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Cultivating the Mind of a Warrior

by Elizabeth Stanley

I hail from a long warrior lineage, with Stanleys having served in the U.S. Army every generation since the Revolutionary War. My grandfather saw combat in World War II–Pacific and the Korean War; my father served multiple combat tours in Vietnam. As a result, my nervous system was literally wired through the caregiving of intergenerational trauma, a patterning that drew many traumatic events to me early in life. I had an Army ROTC scholarship at Yale—for which I drilled seventy-five miles away since ROTC got kicked off campus during the Vietnam War. I served as a military intelligence officer in Korea, in Germany, and on two Balkans peacekeeping deployments. While serving in Bosnia, I experienced firsthand the stressors of deployment in a complex operational environment. After I left active duty, my career as a civilian academic bloomed, but I struggled privately for years with a variety of symptoms related to the cumulative effects of these experiences.

Put another way, I know the profession of arms from the inside out: from its integrity, nobility, heroism and selfless service on the one hand, to its horrors, traumas, shadow behaviors and deep suffering on the other.

The depth of these experiences led me on a journey to heal my noble-yet-traumatic lineage and transmute that suffering to wisdom and compassion. During this journey, I received extensive training in mindfulness, with intensive practice in the United States and Burma. I also learned how to reregulate my mind-body through body-based trauma therapies, and eventually sought clinical training in these techniques. I came to realize that many symptoms I experienced resulted from rejected and denied experiences in my past. Because those experiences had been too overwhelming for my mind when they happened, they had been stored outside my awareness in my body. By bringing awareness into the body and its sensations, I learned to use my conscious mind to help the mind-body recover and return to a healthy baseline. I also learned to exhibit flexibility, resilience and the adaptive capacity to function effectively during constantly changing—even incredibly difficult—experiences.

Though complex, the science behind this is increasingly clear. Put simply, an individual's resilience depends on a well-regulated autonomic nervous system (ANS). The ANS controls the fight-or-flight response, as well as respiration, circulation, sleep, sex drive, digestion, elimination and rest/recovery. A well-regulated nervous system can

tolerate a larger stress response, which means that it can function more effectively during a stressful experience without either acting out against one's goals or values, or dissociating along the "freeze" spectrum. A well-regulated nervous system can also recover back to baseline more efficiently, in preparation for the next challenge. It can respond flexibly, and adaptively switch between "survival brain" and "thinking brain" functions. Finally, it is more aware of the present than caught in the grip of the past, such as in memories or behavioral patterns from past trauma.

In contrast, a dysregulated nervous system cannot tolerate much stress and, in fact, tends to elevate it, causing ineffective decision-making. Dysregulated individuals become easily overwhelmed and may find themselves unable to act at all, or acting in ways they normally may not. Stress, in these circumstances, can trigger impulsive, reactive or counterproductive behavior inappropriate for the situation at hand.

As I embodied these mindful-awareness practices, I quickly saw their direct relevance to the particular challenges to which warriors are exposed today. My definition of warriors is inclusive: anyone who serves their communities in high-stress contexts, including members of the military, law enforcement and other first-response organizations. As an academic who teaches and writes about international security, I believed that mindfulness and body-based self-regulation skills could help with the cognitive degradation (well-documented in empirical research) associated with military stress-inoculation training. I believed it might help troops regulate their ANS and thus function more effectively while deployed. In military circles, this is called the "strategic corporal" concept, where an individual's choices or actions while deployed have tremendous effects on the nation's ability to accomplish its strategic goals. I also believed it might shield troops—and their families—against health disorders and behavioral symptoms of the stress spectrum after returning home.

By 2007, after generating interest at the U.S. Department of Defense, I found my first neuroscientist collaborator, Dr. Amishi Jha, and together we secured funding for a pilot study. I created Mindfulness-based Mind Fitness Training (MMFT)®, blending mindfulness and body-based self-regulation skills into a wider didactic framing for individuals in high-stress environments. By 2009, I founded the nonprofit Mind Fitness Training Institute to support the research, development and broad dissemination of MMFT. The institute has now conducted four empirical research studies—the most recent embedding MMFT into a U.S. Marine Corps school—and trained thousands in both military and civilian high-stress environments, as well as their care providers and family members.

MMFT is a twenty-hour course, usually taught over eight weeks but also taught in an intensive format. Designed for individuals operating in high-stress environments, with prior exposure to significant stress or trauma, it cultivates mindfulness with exercises to

train attention and awareness of sensations in the body. It also cultivates stress resilience with specific exercises to support the self-regulation of the autonomic nervous system, by extending concepts from sensorimotor psychotherapy and Somatic Experiencing. These body-based self-regulation skills make MMFT distinct from other mindfulness-based approaches. In addition, MMFT has eight didactic modules that explore the relationships between mindfulness, warrior traditions, neuroscience, stress resilience, emotion regulation and promoting effective decision-making, performance and choice in stressful environments.

To be sure, this work has been somewhat controversial across the spectrum. As two examples, one variant runs something like this: "I can see how mindfulness could be helpful for veterans who have left the military. But how could it ever be ethical to offer such training to troops still on active duty? Isn't that just going to help them suppress their human revulsion for war and thereby make them more efficient at killing? Won't this just give the government another way to use the military for aggression and imperialist foreign policy?" Another variant: "Isn't mindfulness only going to make troops more touchy-feely and compassionate? Won't it just make them more mindful of the awful things they are being asked to do, and then they won't have the willpower to do it? Isn't it better for them to be checked out when they have to kill people?"

To see through the misunderstanding captured in these arguments requires disentangling and clarification.

First, the warrior—at his most impeccable and most effective—must embody what one Marine lance corporal once described to me as "both the monk and the killer." This truth makes many civilians, especially those at the liberal end of the political spectrum, very uncomfortable. A true warrior must be able to still her body and mind to call forth strength; exhibit endurance during harsh environmental conditions; have awareness of herself, others and the wider environment so she can make discerning choices; access compassion for herself, her compatriots, her adversary and the locals where she is deployed; and show self-control during provocation so that she doesn't overreact. And yet, if the moment demands, she must also have the capacity to kill, cleanly, without hesitation and without remorse.

This is the paradox of the warrior: he doesn't seek aggression out, but if he encounters aggression that cannot be resolved nonviolently, he must meet it decisively. In other words, the warrior must be able to access his vulnerability and his strength simultaneously. It is only by accessing both qualities fully at all times that the warrior can engage in right action.

Since the Vietnam War, the United States still has not healed aspects of a civil-military gap that contributes to a range of pathologies in U.S. foreign policy and national security —including its tiny all-volunteer force (less than 0.5% of the population) that draws

disproportionately from traumatized, evangelical, rural, minority and lower socioeconomic groups; a civilian business, media, intellectual and political elite that lacks firsthand understanding of the military tool under its democratic control; an overreliance on technology in pursuit of a sterile, low-cost, "precise" form of warfare that lowers that elites' threshold for interventionist foreign policy; an overextended military increasingly physically and culturally divorced from the society it serves but bearing the brunt of civilian policy choices; and an American public increasingly ignorant of and apathetic about the role of U.S. power on the planet.

No wonder we feel a collective discomfort with the truth that an effective warrior needs to be "monk and killer" simultaneously. No wonder, if we filter the "mindfulness in the military debate" through this wider cultural context, people tell me that we need to hold an "ethical line" and only offer mindfulness training to veterans but not to active-duty troops.

Second, and relatedly, resilience and performance enhancement are actually two sides of the same coin: it is only our collective discomfort that makes us want to divorce them. For example, according to U.S. Military Mental Health Advisory Team research, troops who screened positive for mental-health problems after deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan were three times more likely to report having engaged in unethical behavior while deployed. Such behavior—including unnecessarily damaging property or insulting, harming or killing noncombatants—is obviously counterproductive to "winning the hearts and minds" of the local population. This finding suggests a strong link between the negative effects of stress and ANS dysregulation, which degrades troops' capacity to manage their own emotions and thereby to control impulsive, reactive behavior and declines in effective mission performance.

If the nation's leaders have decided to send troops into harm's way, those troops' hearts, minds and bodies will experience the stressors of war—whether they are mindfully paying attention or not. With mindfulness, however, they are more likely to see the environment around them clearly, without being influenced by unconscious "survival-brain" filters that can exaggerate what's really there. They are more likely to regulate their hard-wired stress response and the reactive impulses this stress response can create. As a result, they are more likely to pull the trigger only when they really need to—when imminent harm to themselves or those they are protecting actually exists in the environment. Conversely, they are less likely to pull the trigger reactively, giving in to strong impulses like fear, vengeance, anger or confusion. They are less likely to act in ways that undermine mission effectiveness, such as inadvertently shooting a noncombatant and thereby pushing locals to side with the adversary. They are also less likely to act in ways that afterwards they will regret—which often fuels shame, isolation, survivor guilt and psychological injury later on.

In other words, they are less likely to cause harm to others and to themselves.

As our empirical research about MMFT has suggested, the takeaway here is that MMFT can be protective: for the troops themselves; for the allies, potential adversaries and local populations they encounter while deployed; and for their families and communities when they return home.

Given our collective responsibility for U.S. national security policy—which we wield through our vote, voice and choices we make for how to spend our time, energy and money—we need to recognize the moral imbalance that exists between us and those serving on our behalf. Those in uniform swear to uphold the Constitution and defend this nation, with their own lives if necessary—a sacrifice the rest of us are not being called upon to make. We have an ethical obligation to provide them with training to increase their capacity for nonharming of themselves and others. And as uncomfortable as it might make us, such training will likely confer the most nonharming effects if it is offered as soon as they enter the military, as part of their foundational military skill training.

Finally, one concern is that such training could hone attention skills in the service of unethical behavior. I am sympathetic to this danger. This is why I believe mindfulness should never be taught in any context unless the person teaching is already an experienced practitioner, having sat with his or her own mind, body and heart through the vast range of human experience for a significant time. It is the reason why I have refused to participate in research to examine the effects of teaching mindfulness to warriors separate from the wider didactic MMFT framework, which provides the ethical context of the warrior traditions and information and skills for ANS and emotion regulation in high-stress contexts. It is the reason why the Mind Fitness Training Institute has established a comprehensive certification process for MMFT trainers, to ensure that trainers have completed intensive practice in reregulating their own ANS, mind-body and heart before they teach others, and why we do not allow someone to teach MMFT without certification.

In this short essay, it is tough to capture the complexity of these issues and my decision to bring mindfulness into the military context. My aspiration has been to lay out uncomfortable truths, describing a world that many Americans do not know, and to allow people to open to these truths in their own time.

The profession of arms is unlike any other. It is the only profession that requires leaders to nurture, mentor and train their subordinates—in fact, love them—but then be willing to send these same subordinates into harm's way, to kill and perhaps be killed. And it is the only profession that requires subordinates to respect and trust their leaders enough to willingly follow orders that may lead to their own wounding, dismemberment or even death.

Given the difficulties inherent in waging war, we have an obligation to train our

warriors to embody as much capacity for self-regulation and nonharming as is possible. With training and deliberate practice, warriors can learn to see clearly exactly how things are, tolerate what's happening without getting jerked around by impulses or reactivity, and then choose the most effective course of action in the service of others—without sacrificing their own humanity in the process.

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