combat. Then veteran is whisked from the killing ground and immediately plunked down in America. He comes home the way he was in Vietnam.

Shay's decades of work with Vietnam veterans, as described and explained in this book, helped formalize the syndrome of behavior that came to be known as post traumatic stress disorder. It afflicts soldiers living in mortal danger for long periods of time, leaving them afterwards in a near-permanent state of hyper-vigilance. They have suffered what Shay characterizes as a moral injury, which like other disabling war injuries prevents them from returning fully to civilian life. He calls it a moral injury because what has been injured is the ability to trust - even those closest and dearest - and living in the civilian world is impossible without it. The ancients, Shay argues, understood the psychological dangers of combat for those who fight, survive, and return home. The combination of both cunning (necessary for survival) and the predictable errors in judgment among those who both give and take orders are reflected in the character of Odysseus, who returns with his men from the Trojan War in Homer's "The Odyssey." There is, Shay asserts, good reason why his name means literally, "he who makes trouble for others." The loss of all of his men and then the bloodbath that follows his arrival in Ithaca, as he eliminates Penelope's suitors, illustrate how violence and death follow him long after the war is over. The fault lies not in individual men, Shay argues, but in a kind of military command that treats them as replaceable parts of a large fighting machine, instead of as groups of soldiers who train and fight together and then are demobilized together. The communal aspect of this supportive group process helps men and women make the return safely and helps them overcome the aftermath of war's traumatizing impact.

This book was chosen as required reading for Combat Logistics Regiment-25 Officers returning from Iraq. The following is my personal comments and do not necesarliy reflect the view of CLR-25, the United States Marine Corps or the United States Government. Dr. Shay M.D uses the story of Odysseus 10 year trip home from the Trojan War as an allegory for Vietnam Veterans return home. It is interesting reading with lots of good "war stories" to keep the pace lively. However the book can be quite academic at times. The allegory is very plain. Odysseus is a soldier having trouble getting home and adjusting. Some Vietnam Veterans had trouble adjusting. Dr Shay defines Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as persistence of valid adaptations to danger into a time of safety afterward.

In other words the Veteran with PTSD that freak's out in crowds is doing so because "crowds draw mortar fire". He lists some of the skills that combat veterans learn are:^{*} Control of fear^{*} Cunning, the arts of deception, the arts of the "mind f--k."^{*} Control of violence against members of their own group.^{*} The capacity to respond skillfully and instantly with violent, lethal force.^{*} Vigilance, perpetual mobilization for danger.^{*} Regarding fixed rules as possible threats to their own and their comrade's survival.^{*} Regarding fixed "rules of war" as possible advantages to be gained over the enemy.^{*} Suppression of compassion, horror, guilt, tenderness, grief, disgust.^{*} The capacity to lie fluently and convincingly.^{*} Physical strength, quickness, endurance, stealth.^{*} Skill at locating and grabbing needed supplies whether officially provided or not.^{*} Skill in the use of a variety of lethal weapons.

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