War, peace at home

By Chaplain Allen Vaughan

There is a famous quote from an anonymous author who said, "Marriage is the only war in which you sleep with the enemy." This quote is meant to be humorous, but even humor is based upon reality sometimes.

In good marriages, but especially in marriages that are struggling, husbands and wives occasionally find themselves in opposition to one another, perhaps even at war with each another. What most couples are truly seeking is an authentic and lasting peace in their homes, their marriages, and their families.

Couples who are experiencing conflict or disagreement may feel that they are on two opposing sides of an issue and something has come between them. That "something" can be very small at first, like: "Who is going to do the dishes tonight?" Or, "Why don't you pick up your dirty clothes and put them in the laundry?" If allowed to go unresolved, the "something" can grow into: "Why are you coming home later and later?" And, "Do you really appreciate what I do for you and the family?"

Every war starts over seemingly small, localized conflicts. However, small conflicts can quickly escalate into larger battles, and then to full-scale war, if the little skirmishes are not resolved. A temporary end to the fighting may come as the result of a "ceasefire", a "peace treaty", or the fact that one side is declared the "winner" and a resolution is forced upon the "loser."

For there to be a true and lasting peace between warring factions, the parties must not only resolve their conflict, but they have to reach a new state of understanding and a new way of existing together. They have to be reconciled with one another.

The word "reconcile" means to be no longer opposed. But, quite literally, from the Latin root of the word, it means "to be able to be together again." To be reconciled is to overcome distrust, hostility and whatever may have come between you and the person you love, in order to be together again… to be no longer opposed.

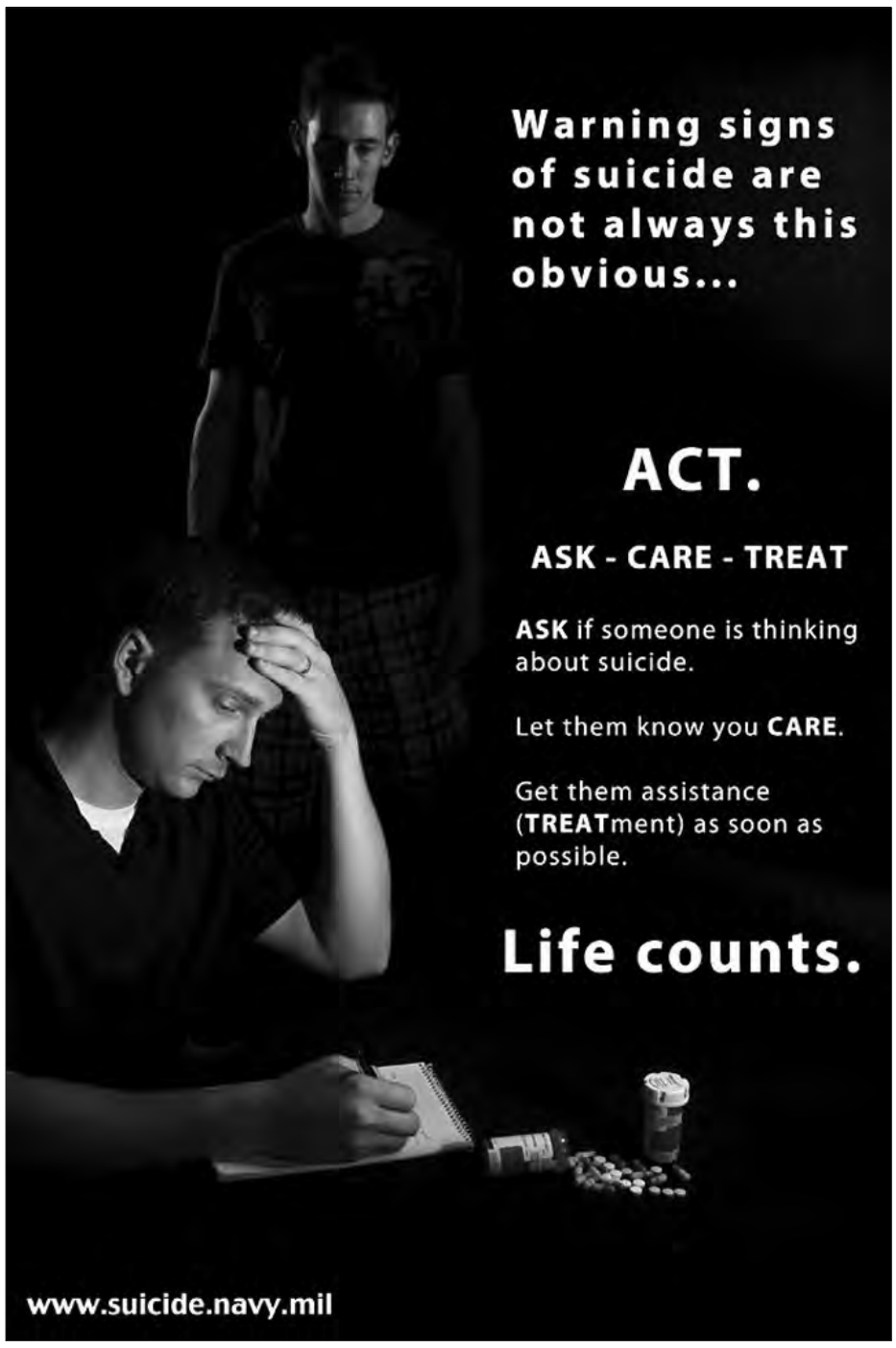
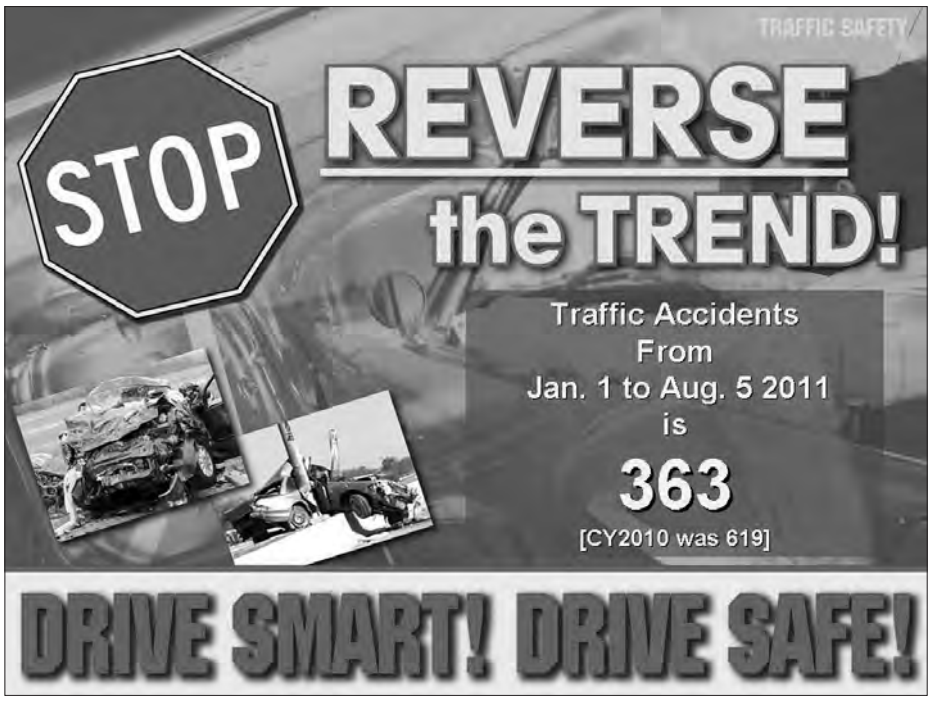
There has been plenty written about how to resolve conflict in marriages in a loving and peaceful manner, and I wholeheartedly affirm that it is important we learn how to disagree without being disagreeable. However, I believe it is absolutely vital for lasting peace in our marriages that we go one step beyond conflict resolution, and seek reconciliation.

It is a given that husbands and wives will experience conflict and will take opposing positions on certain issues. But, if we remain in opposition to our spouses and never reconcile with the ones we are supposed to love, married life or family life becomes miserable, stressful, and unhealthy.

Resolving conflict means coming to a solution to bring an end to the fighting or arguing. However, you may resolve a conflict by simply agreeing to disagree, using the "silent treatment", or by parting and going your separate ways. The problem is resolved, the argument is over, but the end result will be lingering anger, disappointment, resentment, and distancing from one another.

Reconciliation includes these different steps: (1) Honesty… with yourself and with others; (2) Humbleness… to be able to admit that you may be wrong, and that the other person has the right to view the problem in a different way; (3) Directness… to speak directly to the person about the problem, not to all your friends and co-workers; (4) Initiative… don't wait for the other person to come to you, instead you need to initiate the conversation that may lead to reconciliation; (5) Willingness… to change whatever behavior, mindset or attitude that has contributed to the problem; (6) Accountability… to demonstrate that you truly have changed; and (7) Forgiveness… which is giving up your right to hold on to the hurt and hold it against the person who has hurt you.

Now, this point probably should have been made from the start, but it is very important to acknowledge that, in some circumstances, reconciliation is not advisable. Reconciliation may not be possible, or even safe, with someone who has a proven track record of emotional, physical or sexual abuse.

Reconciliation may not be possible with someone who refuses to follow any of the seven steps listed in the previous paragraph. Even if reconciliation is not possible, there is always the option to forgive and move on.

However, if you and your loved one you desire to find authentic and lasting peace, but seem to be in opposition to each other, whether you are fighting small battles or engaged in all out war, I encourage you to strongly consider how you might become reconciled. Reconciliation brings a much needed peace—an authentic peace—to your home, and not just an uncomfortable stand off or temporary ceasefire to end the war.