

# Warriors in Liminality: An Alchemical View of the Transition from Military Service to Civilian Life

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*Abstract.* This paper uses alchemical metaphor to examine the psychological challenges United States military veterans face as they attempt to reintegrate into civilian society. The arc of the research tracks a military member's progression from Basic Training to the transition back into civilian life. In particular, it pinpoints the psychological harm inflicted by the military's collective consciousness on the individual psyche. Examining the process of military training from the perspective of a Jungian understanding of the psychological stages of alchemy, the paper illuminates a process that presents each military member with profound difficulties related to identity, the ability to engage in a vibrant relationship with the Self, and the ability to reenter civilian life. In conclusion, it highlights the need for civilians, elected officials, and the mental healthcare community to help military veterans address the psychological pain of their service through practices that support their adjustment to civilian life from a holistic perspective that includes image, soul, and conscious connection fostered between the ego and archetypal forces that animate human life.

*Keywords:* adjustment disorder; alchemy, archetype; civilian; ego; individuation; military, post-traumatic stress; reintegration; veterans

## Introduction

For thousands of years individuals have gone through different rites of passage to become warriors who fight and protect those whom they love. Individuals who choose to become warriors in the United States join one of five branches of military service and may serve anywhere in the world, each experiencing a variety of environments and challenges. The United States has been consistently involved in overseas conflicts since 2001, the longest period of consistent warfare activity in the country's history (Bandow, 2019). Though many people are familiar with the physical demands experienced by military personnel, as a global society we are only beginning to understand the long-term psychological impact of military training and service (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2017; Carta, et al., 2009; Tick, 2005).

The Veterans Administration (VA) is the primary organization providing veteran health care in the United States and has traditionally focused on treating post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In recent times, however, a growing number of veterans are being diagnosed with Adjustment Disorder, which can be caused by significant changes or stressors, including, but not limited to, changes in living situation, loss of a job or loved

one, or potential financial issues, all of which are common challenges for newly separated veterans (Reger, et al., 2015; Veterans Administration, 2018a Mobbs & Bonanno, 2017; Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, 1998–2019). In a study done from 2001 to 2004 by Rundell on military personnel returning from Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), “the most common diagnosis was adjustment disorders (37.6%),” not PTSD (Carta, et al., 2009, para. 41). This shift in diagnosis illuminates the fact that one of the greatest challenges currently facing America’s warriors is that of reintegration, in particular the search for identity and purpose (Tick, 2005).

Once separated from the military, the group they were so closely bonded to, military members experience a psychological tear in their identity, often struggling to move through the world as individuals. As they physically are severed from the military body, their weakened ego is no longer contained by the “superior, more comprehensive viewpoint” of the military collective consciousness, and the newly separated individual must decide on their own where to live, what to wear, who to be (Edinger, 1994a, p. 56). This life-altering event can trigger the beginning of the often lonely process of individuation (Jung, 1942/1967), which for some can be more traumatic than their actual military service. This paper suggests that to better provide U.S. veterans with the care needed for the transition from military service to civilian life it is imperative for civilians and mental healthcare providers to understand the influence of the military’s collective consciousness on the veteran’s sense of self and the impact that severance from it has on the process of individuation.

### **An Alchemical View of the Transition from Military Service to Civilian Life**

Jung (1942/1967) believed that alchemy was “a concretization, in projected and symbolic form, of the process of individuation” (para. 140). The alchemical metaphor provides a uniquely holistic structure through which to view the transition from civilian to military member to veteran. Alchemy, as “a highly elaborate philosophical and psychological system” based in symbolic imagery, makes it possible to better understand the influence and impact of collective consciousness on the individual psyche (Hopcke, 1999, p. 162). This paper explores the stages of *calcinatio*, *solutio*, *coagulatio*, *sublimatio*, *mortificatio*, *separatio*, and *coniunctio* to elucidate how the influence of the collective military consciousness creates a contaminated psychic mixture for military members in which the individual’s sense of self is overcome by the collective and is thus forfeited to ego identification with the group, increasing the potential for death of consciousness and loss of life for America’s veterans (Edinger, 1994a).

### **Military Enculturation Through the Alchemical Lens**

#### *Basic Training Weeks 1–2: Calcination*

In alchemical practice, *calcinatio* is the process of purification through fire (Edinger, 1994b). What is left, whatever survives this stage, is considered a pure substance. During the first week of Basic Training the individual is stripped of their clothing in the presence of others and forced to give up all jewelry and personal items, for the fire of *calcinatio* burns away all “such luxurious pleasures and earthly loves” (Edinger, 1994a, p. 27). If the military member is male, his head is shaved. The military member (in alchemical terms,

the initiate) loses all removable forms of individual identity and anything physical they might want to hold onto for comfort during the destabilization of their sense of self. Psychologically, the members are witnessing their outward individuality disappearing as all observable differences are literally removed, and they are absorbed into the image of the group, into the lines and lines of bodies that are almost completely indistinguishable from each other. Their awareness of the physical changes taking place is most likely the only consciously recognized part of the entire alchemical process, the only time they really are aware that they are losing themselves. It is also intentional that they are aware, that they witness the loss, to encourage the feelings of being weak and alone, making it more likely that they will allow the larger consciousness of the group to lead them to a feeling of safety once again.

Alchemically, the heat of the initial weeks of military service continues, moving into “the drying out of waterlogged unconscious complexes” (Edinger, 1994a, p. 42). Through ridicule and harassment, those in charge of new recruits bring forward from the *prima materia*, the primal energies of our psyche and soul, any shadow material that exists within it that is connected to their lives as civilians. This process is intended to eradicate any aspect of the recruit that makes them stand out, see themselves as different, or consider themselves more or less entitled than the others. The burning away of individuality allows “thoughts, deeds, and memories that carry shame, guilt or anxiety” (p. 42) to come forward, often in exaggeration towards full expression, to be burned away, leaving only the pure essence of the individual. Military members who come from wealthier backgrounds are given the most demeaning jobs, and those who believed themselves to be mentally or physically tougher than the others are torn down through excessive physical exertion and emotionally abusive remarks screamed at them until their former sense of self breaks down, and the person surrenders their imagined superiority.

### *Basic Training Week 3: Dissolution*

During *solutio* there is a dissolution of the old form, which creates space for a new one to come forward (Edinger, 1994b). Depending on the strength of the individual ego, the process can feel like a welcome surrender or an “annihilation of self” (p. 52). One of the reasons the military has an upper age limit on recruits, besides the physical implications, is that the older an individual is, the stronger and more entrenched the person’s ego formation will be, making it more likely the ego will fight harder against the change of identity it is being subjected to, psychologically speaking. During week three of Basic Training, individuals are brought into the collective. At this point, recruits are allowed to wear the full uniform, begin marching drills, and are no longer singled out, but now are punished as a group for individual infractions. The shift from individual to collective marks a crucial moment in the process of identity transformation for a warrior.

When the bare ego of the individual is immersed in a group at this point in the alchemical process, the strength of the group identity can easily overwhelm the individual, causing “confusion between authentic reconciliation of opposites through greater consciousness and a regressive dissolution which blurs awareness of the opposites” (Edinger, 1994a, p. 67). Individuals lose themselves in the identity of the group, no longer seeing themselves as one, but rather, as one piece of a whole.

The *solutio* phase in Basic Training begins to highlight those who will not become one with the military body, those who cannot endure the dissolution process as it “dissolves

all separateness and individual distinctions” (Edinger, 1994b, p. 58). For these individuals, the felt sense of an attack on the ego often leads to rebellious actions and a reversion in their training, discharge from service for unsuitability, or self-harm (including suicide).

#### *Basic Training Weeks 4–6: Coagulation*

The awakening of the new conscious personality to full awareness happens during *coagulatio*, as “it’s form and location are fixed . . . it has become attached to an ego” (Edinger, 1994a, p. 83). These weeks during Basic Training are focused on learning and honing the skills of the specific branch of service that they have joined: Marine Corps, Coast Guard, Army, Navy, or Air Force. During the coagulation phase of a warrior’s Basic Training, individuals are moving fully into their new identity with purpose, practicing all the elements of their new consciousness through time in classrooms, as well as out in the field. Depending on the branch of service, this time can include practical experience in weapons familiarization and proficiency, firefighting, damage control practices, combat first aid, line handling and knot tying, and various survival skills, including navigation. It also includes practicing more intangible skills, such as demonstrating adherence to their new values and beliefs through correct physical posturing and spoken responses, maintaining a high standard of cleanliness of self and living quarters, committing to support those around them throughout daily trials, and developing a presence of mind that allows them to let go of anything that is not within their physical surroundings. In alchemical terms, this process of transformation is often referred to as being cooked, kneaded, washed, hardened, softened, raised, lowered, divided, and finally united (Edinger, 1994a). As this phase in a recruit’s Basic Training comes to an end, the individuals, now part of the whole, move through all tasks together in groups; they are no longer singled out or punished alone. When one member makes a mistake or completes an objective, the group either suffers or reaps the benefits as a whole. Relationships have begun to form between the members, solidifying as recruits realize that one cannot succeed without the others. Warriors are learning to work together, allowing their relationships to further coagulate their new identity (Edinger, 1994a).

#### *Basic Training Week 7: Sublimation*

Military drills continue in week seven of Basic Training as a way of fine tuning the member through perfection of technique. Historical stories of glory and grandeur are shared to help display the overarching and widespread influence of the group. *Sublimatio* is the alchemical operation that transforms the material being worked on “into air by volatilizing and elevating it” (Edinger, 1994, p. 117). Applied to a recruit’s experience of military training, sublimation is the point in the process where individuals learn their place in the world and the heavens. Psychologically, sublimation creates the conditions needed for the ego to “learn how to see themselves and their world objectively . . . [and] strive to present life in terms of eternal forms and universal ideas” (Edinger, 1994a, p. 125). In week seven, military branch-specific creeds, oaths, and songs declaring allegiance and loyalty are sung and chanted repetitively to encourage pride in the collective and its honorable place in the world. This focus helps bring shape to the Other, that which is not exalted but is instead experienced as shadow, as “the enemy to be overcome” (Edinger, 1994a, p. 125).

### The Intentional Avoidance of Mortification and Separation

Military Basic Training seems to intentionally avoid the stages of *mortificatio* and *separatio*. Avoiding these operations allows the group consciousness to maintain and even strengthen its influence. These two operations would allow the individual to face and slay the Other within, which in Basic Training is the budding military identity, and cause the unwanted “death or transformation of [the] collective dominant” (Edinger, 1994a, p. 151). Ending the false identification with the group ego would directly undermine all the work that has been done to provide the individual with direct access to the strength of the military collective. Though potentially detrimental for the individual once they return to civilian society, connection to the collective is vital to their success in the military and, most importantly, to their survival during certain military operations.

In alchemy, *separatio* is the phase of distinction, bringing awareness to the shadow within, facing injured or undeveloped aspects of one’s personality and deciding what to do with them (Edinger, 1994a). Here, the ego faces a choice: engage with new and often challenging aspects of identity or discard them completely. This is a time of solitude, a time for an individual to decide what goes or stays, but for a warrior in Basic Training solitude is intentionally avoided, leaving no space for one’s dark side to be acknowledged. Through the bypassing of the *separatio* process, the military reinforces that the Other is outside of oneself and outside of the group. Therefore, all shadow is external to the group.

The impact of this process on a military member’s identity is profound. For if shadow were to be identified within oneself as elements of the Other that do not belong to the newer identity, *mortificatio* would come forward as part of the process of transformation to destroy what has been declared Other. However, when the Other is projected outward, and the self is seen only through the heavenly lens of *sublimatio*, then each aspect of a person’s personality that is not part of the group identity can be considered to have “become earth or flesh [and] is thus subject to death and corruption” (Edinger, 1994a, p. 154). When the individual identifies “with one of a pair of warring groups or factions of any kind,” the ability to see the opposites within is lost (Edinger, 1995, p. 323). Here a warrior must now locate “the enemy on the outside and, in the process, become a ‘mass man,’” seeking to destroy the projected enemy with the strength and hunger of the collective (Edinger, 1995, p. 323).

#### *Basic Training Week 8: Conjunction*

The final goal of alchemy is the *coniunctio*, a union of those parts that were dissolved down into their essence and then rebuilt piece by piece into something new. In the experience of a warrior, the misaligned experience of Basic Training encourages an erroneous identification with the collective consciousness of the military, leading to creation of an internally “contaminated mixture” and fragmentation of the psyche (Edinger, 1994, p. 215).

Upon graduation, fully initiated military service members are sent to their new units with their identity firmly connected to that of the group. They are no longer known as civilians, or as individuals, but rather as members of the military collective. This *false coniunctio* acts as an alchemical bond between the service member and the group, making it nearly impossible for the service members to see themselves as separate from the collective. Alchemically, as a warrior’s bond strengthens through years of service, “the more highly charged the collective consciousness, the more the ego forfeits its practical importance. It is, as it were, absorbed by the opinions and tendencies of the collective

consciousness” (Jung, 1954/1969, para. 425), creating psychological consequences upon separation that can include depression, anxiety, and even suicide (Hillman, 1997).

### **Warriors in Liminality: Facing the Challenges of Transition**

Separation from military service can happen in many ways depending on individual situations and branch-specific procedures, but the one common experience shared by all members who have ended active duty is the transition from the collective society of the military into the individual-centered civilian culture of the United States. Typically, the transition occurs on a conscious and cognitive level, far before one’s psyche or body has time to process the change. Earlier, we said that the tools and resources offered to support service members who are making a reentry into civilian life are inadequate. One example supporting this claim is the brief class provided to separating members. The intention behind the class is to teach departing warriors how to find a job in the civilian world and orient them to the VA benefits available once they are severed from service and officially classified as a Veteran. Though a fair amount of information is shared with warriors transitioning back to civilian life, little support is provided to help them transition psychologically from the communally based culture of the military to the once familiar, yet now confusingly foreign, individualistic culture of Home.

### **Who Am I without You?**

After their time has been served, military members are severed from service. The uniform they wore every day for years is put aside. The title they answered to, including the rank and privilege they worked hard to earn, is stripped away, and they must learn to respond to just a name—to an identity that was burned away and must now be regenerated. The men and women with whom they worked side by side through some of the most dangerous and most awesome experiences of their lives are now somewhere else, with someone else. But most importantly, veterans no longer feel the connection with others in the same way they once did. Comprising about 7% of the population (Pew Research Center, 2017), veterans often struggle to find others like themselves who understand the challenges they are experiencing as they try to transition back into civilian culture. At this point in their experience, veterans can feel isolated and alone.

The connection between service members has been described as an interlocking of psyches, one that splits off the possibility of individuality and disobedience into the unconscious and creates not only a collective consciousness but also a type of “co-unconscious or collective unconscious, that provides a deep bond between [the individuals], almost as if they belong to the same family” (Kellermann, 2007, p. 59). Throughout years of service, military members work together to accomplish seemingly impossible goals. Yet through the strength of the alchemical bond that forms, service members are able to overcome obstacles that civilians most likely could not complete. For example, they are able to mobilize units with thousands of service members and erect safe military bases with full communication and operational capability in foreign locations in mere hours, perform dangerous reconnaissance and threat-elimination missions with minimal casualties, and can march for miles and days at a time through dangerous and unknown territories without anyone being left behind. Every service member knows their role and can trust that those around them will do their jobs—they will always do their best to get things done, no matter what. Teams made up of military members can move faster

and more efficiently because they have an inner knowing of one another because, in a way, they *are* one another. Service members draw from the collective, the group psyche, which provides priceless access to the diverse talents of all the individuals who contribute. Separation from the collective of the military means more than finding a new job: It means not only finding a new family and a new identity but also having to do these things without the strength of the group to support them through the challenge. Due to the contaminated internal mixture created during Basic Training, once individuals have separated from military service there is no clear identity left for them to grasp onto. As the strength of the group consciousness recedes, the individual's complexes are laid bare like shallow pools at low tide, and the *prima materia*, the dark and often unknown matter being worked, surges up from the unconscious, threatening to devour them.

### ***Solutio* and the Dissolution of Group Consciousness**

Dissolution of military consciousness within the individual begins upon separation from service, and the Self, which was overwhelmed by the group consciousness during Basic Training, begins to emerge as if from a coma. Considering the strength of the archetypally charged and collectively supported military ego, even if established through a false *coniunctio*, the veteran may struggle against the process of dissolution, making the identity loss even more traumatic. In the context of alchemical theory and practice, Edinger (1994) pinpointed the dynamics at work here from a Jungian perspective: “[B]ecause that which is being dissolved will experience the *solutio* as an annihilation of itself” (p. 52), and if that Self held high honors, accomplished many great things, enjoyed tight familial bonds, and so much more, the dissolution could be terrifying indeed, and most certainly the type of loss one would try to avoid or deny. Edinger (1994) also emphasized that the terrifying experience of “*solutio* leads on to the emergence of a rejuvenated new form” allowing the individual immersed in the alchemical process to begin anew (p. 52). Without support and guidance, however, newly separated veterans may struggle to understand what they are going through.

Once the group consciousness has begun to fade, the veteran has two choices: first, to submit to this dissolution, allowing their individual ego to come forward fully, once again; or, second, to fight the dissolution and try to hang onto the group consciousness that has severed ties to the individual. In order to move into the stage of coagulation, the individual must choose to relinquish ego attachment to the group and solidify their new civilian identity through pursuits in education, a new career field, or volunteer work. For those who fight the dissolution, they are merely delaying the inevitable: surrender to the once subordinated but newly emerging Self.

### **The Contained and the Container: Refusing to Let Go**

Newly separated members who fight the dissolution of the military group consciousness may find themselves in an alchemical conflict that Jung referred to through a concept he called the “contained and the container” (cited in Edinger, 1994a, p. 56). “Whatever is larger and more comprehensive than the ego,” Edinger (1994a) wrote, “threatens to dissolve it. Internally, the unconscious as the latent Self or totality of the psyche can dissolve the ego” (p. 56).

These dynamics pose a psychological problem for service members who find themselves caught in the dynamics of a re-forming identity, one that had been destroyed to

align with the group consciousness of the military. These warriors can feel as if their own ego is not large enough to be “the containing vessel,” thus desiring to retain the smaller, less comprehensive viewpoint, in need of containment (Edinger, 1994, p. 56). In this instance, the individual must locate a new group or collective to take up the space that the loss of the military collective has left behind. Once a new, “more comprehensive viewpoint—one that can act as a containing vessel” is found, the “group collective can easily attract the projection of the Self and swallow up the individual,” providing for them the safety of containment they have become so accustomed to (pp. 56–57). Examples of these groups include religious organizations, social clubs, veteran-focused nonprofits, or even careers that are similar to the work the individual did in the military.

### **The Bridge of Opportunity**

Many of the social or veteran-focused nonprofits, such as Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), the American Legion, Team Red, White, and Blue (Team RWB), or The Mission Continues, have cultures similar to that of the military, making the transition from one collective to the other easier for the individual. Both the VFW and the American Legion allow only veterans to join their groups, creating a new selective and segregated society for veterans to be a part of (Veterans of Foreign Wars, 2018; The American Legion, n.d.). However, Team RWB and The Mission Continues, both of which are newer organizations, allow civilians to join as well (Team RWB, 2015; The Mission Continues, 2018). Though all of these organizations can potentially enable the veteran’s avoidance of the individuation process by providing a new collective dominant reinforced through organizational creeds, shared values and beliefs, and the wearing of similar tee-shirts as a sort of uniform, the inclusion of civilians in both Team RWB and The Mission Continues can also create a psychological bridge from the collective culture of the military to the more individual-centered civilian society of the United States. The presence of civilians, in the same uniform of a red Team RWB or blue Mission Continues shirt, creates the opportunity for veterans to relate, both somatically and psychologically, in a shared space that carries the potential for them to begin seeing themselves as part of civilian culture, versus that of the military. In this way, though the group enables the potential avoidance of the individuation process, it also provides a path for the veteran to begin to rebuild the individual ego within the safe container of a group.

### **A Temporary Refuge**

The flexibility, creativity, and sheer number of choices to be made each day in civilian culture can be overwhelming for many veterans, causing them to seek out a career with a militaristic culture that can offer comfort upon transition out of military service (Veterans Administration Mental Health Services, n.d.). Organizations with large numbers of veteran employees often maintain cultures that are very similar to that of the military, often requiring employees to wear uniforms, for example. They also typically operate in a straightforward, hierarchical, top-down management style. The rules at these types of organizations are often clearly laid out, with little to no ambiguity, which can feel comfortingly familiar for the veteran. This type of environment can provide a level of certainty and predictability that will aid the transitioning veteran as they try to find their place in the more relaxed and flexible civilian world.



Once their post-military service career ends, the external presence of the collective dominant they had been relying on to keep dissolution at bay is suddenly removed. At this point, they are often faced with the disturbing presence of their own dark matter, the foundational matter of the transforming personality that now calls out to be addressed and attended to, that which most other veterans dealt with years, if not decades, earlier. Unfortunately, it can be much more challenging for a veteran who is at the retirement age of 65 to find a new collective to take the place of the group consciousness that has been residing within. If the veteran becomes overwhelmed by the dissolution and experiences the “annihilation of self” as a literal event, the most likely outcome will be suicide (Edinger, 1994, p. 52; Hillman, 1997). According to the Veterans Administration’s *National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report* issued in 2022, most veteran suicides, more than 2,222 in 2020, were committed by male veterans ages 55–74 (Veterans Administration, 2020a). This is the same age that most veterans find themselves retiring from their civilian careers, leaving behind their uniforms, desks, missions, coworkers, partners—and often their identities (Veterans Administration, 2018c). Hillman (1997) spoke of this type of suicide as a “late reaction of a delayed life which did not transform as it went along” (p. 73). Eventually, Hillman added, the process catches up to them and the soul will now “die all at once . . . because it missed its death crisis before” (p. 73).

### **Facing the Other Within**

In alchemical practice, “the *prima materia* was thought of as a composite, a confused mixture of undifferentiated and contrary components requiring a process of separation” (Edinger, 1994, p. 183). “Psychologically, the result of *separatio* by division into two is *awareness of the opposites*” (p. 187, emphasis in original). For the veteran, the process of *separatio* after dissolution of the military collective consciousness, involves the search for the Other, the Self. Jung viewed the Self as “the regulating center of the psyche,” as well as “a transpersonal power that transcends the ego” (Sharp, 1991, p. 119). Often expressed in dreams by “images of death and killing,” the experience of separating out difficult psychic material also involves the identification of unwanted or unknown parts of the self, as well as shadow elements that were projected out onto the designated enemy of the collective beginning in Basic Training (Edinger, 1994a, p. 191). Without the strength of the collective to push them away, the individual must now face those shadow elements as they reside within themselves and find a way to reconcile actions they may have carried out due to their projections.

### **Moral Injury and the Problem of Good and Evil**

When one comes to face the shadow, to truly see the opposites within oneself, “it’s a momentous occasion” (Edinger, 1995, p. 210). It is during this moment that the ego of the returning veteran must face that which has been done to the projected other, those actions they committed while existing in such a one-sided state that they may have lost sight of “the blackness of the whiteness, the evil of the good, the depth of the heights,” and through unconscious counterbalance may have become the exact evil the veteran thought he or she had been fighting to destroy (p. 210).

When fighting a war that is declared to be a good war, a justified war, or when one has to make life-and-death decisions for themselves and others, murder can become justified, sometimes even righteous, and is known in this context as merely killing

(Meagher, 2014). No matter the “level of violence, death, suffering, [or] destruction involved,” as long as the intention of the killer is to do the will of the legitimate authority, then “all is well in heaven and so on earth” (p. xiv). During active military service, the military member serves the cause and follows orders leading them to believe that they can “do no wrong,” that is, until they are no longer serving and have to reconcile the actions they took following those orders (p. xv). Here veterans often notice the presence of what Jung (1943/1966) called the “‘shadow’ archetype,” which he described as “the dangerous aspect of the unrecognized dark half of the personality” (p. 96). Faced with the moral weight of acknowledging and integrating injured or conflicted aspects of their personality that were impacted by military experience, Edinger (1995) warned that

the very survival of the ego depends on how it relates to this matter, because in order to survive it is essential that the ego experience itself as more good than bad. If it experiences itself as more bad than good, it has no grounds for survival. It will have to commit suicide or annihilate itself in some other way. (p. 210)

With the gravity of life and death in mind, it is during the process of *separatio* that the veteran may experience what many have come to call *moral injury*, described by one commentator as “the violation, of what is right, what one has long held to be sacred—a core belief or moral code—and thus wounding or, in the extreme, mortally wounding the psyche, soul, or one’s humanity” (Meagher, 2014, p. 4). Veterans suffering from moral injuries often feel as if their actions during war were unnatural or inhuman, as if they have lost their sense of humanity. These veterans return home to a country that calls them a *hero* and gives endless vague thank you’s for actions that the veteran cannot personally reconcile. This treatment creates an inner divide between the veteran and their community, leaving these warriors feeling isolated as they are consumed by shame and guilt.

If a veteran’s identity is so entangled with that of the collective, if they are unable or unwilling to identify the representations of the other within, then “this denial places them outside in the world, where the internal influences of complexes now become paranoid fears of invasions by enemies” (Hillman, 1975, p. 33). Veterans, no longer in an actual war zone, will still feel and act as though they are surrounded by enemies, making it almost impossible for them to relax, feel safe, or connect with others in a way that allows them to build healthy relationships. These types of complexes are often accompanied by post-traumatic stress and are suffered by many veterans, making it nearly impossible for them to lead a normal life (Veterans Administration, 2018c).

### **Suicide as the Literalization of a Necessary Metaphorical Death**

Veteran suicide rates for ages 18–29 have continued to increase over the last decade, increasing 95 percent since 2001 (Veterans Administration, 2020a). This age range is also when most individuals transition out of military service, their military identity dissolving as they face the task of re-forming an identity destroyed in service to the collective consciousness and goals of the military. Service members who are returning to civilian life must now face the darkness of the *prima materia*, the foundational first matter of their own personality. From a Jungian perspective, the experience of darkness is essential, for without it there can be no transformation, no remaking of one’s identity (Edinger, 1994). Unfortunately, American culture not only avoids darkness but also seems to fear it through

a compulsive pursuit of happiness, (Mackay, 2013). For a returning veteran this cultural attitude does not support transformation, but rather encourages avoidance and impatience with emotions such as sadness and grief. The processes of dissolution, separation, and mortification require acceptance of these very elements, and when ignored or avoided, they find other ways to come forward.

When an individual cannot move through the alchemical process, lethal consequences can come about. Here a person's soul, their deep inner essence, can become caught "in conflict with circumstance" (Edinger, 1994, p. 174). Edinger pinpoints the life-and-death quality of this anguished soul's experience:

What is madness? It is soul in conflict with circumstance. It is inner and outer reality confused. Illusions are being dissolved. One's dark side is pinned and must be acknowledged. The opposites come into view, and the ego must traverse the narrow edge between them. (p. 174)

For the returning veteran, troubling images of death stream forward from the depths of the unconscious, inviting them into the work of healing and growth through engagement with the images. Alchemically, the images need to be acknowledged, to be kneaded or worked with. If a person is not able or willing to engage in this way, these inner expressions of distress can become a monster—a threatening Other, an enemy who must be killed. Hillman (1997) believed that "death appears in order to make way for transformation" (p. 67). However, when taken literally—when enacted in a concrete way—psychological death becomes a suicide, a literal killing constellated by a "transformative drive" aimed at creating a new form through the death of the old one (p. 68). Here, Hillman (1997) believed the individual knows that a shift must be made, that something must change, but they feel no control over anything other than their "own body, that part of the objective world over which" they still have some power. In this way, he added, "suicide becomes the ultimate empowerment" (p. 68, 197).

### **The Collective Responsibility to Support America's Warriors**

At a rate almost three times their non-veteran peers, more than 127,560 U.S. veterans have committed suicide since 2001 (Veterans Administration, 2020a; Veterans Administration, 2020b). The victims include men and women of varying races and ethnicities, from all branches of service, and every age group. Although their individual backgrounds vary, each of these individuals has something important in common: each veteran swore an oath and made a commitment to serve their country. Although they did not die in battle, ultimately it might be said that they sacrificed their lives to the military's mission to protect and defend the people of the United States.

The VA has long focused on post-traumatic stress as the primary ailment of the veteran. However, with a steady increase in the rate of suicide for transitioning veterans, the lack of a correlation between combat service and suicide attempts, and a rise in adjustment disorder diagnoses among veterans, the focus on care needs to shift. There is an urgent need for American citizens and elected officials to acknowledge the challenges veterans face during transition, understanding that these challenges are just as dangerous as the enemy they faced during their military service (Reger, et al., 2015; Veterans Administration, 2018a). The American people need to do more than say, "Thank you for your service." What returning veterans need is understanding, acceptance, and patience

from their communities as they move through the darker phases of identity transformation in a collectively held and supported way. To improve the quality of American veterans' lives and reduce suicidality, it is imperative that Jungian scholars help these warriors find a contained and metaphorical way to experience the psychological death of their military identity once it is no longer necessary. Responsibility for the healing and growth of returning veterans must be taken at a collective level to heal the wounds caused by the moral atrocities America's veterans have enacted and endured as a part of their military service. When we, as scholars and practitioners of Jungian psychology, appropriately view the "self as the interiorization of community," it becomes clear that until the American people can bring to consciousness the shadow of freedom created through the supposed victories of war, returning veterans will continue to face the psychological pain of their service and the adjustment of reintegration without the support and resources needed for healing to occur (Hillman, 1997, p. 196).

### Contributor

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