The ethics of relationships

By Chaplain Corey Thornton

We have just come to the close of Sexual Assault Prevention Month (April). One training event this year in support of this that stood out to me was called SCREAM. As a departure from the familiar PowerPoint briefs, they gathered a cast of Sailors from various commands and prepared short dramas. The dramas were designed to function as scenarios to depict various ways in which sexual assault might occur. These were well thought out and realistic. I can remember assisting more than one service member who had experienced the same scenario as one of the SCREAM dramas. After each drama, there was an open microphone discussion with the audience to hear their thoughts on the assault and the best responses to care for the victims. The approach of drama and discussion proved to be an affective way to teach the ethics involved in sexual assault prevention. It seems that anytime ethics are taught within the context of stories—stories that we can relate to—they become personal and help us to better see how to conduct sound relationships.

In addition to their compelling approach, I also found this year's sexual assault prevention theme, "Hurts one…affects all. Prevention of sexual assault is everyone's duty," quite appropriate. What is of a particular advantage to this theme is that its underlying principle is to build community. What each of us does as individuals does not only affect us but creates a lasting effect within the whole community. When we are able to see the reality of this, our moral responsibility to those around us becomes much more evident, and we realize that doing what we believe to be the right thing does not just make us better people, it also makes the community in which we live a better place.

In 1923 the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, wrote a now famous book entitled, I and Thou. In it he describes the state of human relationships and how we perceive them. Buber says that there are two types of relationships: I-It and I-Thou. I-It relationships are those in which we perceive the other as an object, a de-personal entity wholly other than us. I-Thou relationships are those in which we perceive the other as a subject, as a personal entity wholly relatable to us. I-It relationships bring about a sense of isolation and self-centeredness. As we perceive those around us not as beings but as objects, we turn the focus of our thoughts and concerns onto ourselves. Perceiving others in I-It relationships can lead to using them to one's personal advantage; such is almost always the case in sexual assaults. I-Thou relationships cultivate a sense of connectedness to those around us. When we perceive that we are not alone, but that all of those around us are persons, human-beings just like us, we begin to understand how our existence is contingent upon and integral to the wellbeing of others. In I-Thou relationships we see that our actions affect and are affected by others.

It is Buber's I-Thou relationships that the SCREAM presentation and the Sexual Assault Prevention theme is promoting. Out of these relationships comes a more mature and healthy community.

Cultivating these relationships does take discipline. For example, in I-Thou relationships there can be no "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas," or more germane to our setting, "What happens on port visits stays at port visits." For one thing, the activities that are kept in confidence on these port visits are based in I-It relationships and involve people who are practically strangers to us. This depersonalized use of others for our individual satisfaction is un-ethical. For another thing, no one leaves these relationships unchanged. Once an individual uses another in this way, he or she is less moral and less human. The feeling or state that accompanies this is guilt. One cannot leave guilt behind.

Buber says that the ultimate I-Thou relationship is between God and a human-being. To encounter God—the source of all life—is to find what it is to be alive. Once this ultimate I-Thou relationship has been experienced, all I-It relationships seem a betrayal of this I-Thou. When we encounter the Creator of our person and perceive that all persons around us were also thus created, to use them as objects for our advantage is to deny them the dignity given to them by their Creator.

When we choose to perceive others in I-Thou relationships we see them as they truly are. Out of these relationships develops a community of mutual respect, care, tolerance, patience, unity, cohesion and love. Such communities are antithetical to the selfishness and violence of sexual assault. So hats off to the cast and crew of SCREAM and the sexual assault prevention training team for a job well done.

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Rising to the challenge and representing the Navy–Coast Guard team has its responsibilities. Edmonston, injured in a 2009 motorcycle accident, understands the responsibility and the honor of being chosen the Ultimate Champion.

"It's a lot of work and training, and only two are picked," said Edmonston. "The team leader thought enough of you to have the chance to win. It's kind of like being the [Most Valuable Player]."

Chosen as the Ultimate Warrior merely a month ago, Edmonston has had to adjust his training style for the new events.

"I've been pretty steady, but I changed it up. I made adjustments to get ready," Edmonston said. "Cycling is a challenge."

But Edmonston feels the support from teammates and the coaching staff.

"I will be proud to win, but it's really about the points for the team in the end," Edmonston said.

Suter is facing the challenge as a first time Warrior Games athlete, as well as a competitor for Ultimate Champion. Suter has been a life-long athlete even after being diagnosed with Cushings Syndrome in December 2010.

Through adversity, Suter's positive attitude has helped to shape who he is and how he approaches challenges. It is what brought him to the Navy and is guiding him to pursue his dream of becoming a Navy SEAL.

As for participating in the 2012 Warrior Games and being chosen as the Ultimate Warrior, Suter states it plainly, "I like it, it is a good time."

Suter's affinity for intense sports developed at the young age of five when he first began riding motocross and grew into an enjoyment of rugby, football, and boxing.

"It is my safe zone. Some people go for massages, I go for competition," Suter said. "It is definitely a challenge. There are a lot of good athletes out there. It's the next level up."

Seeing his own progress in cycling has helped him to focus on the challenge.

"I didn't like [cycling] at first. It was killing me."

But while participating in a Ride 2 Recovery event, Suter watched how the teammates supported each other.

"The stronger riders pushed the weaker riders."

Describing his first and most challenging bike event, Suter wanted to give up. But when he looked back after feeling a push, he saw a double-amputee pushing him. Suter remembered thinking, "I can't give up now."

Suter is grateful for the chance the Navy Safe Harbor has given him and his teammates, to challenge himself and step up for the team.

"I could have done one event and won, but then I couldn't have done ultimate warrior. Even if I don't win it, I know I went for it."

In the end it is about the athletes and coming together to heal as a team according to Navy Safe Harbor Ismael "Marty" Martinez.

"The physical strength and mental strength it takes to compete after having an injury or illness is a very challenging position. It's a compliment to the amount of courage of all of the athletes," said Martinez. "To still be a part of a team once you get injured doesn't always happen. It's about getting back with the team."

The 35 warrior athletes are participating as Team Navy–Coast Guard, sponsored by Navy Safe Harbor, the Navy and Coast Guard's wounded warrior support program and lead organization for coordinating the non-medical care of wounded, ill and injured Sailors, Coast Guardsmen, and their families. Through proactive leadership, Safe Harbor provides a lifetime of individually tailored assistance designed to optimize the success of enrollees' recovery, rehabilitation, and reintegration activities.

The wounded warrior program is a key component of the Department of the Navy's 21st Century Sailor and Marine initiative. The initiative consolidates a set of objectives and policies, new and existing, to maximize Sailor and Marine personal readiness, build resiliency and hone the most combat-effective force in the history of the Department of the Navy.

The Warrior Games, hosted by the U.S. Olympic Committee's paralympics military program, provides an opportunity for wounded, ill, and injured service members to participate in competitive sports against members of other branches of service. Participants will challenge themselves mentally and physically to overcome upper body injuries, lower body injuries, spinal cord injuries, traumatic brain injuries, and post-traumatic stress, in pursuit of victory.

For more information about Navy Safe Harbor, visit http://safeharbor.navylive.dodlive.mil, call 877-746-8563, or email safeharbor@navy.mil.