

A Review of *Souled Out: A Memoir of War and Inner Peace*

by Amy Bluemenshine, *Coming Home Collaborative*

As pastoral care providers and parishioners seek to learn about the spiritual impact of war on soldiers, they would be well served to read the recent memoir by Wisconsin veteran, Michael Orban. Exquisitely reflective and with well-crafted description, Orban describes his own decades of healing his war-wounded soul.

Not yet 20, he had slogged his way through the Vietnamese bush in the infantry, acting with a “Kill or be killed” mentality. While acting to survive, he witnessed and participated in activity that he describes as stealing his soul: Everything spiritual that had formed the foundations of my soul and guidance in life felt like a lie, as did my social teachings. My soul had been scooped and cleaned out just as one scrapes a pumpkin to make a jack-o-lantern. Every seed, every strand of pulp of my beliefs was gone. I was souled out, and the windows to my soul [‘the thousand yard stare’ of his eyes] were positive proof.

Upon returning home, he was eager to resume his life, but was stymied by his post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. He lost his marriage and failed college. Alcohol became his way to cope. His PTSD would not be treated for over two decades. “Nothing gave me pleasure or was of interest. I felt spiritually dead. . . . The enormous volume of unreal experiences seen in war plagued my mind. This confusion and inability to understand myself and what was in my mind added additional fear to the quantity already buried behind the barrier protecting my psyche. I felt that the failure of my belief system left me with no comprehension of whom I was. There is probably no more frightening or dreadful fear than that of losing your mind. Nor is there a greater struggle than to keep that torment hidden. Years later I would find I had no choice; those festering emotions were coming out, like it or not.”

Still desperately trying to maintain a facade of being okay, he fled to Africa, working in the Gabon bush for the Peace Corps and in Cameroun for a non-governmental organization. “Here before me was God’s cure if I chose to take it.” In Africa, “I would marvel . . . at the majesty of life; the realization that life was much bigger than we are; that life is about more than any one of us and greater than any single person. This realization eventually led me beyond my egocentric concentration on my war experiences, and helped me choose between going inward to my own demons, or moving outwards to experience life as a part, not the center.”

Returning to the states, he writes that but for the “over-generosity” of his many siblings, he would have been homeless due to his alcohol use and other PTSD symptoms. Eventually, his confrontation with suicide prompted a more productive search for healing.

He came to conclude that part of his problem was the societal denial of the harm related to soldiering. “Society seems to have a need to think of its military as this ‘pure clean assembly of men and women’ who could not possibly hurt or abuse prisoners or others, shoot their own soldiers, or become mentally traumatized. Society needs to feel secure and believe that its military is honorable, courageous, and will fight within the rules set up to appease governmental leaders. . . . We mask over many truths to have that security, and war veterans are a part of this erroneous thinking. He or she must return heroic and unaffected by the experience. Society needs (and government intends) to see this for the sake of social sanity.”



For Orban, his path to recovery after the confrontation with war required addressing his belief system and the care of his soul. “To rebuild a belief system that makes sense of life is not easy, but this is essential for getting out from behind the facade and facing the truth of the darkness.”

Our experience paying attention to the impact of war on veterans is not yet broad enough that we can say that all military involved in war will have problems of the soul as Orban did. Clearly some do, however. May we in the church be prepared to help them in their recovery.

Souled Out: A Memoir of War and Inner Peace, by Michael S. Orban, Candler, N.C.: Silver Springs Press, 2007. www.michaelorban.com.

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Unfortunately at the moment we do not have enough churches expressing a willingness to explore such partnerships. For example, we have a woman from Somalia, a former Muslim, now a Christian, who has studied at a seminary in Kentucky and is currently active in learning at the Discipleship Academy. She is interested in leading one or more congregations in outreach to Muslim neighbors. So far, no congregation has expressed interest.

The Lutheran churches in our area and indeed throughout the United States are shrinking in membership. Here is a way for our congregations to reach out to new people in their communities. And because many of these immigrant refugees plan to return to their homeland one day, the faith relationships we form with them here they will carry back overseas with them. Thus, your congregation has a great opportunity to get personally involved in global mission.

To learn more about Agora’s work and to explore the possibilities it may offer your congregation, visit the Web site at www.agoraminsty.org or phone 952-888-5197. We want to help you carry out Christ’s command to disciple all nations.