



U.S. Army Sgt. Kamirah Williams, a human resources specialist with the U.S. Army Civil Affairs & Psychological Operations Command (Airborne), braces against rotor wash from a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter during an airborne operation at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, July 17, 2020. (U.S. Army photo by Michel Sauret)

Interior Freedom

Strengthening Spritual Readiness & Resilience

By Maj. Brigid Calhoun

Army Joint Chiefs of Staff Internship Program

As the recently published *Fort Hood Independent Review* and *Department of Defense Annual Suicide Report* shows, the U.S. Army continues to struggle with sexual assault and harassment, suicide, anxiety, and depression are not going away (Cronk, 2020; Department of the Army, 2020a). The reports cite failures in leadership, individual decision-making, chemical imbalances, and past trauma as causal factors for Sexual Harassment Assault Response Prevention (SHARP) program and suicide incidents. But the U.S. Army should also consider a breakdown in respect for self and others as contributing to these incidents. This breakdown points to possible larger underlying issues with the force's spiritual readiness and resilience.

According to *Field Manual (FM) 7-22: Holistic Health and Fitness*, spiritual readiness “develops the personal qualities a person needs in times of stress, hardship, and tragedy. These qualities come from religious, philosophical, or human values and form the basis for character disposition, decision making, and integrity” (Department of the Army, 2020b, p. 10-1). While no “silver-bullet” solution exists to automatically reverse the Army’s SHARP and suicide trends, this article proposes a renewed focus on spiritual readiness and resilience centered upon helping Soldiers strengthen their interior lives as a part of a broader strategy to manage these issues. The NCO Corps is the ideal mech-



Chaplain (Maj.) John Scott, U.S. Army Garrison Fort Bliss, leads a discussion on the importance of spiritual fitness for all Soldiers, Civilians, and Families, regardless of religious affiliation, as part of the inaugural Ironclad Summit at Fort Bliss, Texas, March 11, 2021. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Nicholas Brown-Bell)

anism to achieve this renewed focus because resilience begins at the team, squad, and platoon levels.

It is important to clarify this article's intent. It does not aim to supplant or replace psychological, medical, or scientific studies on behavioral health, sexual assault, and sexual harassment. Nor does the article's grouping of SHARP and behavioral health issues suggest causal chains between any of them, or that one should view the perpetrator of a sexual assault crime in the same light as a Soldier who attempts or commits suicide. Grouping these issues, each of which separately impacts individual and unit readiness, merely facilitates their discussion within a single article. It is worth considering that promoting the development of rich interior lives could improve respect for self and others across the Army. It stands to reason this respect could possibly effect the Army's SHARP and suicide trends.

A Rich Interior Life

So, what does a rich interior life look like? Fundamentally, it includes a strong sense of worth and respect, both for oneself and others. It embodies a commitment to the values of faith, trust, and a hope in something bigger than oneself. A well-developed interior life may result in higher levels of resilience. Consider the heroic survival stories of former South African president Nelson Mandela or American prisoners of war (POWs) like late U.S. Senator John McCain and World War II flying ace Louis Zamperini ("Biography of Nelson Mandela," n.d.; Meroney, 2014; "The Story of John Sidney McCain III," n.d.). The military's own Code of Conduct urges POWs to rely on their interior lives to "keep faith" and "trust in God and in the United States of America" ("Code of Conduct," n.d., para. 6). This ethic applies in peacetime and can be leveraged

to combat sexual assault and harassment, suicide, anxiety, and depression.

How should the Army go about developing Soldiers' interior lives? French spiritual author Jacques Philippe offers a potential course of action. His pocket-sized book *Interior Freedom* provides an accessible framework for building an inner life grounded in interior freedom.

But what can a spiritual Frenchman teach Soldiers about resilience? Although his writings are inherently Christian, they promote universal and transcendental truths applicable to Army resilience and the military ethic. Even for non-religious readers, Philippe makes a compelling case for how developing a strong sense of self-worth and self-respect yields interior freedom, which he describes as, "a space of freedom, within ourselves, that nobody can take away. If we have learned to let this

inner space of freedom unfold, then, even though many things may well cause us to suffer, nothing will really be able to oppress or crush us" (Philippe, 2007, p. 9).

In a military context, interior freedom supports disciplined initiative, personal courage, and respect. Soldiers pride themselves in being a part of something bigger than themselves; faith in "something" outside of themselves underscores their sense of duty. Overcoming suffering can also make us better leaders. Reading *Interior Freedom* through this lens will unveil practical wisdom to strengthen resilience and spiritual readiness in all ranks. To reinforce Soldiers' rich interior lives, chaplains and unit ministry teams can help NCOs explain and teach Philippe's concepts.

Interior Freedom

Philippe divides *Interior Freedom* into five chapters, with the first two being the most applicable to this article. Chapter 1 concerns freedom and acceptance while Chapter 2 focuses on the present moment.

The Search for Freedom

According to Philippe's first chapter, we find happiness and fulfillment when we receive love and acceptance freely given. This is instructive considering how many suicides and suicide attempts stem from breakdowns in familial or romantic relationships.

Philippe then debunks several myths about freedom, the first being that freedom only exists outside ourselves and is defined by our circumstances, limitations, and restrictions. He dismisses this notion as unrealistic, because even in the absence of limitations and restrictions, we still may not find true freedom. Philippe ties this to the second misguided notion of freedom which manifests itself in our attempts to

overcome faults and vices such as drug and alcohol abuse and high-risk, thrill-seeking activities.

Faith, Courage, and Devotion

To demonstrate that true freedom lies internally, rather than externally, Philippe relays the story of Etty Hillesum, a 29-year-old Jewish woman who was killed at the Auschwitz concentration camp in November 1943 and whose diary was published in 1981. Philippe cites Etty's faith (even though she was not particularly religious), courage in suffering, and devotion to her neighbors as models for interior freedom. However, Etty's own words, written while detained, powerfully demonstrate the depth of her inner life:

"The Nazis can't do anything to us, they really can't. They can harass us, they can rob us of our material goods, of our freedom of movement, but we ourselves forfeit our greatest assets by our misguided compliance. By our feelings of being persecuted, humiliated, oppressed. By our own hatred...our greatest injury is the one we inflict upon ourselves. I find life beautiful, and I find it free. (Philippe, 2007, p. 23)"

Etty provides a powerful example to Soldiers of all ranks: regardless of our circumstances, we can still find life good, beautiful, and free. We bolster our interior freedom by keeping faith and hope in our institution and maintaining a sense of duty towards and love of our brothers and sisters-in-arms.

Acceptance of Reality

Philippe next discusses how acceptance of reality, self, and others contributes to interior freedom. By accepting the aspects of reality we have not chosen and cannot control, we consent to the opportunities for growth they provide. He describes three typical reactions to adversity:

1. The first is rebellion or rejection of reality, which ultimately leads to despair, violence, and resentment. Think here of attempted and completed suicides in which despairing Soldiers harm themselves believing they have no way out of their pain and difficulty.
2. The second reaction is resignation, a declaration of powerlessness and giving up resulting in inaction and loss of motivation.
3. The third is consent, which leads to the completely opposite interior attitude of rebellion. In consenting to reality, however difficult it may be, we dare to hope something good may come of it.

Accept and Affirm Others

Philippe urges us to "accept our limitations without resigning to mediocrity; we can only transform reality fruitfully if we accept it first" (2007, p. 34). Here friendship and leadership come into play, because when others freely affirm and love us despite our weaknesses, we move closer to true freedom and happiness. Philippe suggests we can also extend this grace to others by accepting and affirming them.

Forgiveness is also important so we don't become "prisoners of our own bitterness (2007, p. 64). In fact, acceptance of self and others are two sides of the same coin – they can both weaken and strengthen one another. Failure to accept others often stems from "an inner tension, a sense of dissatisfaction and frustration that is then taken out on others, who become scapegoats for our inner conflict" (2007, p. 43). We can see this play out in certain SHARP incidents in which an interiorly troubled aggressor disregards the dignity of and respect for the victim.

Accepting Difficulty

In closing the chapter on acceptance, Philippe describes acceptance of suffering and adversity. Here he offers perhaps the most direct corollaries to Army resilience. He urges against becoming passive and stoic in the face of difficulty; rather, by actively choosing to accept trials, we welcome them as opportunities for growth. Here I'm reminded of a favorite quip from a former history professor, Col. Matthew Hardman: "The Army will make you do a lot of things. But don't think of it as you 'have' to do something; instead, view it as you 'get' to do something."

Philippe acknowledges that actively choosing to consent to difficulty is not easy, but we only need to look at history to see examples of good arising from evil or impossible circumstances. We can refer back to Mandela, McCain, and Zamperini, or to the Army's winter sufferings at Valley Forge and Bastogne. We experience



U.S. Army Soldiers with the 3rd Field Artillery Regiment participate in a Holistic Health and Fitness combat mobility yoga session at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington, Feb. 26, 2020. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Casey Hustin)

more pain in rejecting suffering than accepting it, for in accepting it we find new strength. Philippe states that suffering “matures and trains us, purifies us, teaches us to love unselfishly, makes us poor in heart, humble, gentle, and compassionate toward our neighbor” (2007, p. 43). It provides empathy and even credibility, which can make us more effective leaders and peers.

The same wisdom underscores the Army’s approach to tough, realistic training. Soldiers undergo a degree of suffering and face adversity during live-fires and combat training center rotations to prepare them for war. We can overhype the unpleasantness of field conditions in our own heads (a departure from reality) and count down the hours until it’s over, or we can accept it, make the most of the training event, and ultimately grow as Soldiers and leaders.

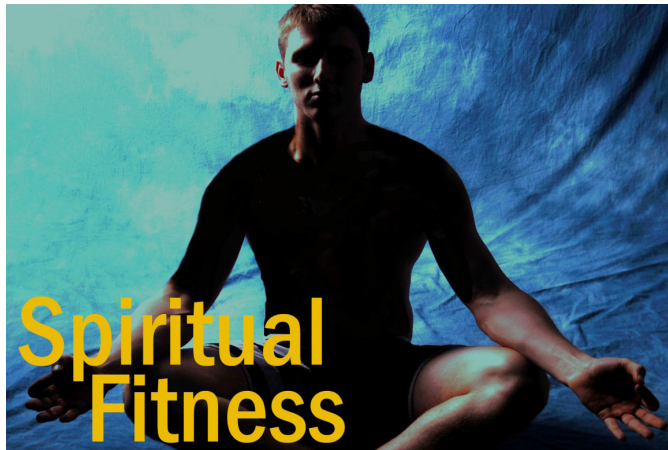
Philippe concludes that adopting this mindset grounds us in reality and conserves energy otherwise wasted on complaining and despairing. We are still duty-bound even when we don’t understand why we’re suffering. Ultimately, the worst thing that could happen would be for everything in life to turn out as we’d like, because that would be the end of our growth.

Living in the Present

In his much shorter second chapter, Philippe relates freedom to living in the present. We can only exercise our freedom in the present because it is then we are in contact with reality. Conversely, we are powerless over the past and the future. We easily become overwhelmed if we regret the past or worry about the future. Once again, Etty Hillesum imparts wisdom:

“If one burdens the future with one’s worries, it cannot grow organically. I am filled with confi-

dence, not that I shall succeed in worldly things, but even that when things go badly for me I shall still find life good and worth living. Ultimately, we have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves, more and more peace, and to reflect it towards others. (2007, p. 89)”



(U.S. Army graphic)

Philippe also cautions against waiting to live or focusing too much on the future in hopes of something better or happier to come. This is a byproduct of not fully accepting reality and may cause disappointment when our expectations are not met. We can relate this to young officers and NCOs (myself included) who lament their staff time as they

await platoon and company leadership positions. This entitled mindset prevents us from being fully available to others which can be detrimental to leaders, as their subordinates deserve their full attention in the present. Leaders who are not fully available to their peers and subordinates may demoralize them and/or miss warning signs of high-risk behavior.

Conclusion

At face value a book like *Interior Freedom* may appear too spiritual or philosophical for military application, but Philippe’s ideas and recommendations can help improve Army resilience programs by showing Soldiers of all ranks how to strengthen their inner lives by cultivating his philosophies. Considering Philippe’s concepts can build up self-worth and respect for others. They are accessible, rational, and easily understood. As such, they can be integrated into existing resilience, SHARP, suicide prevention programs, and ethical education programs at echelon. Helping Soldiers accept and consent to reality can build a more resilient force and possibly contribute to a decline in SHARP and suicide-related incidents. ■

References

- Biography of Nelson Mandela*. (n.d.). Nelson Mandela Foundation. <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/content/page/biography>
- Cronk, T. M. (2020). DOD releases annual suicide report for 2019. *Defense News*. <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2370197/dod-releases-annual-suicide-report-for-2019/>
- Department of the Army. (2020a). *Army senior leader message to the force*. <https://www.army.mil/article/241501/army-senior-leader-message-to-the-force>
- Department of the Army. (2020b). *FM 7-22: Holistic Health and Fitness*. https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN30964-FM_7-22-001-WEB-4.pdf

Department of the Army. (2020c). *Report of the Fort Hood Independent Review Committee*. https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/forthoodreview/2020-12-03_FHIRC_report_redacted.pdf

Ham, C. F. (2021). DoD Commitment on Combatting Sexual Assault. *Real Clear Defense*. https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2021/02/05/dod_commitment_on_combatting_sexual_assault_659205.html

Meroney, J. (2014). *World War II Isn't Over: Talking to Unbroken*

Veteran Louis Zamperini. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/11/world-war-ii-isnt-over-talking-to-unbroken-veteran-louis-zamperini/382616/>

Philippe, J. (2007). *Interior Freedom*. Scepter Publishers, Inc. *The Code of Conduct*. (n.d.) Association of the U.S. Army.

<https://www.ausa.org/code-conduct>

The Story of John Sidney McCain III. (n.d.). The McCain Institute Foundation. <https://www.johnmccain.com/story/>

Maj. Brigid Calhoun is enrolled at Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy as part of the Army's Joint Chiefs of Staff Internship Program. She previously commanded the 173rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team's (Airborne) military intelligence company. She holds a bachelor's of science degree in history from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.



<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>
<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>
<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>
<https://www.instagram.com/ncojournalofficial/>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

