



# The lingering trauma of the Vietnam war

By EVE MARX

On Friday, Nov. 9, Larry Winters, a senior clinician at Four Winds Hospital, Vietnam War veteran, and author of "The Making and Unmaking of a Marine," gave a talk and presentation on post-traumatic stress disorder.

To a rapt audience of Four Winds personnel, two uniformed military medical officials and friends and fans of the speaker, Mr. Winters spoke about the devastated mental state of the men and women who return to this country after experiencing war, and how to best reintegrate them into the culture.

Although the event was advertised by Four Winds in their Grand Rounds brochure as focusing on the 20,000 troops deployed in Iraq, Mr. Winters spoke almost exclusively about Vietnam veterans and his own heartwrenching experience. He said that many veterans of the Vietnam War remain significantly damaged; many are still unable to work or to sustain meaningful personal relationships. He described them as individuals particularly subject to depression, alcoholism, drug addiction, even suicide.

Mr. Winters spoke almost exclusively of his personal history. Born and raised in New Paltz, he willingly and ignorantly enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps during the Vietnam engagement. At the time, even though he couldn't have said where Vietnam was, he knew he was a patriot. He served in that country for over four years, and upon his return home took a degree from Empire State College. He became known as the creator and formulator of a psychodrama directive group therapy, and in the role of a therapist, returned to Vietnam to study post-traumatic stress syndrome, as well as to "apologize to Vietnamese people." Today Mr. Winters is a published poet, and as Janet Segal, the director of Four Winds, said, "a truly original man."

Mr. Winters began his presentation by asking people sitting next to each other to recall a veteran they knew who had experienced war. Names of war veterans were written on paper and held up on easels at the front of the room.

Prior to the Vietnam War, a warrior returning to this society held on to his identity when he returned from the battle scene, Mr. Winters said. Vietnam veterans, he said, were the



EVE MARX PHOTO

**Clinician Larry Winters shared his heartwrenching wartime experience at Four Winds Hospital in Katonah.**

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first returning soldiers to be vilified for their service, called "baby killers" and other epithets.

Mr. Winters spoke passionately about the grievous wounds to the psyche experienced by returning soldiers. He talked about taking 30 years to write his book and 30 years of writing poetry to make sense of his experience. He read a prose poem called "Confession," which was both disturbing and magnificent. He spoke about how returning veterans are expected to "get on in life," but how few are able to do that.

Rather than accepting the usual diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, Mr. Winters

described the condition of war veterans as being a "disorder of the soul." He said that the usual spectrum of drugs used to treat PTSD are ineffective because "drugs may help treat the symptoms, but they do not address the soul. Living in repressed shame, guilt and humiliation requires treatment in the form of a very special kind of listening," he ruled.

Cognitive behavioral therapy, the usual treatment for PTSD, he said doesn't do much for those who participated in a war. He said looking for new and unique tools to heal PTSD is "beside the point. We miss the target looking for new tools," Mr.

Winters espoused. "The soul cannot be put in a box to be examined."

What does help, he said, is "caring, listening and above all, truthfulness of the clinician." Tools, he said almost sarcastically, "insulate us from feeling, which should be a central source of information how to work as therapists and healers." He described most therapeutic tools as "nothing more than diagnostic armor to protect us from the soul-dehumanizing experiences of those before us."

Deep listening, he counseled, uses more than the ears. "It's easy to hear the facts, assess the circumstances and come up with a game plan for help," Mr. Winters said. "But few take the time to really listen."

"The skills needed to work with a war veteran are different," he said. "We want these people to function the way they did before they went away, but they can't, because they are permanently transformed."

An Army psychiatrist spoke briefly about what VA hospitals are currently doing to treat PTSD in returning Iraq and Afghanistan soldiers. "This is so complex and so ambiguous a war," he said. "There is no front, no rear, no safe zone. It's such a hyperkinetic war; the adrenaline levels are so much higher because there is no front line. Every place and every person is dangerous." He said that for soldiers returning from these conflicts, what is needed is to "keep soldiers actively engaged. We put them into warrior transition units. We assign them a squad leader, a platoon leader they report to when they get back to the U.S. and their homes. Soldiers understand a mission, and their mission is to heal."

Mr. Winters maintained that most soldiers returning from war are beyond healing. "Healing does not apply to people who have experienced this level of trauma," he said. "The best we can do is try to help a person manage what their own history has left them. It's not a matter of expecting peace or quiet or freedom from the past. It's helping the person manage, handle, accept and live with the consequences of what they went through."

"Don't beat us up too hard, because we didn't predict this," the Army doctor said, speaking of the current war. "We realize now the paradigm has significantly shifted."