

Chaplain Pursuit of “Buffered Selves”: Shepherding the Tough in Spirit

By Chaplain (Major) Luke Heibel

An infantry brigade commander reflected on the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.¹ He confessed to his staff that he struggled with the sobering costs of giving so much for so long with such dubious results. The experience led to public and private soul-searching. This struggle was compounded with daily challenges in the human domain. Problems grew across the formation despite many resources and competent leaders. He observed to his staff, “We used to just go out with the chaplain, get outside and do hard things together. This solved a lot of our problems. Can’t we just do that again?”

This Commander’s conviction that Soldiers just need to get outside and go do hard things with their chaplain was a catalyst for a brigade Unit Ministry Team (UMT) program called “Tough in Spirit” (TIS). It was implemented in each battalion across the 173rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne). The structure and duration of events varied.² But the simple formula “go outside and do hard things with your chaplain” was implemented across the brigade. What follows is one battalion chaplain’s reflection on pastoral dynamics operative in TIS events and how those dynamics aim to facilitate spiritual readiness (SR) in a time when many people no longer conceptualize a need for God.

In this paper, I offer three elements of the TIS formula: struggle, content, and process. I frame these elements as an active form of “ministry of presence” (MP). I argue that MP is a form of active pursuit essential to building Soldier SR. Finally, I examine TIS participants through the lens of what philosopher Charles Taylor calls the “buffered self” of our secular age. I draw on Taylor to conceptualize the challenges of ministering

to “buffered selves” and to highlight the importance of events like TIS for creating unique opportunities to both challenge and equip Soldiers.

“Tough in Spirit”

The 173rd Airborne Brigade TIS initiative was a command-directed and unit-supported event. Command support was the most important aspect of this program’s success. Endless requirements compete for a unit’s limited training time. There is rarely protected time for religious support initiatives. Chaplains learn to nest initiatives into existing training or offer events during evenings or on weekends.

The average TIS cohort was comprised of ten to thirty Soldiers who have different backgrounds, religions, aptitudes, fitness levels, and interest in participating in the program. The twelve-hour TIS program, in my unit, used this structure: 0600 start time followed by ninety minutes of classroom instruction at an off-post location. The classroom training focused on the importance of the spiritual domain for every Soldier. It featured short videos designed to facilitate discussion about Soldiers’ worldviews that nested within the Army’s definition of SR.³ Subsequent discussions were designed for sharing personal opinions and spiritual beliefs. The chaplain, as facilitator, worked to persuade TIS participants that the spiritual domain is relevant to everyone, not just the formally religious.⁴

The next phase required an hour-long bus ride to the training location. Upon arrival, Soldiers were provided a big breakfast.

The mealtime included intentional conversation shaped by discussion cards and followed by large group processing. After breakfast, the group transitioned to a long-range movement over rough terrain. The group engaged with one another around participant-driven content at planned intervals along the route. The event concluded with another big meal and more intentional conversation. Lastly, we conducted an after-action review before the bus ride back to base.

The TIS model is deceptively simple: get people together, do hard things outdoors, provide some training, eat good food, and talk in an intentional way. How do these simple ingredients foster SR? Soldiers already do some version of these activities every day. Many participate in these common activities and never develop a relationship with God, become resilient, find meaning or purpose, or experience belonging. Inertia, task saturation, exhaustion, apathy, and general entropy see to that. Several key ingredients are required to facilitate fostering Soldier SR: a common struggle, quality content, and a humanizing process. Is the chaplain essential? Yes. TIS is a potentially formative experience. But transformation requires a chaplain who can shape each part and translate MP opportunities into SR gains.

STRUGGLE

Through a common struggle, chaplains work to focus attention, build teams, and strengthen relationships. Our TIS events used a long walk in often frigid temperatures over rough terrain to these ends. War journalist Sebastian Junger observes that forging a “community of sufferers” and a “brotherhood of pain” ironically has positive impacts on mental health.⁵ During TIS the struggle provided the occasion for deeper engagement

with others. Junger writes that “adversity often leads people to depend more on one another, and that closeness can produce a kind of nostalgia. . . . What people miss presumably isn’t danger or loss but the unity that these things often engender.”⁶ Positive memories of shared hardship builds teams. I hoped that, at a minimum, my Soldiers would come away from TIS as a stronger team.

In addition to the physical struggle, Soldiers experienced an interpersonal struggle to be vulnerable and the intellectual challenges to think about difficult subjects. Before the long-range movement Soldiers were given a card with a trust-building behavior on it. Along the way each were provided a chance to illustrate the behavior with a personal story. Many Soldiers used this simple practice to share a story that reframed their platoons’ understanding of who they are. Many shared personal issues or life stories in a vulnerable, humanizing way. One Soldier said he learned more about his platoon in one day – during TIS – than in the past year.

QUALITY CONTENT

Soldiers assumed TIS would be more indoctrination than education. Discussions of spirituality and religion are frequently divisive. Moreover, many Soldiers lack the vocabulary to have robust spiritual conversations. Soldiers need SR terms and concepts “issued,” like mission essential equipment, to assist meaningful dialog. Military hierarchy is also a barrier to conversation. Soldiers need formal permission and encouragement to speak freely.

The TIS training goal was to address spiritual readiness, personal identity, belonging, and moral courage.⁷ I provided spiritual terms and concepts during the classroom phase and the long hike

outdoors. Small group discussion, videos, and anecdotal illustrations were used to stimulate thought and empower conversation. Along the way, we considered the difference between spirituality and religion, the nature of suffering, the protective factors of spirituality, and the Army’s concern for the spiritual domain. We reflected on why spirituality matters. Additionally, each platoon’s leadership was given an opportunity to shape training content to ensure their TIS event addressed known needs.

HUMANIZING PROCESS

The process of Soldiers reflecting in these ways during TIS was aided by natural beauty. Our long-range movements were conducted in rugged but mostly beautiful places. The Army’s physical environments are utilitarian. They are designed to be useful, not beautiful. But aesthetics matter. “The medium is the message.”⁸ Soldiers have brains and souls – but these are routinely subordinated to the physical. Reducing life to the utilitarian and purely physical is inherently dehumanizing. I believe that we are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) and thus have a longing for experiences that address us as embodied souls. We long for transcendence.⁹

We hosted meals in a Bavarian “Gasthaus” featuring traditional German fare (schnitzel, knödel, grillhaxe, etc.). By paying wise attention to content, environment, and process the chaplain can combine these elements with quality food to facilitate an experience of the sublime for Soldiers. Military dining, like military architectural design, underwhelms. Simple meals prepared with care set the stage for rich communion. Theologian Norman Wirzba highlights the significance of food for connecting us to God:

Eaters can consume a wide variety of foods and not really savor any of it as God's love made nurture for us. To eat with theological appreciation presupposes reverence for creation as the work of God's hands. It entails spiritual formation in which we allow God the Gardener (Genesis 2:8) to conform us to his image as the one who looks after and provides for creatures. . . .Without this ongoing catechesis we run the risk of reducing the gift of food and the grace of eating to a desecration.¹⁰

This combination of a humanizing process and pleasing aesthetics is disarming. It can stir a person's soul in ways mere words cannot. The pairing can even lead the jaded participant to be less defensive and more fully present with his peers.¹¹

Ministry of Presence

One practice chaplains use during TIS events is the ambiguous sounding "ministry of presence" (MP). MP means being physically present and rooted with Soldiers in places others cannot go. MP can have both active and passive shepherding aspects. MP in a passive sense is participation in the mundane realities of Soldiers' lives: formations, physical training, motor-pool, meetings, exercises, mobilizations, etc. Passive MP is shepherding conducted in the daily grind of a willing, observing presence.¹² It is a form of pursuit rooted in being consistently present and available. A passive MP leads to credibility through effort over time, sharing the unit's story.

An active MP is a form of shepherding patterned on the "shepherd God of Israel" that seeks to know and positively shape other Soldiers.¹³ An active MP

gives direction and challenges others. It develops personal knowledge and grows relationships. Chaplains are often an abstraction to their Soldiers. If a chaplain is too passive, he will never become trusted and sought out by his Soldiers. A chaplain must employ an active MP to move from being seen as an abstraction to being seen as a person with trusted and indispensable qualities.

Practicing both active and passive MP are essential pastoral tasks for Chaplains. Nesting effectively into a unit's battle-rhythm, staff functions, and footprint is skilled labor. Information traffic rarely flows in the chaplain's direction without sustained effort and healthy relationships. Passive chaplains are easily marginalized. The presence of adverse organizational and relational dynamics can neutralize a chaplain's effort to integrate. Commanders and their staff ensure information flows consistently through the chain of command as subordinates report up. Chaplains on the other hand – who are expected to know people and unit dynamics – must "work to work."¹⁴ They must actively pursue others. Chaplains must work to know people, work to integrate, and work to learn unit dynamics through proactive engagement. They must earn the privilege to do the spiritual "soul work" that transforms individuals and unit culture. A chaplain's MP is a skillfully curated effort that enables both advisement capabilities and spiritual care.

An Obstacle to Ministry: "Buffered Selves"

Practicing a robust MP allows the chaplain to know Soldiers and fulfill the religious support mission. Yet many Soldiers today don't want or think

they need a chaplain. The demand for spiritual care is muted in our secular age.¹⁵ While many people are open to spirituality – it is nevertheless seen as optional, a mere life-style accessory.¹⁶

Twenty-first century selves are shaped by a vastly different spiritual landscape than previous generations.¹⁷ Philosopher Charles Taylor accounts for these radical cultural shifts.¹⁸ He notes the human self is no longer conceived of as "porous" or vulnerable to external spiritual authority.¹⁹ In previous eras, the self was commonly understood as vulnerable to spiritual forces and dynamics outside of one's control. Yet, for Taylor, the modern self is insulated from external spiritual realities by a "buffer" that neutralizes the dire need for spiritual connection to God and for God's protection.²⁰ This accounts for, in Taylor's words, "a very different existential condition."²¹ He notes: "As a bounded self I can see the boundary as a buffer, such that the things beyond don't need to 'get to me'... That's the sense to my use of the term 'buffered' here. This self can see itself as invulnerable, as master of the meanings of things for it."²² Theologian Andrew Root, one of Taylor's key interpreters, outlines several pastoral implications implied by this understanding of the self as buffered: a changed view of personal freedom and the perception of the self as invulnerable.²³ Again, Taylor writes: "The buffered self is essentially the self which is aware of the possibility of disengagement. And disengagement is frequently carried out in relation to one's whole surroundings, natural and social."²⁴ This phenomenon explains why spirituality often just seems irrelevant to people today.²⁵ It explains why people think they don't need God.

TIS events engaged Soldiers in conversations that brought identity,

meaning, and purpose to the surface. Many Soldiers responded with atheistic convictions. Others openly scoffed at notions of meaning beyond what is self-created (which is textbook “buffered self” behavior).²⁶ This is predictable. In our secular context, few ask for guidance that connects identity, purpose, and meaning with God. Thus, Taylor’s conception of the buffered self is useful for explaining why many metaphysical answers to Soldiers’ questions don’t get traction today.

Root observes that the shaping and directing of peoples’ inner lives has been the preserve of pastors for centuries. He writes:

Since [the time of] Augustine [in the fourth century AD] the pastor’s job has been to impact, direct, and lead people’s inner lives...The pastor is to get deeper than behavior, treading inside the inner world of people’s intentions...For the next fifteen hundred years, pastors sketched out for people the need to surrender this inner reality to God.²⁷

People’s needs seem different today. Root suggests that some “might need a therapist, or financial advisor, or social worker, but not a pastor.”²⁸ Pursuing others is a crucial skill for chaplains to learn. Yet this pastoral skill is challenging work and often ambiguous. Reduced calls for pastoral care don’t obviate the chaplain’s duty to pursue Soldiers. It does change pastoral dynamics and passive chaplains who expect Soldiers to come to them will be frustrated and largely avoided.

Root observes that one consequence for the buffered self is that “personal encounter with Divine Action has been

locked out of the compound of the self.”²⁹ This makes sense of the reduced demand from Soldiers for guidance on their spiritual lives; they don’t experience it as an existential priority. Soldiers today are insulated from spiritual promptings. This insularity is reinforced by powerful technologies.³⁰ We today are bombarded with information and formed within an “epistemological habitat” that is filled with the noise of endless distractions.³¹ These conditions pose a challenge to chaplains whose goal is to connect “God to Soldiers and Soldiers to God.”³² Regardless, chaplains have been adapting to dynamic and formidable ministry conditions since its inception.³³

Ministry to “Buffered Selves”

Many Soldiers keep their chaplain at a distance. Thus, the best moments of ministry often lie on the far side of a chaplain’s pursuit. Like a sniper waiting a long time for a clear shot, chaplains must “go out” (patient MP) before a Soldier “comes in.” TIS events facilitated the “proximity principle.”³⁴ They allowed for closer proximity and a robust passive and active MP. TIS events ensured multiple points of meaningful intersection with Soldiers. Yet proximity alone offers no guarantee of ministry success or that Soldiers will accept the chaplain. Nor does it facilitate true spiritual formation.

Proximity itself doesn’t prove chaplains are serving as God’s ambassador to Soldiers. Once chaplains draw near to Soldiers, however, they have opportunity to minister to the soul. The chaplain’s other work only begins after the work it takes to get close. This other work is to generate interest in and facilitate true spiritual formation. The goal is to be God’s ambassador to Soldiers.

It involves a willingness to bridge the distances that isolate Soldiers from others, creation, and God.

TIS was not a religious event offering traditional means of grace. However, our TIS events were filled with moments to consider the sacred within the ordinary – in shared struggle, in challenging content, and in a humanizing process. Healthy spiritual formation inevitably involves a “re-sacralizing” process.³⁵ Re-sacralizing doesn’t happen by “re-enchantment” or mere declaration,³⁶ much less from a long, difficult hike. However, TIS sets conditions for the ordinary to gain more attention and point beyond itself. It is here that Soldiers—those who are “tough in spirit”—need an intentional shepherding presence to direct this enterprise, seeking opportunities to point out Divine action.³⁷ When these TIS elements align and are well received, the experience facilitates SR.

The TIS initiative was conducted with a Soldier population that was spiritually diverse and often conspicuously irreligious. Through TIS, many Soldiers experienced a shift in their existential horizon. They expressed this through a new (or renewed) interest in their spiritual lives. Some even turned to God. Though a minority remained isolated and unimpressed, all were provided a chaplain’s active MP. Most Soldiers were very open to participating in a common struggle, engaging meaningful content, and embracing a humanizing process that deepened engagement with their platoon. The process invited buffered selves into dynamic conversations that facilitated reflection on their own SR. And this is why the commander’s exhortation to “get outside and go do hard things with the chaplain” remains timely guidance.

Chaplain (Major) Luke Heibel is a Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) minister and a graduate of Westminster Theological Seminary, Richmond Graduate University, and the University of North Carolina at Asheville. His assignments include the 82nd Airborne Division, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne), 66th Military Intelligence Brigade, and the 173rd Airborne Brigade. He has two combat deployments. He is happily married to his amazing wife Anne and is the proud father of two phenomenal boys – Conrad and Judah.

NOTES

- 1 Colonel Michael Kloepper, former brigade commander of the 173rd Airborne Brigade.
- 2 Andrew Efaw, "Tough in Spirit," *Army Engineer Magazine* (Summer 2023): 9-10. Chaplain Burt Snyder conducted multi-day Tough in Spirit events covering up to 30 miles over 48 hours. Creative TIS models were implemented by Chaplains: Gerry Miller, Gabriel Pech, Jack Powell, and Kevin Jones – under the supervision of Chaplain (Major) Joel Payne.
- 3 Department of the Army, *Holistic Health and Fitness* (FM 7-22) (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2020), 10-1.
- 4 Dept. of the Army, *Holistic Health*, 10-2.
- 5 Sebastian Junger, *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, (New York: Hatchette, 2016), 52-55.
- 6 Junger, *Tribe*, 92.
- 7 Joel Payne, "Supplemental Guidance for 173rd IBC (A) Sky Soldier Tough in Spirit initiative events," official memorandum, August 22, 2022, Caserma Del Din, Italy.
- 8 Marshall McLuhan, cited in Samuel D. James, *Digital Liturgies: Rediscovering Christian Wisdom in an Online Age* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 35.
- 9 See James' discussion of Ecclesiastes 3:11 in *Digital Liturgies*.
- 10 Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), xiii.
- 11 Arthur Boers, *Living Into Focus: Choosing What Matters in an Age of Distractions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2012), 42-45.
- 12 Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 210-211.
- 13 Root, *Pastor in a Secular Age*, 156.
- 14 Department of the Army, *Religious Support and Internal Advisement* (ATP 1-05.04) (Washington DC: Department of the Army, 2017) 2-15, 2-19 – 2-25.
- 15 This complex phenomenon owes much to the decline of church attendance in recent decades. Jim Davis and Michael Graham document what they say is the greatest religious demographic shift in American history: "More people have left the church in the last twenty-five years than all the new people who became Christians from the First Great Awakening, Second Great Awakening, and Billy Graham crusades combined." See Jim Davis, Michael Graham, and Ryan P. Burge, *The Great De-Churching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023), 5.
- 16 Root, *Pastor in a Secular Age*, 65.
- 17 Luke Heibel, "Spiritual Readiness in a Secular Age: Embracing the Challenges and Opportunities of Ministry in the Contested Spiritual Domain," *U.S. Army Chaplain Corps Journal* (2021): 30-38.
- 18 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007) 25.
- 19 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 37-39.
- 20 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38.
- 21 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38.
- 22 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38. See also Carl Trueman, "Charles Taylor, Psychological Selfhood, and Disenchantment," *Public Discourse*, June 11, 2023, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2023/06/89211/>.
- 23 Root, *Pastor in a Secular Age*, 69.
- 24 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 42.
- 25 Root, *Pastor in a Secular Age*, 70.
- 26 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38.
- 27 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 64-65.
- 28 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 78.
- 29 Root, *Pastor in a Secular Age*, 66.
- 30 Samuel D. James, *Digital Liturgies*, 53.
- 31 Samuel D. James, *Digital Liturgies*, 57-58.
- 32 "Overview of an Army Chaplain," U.S. Army Recruiting Command, accessed January 12, 2024, https://recruiting.army.mil/MRB_ReligiousServices/.
- 33 Richard M. Budd, *Serving Two Masters: American Military Chaplaincy 1860-1920* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002) 154-158.
- 34 Philip Kramer, "The Proximity Principle: Army Chaplains on the Fighting Line in Doctrine and in History," *Master of Military Art and Science*, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2014, 3-4.
- 35 Carl Trueman, "The Desecration of Man," *First Things*, January 2024, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2024/01/the-desecration-of-man> 01.
- 36 Trueman, "The Desecration of Man."
- 37 Root, *Pastor in a Secular Age*, 209.