
To Hell and Back

I can't ever remember being young in my life.

—Audie Murphy

The subtitle for this book comes from the 1955 film, *To Hell and Back*, starring Audie Murphy, one of the most decorated soldiers of all time. In the film, a very youthful thirty-one-year-old Murphy played himself in a swashbuckling tale of a country boy turned hero in World War II. He earned a million dollars from the film and starred in a number of westerns. After he died in a 1971 plane crash, a different picture emerged of his life.

Medical records from his release from active duty indicated vomiting, nightmares, and other indicators of combat fatigue, now known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). We now know he self-medicated his symptoms with drugs and alcohol, and reports of violence towards his first wife and more alarming behaviors have surfaced. As a war hero and media celebrity, it was hard for those who idolized him to believe such a great man could have so many demons. Perhaps no one knew. Perhaps no one wanted to know. He had, after all, pitched a sequel to *To Hell and Back* called *The Way Back*, which chronicled his homecoming, but no one wanted to finance it.

The army I served in adored Audie Murphy. Formed at Fort Hood, Texas, a base where I served for four years, the Sergeant Audie Murphy Club is an elite organization devoted to developing competent leaders for the army. To enter the club, a soldier must stand before several examining boards, answering questions to demonstrate proficiency. One of the areas of examination is Murphy's biography. Only the official biography can be used, however. To my knowledge, Murphy's PTSD, his self-medication, or any of his trials of homecoming are completely omitted. The founders of the club felt that good army leaders needed only to know his service number, how many films he starred in (forty-four), and his military awards for bravery. It is little wonder our warriors feel stigma and shame when they struggle in their post-war odyssey.

But Murphy did go to hell and back, and one of his many songs captures the loneliness of his condition.

Shutters and boards, cover the windows of the house
 Where we used to live
 All I have left, is a heart full of sorrow
 Since she said, she'd never forgive

The house that we built, was once filled with laughter
 But I changed that laughter to tears
 Now, I live in a world without sunshine
 Ooh, I wish you were here

Shutters and boards, cover the windows of the house
 Where we used to live
 All I have left, is a heart full of sorrow
 Since she said, she'd never forgive

Last night I dreamed that you came to our house
 To take an old book from the shelf
 If you'll open the shutters, I'll tear down the boards
 'Cause I drove every nail by myself

Ever since I came home from the war in Iraq, I see the world differently. At first, I thought the world had changed. Later, I realized I had done the changing. Now, for better or worse, I see everything, including God, through this post-traumatic lens. In this book I will argue I am not alone in this post-traumatic vision of God. Although my trip to hell and back cost me dearly, this post-traumatic vision of God is a good thing, a thing that will bring about more human flourishing. The Church needs this post-traumatic vision of God if she is to bring reconciliation and healing to a wounded world.

Our English word “trauma” is the Greek word for “wound.” The purpose of war is to produce trauma in the enemy. Whether the enemy is killed or wounded matters little. All that matters is neutralization of the opposing fighting force. In fact, wounding enemy troops is preferable to killing them since wounded combatants require care by other troops. The dead require very little.

In the United States today, there are several million veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many of us are wounded physically, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually. Sometimes, all four of these categories of wounds exist in the same veteran. Each one of us is different and veterans should interpret their own experiences in combat and homecoming. I only know what I went through in Iraq. I only truly know my own experience, and the fog of war shadows that experience. I have forgotten some events for years, only to be reminded of them in a conversation with another veteran. In this book I offer you my experience in war and homecoming, with the hope my story might resonate with veterans and those who love and care for them.

One of the memories that keeps coming back to me happened in a Humvee between Baghdad and a forward operating base (FOB) south of the city. The vehicle had a .50 caliber machine gun mounted on the roof and a soldier in the turret on high alert. The roads were dangerous, and every car, pile of trash, or dead donkey could be concealing an improvised explosive device (IED).

On the way back from the mission, we passed through an Iraqi Army checkpoint on Route Tampa, the main highway from Baghdad to Kuwait. As we approached the checkpoint, a young Iraqi Army soldier, our ally, was having a heated discussion with an old Iraqi man. It looked like they were delaying the passage of the old man's small Toyota truck. The old man was dressed in a long, off-white, traditional Iraqi dress. As we approached the checkpoint, the young soldier stopped talking to the old man. He turned toward us, the approaching American convoy, and looked right at my vehicle. He had a defiant look on his face and I could see his eyes rest on my chaplain assistant as she sat in the passenger seat. She may or may not have noticed his gaze as she scanned the area for IEDs and other threats. Her M16A2 rifle was ready and the .50 Cal on the roof's turret remained silently vigilant. The young soldier looked at her, then he looked at me, and then he punched the old man in the stomach. The robe billowed around the soldier's fist until his fist hit the old man's stomach. The old man crumpled in a heap and we drove on. We always drove on. To stop anywhere was too risky.

There, in what was probably the least violent event of the whole Iraq War, something happened to me. Was this where my God died? I cannot be sure, but I know something shifted inside of me. I think about this moment often as I reflect on my time in Iraq. I think about what I could have done differently. I think of how helpless I was to help the old man. I think about how much effort we were all giving to "fix Iraq." This moment made the whole place seem unfixable.

Worse events surrounded this roadside punch, a few of which I describe in my first book, *Death Letter*. I try not to get too close to these stories anymore since I have found they often obscure what I want to say about war. Many veterans find it hard to talk about war. For me, this comes from my inability to probe the feelings of the event, feelings of failure and regret for not preventing that big bad thing from happening.

The wound in my soul, the moral injury, was in my powerlessness to do good in a bad situation. It was as if I threw the cruel punch, or, at least, approved of that punch, yea, blessed that punch. Moral injuries are

the things done and left undone, and these are legion in a war. War is an upside-down moral universe where the good is bad and the bad is good. In this world, the morality we learned as children is suspended. “Don’t hit your brother.” “Don’t hit your sister.” Everyday cruelties abound and I was part of them, blessing them.

Now, every time a vehicle I am riding in slows down on the highway, I start to get anxious. The threat of ambush or attack was high in Baghdad and the chances of attack went up when we slowed down because we were lost or in traffic. This feeling is at its worst when the evil hours begin, at twilight. I start a fight with my wife who is driving or complain about little things until the people who are with me begin to feel my anxiety. Never stop, not for anything, is the mantra by body lives by. My inner ear knows to trigger the alarm bells when it feels the slow-down.

I had power in Iraq, more power than I ever had in my whole life. I was part of a team who had the power of life and death. We could kill and get away with it. We could kill and earn awards and medals for it. The only one in the whole universe who has the ultimate power to take a life is God. Except in war. There, in war, an eighteen-year-old woman or man has that power. In the world of war, we were the goddesses and gods.

But that world ended when we came home and the power ended with it. It took a while for me to realize what I lost in Iraq. Sometimes I think it was my innocence. Other times I know it was my god-like power.

When I got home from Iraq, my now ex-wife was having an affair with the neighbor. It took me months to figure that out. I was so out of touch with what was happening around me. I was powerless to save our marriage. In that powerlessness, I came to believe God was powerless too. When I asked, he refused to answer. So much for the deal we had made. So much for the covenant I had kept.

Fear crept into my soul. What I had believed was no longer true. There was no longer any safety with God. There was no longer any safety in the universe. War removed, for me, the illusion that the world is a safe place. I lived with this illusion before combat, but after I saw the elephant, the illusion died with the young men and women who believed it. All

illusions die, I suppose. Some die in explosions and other bleed out slowly without even a whimper.

When I arrived in Iraq, we were told to come up with a plan to kill everyone we met. I was a chaplain, usually the only one without a weapon, so I relied on my chaplain assistant. The chaplain assistant was an ordinary soldier assigned to protect the chaplain among other more administrative tasks. Even though she was there with me, I still had to be ready for anything at all times. In a few days, I grew used to this state of affairs. I grew numb to the danger from the people around me and from the roads of Baghdad.

In spite of my comfort with the uncomfortable, the need to escalate my rage was always smoldering under the surface. Soldiers have to go from zero to sixty in a blink of an eye if they hope to survive the unpredictable dangers of war. This stayed with me when I came home. I rarely felt safe and little things would set me off into a paranoid rage. It was as if the lid of civilization had been taken off the boiling cauldron of my own internal struggles. I quickly found that alcohol calmed me down and I began to use it like medicine, in large doses.

The infidelity in my marriage, and the subsequent divorce, flipped everything in my life upside down. I was angry at everything and everyone, including God. I felt that God had betrayed me. I felt that since I had been a faithful husband, a good soldier, a loving chaplain, and a good Christian, God would hook me up with a good marriage. The divorce reinterpreted my whole year in Iraq. My service in Iraq was no longer a noble event in my life. Now, it represented the lull before the storm. With the failure of the marriage, the losses, the deaths, the tears, the dust, and the punches no longer seemed worth it. In this time, I found that traumatic events have the power to change the entire story of our lives. They can make memories of happy times full of ominous foreboding. When my divorce rewrote the story of my Iraq deployment, I realized I had been living under a delusion of happiness the whole time. Now the war represented the breakup of my family and the loss of my primary identity.

The first assignment I was given in the army after Iraq and divorce was a year of clinical pastoral education (CPE) at Ft. Lewis, Washington. There, while my internal identity recalibrated, I found I could no longer write “God” with a capital letter in my papers. All I could do was write “god.” This raised some eyebrows in my CPE group, but my colleagues were understanding. Most of them had just returned from Iraq too and were recalibrating their theological framework. In the religious community of my youth and young adulthood, this would have been rank heresy.

This lower-case god did not have the rules of the God I grew up with. This god did not regulate sex like the God of my youth. At the time I did not know I was wounded, and that this is often what a wound looks like. I was on a quest to find a new way to relate to God, with the hope that I could still exist and work as a Christian minister. I liked being with people as they struggled with the trials of life, but I could no longer work for the God I no longer believed in. My search for the post-traumatic God was driven by necessity, not by curiosity. This book contains what I found.