

A Soldier's Shift

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Prior to beginning my training as a family therapist, I served as a soldier in the U.S. Army for over twenty years. My shift from a soldier to a student was difficult. I lived my life the "Army way." As a child I learned that everyone was to be treated with dignity and respect. This was reinforced from day one in the military. I was not made aware of the impact of context. Privilege based off of rank, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and gender were not part of my vocabulary or my awareness. Our uniforms blurred context. They acted as a mask that prevented what was underneath from being seen. Everyone was Army Green. Our uniforms meant that everyone wearing them would have the same opportunity. Contextual differences had no meaning to those of us in the United States Army.

According to Raheim *et al.* in their 2004 article titled "An invitation to narrative practitioners to address privilege and dominance," "privilege is used to describe unearned rights, benefits, immunity, and favors that are bestowed on individuals and groups solely on the basis of their race, culture, religion, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, or other key characteristics" (pg 4) In the Army everyone is treated the same with dignity and respect. We are called by our rank and last name. We are treated as brothers and sisters in a large family. We would lay down our life for the one on our left or right. The only time the word privilege is used in the Army is "it is my privilege to serve my country." I did not think that I was privileged. I was not aware that I was privileged due to being a White, heterosexual, married, Christian, male.

Learning about context through my family therapy training has taught me that in the U.S., as much as any other place in the world, we live in a society where inequality is the social norm. Privilege, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, body abilities, religiosity, and gender all affect an individual's access to opportunities in life. And I have learned that through a relational lens, we as members of society can challenge or reinforce these social norms that I have come to understand as labels. I have learned that we can be champions of change. We can change meaning by changing the circumstances that have created these labels. As a result of having my eyes opened to contextual differences, I arrived at a place where I was ready to make conscious decisions to make changes in my life, outside of the clinic, outside of the therapy room.

It was time for me to be more active in the local community, to volunteer over five hundred hours in making a small impact, to spend one hour a week mentoring a school age child who needed a positive role model in his/her life to have discussions with soldiers that I knew when I was on active duty about these contextual differences, showing them how they can make an impact also. It was time for me to stop assuming everyone had the same opportunities, to step out of my comfort zone and start speaking at conferences and lunch and learns about these contextual differences (which could make others uncomfortable).

Transitioning from being a soldier to training as a family therapist was hard. Beginning classes just six months after my retirement from the military, I felt like I was drinking from a fire hydrant for the first two semesters. For the first time in a long time, I realized I had options for simple choices like "how would you like your hair cut?" This question stumped me my first couple of visits to the barber shop. Teresa, my wife, has helped out a lot during this transition.

She is a registered nurse, pursuing her master's degree in nursing. She is my complete opposite. If you were to ask her how she situates herself in relation to me, she would say that although she is my wife, she is a strong, independent, African American.

She asked me what has been the most meaningful thing I have learned in class so far. I said that words have meanings. A fellow soldier and good friend William Warner said this: "words are powerful but in the end they always fall short. If anything, they gain their power from people's ability to manipulate and pull meaning from words however we see fit."

Learning about context and the fact that words have meaning are the two things that had the greatest impact on me. Meanings and context can affect us in small ways or in very large ways. For example, I wish my being White did not impact my relationship with my spouse, but it has. When I was still on active duty, we lived in Alabama for three years. There were places that we would not go to due to the fact that we were a mixed race couple and strident racism remains an issue there. One time we went to a restaurant that was suggested to us by a co-worker, and as we walked in people stared at us and made comments under their breath. As we were leaving people spit on the floor as we walked by. I never experienced this level of racism in New Hampshire; it was not a problem in Colorado or in Texas. My daughter wasn't old enough at the time to understand what was going on, as she was only a year old. We don't let things like skin color or ethnicities have an impact inside of our house. This was the only time it has had an impact to this degree. In our family, we love each other for the stuff that is on the inside not because of the color of our skin.

"Meaning" has also had an impact on my life outside of the therapy room. It has changed the way I communicate with both Teresa and my daughter. Coming from the military, I was used to telling others what to do and knowing they would do it without having to explain myself or go into great detail. The task was accomplished because my soldiers knew what had to be done. My wife and daughter are different. Before my training, I assumed that my wife and daughter knew what I meant when I said something. I was not in the habit of explaining myself or going into great detail. For me, saying what I felt was enough. I learned through my training not to assume they knew the meaning behind my words. Even though my wife and I have been married for fifteen years, and my daughter is nine, they still don't know what I mean sometimes. I am a better communicator and now I explain what I mean when they do not understand.

An example of this is the chore chart we use for my daughter. My wife wants my daughter to do her chores twice a week. I want my daughter to do her chores every day. In conversation with my daughter, she came up with the chores she would do and how often she would do them because my wife and I trust and respect her abilities and values. When she does them, she is rewarded for her work. When she doesn't do them then she doesn't earn that reward. I feel that it teaches her responsibility and ownership. If I just give her everything that she wants (which I sometimes I do) she may continue to expect things without effort for the rest of her life. We want her to be independent and not rely on anyone for the things she wants. Yesterday, she asked me for a video game which cost fifty dollars; I had the money and wanted to get her the game because she deserved it based on her report card. She said instead of just buying her the game immediately, she would do her chores every day for the week without being asked or told. She did this and I got her the game. Her chores include feeding her puppy, letting him out to go to the bathroom when he needs to, and making her bed daily.

Admiral McRaven said it best in his University of Texas Austin 2014 Commencement Address, “If you want to change the world, start off by making your bed. If you make your bed every day you will have accomplished the first task of the day. It will give you a small sense of pride and it will encourage you to do another task and another and another and by the end of the day that one task will have turned into many tasks completed. Making your bed will reinforce the fact that little things in life matter” (Goalcast, 2017). Treating our clients with dignity and respect regardless of our contextual differences matters and as a therapist I can continue to take little steps in my daily life to meet my future clients where they are at in life.

References

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