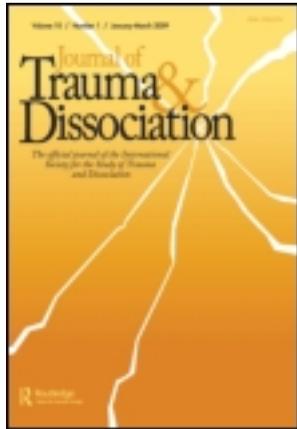


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### When Johnny and Jane Come Marching Home: How All of Us Can Help Veterans, by P. Caplan

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## BOOK REVIEW

P. Caplan (2011). *When Johnny and Jane Come Marching Home: How All of Us Can Help Veterans*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 282 pp.

Arthur Kleinman (2006) related the powerful story of seeing Winthrop Cohen, a World War II veteran who suffered from depression late in life and agonized intensely over having killed a young enemy soldier. Of this case, Kleinman said the following:

He could not come to terms with the morality or normality for his actions during the war, and he knew I couldn't either. He had been remade in a terrifying and devastating way, and yet those very qualities later in life spurred him toward critical self-reflection. . . . It doesn't necessarily respond to treatment. In place of healing it gives voice to pain and suffering about the sometimes defeating reality of our lives: a seemingly despairing reality that, when we confront it, can only be lived through, we imagine, enduring the unmasterable. . . . It is exactly here where religion, ethics, and aesthetics remake meaning, creating hope . . . And amidst great danger and huge uncertainty, hope is what makes the human condition livable. (pp. 44–45)

Kleinman saw Winthrop Cohen as suffering not from disease but from tragedy. It is exactly here where Paula Caplan's important new book about war, trauma, and helping our veterans starts out. *When Johnny and Jane Come Marching Home: How All of Us Can Help Veterans* is both a scathing indictment of the military and mental health establishments designed to "help" veterans and a hopeful and helpful treatise on how we approach the immense suffering of our country's veterans to truly ease their pain. While condemning the "scientific" discourse of our psychiatrized society, Caplan offers solutions that are humane, compassionate, caring, and ultimately healing for our culture as a whole. One of the major strengths of the book is that it constantly turns our gaze away from individuals and what we normally think of as their pathology toward the *cause* of their suffering—war.

Caplan notes what others have noted, that the label of *posttraumatic stress disorder* has done a number of unpredicted things. First of all, as a result of this label we have begun to see a natural and normal response to war as a mental disorder or mental illness. She asks an important

question: “What do we gain if we call these reactions mental illnesses and send the sufferers into the increased isolation of therapists’ consulting rooms?” (p. 5). It is a profound and important question with a number of interlocking answers.

Second, this label also designates veterans as the “other”—putting them outside what our culture defines as “normal” and condemning them to the privacy and isolation of the therapist’s office. Instead of helping, in many instances this increases their isolation and veterans are effectively silenced, feeling that they cannot tell their story outside the therapeutic relationship. This silencing lets the rest of us off the hook—we don’t feel we need to listen to what happened to the veterans, and therefore we become blinded to the effects of war. It also erodes our confidence in our ability to help. How can ordinary citizens help someone with a “mental disorder”? Even the name itself sanitizes the effects of war, where the word *stress*—which we also apply to heavy traffic—leads us away from the horrific experiences of many veterans.

In a heart-wrenching chapter, Caplan gives a concise and painful picture of the problems of veterans, describing the “Eight Plagues of Combat”: trauma; grief and sadness; fear and anxiety; guilt and shame; rage; conflicts of values and crises of meanings; betrayal and mistrust; and isolation, alienation, and numbing. How did we come to label a crisis of meaning as a mental illness? How have we turned away from veterans, finding their pain too much to bear?

In her chapter on the limitations of what therapy can do for veterans, Caplan systematically and effectively dismantles our naïve belief in the ability of psychotropic drugs and psychotherapy to help veterans. Although she is careful throughout the book not to condemn all professional attempts, she is clear that they cannot be our only alternative to help. These professionalized ways of helping have limited ability to help and will only isolate our veterans more.

Her chapters on the limitations of what the military and the Department of Veterans Affairs have done to try to help the situation are perforce a bit detailed and list-like but are complete descriptions of these attempts and an indictment of them. All of these attempts suffer from the same blindness and inability to see the suffering of veterans as anything but an individual pathology. Healing only happens in community, and as long as we condemn our veterans to struggling alone with the effects of the horrendous experiences that we have sent them to, they will never be able to truly heal.

Arthur Kleinman (2006) was partially successful with Winthrop Cohen, lightening his depression and getting him back to work and to his family, but Cohen never thanked him: “To the contrary, at our last meeting, he implied that I was part of the societal collusion to cover up the threatening implications of war experiences such as his” (p. 35). Cohen said,

I can put it away again . . . But you know as well as I do that what's bothering me can't be treated or cured . . . I lost my humanity as those around me did the same. You don't have any answers. Nor do I. Save to live with it. (p. 35)

Caplan asks us again and again in her book not to abandon our veterans but to embrace them back into our human community, letting them tell their stories, listening to them with all our being, and therefore facing squarely the atrocities and vast healing potentials of true community. This book goes a long way toward shaking us out of our “comforting illusions” about war and its effects. Perhaps now the fields of psychiatry and psychology can join with religion, ethics, and aesthetics to create true hope and community for all of our veterans.

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