

**“Cosmopolitan Communication” and the
“Contextual Mentoring” of Student Veterans**

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¹ This composite narrative is the result of merging the outline of prepared remarks, a recorded transcript of the presentation, and a retrospective editing.

My intention was to deliver this presentation in a “TED Talk²” format, but since the underlying theme is “CMM”, or the Coordinated Management of Meaning, maybe it should instead be called a “Cosmo-Conversation,” referencing the notion of “Cosmopolitan Communication³” introduced by Barnett Pearce. Either way, the purpose is to present a short description of a provocative idea with the hope that it might help us to change the way we see some aspect of the world. This is what CMM is all about, making better social worlds through the way we communicate. CMM theory helps us to do that by giving us a frame of reference to look directly at communication, not just through it, to consider what is being “made” in the process. Barnett called this “taking a communication perspective.”

The provocative idea I want to present today is that taking a communication perspective about the way we welcome home returning combat veterans might help us better understand how make their transitions smoother and more coherent, and possibly help to facilitate personal growth as a result of reflecting on powerful

² TED talks are short presentations which focus on the intersection of Technology, Entertainment, and Design (hence, “TED”) The mission statement of TED talks reads as follows: *We believe passionately in the power of ideas to change attitudes, lives and ultimately, the world. So we're building here a clearinghouse that offers free knowledge and inspiration from the world's most inspired thinkers, and also a community of curious souls to engage with ideas and each other.*”

³ “Cosmopolitan Communication” was introduced by Barnett Pearce in his 1989 book, “Communication and the Human Condition.” In simple terms, it is an evolved form of communication that provides mediating structures to allow people from different mindsets and cultures to coordinate with each other while maintaining the integrity of their diverse beliefs and worldviews.

experiences in a constructive way, and “making” something different from them. The context for this discussion will be that of higher education, as a significant percentage of returning veterans will be going back to school when they return home, thanks to the Post-9-11 GI Bill. The particular focus is on communication with advisors or “mentors” in the transition process, and how the communication process may act on both.

In formulating this inquiry, I was guided by this question posed by Barnett Pearce; “how can we structure our organizations so they support the evolution of consciousness”? We have a lot of institutions in this country that were created to help and support veterans, but many of them were created within a now-outdated model of communication, and of institutional service delivery. This is a frame of reference that may no longer represent the best that we can do, and may not be meeting the felt needs of many returning veterans as they make the difficult transition home. So, stated another way, how can we create a better structure to engage, and effectively meet the educational, social, and mental health needs of returning veterans?

To find out what “better” might look like, my starting point was to pay close attention to the voices of several representative student veterans who were identified as showing signs of increased flourishing or sense of purpose. These voices were heard through stories gathered using a phenomenological interviewing process designed to get to the “lived experience” of coming back home and going

back to school, with particular attention to significant episodes of communication with significant others - advisors, guides, or “mentors” at different stages of transition. In some cases, coordination between advisors was intentional and programmatic. In others, it was the result of ad-hoc efforts by dedicated people doing their best to help, using the best information and informal resources available to them. Sometimes the transition process included some of (what we might call) “therapy” to address (what we have labeled) “PTSD.” Quite often, insights came in conversations, through storytelling and reflection.

After gathering the stories, I then used CMM heuristics⁴ as an “interpretive theory” to assess the ways that communication, and the coordinated advice of mentors, may have helped them effectively transition home, deal with difficult experiences, and in some cases, experience some level of increased awareness, personal growth, or transformation. Looking at what was “made” in communication in these stories through the lenses of CMM heuristics may provide some alternatives to the prevalent ways we bring veterans back home from military service. These currently used approaches typically include the “group process” of mustering out through demobilization lectures, and systematic screening to identify those veterans who show signs of difficulty re-adjusting to civilian life to be clinically assessed and treated for a mental illness or “disorder.” In many cases, the transition

⁴ The heuristics, or explanatory tools of CMM help to reveal “what is being made” in episodes of communication. Diagramming tools include the Daisy, Hierarchy, Serpentine, and LUUUUT (“storytelling”) models. For a basic explanation of these, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coordinated_management_of_meaning

between these social worlds is experienced as jarring and abrupt, with little structure in place to help “bridge” or integrate lived experience.

In another way of telling this story of coming home, we might start with the understanding that many veterans have served in an environment that demands a certain level of embodied response; that being hyper-sensitive or aware is a normal response to the abnormal experience of combat – and it may take time to change that. Or, in another way of seeing it, we could begin by recognizing that some veterans may have had experiences that have fundamentally challenged the way they see the world – including what we might call a “moral injury⁵” - and it may take a concerted effort to reconstruct a new world view to make sense of that. We might also consider that the coordinated actions of knowledgeable “mentors” could help returning veterans rebuild – or re-integrate - their social worlds. By looking at these processes again, using CMM as a “practical theory,” we may be able to begin to envision how this coordination may be best accomplished within the context of a structured environment, such as a college campus, through a conceptual model that I will refer to as “Contextual Mentoring.”

To further frame this discussion, let’s take a closer look as to what a “moral injury” might be. Paraphrasing Walt Whitman, it can be seen as something that

⁵ VA Psychologists Shira Maguen and Brent Litz distinguish “moral injury” as a different phenomenon from clinically-diagnosed PTSD, while acknowledging that they sometimes overlap. For more about this, see http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/pages/moral_injury_at_war.asp

“insults the soul,” or violates our sense of a “moral code” that we live by and which defines our social world. We all operate under moral codes; for example the United States Constitution is a moral code that all citizens subscribe to, or at least are presumed to, when they take an oath of citizenship or receive a public school education. Our smaller social units, such as communities, schools, churches, the military, and families, also have particular moral codes that shape our view of the world, and concepts of right and wrong. This is sometimes called “common sense,” or the feeling we all have (more or less) in common of the correct nature of things – often without questioning too deeply. Coordination between and among all of these groups that have moral codes (that sometimes align and sometimes do not) is a challenge under the best of circumstances. Addressing the damage that occurs when the most important of these moral codes are violated, or appear to be violated, is even tougher. Whitman’s advice was to “examine all you have been told,” and this may be a good place to start.

Since moral codes are created and enacted in communication and in community, the most appropriate and effective way to resolve these violations may also be in communication, and in community. This would be a very different approach than diagnosing a mental illness applying individual psychotherapy, as we often do today. But, at the same time, it would appear very difficult to coordinate therapeutic communication in the broader community, using our traditional models of communication and empirical or “evidence-based” standards of treatment. To focus things a bit differently, let’s think about how this might work in a smaller

community setting, the college and university campus, where, as noted earlier, an increasing number of veterans may be found.

According to the Student Veterans of America⁶, there are now just under one million veterans enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities. This has been made possible by the Post-9-11 GI Bill, which pays returning veterans to go to back to school. Furthermore, there are another million veterans coming right behind this first wave, as the current force is demobilized and many of the deployed troops come home. This represents the largest number of veteran students on campus since the end of World War II, and the numbers have been steadily growing since implementation of the Post-9-11 GI Bill on 2009. By and large, most schools were not ready for this to happen. Even for those who did some amount of preparation, the social impact was either underestimated, poorly understood, or both. Either way, we now see a large number of returning veterans on campus, with more coming. This represents an unprecedented opportunity to engage with a substantial number of veterans during their transition process in a coordinated way, in a reasonably controlled environment.

To get a sense of what might be possible, it is helpful to reflect on the reason our institutions of higher education were created in the first place. What are these

⁶ The Student Veterans of America (SVA) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit coalition of over 850 student veteran organizations on college campuses globally. SVA's mission is to provide military veterans with the resources, support, and advocacy needed to succeed in higher education and following graduation.

schools here to do? The mission statements of most schools have some reference to personal development or growth, inculcation of deep values of fraternity, wisdom, and so on, something those in academic circles sometimes refer to as “formation⁷.” But this environment of personal growth may not always be the way the campus environment is experienced by students today, in many cases, and for a variety of reasons. At the core, this type of learning hinges on direct personal engagement with others who understand the process, and embody the values.

One characteristic of military veterans that appears often in history is that if they do not find the values, ethics and support they expect when they show up, they have a way of taking action to bring them into being. When they “hit the beachhead” of the campus, they will look for the things that their moral code, as disciplined and principled warriors, tells them should be there to support them. Most soldiers look to their chain of command – particularly their non-commissioned officers or “NCO’s” - for leadership, guidance, and help when they need it. They will likewise expect certain things of those they perceive to be in leadership positions on campus, which may include both faculty and staff. If these things are not there, they will likely find a way to do what is necessary to bring them about.

⁷ The concept of formation, and “formation mentoring” is discussed in *Transformative Conversations: A Guide to Mentoring Communities Among Colleagues in Higher Education*, Felten, P., Bauman, H.-D. L., Kheriaty, A., & Taylor, E. (2013).

Many leaders in education today are aware that the World War II generation of veterans transformed, and were transformed by, higher education. After that, they then went on to transform the American economy as well. But much less seems to be known about how this transformation came about, or what elements were critical to making it happen. We may not know much about exactly what it was, but there seems to be widespread agreement that much of what happened was good. Only recently are we beginning to appreciate the full implications. As an example, the Harvard Grant Study has tracked the lives of a group of more than two hundred male students – most or all of them veterans – since World War II⁸ One of the principal investigators of that study, George Vaillant, reported earlier this week his conclusion that education is the single most significant factor in predicting the ability to respond positively to traumatic events. Other factors, such as upbringing, genetics, ethnicity, career field, or participation in formal psychotherapy, were not even close. It seems likely that this dramatic result is not due to some bit of knowledge these men acquired at school, but rather who they became in the process of higher education. By taking a communication perspective, looking at “what gets made” through communication in higher education, it may be possible to better understand, and perhaps assist, this process.

Before we pursue that thought further, there is another thing to consider about veterans, and that is that they are not a monolithic group. They represent a

⁸ An account of this study is reported in “Triumphs of Experience: The Men of the Harvard Grant Study” (2012) by George Vaillant.

multitude of ethnicities, come from rural areas and from cities, intact, blended or broken family systems, and have a variety of worldviews and types and levels (including the absence) of religious or spiritual backgrounds. In short, they are us. They represent our society, and who we are. The participants in my current research project represent that diversity, and also a wide range of campus settings, from urban commuter schools to “traditional” self-contained campuses in smaller university towns.

Through the good offices of CMM institute members, and with the support of the CMMI Fellows grant, I have been able to identify and interview two veterans who have been exposed to CMM –based theories of communication as part of their college studies. Both of them have indicated that studying CMM has helped them to come to grips with their wartime experiences, and both had self-identified as having experienced the effects of PTSD. Their CMM studies were undertaken in different academic contexts, but both were able to describe their experience of “making” something helpful in communication with others, whom they described as serving as mentors.

The first veteran - I will refer to him as “A.J.” - has been pursuing academic studies in theology and philosophy since his return from service. I was introduced to him by a professor of communication studies at Syracuse University, Diane Grimes, following a seminar session with Kim Pearce and Arthur Jensen as part of her CMM-based “Mindful Communication” course. A.J. had participated in another

of Diane's courses, "Communication and Contemplative Engagement," sometime earlier. A.J. says he realized, after reflection on some disturbing wartime experiences, how the impact of "logical force" in social environments can produce unwanted and unintended results: how good people can become involved in doing things that appear contrary to their moral codes. He spoke about the disciplined and mindful "warrior-monk" archetype he has seen in the literature, and thinks about someday returning to the Army to teach this mindful communication approach to soldiers, perhaps helping our military become more morally coherent as warriors and protectors of society.

The second veteran - I will call him "K.A." - I met through John Parrish Sprowl at Indiana -Purdue University. K was in John's class on Global Health Communication, which involved a field trip to Poland. The "CMMish" philosophy underlying this class is something that John refers to as "Communication Complex - as opposed to "Communication Simple" - the basic "sender-message-medium-receiver" model still taught in many college communication courses. John explains this difference in a TED talk⁹ in some detail, but the basic idea is that our world today has many more modalities of communication in play than it did just a hundred years ago, yet many of our organizations and social processes are still using the designs and conceptual models created in the days of horses and buggies. K.A. says that this class, and his conversations with John, were pivotal for him in helping him

⁹ John Parrish-Sprowl's TED talk on "Communication Complex" can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OGv_Sk7Appk

to decide on a future career involving intercultural and international relations. He came to this realization by reflecting upon his military experience abroad, working in Afghanistan with people from twenty-seven different nations in for a common purpose. After that, he says it is very difficult to return to a national culture which seems in retrospect to have an insular and ethnocentric perspective.

Those versed in the terminology of CMM would recognize what K.A. had experienced as “Cosmopolitan Communication.” Although he still does not like to talk about his military service all that much, he has found a way to take what he has learned from that experience and envision a future direction for himself in which he can use this knowledge to help to bridge cultural divides. He has also found that he appreciates living in a cosmopolitan environment, and something important is missing for him when he is away from it.

Let’s take a closer look at what may have been being “made” in these conversations. K.A. mentioned John as his most influential advisor without hesitation, but as it turns out, John did not know at the time that he was being a mentor. As he saw it at the time, they were just having conversations, and that he also gained insight as a result. As a person who did not have a military background, and did not like the idea of even talking about war, John had not previously been exposed to those kinds of stories. By taking a communication perspective - and a “cosmopolitan” one at that - he and K.A. arrived at a point of mutual respect from very different cultural perspectives. They also “made” together a profound

understanding to bridge the seemingly incommensurable social worlds of combat and campus. As John put it:

“We say that we ‘hate the war and love the warrior’ But what does that really mean? We can understand that (soldiers) can participate in a larger pattern that requires them to do certain things, and when they come back home, they need to know that we appreciate it, but they also need to know that we “get” what it does to them. Their stories and experiences may be at odds with how they think (about it afterwards), so need to be able to listen, and help sort that out for people when they return....

A wise and patient listener who can learn to understand and love the warrior, may be able to help them love themselves again, too.... and help them make something good from the things they have experienced. This may be possible, even if those conflicted feelings, and the embodied state of hypervigilance that being in a war zone creates, never quite go away.

We have just considered how two young men have come back from the experience of war profoundly changed, as have many soldiers before them. We have also seen examples of how taking a “communication perspective,” with the help of wise and prepared mentors, has helped them to focus this change of perspective in positive directions. A question we might ask at this point is why this is kind of

purposeful and guided transition not the universal experience of returning veterans?

One way of getting at this question is to consider the way the path of the warrior is portrayed in traditional world literature, and in American folklore. There is a “universal monomyth,” described by Joseph Campbell and other scholars, which appears across many cultures. In these mythical tales, the warrior goes off into a strange realm and defeats a powerful adversary, then returns by way of great peril to society, where he bestows a great boon or blessing that he has acquired through his sacrifices. The American monomyth is much different, not quite as conducive to helping the warrior to return. This American monomyth is exemplified by the exploits of heroes like Superman, Batman, and the Lone Ranger. In these stories, the hero comes to the rescue of a threatened community, defeats the enemy, but then cannot remain in the community. He rides off into the sunset, crawls back into the bat-cave, jumps into a phone booth, and disappears or hides behind a secret identity. With this as a model, is it a wonder that, sometimes, our returning warriors get the feeling that they just can’t stick around? This may be one of the aggravating factors leading to moral injury - or at the very least, cognitive dissonance - among many of our troops as they come home.

In another way of looking at it, the process of getting help through our current institutions presents the veteran with a dilemma. To get government-provided mental health services, they must first be diagnosed with a mental illness.

The warrior mentality sees this as a sign of weakness, and a path to helplessness. So if you ask for help, you might become labeled as mentally ill. If you do not ask for help, the unaddressed affects of posttraumatic stress may cause worse long-term consequences. This is commonly referred to as a “double-bind,” or “Catch-22” situation. CMM Theory considers this phenomenon a “strange loop,” and provides insight on how to design a system that does not create this kind of result. Part of that process might start with seeing posttraumatic stress differently, not as a clinician categorizes it, but how a veteran lives it.

To help us better understand the lived experience of a veteran (or possibly anyone else) suffering from the effects of posttraumatic stress, let’s look at the following excerpt from a BLOG entry by a writer who spoke with a number of veterans, including one of my research participants. After reading this post, my participant said that many things that had not made sense to him before, suddenly fell into place for him, and things that had been difficult or beyond reach for him were now possible:

“In my experience, PTSD doesn’t get fixed. That’s because it was never about getting shot at, or seeing people die. It was never the snap trauma, the quick moment of action, (which) breaks a person. PTSD is the wages of a life spent in crisis, the slow, thematic build that gradually changes the way the sufferer sees the world.

PTSD isn't a disease, it's a worldview. War, disaster response, police work, these things force a person to live in the spaces where trauma happens, to spend most of their time there, until that world becomes yours, seeps through your skin and runs in your blood.

Diseases are discrete things. But how do you treat a change in perspective? Science Fiction and Fantasy writer Joe Abercrombie captured it best in his description of Ferro Majinn's final revelation of the world of demons just alongside our own. Once seen the creatures cannot be unseen. When you're quiet enough, you can hear them breathing."

So, how do you go about changing a worldview?

As we have noted earlier, CMM offers some insights into the power of communication to help shape our social realities, and tools to help us see and understand how some existing and entrenched patterns have shaped our perceptions, and how they might be re-shaped in a more intentional way. We have just considered modest examples of how learning about CMM may have helped two veterans to understand that they live in a world created by communication, and recognize that they are in the process of bridging very different social worlds. Can this be done on a wider scale, and with intention?

Let's back up for a minute and take a macro view of the experience of military veterans. Many, if not most, veterans have gone from a particularly defined home environment, entered into the world of military basic training or "boot camp" where communication is vastly different, then gone into a war zone with its own unique communication logics and dilemmas. Back home, they are again faced with adapting to social worlds that are not only different than their military experience, but also different than the social world they may remember before their service. In short, both they, and the way they see the world around them, has changed. This can be even more disconcerting for a veteran coming home and at the same time, entering the unique culture of the college campus, while trying to envision and prepare for a new career or calling which may still be something of a mystery. To help navigate this transition, both the help of a guide or "mentor," and some tools for a new way of seeing the world can make a powerful difference. CMM may provide some of those tools.

CMM combined with mindfulness can be particularly powerful for a veteran returning from the war zone. Mindfulness practices can help to slow things down from the instinctive reactions that a warrior learns to depend upon for survival in combat. Once these embodied and automatic responses have been slowed down, they can be examined. CMM models can help to organize, clarify, and display the logics and outcomes of various communication options. This can lead to more intentional choices about what to "make" in communication situations, and moves the therapeutic interaction to the social space, and out of the internal world. The

emphasis is moved from “I have a problem and need help to fix it” to “I can learn and use this approach to create better outcomes.”

Contrast this approach to what K.A. described as his lived experience of individual clinical psychotherapy:

“I have never had a bad experience with a psychiatrist, or anything but it seems like they just ask one question after another after another, and then saying things like, ‘well, it sounds like you keep mentioning this’, or ‘it sounds like this is what’s really bothering you.’ But it seems like they are too passive, or one-sided.”

K.A. earlier described the ways that studying CMM, and conversations with John Parrish-Sprowl, helped him to understand why he might not always have gotten the reactions he wanted when he shared stories with others who did not have his experiences. He also commented on ways that using CMM, or taking a “communication perspective,” might help mental health professionals to be more effective, as well, particularly the recognition that reality is “made in communication,” and that it is an active and two-way process:

“John often asks, ‘would you rather be right, or would you rather be effective?’ (Using CMM) would help to get the client and the caregiver on the same page, help them understand each other a little more.... recognizing it is

difficult to see things exactly the way the other person sees them... and for caregivers to understand that, while they are trying to understand the patient, the patient should be allowed to understand the caregiver and their knowledge a little bit, too - to be able to describe or identify the factors that are causing their feelings or their emotions.”

In other words, pay less attention to being “right” in making a supposedly objective diagnosis, and actively participate in being “effective” by creating something together, in communication.

Veteran A.J. also described his experience with mental health providers in a similar way:

“You have a symptom, and then you (talk with) somebody who is looking for a label, and they just sort of jam it together, and if it fits enough, you get labeled as something, and it’s a self-fulfilling prophesy, and I feel like that’s what happened.”

This is not to suggest or imply that we do not need clinical psychologists. On the contrary, we need them more than ever, but we could benefit even more by finding ways to put their knowledge to work in the real world, what phenomenologists call the “lifeworld” – and not just behind the closed doors of the therapy room.

This is also not to imply that PTSD is not real, and not a significant problem for many veterans. The personal and social consequences of not actively helping veterans with their transition are well-known, ranging from isolation and broken relationships, to risky behavior and substance abuse, to suicide. What I am suggesting is that some of the worst of these results may be preventable. PTS does not have to turn into PTSD, but it usually doesn't just go away on its own, either. In communication with wise others, perhaps something else could be “made” of it, and that something else might include greater awareness or even personal growth.

With these realizations, we probably should not just send veterans right back to school when they come home, and hope for the best. Many returning veterans do not know how they will fit back into civilian society, have no idea what they want to study. They aren't ready for school, and when they get there, may end up feeling alien, alone and apart from the carefree young folks around them. Many schools are for many reasons interested in attracting GI Bill-funded tuition, but only a few have considered the impact and needs of these unique, “post-traditional¹⁰” students, who are not just out of high school but come with many experiences, many more questions, and are not best served by pedagogical approaches to education.

¹⁰ The term “post-traditional student” reflects the reality that most students in higher education today are not coming directly from high school. *See* “Post-traditional Learners and the Transformation of Postsecondary Education: A Manifesto for College Leaders.” Louis Soares, American Council on Education publication, January, 2013.

In a growing number of schools, the unmet need for guiding these student veterans is being filled by advisors or “mentors,” located in the context of the campus.

Colleges and universities have many formal and informal advisors, with a variety of skills and knowledge. They may be found in student affairs, counseling and mental health services, some very attuned and accessible professors (like John), and peer mentoring resources through groups like the Student Veterans of America. A small number of campuses also partner with the VA to make specially trained clinical counselors more casually accessible. In some very rare cases, these mentors are talking to each other, sharing their knowledge of the veteran experience, and working together to guide student veterans through the process of coming home. I am using the term “contextual mentoring” to describe this phenomenon, since it is often more than just the effort of one mentor, and the connections seem to happen more by encounter than design.

Much of this seems to happen outside the formal academic structures, but the fact that it is happening touches on why we have colleges and universities in the first place; to help people grow, expand their horizons, and realize their potential. The term also implies the potential to frame the interactions of these mentors in some more intentional or coordinated way.

So, how do we get more of this “contextual mentoring” in our institutions of higher learning? CMM, used as a “practical theory,” provides a coordinating framework in which many disciplines and concepts can be organized for a common

purpose. And there are places in higher education where the disciplines of psychology, education leadership, and organizational change are studied and taught....which synchronously may include Fielding Graduate University. By working together in a more “cosmopolitan” way, with fewer silos dividing the disciplines we teach, we can create structures that enhance and facilitate coordination between these disciplines, but still allow these individual cultures to maintain their diversity. This maintains the essential open and diverse nature of the university, while also providing assistance to navigate it in a purposeful way.

What would seasoned veteran care professionals have to say about such a radical departure from the status quo? Jonathan Shay, a former official of the US Department of Veterans Affairs, is one such expert who has long advocated a comprehensive approach to PTS treatment. In his words:

“We need to move towards an integrated approach that addresses the whole human critter; brain, mind, society, and the dynamics of mental health.”

This also sounds a lot like an idea my colleague Kazuma Matoba refers to as “Global Integral Consciousness: Mind, Brain, Culture and System¹¹,” which he bases upon CMM and Integral theories. Admittedly, this is much more comprehensive and

¹¹ A conceptual model that combines integral theory by Ken Wilber and cosmopolitan communication by Barnet Pearce, as described by Kazuma Matoba in the September 2012 Integral Leadership Review. *See* <http://integralleadershipreview.com/7819-sietar-forum-201238-in-berlin/>

inclusive than anything we are doing now institutionally. But, as we have just seen, such things are possible on a smaller scale.

By using the insights of CMM theory, perhaps we can work on our organizational contexts to bring our knowledge of human psychology into our communication patterns in social contexts that are more growth-promoting, insightful, and inclusive. Within these contexts, perhaps veterans can tell their stories, and with the understanding and support of wise mentors, and re-author these narratives to be more coherent and lead to better directions. Mindfully and with intention, we can work together to create the “better social worlds” envisioned by Barnett Pearce – through organizational forms that truly “promote the evolution of consciousness.”

