

## Post Traumatic Growth

### Seth Pollack

In February 1991 I was 20-years old driving a Humvee through the Saudi desert crossing border into Iraq just west of Kuwait. I was an electronic warfare specialist and Army linguist assigned to the 1st Brigade Combat Team of the 1st Armored Division. As we rolled through lanes in the defensive berms blown open by our assault engineers, we passed over the buried trenches once occupied by Iraqi conscripts and **still occupied by many who weren't able to surrender in time.**

The next few days were a blur of burning tanks and trucks, destroyed bunkers and the near constant concussion of outbound artillery and rockets firing over our heads. We slaughtered many thousands of people in order to "liberate" the oil fields for the ruling family of Kuwait and protect those of the Saudi king all to defend our freedom at home to mindlessly and endlessly consume cheap fuel and destroy the planet in the process.

After the Iraqis' formal surrender we spent weeks living in the slimy smoke from burning oil wells and were exposed to nerve agent from a cloud released when Army engineers destroyed a supply dump at Khamisiyah. A quarter million troops and a countless number of civilians were exposed to Sarin gas per a DoD report released only **after ten years of denial. Numerous people I worked with have serious lasting health effects.**

That's the story of how I became an activist protesting the second invasion in 2002 and a passionate proponent of clean renewable energy that **doesn't fund autocracies** who repress freedom, deny the rights of women and fund international terrorism.

But it's **not the story of the trauma** that defined the last 25 years of my life and prevented me from **grieving for my best friend from basic training, Richard Flick.** And believe me, we teased him endlessly about that name and he always just smiled and laughed right along with us.

Richard was an 18-year Army veteran who died in 2006 not long after he returned from a tour in Iraq. His death was reported as an accident but I was told he got drunk and intentionally crashed his car. I don't know if he was counted among the estimated **131,000 veterans who have taken their own lives since 2001.**

We've all heard these numbers before and frankly, like many of the massivley scaled tragedies we hear about, this is just one more bit of information piled on to our already overloaded souls.

I don't have the wisdom to help us know how to process any of it so I'm going to just leave those numbers to stand on their own: **131,000 suicides in 20 years with about 17 more each day.**

A few weeks ago I was getting ready to take a shower and my eye caught the 'US Army' tattoo I have on my left shoulder. I had wanted something unique so I had asked my friend Richard to sketch me something. Frankly, it's not very good art. Richard's talents were more in his fun loving personality, wits and undeniable charm but like anything I could have asked from him, he gladly said yes.

I've seen that tattoo every day of my life since age 18 but **this time** I started crying. Finally my heart had been cracked open enough to let me honor my friend 15 years after his passing.

I want to share my journey of how I spent the last few decades deflecting thanks for my service that is common this time of year and being a person whose walls were so thick he couldn't mourn his friend to where I am now, which is a much better place.

Before I begin I want to warn you that I'll be talking about things that may be difficult to hear. If you are sensitive to hearing about violence in its worst forms and need to leave, please do. I get it. I've spent a long time avoiding these things.

Thank you.

I was a Special Agent in the Army's Criminal Investigation Division for the final four of my years of service and my job was to handle all the horrible things.

The children abused by their parents. Women assaulted by abusive husbands. Far too many rapes and sexual assaults. And the deaths. So many deaths.

Soldiers killed in training or traffic accidents. A teenager killed by a truck while riding his bike. An air force pilot who crashed during a training mission. Babies who died of natural causes and one who was shaken by her mother. A soldier who hung himself from a tree.

His was my first body and I can picture him in a peaceful area of the woods near our base in Germany. I can picture all of them if I'm being honest.

I investigated their lives, the circumstances of their deaths and witnessed their autopsies. It's hard to explain how strange an autopsy is. It's at once both highly intimate and coldly scientific. One of my jobs was often to take a final set of fingerprints from the deceased.

And one night in April 1995, something worse than all of that. That night ended my young career, and left me sleepless, anxious, depressed, angry and unfeeling. **My heart didn't break. It went dark.** A lot of people I love suffered because of that night and from a decision I made earlier in the day.

I was the duty agent on the 14th of April when I was told by our receptionist that a soldier was there to report his wife having an affair with another soldier. This is a crime in the military but didn't rise above the line to be my responsibility. So I told the receptionist to send the soldier to the MPs office. He didn't go there. Instead he did a few other things and later that night went to his home and **shot his two children in their beds and his wife in the hallway and then himself.**

It's the guilt and shame I've carried ever since that's prevented me from having pride in my service and frankly, that's the least of what it did to me.

I had fully convinced myself that if I had just gotten up off my ass and talked to that man I would have recognized the state he was in and found a way to interrupt that chain of events. But I was too prideful to be bothered by him. I was too busy. I was too important for that man's problem.

That's the story I've been telling myself ever since.

And look, you don't survive a job like that if the eighteen inches between your head and your heart are connected. You don't keep a job like that if you "talk about your feelings" or seek professional help. So when I started having panic attacks and intrusive memories in the months following that incident I did the only thing I could think of; I went to a chaplain. I was told to pray more. Needless to say that wasn't the help I was looking for.

Within two years I had given up a promotion, all my training, my undergrad degree in criminal justice I worked so hard for in night school, and I left the Army thinking that if I just did something normal with my life I could put this behind me. I think you can guess how well that turned out.

I spent the next two plus decades fighting down anger, not always successfully; lacking confidence and pride; questioning everything; self-medicating; and worst of all, emotionally detached and unavailable to myself or my family. **I have a lot of damage to repair.**

In 2019, thanks mostly to the things I learned in this building, I decided to at least try and fix myself. I started to meditate to help calm my mind. I picked up yoga to help heal a hip fracture suffered in an accident in 2017 that took away whatever joy and solace I found in biking and tennis. I surrounded myself with loving, kind, wonderful people who I recruited, without their knowing, to help prop me up.

And then just as I was making a bit of progress and starting to see that I might not be permanently broken, 2020 hit. And it hit all of us, of course, but our family had some additional challenges on top of all that. I kept it together as best I could but by the beginning of this year I was exhausted. I was soon taking meds for high cholesterol, high blood pressure, anxiety, sleep, and depression. I was out of shape and overweight and had no energy or motivation to do anything.

Around that time, an old friend I had worked with a bit in Phoenix messaged me. She had recently taken a job working for a non-profit with a program targeted towards veterans with PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury. I didn't have a TBI so her program wasn't a fit but she pointed me to the Gary Sinise Foundation and through that I found Boulder Crest in nearby Bluemont, VA. They have a program called Warrior Pathh for combat veterans and first responders who aren't struggling well.

At that point I had a formal diagnosis and disability rating from the VA and had tried some of their treatments. I didn't really think this non-profit program would help and figured it was too late for me anyway. But with a "what the hell, why not" attitude, I reached out via an online form and within days I was on the phone with a combat vet who had gone through the program. He convinced me to give it a try.

The program is based on Post Traumatic Growth theory by two UNC-Charlotte psychologists, Dr Richard Tedeschi and Dr Lawrence Calhoun. The founder of Boulder Crest, a Navy Explosive Ordnance Tech who made a ton of money after leaving the military, worked with other specialists to turn the academic work into a viable and scalable training program. I'm part of Warrior Pathh class 117. Over 6000 women and men have gone through this training and they've had incredible results.

One of my many hesitations about trying this program was its frequent use of words like "warrior" and "hero". I certainly didn't consider myself any kind of hero and I'm not the kind of

veteran who wears their service on their sleeve. Or on a hat. Or bumper stickers, flags, and pins. I've not fired a weapon since leaving the Army in '97.

One of many lessons they teach is how to "change the angle". If something isn't working or is too difficult, find another way to look at it. Another approach. That seems simple but too often we seem to follow old habits and insist on making things harder than they need to be or only take the most common meaning of words.

This is how BoulderCrest defines "warrior":

*While many people associate Warriors with what takes place in combat, we know that being a Warrior means something quite different. To us, a Warrior is a **person who protects rather than harms others, insists on serving a cause greater than their own, and is never a victim of circumstance or a product of their environment.***

You see what they did there? They changed the angle. Instead of being a program about helping me be happier, it's now about helping me unlock my potential to help my community.

That's a person I can aspire to be.

It's an 18-month program and I've completed the seven-day onsite portion where I was on a small team of people learning different wellness practices like daily meditation, breathing techniques, journaling, and daily gratitude.

But the real magic was being part of that team and learning from those other heroes. I helped myself by helping them.

For example, during a sharing exercise my new brother, a former Marine, told us how he applied pressure to a wounded buddy while also calling for help on the radio and firing his weapon during an ambush in Afghanistan. That wounded Marine didn't survive and my friend has carried that guilt and shame ever since. But when I told him he did everything he was trained to do and the outcome was never in his hands I thought about what kind of hypocrite I would be if I didn't accept that same advice and comfort for my own guilt.

I let go of a lot that day thanks to his sharing.

I had thought I had learned to survive at a reasonable level and at age 50 that was good enough and really, did I deserve more?

But then I met Hal Pines, a retired chief firefighter who after 26 years dealing with all kinds of horrible situations on that job finally had a moment of clarity and release related to his time in the Marines as a tank gunner during the invasion of Grenada in 1983. I watched Hal bravely share his pain and lift his burden from what he was asked to do so long ago. At 64, he is finally ready to face life as a new, better man.

If he could do it, so could I.

My moment finally came while **walking a labyrinth**. We were told to select a rock from a pile and leave the rock at the center as a symbol of letting go. I wasn't resistant to the exercise but I certainly didn't expect anything from it.

We had lined up and entered the labyrinth after talking individually with Dusty, the exec director of the program. That way we were spaced apart as we wound our way towards the center but we constantly were passing near each other.

We're on our own path but we were never alone.

Before I went in, Dusty looked in my eyes and said my mind had always taken care of me but I had to **start trusting my heart**. I nodded, reached down and picked up a medium-sized stone and started slowly walking with no plan or preconceived notion of what would happen.

I soon found myself examining this rock very closely. I wasn't sure why. It was about 12 inches long and four inches around with one sharp edge. It weighed about five to eight pounds. Solid but not heavy. I turned it over in my hands as I walked. I rubbed it and felt it. *I needed to understand this rock.*

And then I saw the face of the little girl with the small bullet hole under her left eye who was killed that night in 1995 and I understood. *I needed to say goodbye.* As I continued walking I pulled each member of the family into my head one after the other and I cried. I cried so hard I could barely walk. I couldn't really see and I definitely struggled to stay in the lines. I kept on, occasionally passing my teammates and drawing from their strength. And when I finally got to the center of that labyrinth I fell on my knees and placed that rock on the ground and put my forehead to it. When I stood up I was embraced by my new brothers. I've finally said goodbye in a way that felt significant, respectful and honorable. **I've not been the same person since.**

My heart feels open. I feel physically lighter. I am more present and engaged. I'm not on edge and looking for something to go wrong and overreacting if it does.

But I am not fixed. **I'll never be fixed. I'll never stop seeing those faces. I'll never believe I shouldn't have acted differently that day in 1995.**

But I've **forgiven myself** and come to understand, finally, that one small decision when I was 25 years old doesn't need to drag me down forever. It's part of my story that can't be changed, erased or forgotten. But it doesn't have to define who I am.

The guilt and shame and pain I've lived with has made me a different person. Maybe even a better, stronger person. I'll never stop struggling with this part of myself but I'm learning to **struggle well.**

And now when I can't sleep or get angry for no good reason I know exactly what's going on and I have practices to lean on. I can use breathing techniques for immediate relief. My daily meditation practice helps me process and backwash the gunk from my head and keeps me fairly level. My fitness routines keep me feeling energized and strong. And I have a group of teammates who will answer the phone anytime I need to talk. They understand me and can help me just as I can help them when they call.

I very much understand that I need to spend my life on a path of curiosity and learning. I need to treat my body with care and love so I can be a better partner to my wife and father to my kids. I need to feed my spirit by being a positive influence in our community and finding ways to give back.

I now also have three clear principles to guide my life. Acceptance - for myself and others. Determination - to stay on the path of wellness and learning. Empathy - to remind myself never to let my heart go dark again.

And if you'll forgive me for boasting: my cholesterol and blood pressure are back to normal; I'm sleeping 7-8 hours almost every night instead of 4-6 hours if medicated; I've lost about 30lbs and am running, hiking, backpacking, biking and I even played tennis this summer without hip pain. Oh, and I still do yoga at least once per week. And I'm standing here today sharing my story which would have been unimaginable just a few months ago.

I don't always agree with how our country has used its power and I definitely have issues with the adverse impacts of bloated defense spending, but I'm proud of *my* service. I'm proud of the work I did trying to help people. I'm proud of my intentions as a 17-year-old when I first took that oath. And I am so incredibly honored to have a piece of Richard Flick with me forever.

So this Veterans Day for the first time since I earned that title 24 years ago, if you thank me for my service, I'll look you in the eye and accept that gratitude.

But my term of service isn't complete.

### Intro to *Shadows of the Past*

I'm honored to now turn things over to Lisa and Bill Broomfield who are going to share a song our group wrote together with the help of a Nashville musician during our on-site at Boulder Crest. I'm not the most musical person myself and when I heard about this activity I thought, "well, that's cute." The collaborative process turned out to be an incredible experience and when I hear the song I can picture the faces of all my friends in the different lines. I find this final version to be very powerful. I hope you get something from it as well. And of course, I can't thank Bill and Lisa enough for being wonderful friends and using their incredible talents to help me share this with you.

## LYRICS

### Shadows of the Past

I've been carrying a lot of shame  
I've been carrying a lot of pain  
I've come a long, long way  
To be the new man I am today

I've spent a whole lot of sleepless nights  
Crying and trying to see the light  
I've hurt a whole lot of people  
And I'm just trying to make it right

### CHORUS:

Shadows of the past  
I shine a light on you

It helps my head and heart  
So I can honor you  
Shadows of the past  
You have molded me  
From the king I was  
To who I wanna be  
Shadows of the past

You're gonna make me a better man  
I'm dumping out these boots of sand  
I'm dropping all that weight  
So I can hold my baby's hand

But this journey has just begun  
I'm finding out I'm not the only one  
This pathh is changing me and together we  
Will overcome

CHORUS:

Shadows of the past  
I shine a light on you  
It helps my head and heart  
So I can honor you  
Shadows of the past  
You have molded me  
From the king I was  
To who I wanna be  
Shadows of the past

Bridge:

I gotta whole lot on my plate  
But sorrow's not my fate

CHORUS:

Shadows of the past  
I shine a light on you  
It helps my head and heart  
So I can honor you  
Shadows of the past  
You have molded me  
From the king I was  
To who I wanna be  
Shadows of the past  
Shadows of the past  
Shadows of the past  
Shadows of the past