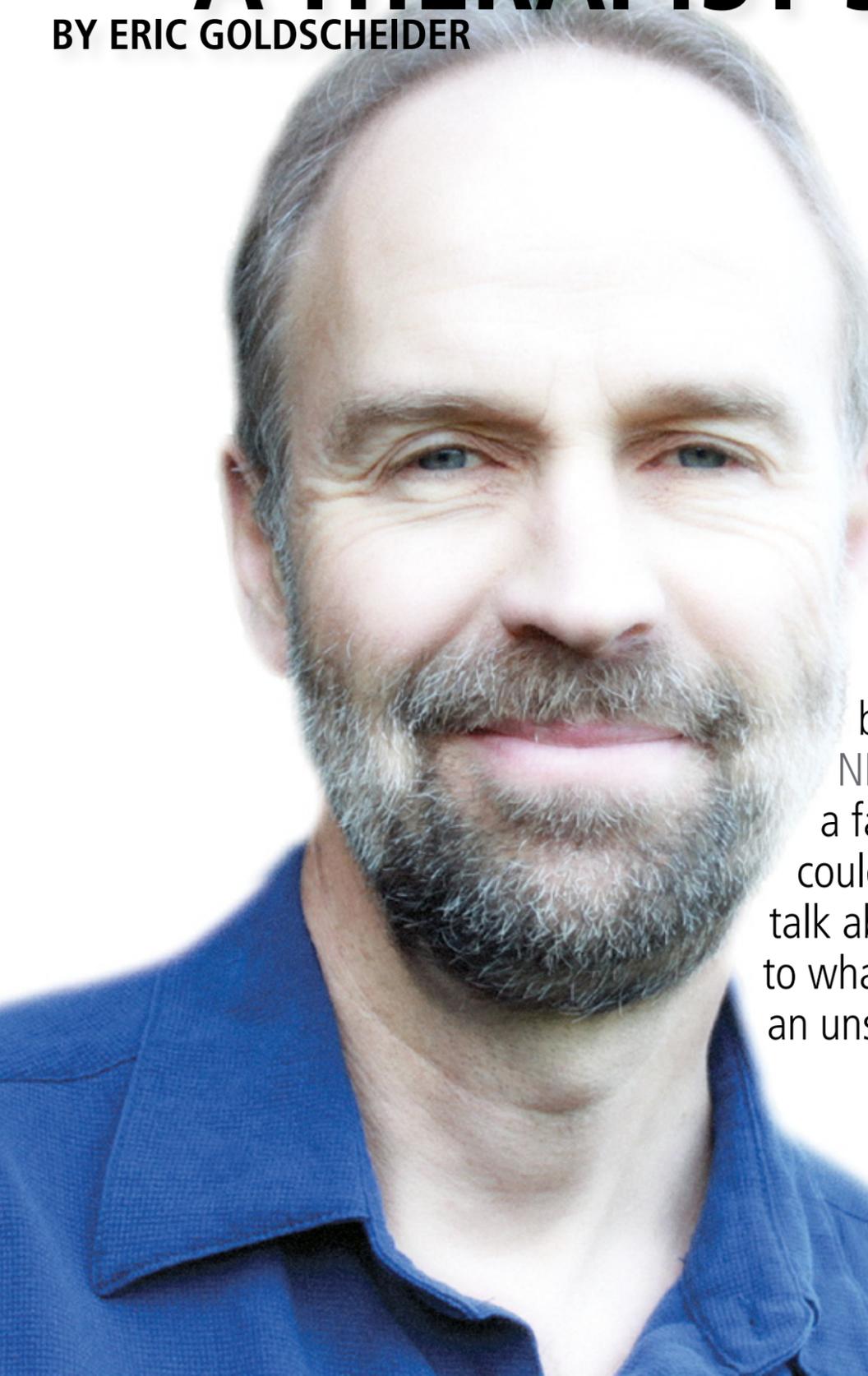


A SOLDIER'S PAIN, A THERAPIST'S STORY

BY ERIC GOLDSCHIEDER



It was more than a year after his client, an Iraq war veteran, committed suicide before MARK NICKERSON '75, a family therapist, could bring himself to talk about his response to what to him was an unspeakable tragedy.

Jeffrey Lucey, a reservist in the United States Marines, was 23 years old when he hanged himself with a garden hose from a low beam in the basement of his family's home in Belchertown, Mass. The day before, as he had been once or twice a week during the previous month and a half, Lucey was in Mark Nickerson's office. The soldier was in a downward spiral exhibiting severe symptoms of what Nickerson identified as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He had returned the previous July from a tour of duty as a truck driver in the initial invasion of Iraq by U.S. troops massed in Kuwait. He began to fall apart on Christmas Eve and staggered from crisis to crisis, sometimes fueled by strong German beer and blackberry brandy. He wrecked a car, he made a spectacle of himself at what was to have been his graduation from community college, and he fought off people trying to help him.

Lucey's mother contacted Nickerson in April 2004. Their therapy sessions began in May, and on June 22 Lucey was dead, just a few weeks before he was supposed to redeploy.

The topic of suicide came up several times, but Lucey assured his therapist that he wouldn't allow his feelings of hopelessness to drive him to do something that drastic. "He always reassured me that he wouldn't kill himself because he didn't want to hurt his family," Nickerson recalled during a recent interview. "That was a credible motivator because he had a strong relationship with his family."

Nickerson knew Lucey from before the war, having counseled him when he got into some minor trouble during high school. "He had a *joie de vivre*, a sense of invincibility," remembers Nickerson. This time around, Nickerson could still see traces of Jeff's humor and "mild cockiness," he said, "but it seemed like there was a hole blown out of the center of him.... it was very striking how much this young man had changed."

The family succeeded in getting Lucey into the Veterans Administration hospital in the Leeds section of Northampton, not far from their home, over the Memorial Day weekend, but Jeff checked himself out after 72 hours and wouldn't go back. Nickerson helped identify a residential treatment program for PTSD in Vermont with an open bed and was arranging the placement with a veterans advocate on the day Lucey died.

Nickerson felt his own world change when he got the call just a few hours after Kevin Lucey found his son's body. "I was in shock," he said. As a trauma specialist with a special interest in men's mental health, Nickerson regularly sees patients with histories of violence and desperation. "I have been doing this long enough that I've learned to leave the content of a session in the session. I don't carry a lot away with me," he said, "I have trained myself in my life not to dwell on what might have been."

This time he was sobered by something profoundly gripping. Nickerson made a point of being available to the family after the suicide. But he tried to put Jeff's death to the side as much as possible. "I acknowledged it, but I didn't actually really want to," he said, "I was so concerned it would seep into the rest of my life, into the rest of my work, and that it would make me afraid to work with deeply troubled people."

It was several months before Nickerson even shared the fact of his patient's suicide with a peer consultation group "Partly, I think I was afraid that people would attribute it as a failure on my part."

After some time passed, Nickerson started speaking at public forums with Joyce and Kevin Lucey, Jeff's parents, on PTSD and the mental health needs of veterans. He testified as part of a successful lawsuit the Luceys brought against the Department of Veterans Affairs for not having appropriate systems in place to respond to their son's crisis. He also supported the Luceys in their decision to talk openly about their horror.

More recently, Nickerson realized that he had his own story to tell, especially since he knew Jeff both before and after his military service. The Luceys gave him their blessing to breach the traditional obligation a therapist has to keep the contents of client sessions in strict confidence, and to embark on a book he is tentatively calling *Camel Spiders*. The title is a reference to arachnids common in Iraq. Their size, speed, and ferocity are the subject of much lore among veterans. "As it turns out," said Nickerson, "Jeffrey was afraid of spiders as a kid. And they were among his hallucinations as part of his PTSD and drinking-related problems. He woke up at night, sometimes thinking there were spiders in his room. To me that's a metaphor for all that was really bothering him. Even to big tough military people with guns, apparently this slips in and finds a vulnerability."

Nickerson remembers one of the first conversations he had with Joyce Lucey after Jeff's death. "I remember saying, 'you can keep this tragedy really private, bear the weight of this alone and perhaps struggle with self-blame for not having done enough. Or, you could see it in a larger context of society and war and let others share the burden.' They chose the latter and went on to share what they'd been through."

Over the last seven years Joyce and Kevin Lucey have appeared on television talk shows, spoken at anti-war rallies, and made themselves available to reporters and documentary filmmakers from around the world. Nickerson introduced them to the Veterans Education Project, which sends speakers throughout Western New England to talk about firsthand experiences of war. They also worked along with Nickerson on



Jeffrey Lucey, a reservist in the United States Marines, returned from active duty in Iraq remarkably changed, according to therapist Mark Nickerson '75.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE LUCEY FAMILY

several occasions to present their family's ordeal to psychologists and social workers as a case study at professional conferences. Nickerson testified as part of a successful lawsuit the Luceys brought against the Veteran's Administration for not having appropriate systems in place to respond to their son's crisis.

In deciding to write a book, Nickerson recognizes that he is on a parallel path in working to overcome his own vicarious trauma from this experience. The idea of sharing his own point of view dawned on him during a forum where he was introducing a panel on veterans' mental health. "Suddenly, I started to feel on an emotional level the depths of this story inside of me," he said. "I was not just a detached professional doing my job; I was a real person in a poignant drama of our times." He also realized that he is not the only therapist facing the tremendous job of healing our veterans.

During a writing retreat on Cape Cod last June, Nickerson's mind kept coming back to a question that still haunts him. "What's most gripping is trying to understand what Jeffrey must have experienced in Iraq that would have splintered him into different parts." An element of the drama imbued in Lucey's story is that he reported first to his sister and then to others, including Nickerson, that he followed an order to shoot and kill two unarmed Iraqi men.

The military disputes this claim, which was reported on extensively by several news outlets.

By almost any measure, such an incident would be considered a war crime. Nickerson believes it is true based on conversations with Lucey and others the young Marine talked to. "Perhaps the truth will never be known," states Nickerson, "but, clearly, something happened to Jeffrey and to debate exactly what misses the larger point of a combat veteran with PTSD."

Throughout his professional life Nickerson has been interested in what it means to be a man in our society. He knew he wanted to be a psychology major when he came to Wesleyan. His father, Ivan Nickerson '47, a Methodist minister, died soon after Nickerson arrived at the college that would become a shared alma mater. As he came to grips with this loss, he began to think deeply about male identity formation

Although an avid soccer player at

Wesleyan, Nickerson knew there was more to life than competition. "At Wesleyan I became involved with men's consciousness raising groups," said Nickerson. "The groups were an echo of the women's movement." A speaker who came to campus, Warren Farrell, prompted him to start thinking about cultural messages around masculinity. When Nickerson moved back to his native Western Massachusetts after graduate work at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, he pursued this interest by co-founding the Men's Resource Center for Change (MRC). He was the first chair of the board of directors, a position he recently reassumed. An important part of the organization's work centers on men who are violent, especially domestic batterers. The MRC created a court-certified program for men to examine and overcome violent tendencies.

In his own practice, Nickerson sees a wide spectrum of clients. "I've worked with many who have experienced major interpersonal trauma, but war trauma has a very different feel to it," he said. "Most civilian therapists don't really understand just how traumatizing war can be." Through Lucey's death it became increasingly clear to him that a country sending young people off to war must grapple with challenges of reintegrating traumatized individuals into society. "We can't just sit back and think we can divest ourselves from a society in which the military is involved," he said. "I want people to better understand the impacts of trauma and I want there to be a greater understanding of the hidden wounds of war."

The Lucey family said when Jeffrey enlisted as a reservist in 1999, before the 9/11 attacks, he didn't imagine he would be sent into combat. With the onset of war, reservists saw multiple deployments as part of an overextended military.

Since Lucey's death, Nickerson has learned that "there is a much greater vulnerability to PTSD among reservists than there is with the regular soldiers. They have less training, and less connection to the military culture, and when they come back from military duty, they are often released directly into civilian society. But, too often, a big part of them remains in combat."

Nickerson said Lucey resisted seeking mental health counseling from the military because he was afraid his illness might go

on his record and limit his options, such as pursuing a career in law enforcement. By the time he got to a civilian counselor his crisis had deepened to the point where "he couldn't see into the future and imagine a time when he would be okay," said Nickerson. "My first goal was to help him stabilize so he could have some sense of being able to observe what he was going through in a detached way." He explained the nature of PTSD to Lucey, pointing out that his symptoms were classic. "The sad truth is that I gave him the information but he wasn't at a place where he could fully integrate it... he was at the mercy of the churning seas of confusion inside of him."

A traumatic experience can overwhelm a person's ability to cope. "The individual can fluctuate radically from moments of

can't function in the present, rather than understanding that it is PTSD, you start to fully believe that you are incompetent or that you are permanently damaged," said Nickerson. He has come to think that underlying Lucey's suicide was a lurking belief that he was doing his family and his military unit a favor by "taking himself out." Nickerson saw a dichotomy in Lucey typical in males. "He was extremely vulnerable and yet having been trained to be a hero-type, he couldn't come to terms with the disparity. He clearly was troubled but was perhaps more disturbed that he might be troubling others. ... He was a bundle of needs and I think he hated that about himself."

"Many civilian therapists are just beginning to appreciate the prevalence and nature of war related PTSD", said

"I've worked with many who have experienced major interpersonal trauma, but war trauma has a very different feel to it," he said. "Most civilian therapists don't really understand just how traumatizing war can be."

overstimulation and anxiety to moments of complete shutdown and depression. Just when the person feels at rest, like while asleep, intrusive flashbacks force their way forward," said Nickerson. "When a person recalls a traumatic memory he or she often has a physiological reaction as well, like a tensing of muscles." A traumatized person often doesn't know where these sensations are coming from and attributes them to present circumstances. "The past becomes the present... they are no longer making decisions in terms of what's actually real," said Nickerson, "they experience a swirl of emotions, fragmented memories, and a lot of body sensations. Often substances are used to try to manage the feelings."

Lucey returned to school but panicked when he was not able to focus on his academic work. "When your life feels out of control and you begin to perceive that you

Nickerson, acknowledging his own learning curve. Knowing what to do about it is the next step. With the book, written for a broad audience, he feels compelled to tell Lucey's story at a level of detail that will help people understand lessons to be learned about the devastating impact of trauma on combat veterans and their families. "I tried to keep quiet, support the family, and then just move on to other things," said Nickerson, "but I found that I just couldn't let it go." He also believes the military should examine its recruiting, training and post-deployment practices. "The world needs to reflect much more deeply about what it means to actually send a young man or young woman off to war. In my case it came knocking on my door."

Eric Goldscheider is a freelance writer living in Western Massachusetts.