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Getting Over It

*The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit put
the war behind him. Why can't we?*

by Malcolm Gladwell

1.

When Tom Rath, the hero of Sloan Wilson's 1955 novel "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit," comes home to Connecticut each day from his job in Manhattan, his wife mixes him a Martini. If he misses the train, he'll duck into the bar at Grand Central Terminal and have a highball, or perhaps a Scotch. On Sunday mornings, Rath and his wife lie around drinking Martinis. Once, Rath takes a tumbler of Martinis to bed, and after finishing it drifts off to sleep. Then his wife wakes him up in the middle of the night, wanting to talk. "I will if you get me a drink," he says. She comes back with a glass half full of ice and gin. "On Greentree Avenue cocktail parties started at seven-thirty, when the men came home from New York, and they usually continued without any dinner until three or four o'clock in the morning,"

Wilson writes of the tidy neighborhood in Westport where Rath and countless other young, middle-class families live. "Somewhere around nine-thirty in the evening, Martinis and Manhattans would give way to highballs, but the formality of eating anything but hors d'oeuvres in-between had been entirely omitted."

"The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit" is about a public-relations specialist who lives in the suburbs, works for a media company in midtown, and worries about money, job security, and educating his children. It was an enormous best-seller. Gregory Peck played Tom Rath in the Hollywood version, and today, on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the book's publication, many of the themes the novel addresses seem strikingly contemporary. But in other ways "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit" is utterly dated. The details are all wrong. Tom Rath, despite

an introspective streak, is supposed to be a figure of middle-class normalcy. But by our standards he and almost everyone else in the novel look like alcoholics. The book is supposed to be an argument for the importance of family over career. But Rath's three children--the objects of his sacrifice--are so absent from the narrative and from Rath's consciousness that these days he'd be called an absentee father.

The most discordant note, though, is struck by the account of Rath's experience in the Second World War. He had, it becomes clear, a terrible war. As a paratrooper in Europe, he and his close friend Hank Mahoney find themselves trapped--starving and freezing--behind enemy lines, and end up killing two German sentries in order to take their sheepskin coats. But Rath doesn't quite kill

one of them, and Mahoney urges him to finish the job:

Tom had knelt beside the sentry. He had not thought it would be difficult, but the tendons of the boy's neck had proved tough, and suddenly the sentry had started to sit up. In a rage Tom had plunged the knife repeatedly into his throat, ramming it home with all his strength until he had almost severed the head from the body.

At the end of the war, Rath and Mahoney are transferred to the Pacific theatre for the invasion of the island of Karkow. There Rath throws a hand grenade and inadvertently kills his friend. He crawls over to Hank's body, calling out his name. "Tom had put his hand under Mahoney's arm and turned him over," Wilson writes. "Mahoney's entire chest had been torn away, leaving the naked lungs and splintered ribs exposed."

Rath picks up the body and runs back toward his own men, dodging enemy fire. Coming upon a group of Japanese firing from a cave, he props the body up, crawls within fifteen feet of the machine gun, tosses in two grenades, and then finishes

off the lone survivor with a knife. He takes Hank's body into a bombed-out pillbox and tries to resuscitate his friend's corpse. The medics tell him that Hank has been dead for hours. He won't listen. In a daze, he runs with the body toward the sea.

Wilson's description of Mahoney's death is as brutal and moving a description of the madness of combat as can be found in postwar fiction. But what happens to Rath as a result of that day in Karkow? Not much. It does not destroy him, or leave him permanently traumatized. The part of Rath's war experience that leaves him truly guilt-ridden is the adulterous affair that he has with a woman named Maria while waiting for redeployment orders in Rome. In the elevator of his midtown office, he runs into a friend who knew Maria, and learns that he fathered a son. He obsessively goes over and over the affair in his mind, trying to square his feeling toward Maria with his love for his wife, and his marriage is fully restored only when he confesses to the existence of his Italian child. Killing his best friend, by contrast, is something that comes up and then gets tucked away. As Rath sat on the beach, and Mahoney's body was finally taken away, Wilson writes:

A major, coming to squat beside him, said, "Some

of these goddamn sailors got heads. They went ashore and got Jap heads, and they tried to boil them in the galley to get the skulls for souvenirs."

Tom had shrugged and said nothing. The fact that he had been too quick to throw a hand grenade and had killed Mahoney, the fact that some young sailors had wanted skulls for souvenirs, and the fact that a few hundred men had lost their lives to take the island of Karkow--all these facts were simply incomprehensible and had to be forgotten. That, he had decided, was the final truth of the war, and he had greeted it with relief, greeted it eagerly, the simple fact that it was incomprehensible and had to be forgotten. Things just happen, he had decided; they happen and they happen again, and anybody who tries to make sense out of it goes out of his mind.

You couldn't write that scene today, at least not without irony. No soldier, according to our contemporary understanding, could ever shrug off an experience like

that. Today, it is Rath's affair with Maria that would be rationalized and explained away. He was a soldier, after all, in the midst of war. Who knew if he would ever see his wife again? Tim O'Brien's best-selling 1994 novel "In the Lake of the Woods" has a narrative structure almost identical to that of "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit." O'Brien's hero, John Wade, is present at a massacre of civilians in the Vietnamese village of Thuan Yen. He kills a fellow-soldier--a man he loved like a brother. And, just like Rath, Wade sits down at the end of the long afternoon of the worst day of his war and tries to wish the memory away:

And then later still, snagged in the sunlight, he gave himself over to forgetfulness. "Go away," he murmured. He waited a moment, then said it again, firmly, much louder, and the little village began to vanish inside its own rosy glow. Here, he reasoned, was the most majestic trick of all. In the months and years ahead, John Wade would remember Thuan Yen the way chemical nightmares are remembered, impossible combinations,

impossible events, and over time the impossibility itself would become the richest and deepest and most profound memory

This could not have happened. Therefore it did not.

Already he felt better.

But John Wade cannot forget. That's the point of O'Brien's book. "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit" ends with Tom Rath stronger, and his marriage renewed. Wade falls apart, and when he returns home to the woman he left behind he wakes up screaming in his sleep. By the end of the novel, the past has come back and destroyed Wade, and one reason for the book's power is the inevitability of that disaster. This is the difference between a novel written in the middle of the last century and a novel written at the end of the century. Somehow in the intervening decades our understanding of what it means to experience a traumatic event has changed. We believe in John Wade now, not Tom Rath, and half a century after the publication of "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit" it's worth wondering whether we've got it right.

2.

Several years ago, three psychologists--Bruce Rind, Robert Bauserman, and Philip Tromovitch--published an article on childhood sexual abuse in *Psychological Bulletin*, one of academic psychology's most prestigious journals. It was what psychologists call a meta-analysis. The three researchers collected fifty-nine studies that had been conducted over the years on the long-term psychological effects of childhood sexual abuse (C.S.A.), and combined the data, in order to get the most definitive and statistically powerful result possible.

What most studies of sexual abuse show is that if you gauge the psychological health of young adults--typically college students--using various measures of mental health (alcohol problems, depression, anxiety, eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, social adjustment, sleeping problems, suicidal thoughts and behavior, and so on), those with a history of childhood sexual abuse will have more problems across the board than those who weren't abused. That makes intuitive sense. But Rind and his colleagues wanted to answer that question more specifically: how much

worse off were the sexually abused? The fifty-nine studies were run through a series of sophisticated statistical tests. Studies from different times and places were put on the same scale. The results were surprising. The difference between the psychological health of those who had been abused and those who hadn't, they found, was marginal. It was two-tenths of a standard deviation. "That's like the difference between someone with an I.Q. of 100 and someone with an I.Q. of 97," Rind says. "Ninety-seven is statistically different from 100. But it's a trivial difference."

Then Rind and his colleagues went one step further. A significant percentage of people who were sexually abused as children grew up in families with a host of other problems, like violence, neglect, and verbal abuse. So, to the extent that the sexually abused were damaged, what caused the damage--the sexual abuse, or the violence and neglect that so often accompanied the abuse? The data suggested that it was the latter, and, if you account for such factors, that two-tenths of a standard deviation shrinks even more. "The real gap is probably smaller than 100 and 97," Rind says. "It might be 98, or maybe it's

99." The studies analyzed by Rind and his colleagues show that some victims of sexual abuse don't even regard themselves, in retrospect, as victims. Among the male college students surveyed, for instance, Rind and his colleagues found that "37 percent viewed their C.S.A. experiences as positive at the time they occurred," while forty-two per cent viewed them as positive when reflecting back on them.

The Rind article was published in the summer of 1998, and almost immediately it was denounced by conservative groups and lambasted in the media. Laura Schlessinger--a popular radio talk-show host known as Dr. Laura--called it "junk science." In Washington, Representative Matt Salmon called it "the Emancipation Proclamation for pedophiles," while Representative Tom DeLay accused it of "normalizing pedophilia." They held a press conference at which they demanded that the American Psychological Association censure the paper. In July of 1999, a year after its publication, both the House and the Senate overwhelmingly passed resolutions condemning the analysis. Few articles in the history of academic psychology have created such a stir.

But why? It's not as if the authors said that C.S.A. was a good thing. They just suggested that it didn't cause as many problems as we'd thought--and the question of whether C.S.A. is morally wrong doesn't hinge on its long-term consequences. Nor did the study say that sexual abuse was harmless. On average, the researchers concluded, the long-term damage is small. But that average is made up of cases where the damage is hard to find (like C.S.A. involving adolescent boys) and cases where the damage is quite significant (like father-daughter incest). Rind was trying to help psychologists focus on what was truly harmful. And, when it came to the effects of things like physical abuse and neglect, he and his colleagues sounded the alarm. "What happens in physical abuse is that it doesn't happen once," Rind says. "It happens time and time again. And, when it comes to neglect, the research shows that is the most noxious factor of all--worse than physical abuse. Why? Because it's not practiced for one week. It's a persistent thing. It's a permanent feature of the parent-child relationship. These are the kinds of things that cause problems in adulthood."

All Rind and his colleagues were saying is that sexual abuse is often something that people eventually can get over, and one of the reasons that the Rind study was so unacceptable is that we no longer think that traumatic experiences are things we can get over. We believe that the child who is molested by an uncle or a priest, on two or three furtive occasions, has to be permanently scarred by the experience--just as the soldier who accidentally kills his best friend must do more than sit down on the beach and decide that sometimes things just "happen."

In a recent history of the Rind controversy, the psychologist Scott Lilienfeld pointed out that when we find out that something we thought was very dangerous actually isn't that dangerous after all we usually regard what we've learned as good news. To him, the controversy was a paradox, and he is quite right. This attachment we have to John Wade over Tom Rath is not merely a preference for one kind of war narrative over another. It is a shift in perception so profound that the United States Congress could be presented with evidence of the unexpected strength and resilience of the human spirit and reject it without a single dissenting vote.

3.

In "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit," Tom Rath works for Ralph Hopkins, who is the president of the United Broadcasting Company. Hopkins has decided that he wants to play a civic role in the issue of mental health, and Rath's job is to write his speeches and handle public relations connected to the project. "It all started when a group of doctors called on me a few months ago," Hopkins tells Rath, when he hires him for the job. "They apparently felt that there is too little public understanding of the whole question of mental illness, and that a campaign like the fight against cancer or polio is needed." Again and again, in the novel, the topic of mental health surfaces. Rath's father, we learn, suffered a nervous breakdown after serving in the trenches of the First World War, and died in what may well have been a suicide. His grandmother, whose death sets the book's plot in motion, wanders in and out of lucidity at the end of her life. Hopkins, in a hilarious scene, recalls his unsatisfactory experience with a psychiatrist. To Wilson's readers, this preoccupation would not have seemed out of place. In 1955, the population of New York State's twenty-seven psychiatric hospitals was nearly ninety-four thousand. (Today, largely because of anti-psychotic

drugs, it is less than six thousand.) It was impossible to drive any distance from Manhattan and not be confronted with ominous, hulking reminders of psychiatric distress: the enormous complex across the Triborough Bridge, on Wards Island; Sagamore and Pilgrim Hospitals, on Long Island; Creedmoor, in Queens. Mental health mattered to the reader of the nineteen-fifties, in a way that, say, AIDS mattered in the novels of the late nineteen-eighties.

But Wilson draws a very clear line between the struggles of the Raths and the plight of those suffering from actual mental illness. At one point, for example, Rath's wife, Betsy, wonders why nothing is fun anymore:

It probably would take a psychiatrist to answer that. Maybe Tom and I both ought to visit one, she thought. What's the matter? the psychiatrist would say, and I would reply, I don't know--nothing seems to be much fun any more. All of a sudden the music stopped, and it didn't start again. Is that strange, or does it happen to everyone about the time when youth starts to go?

The psychiatrist would have an explanation, Betsy thought, but I don't want to hear it. People rely too much on explanations these days, and not enough on courage and action. . . . Tom has a good job, and he'll get his enthusiasm back, be a success at it. Everything's going to be fine. It does no good to wallow in night thoughts. In God we trust, and that's that.

This is not denial, much as it may sound like it. Betsy Rath is not saying that her husband doesn't have problems. She's just saying that, in all likelihood, Tom will get over his problems. This is precisely the idea that lies at the heart of the Rind meta-analysis. Once you've separated out the small number of seriously damaged people--the victims of father-daughter incest, or of prolonged neglect and physical abuse--the balance of C.S.A. survivors are pretty much going to be fine. The same is true, it turns out, of other kinds of trauma. The Columbia University psychologist George Bonanno, for instance, followed a large number of men and women who had recently lost a spouse. "In the bereavement area, the assumption has been that

when people lose a loved one there is a kind of unitary process that everybody must go through," Bonanno says. "That process has been called grief work. The grief must be processed. It must be examined. It must be fully understood, then finished. It was the same kind of assumption that dominated the trauma world. The idea was that everybody exposed to these kinds of events will have to go through the same kind of process if they are to recover. And if you don't do this, if you have somehow inhibited or buried the experience, the assumption was that you would pay in the long run."

Instead, Bonanno found a wide range of responses. Some people went through a long and painful grieving process; others a period of debilitating depression. But by far the most common response was resilience: the majority of those who had just suffered from one of the most painful experiences of their lives never lapsed into serious depression, experienced a relatively brief period of grief symptoms, and soon returned to normal functioning. These people were not necessarily the hardest or the healthiest. They just managed, by one means or another, to muddle through.

"Most people just plain cope well," Bonanno says. "The vast majority of people get over

traumatic events, and get over them remarkably well. Only a small subset--five to fifteen per cent--struggle in a way that says they need help."

What these patterns of resilience suggest is that human beings are naturally endowed with a kind of psychological immune system, which keeps us in balance and overcomes wild swings to either end of the emotional spectrum. Most of us aren't resilient just in the wake of bad experiences, after all. We're also resilient in the wake of wonderful experiences; the joy of a really good meal, or winning a tennis match, or getting praised by a boss doesn't last that long, either. "One function of emotions is to signal to people quickly which things in their environments are dangerous and should be avoided and which are positive and should be approached," Timothy Wilson, a psychologist at the University of Virginia, has said. "People have very fast emotional reactions to events that serve as signals, informing them what to do. A problem with prolonged emotional reactions to past events is that it might be more difficult for these signals to get through. If people are still in a state of bliss over yesterday's success, today's dangers and

hazards might be more difficult to recognize." (Wilson, incidentally, is Sloan Wilson's nephew.)

Wilson and his longtime collaborator, Daniel T. Gilbert, argue that a distinctive feature of this resilience is that people don't realize that they possess it. People are bad at forecasting their emotions--at appreciating how well, under most circumstances, they will recover. Not long ago, for instance, Gilbert, Wilson, and two other researchers--Carey Morewedge and Jane Risen--asked passengers at a subway station in Cambridge, Massachusetts, how much regret they thought they would feel if they arrived on the platform just as a train was pulling away. Then they approached passengers who really had arrived just as their train was leaving, and asked them how they felt. They found that the predictions of how bad it would feel to have just barely missed a train were on average greater than reports of how it actually felt to watch the train pull away. We suffer from what Wilson and Gilbert call an impact bias: we always assume that our emotional states will last much longer than they do. We forget that other experiences will compete for our attention and emotions. We forget that our

psychological immune system will kick in and take away the sting of adversity. "When I talk about our research, I say to people, 'I'm not telling you that bad things don't hurt,'" Gilbert says. "Of course they do. It would be perverse to say that having a child or a spouse die is not a big deal. All I'm saying is that the reality doesn't meet the expectation."

This is the difference between our own era and the one of half a century ago--between "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit" and "In the Lake of the Woods." Sloan Wilson's book came from a time and a culture that had the confidence and wisdom to understand this truth. "I love you more than I can tell," Rath says to his wife at the end of the novel. It's an ending that no one would write today, but only because we have become blind to the fact that the past--in all but the worst of cases--sooner or later fades away. Betsy turns back to her husband:

"I want you to be able to talk to me about the war. It might help us to understand each other. Did you really kill seventeen men?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to talk about it now?"

"No. It's not that I want to and can't--it's just that I'd rather think about the future. About getting a new car and driving up to Vermont with you tomorrow."

"That will be fun. It's not an insane world. At least, our part of it doesn't have to be."

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