

Soul Repair©
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I grew up during the Vietnam War and found myself interested in how popular music dealt with the war. When I was younger it was “All We are Saying is Give Peace a Chance” and “War Huh! What is it Good for ... Absolutely Nothing.” Sometimes it was, “Where have all the Flowers Gone,” and it was also Bob Dylan’s “Masters of War.” Dylan’s song was an indictment of the Industrial American War machine. I understood that quite clearly, as clearly as black is different from white. However, Bruce Springsteen’s song, “Devils and Dust” is much more nuanced, written after the desert horrors of Abu Ghraib began to unfold. He is many things, but mostly he is the cheerleader for regular folks, the everyday guys who often feel stuck in situations that they cannot fully grasp and do not control. And without using the words “moral injury” his song describes being stuck, confused, scared, wrestling with what the experience of being in war means.

For those fighting, war offers an almost narcotic emotional intensity and tight camaraderie. Withdrawal from this experience is intense. Once removed from the war, as memory and reflection deepen, negative self-judgments can torment a soul for a lifetime. Moral injury in addition to destroying a person’s sense of meaning can sink a warrior into a state of silent solitary suffering where the bonds of intimacy and care seem impossible. Our warriors would not be suffering moral injury if they were not so deeply human.

Like the war in Vietnam, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan present terrible moral dilemmas for engagement because the lines between civilians and combatants are invisible and because the absence of a clear battle line makes every situation potentially lethal. Women, children and family pets can be dangerous or used as shields. These category confusions are also moral confusions, and they are aggravated by the reflexive shooting methods the military started to teach after World War II.

Many of us who have not been soldiers have certain images in our head about combat. The word “war” itself contributes to public misunderstandings of what our young veterans are facing. The Afghanistan and Iraq campaigns are not wars between two countries with armies. In fact, our Army calls these counterinsurgency operations. In such conflicts, the traditional boundaries between enemy combatants and civilians are almost completely blurred and there are no front lines or safe places in the rear. No civilian is guaranteed to be safe, but killing a civilian violates the code of conduct for war. Yet, it happens all the time. How do you go home after all of this?

In the article, *Engaging the Moral Injuries of War: A Call to Spiritual Leaders* (n.d), Gabrielle Lettini shares what the soldier Camilo Ernesto Mejio reported:

Nothing ever prepares you for going to Iraq and seeing the destruction of an entire nation. Nothing ever prepares you for... the unmeasured killing of civilians. Nothing prepares you for what that does to you as a human being...to kill an innocent person. Nothing is going to really prepare you for the level of destruction that you bring upon a nation and you bring upon yourself for being a part of it.

Lettinini also reported the words of Specialist John Middleton as:

A lot of things really make sense when you're doing them over there. When you come back, it's just like, "How did I do that?" It's just like a totally different world. Everything is kind of muted, and I'm never really happy. I don't really enjoy things. I just feel hopeless and listless. And I just feel like I don't fit in with other kids my age. It's just like... I don't know. It's just really hard to relate to anyone. I want, more than anybody else, to find a meaning to my experience over there and something to feel good about. But I just can't find it.

Those who survive and return home are expected to switch almost seamlessly from a combat zone to life back home; to shift from the urgencies and traumas of war to ordinary civilian life. They step onto a plane or ship transported from war, receive an exit interview, spend a few hours or days in transit, and if they are lucky, step into the waiting arms of their families. There is a boot camp to prepare for war, but there is no boot camp to reintegrate veterans to civilian life. They were taught reflexive fire shooting but not how to recover a shredded moral identity.

The journey home to peace is perilous after war. Moral injury is not Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Many books on veteran healing confuse and or conflate these as one in the same. It is possible to have moral injury without PTSD and PTSD without moral injury.

PTSD occurs in response to prolonged and or extreme trauma and is a reaction to danger. Moral injury is the result of reflection on memories of war or other extreme traumatic conditions. It comes from having transgressed one's basic moral identity and violated core moral ethics or having them violated by someone else.

Moral injury results when soldiers violate their core moral beliefs, and in evaluating their behavior negatively, they feel they no longer live in a reliable, meaningful world and can no longer be regarded as decent human beings. They may feel this even if what they did was warranted and unavoidable. Killing, torturing prisoners, abusing dead bodies, or failing to prevent such acts can elicit moral injury.

Most of this moral reckoning comes once the soldier has returned home.

Coming home brings no closure or relief. Instead, returning home can be the beginning of an ever deepening reckoning with what the soldier has done and who he or she has become.

Vets returning home have been described as coming into solitary confinement. They engage in a process of emotional and spiritual isolation as they grieve their losses and doubt the morality of what they've done. When they do come home they find themselves bereft of the intense camaraderie and noble meaning that supported them in combat. And if we look at ourselves honestly we see that they returned to a society full of lonely, purposeless individuals; a declining desperate middle class; weak communities; ineffective and unresponsive government and a therapy or healing driven approach to moral issues. Veterans are pressured both by themselves and society to "put the war behind them" and move on.

A vet named Mack writes:

When we feel that what we did was wrong or unforgivable and that our lives and meaning systems no longer makes sense, our reason for living is in tatters. This shattering of the soul challenges what holds life together, and the anguish of moral injury begins. Over there, things were different... Or maybe I was different. As much as I have come to hate the war, there at least I felt I belonged. I knew what was expected of me, and I had become ruthlessly proficient at fulfilling those expectations. Here, I am a misfit, an aberration, isolated and alone.

When our veterans do come home they wage another war within themselves. Their fears and doubts come face-to-face with their conscience. They are in a war to reclaim their humanity and spiritual freedom. Memories of combat, previously repressed, can flood to the surface.

Iraqi war veteran, Tyler Boudreau wrote:

They say war is hell, but I say it's the foyer to hell. I say coming home is hell, and hell ain't got no coordinates. You can't find it on the charts, because there are no charts. Hell is no place at all, so when you're there, you're nowhere - you're lost. The narrative, that's your chart, your own story. There are guys who come home from war and lived fifty years without a narrative, fifty years lost. They don't know their own story, never have, and never will. But they're moving amidst the text every day and every long night without even realizing it... They live inside the narrative like a cell, and their only escape is to understand its dimensions.

After we send men and women off to war, how do we bring them home to peace? The psychological and emotional effects of combat are often referred to as the hidden wounds of war. But given veteran rates of suicide, homelessness, unemployment, divorce, depression, poverty, and imprisonment, how can such wounds really be invisible or hard to detect?

Veteran suicides averaged one every 8 minutes, an unprecedented eighteen (18) a day or 6000 a year. Veterans are 20% of all US suicides, though veterans of all wars are only about 7% of the US population. Between 2005 and 2007 the national suicide rate among veterans under age 30 rose 26%. In Texas, home of largest military base in the world and the third highest veteran population, rates rose 40% between 2006 and 2009. These rates continue, despite required mental health screenings of those leaving the military, more research on PTSD, and better methods for treating it. Veterans are also disproportionately homeless, unemployed, poor, divorced, and imprisoned. We look at these statistics, and they sketch a view of even more damage and devastation on the veterans' families and friends, on their communities and on other veterans. They are suffering huge amounts of shame. They don't treat themselves well and isolate themselves. To make their pain hurt less they medicate themselves.

War has a whole mythology around it. It is a powerful mythology of bravery, sacrifice, service, brotherhood, being a part of something larger than yourself: a noble purpose which gives your life incredible structure and meaning.

Rarely if ever, in ordinary life are people required to focus, with such purity, everything in them - mind, emotions, physical strength, perception, and skill - on the present moment with so many others. This experience is self transcending and completely absorbing. It is akin to euphoria and like euphoria is addicting. But there is no place in this feeling for emotional vulnerability or feelings of equanimity that are crucial for soul repair. Battle camaraderie cannot hold the complexities of a whole person. The transition from war camaraderie to life-sustaining, intimate relationships requires withdraw from an addiction to the drama of combat and a transition to ordinary life: doing daily chores, going to work every day, and forming emotionally open, complicated relationships with family and friends. The journey back is a jagged, arduous route on treacherous trails.

Perhaps. in addition to having a department of war, we should have a department of peace. Perhaps, in addition to boot camp training to be warriors, we need boot camps to train returning vets to be civilians again. Societies have many strategies for hiding the wounds of war, and the US has engaged in all of them:

- First there is the suppression of facts. For a while photographers were forbidden to take pictures of the caskets of returning dead. The press is managed now and often reports only the news they are fed.
- Then there is avoidance. We have avoided taking proper care of our vets and until recently held no one accountable for their care in the Veteran's Administration.
- Then there is amnesia. Even though the 1960's were full of an illegal, immoral war with devastating consequences for those who served, we seemed to forget the costs of war and most of Congress voted to go to war.
- Finally, there is nostalgia. Most vets find parades and a clueless rote "thank you for your service" or "U.S.A ... U.S.A ...rah rah rah" to be extremely

unhelpful on their journey to soul repair. Don't think that a "thank you for your service" and a parade is going to make things better. Being treated like a hero when you are feeling moral injury can actually make it worse.

As a community, when we take responsibility for helping those with moral injury, we must do so with integrity, rather than by scapegoating individuals or pressuring them to deny what they know to be true. Both an insistence on positive thinking, and the punishing of individuals who speak up, fail to address the morally compromising nature of war. Please join me in making more space for vets as they embark on a journey toward wholeness. Please join me in not pressuring them to move on and in understanding what a role shame is playing in their struggles.

Veterans need our patience and understanding. Their journey to reweave themselves back into civilian life is, as we have seen, challenging. As Unitarian Universalists we believe that all of us can be transformed and that healing and soul repair are available to all and that all are worthy.

We also believe that the seeds of wholeness are inside of each of us. Over the last few weeks as I was preparing myself for Veteran's Day, I was finally able to watch the entire Ken Burns and Lynn Novick documentary on the war in Vietnam. It was so hard! In fact, I have not cried so long and so hard over several days since my brother died. I cried so much that, just like that week back in February of 2013, I got a severe eye infection. If you haven't seen the entire documentary, I highly recommend it.

I know that we as a country cannot completely mend the many fabrics of life that we tore and broke while we were waging war in Vietnam. That being said, I was incredibly moved by the leadership that the veterans of that war exhibited with their work to rebuild the schools and hospitals they bombed and to continue to clear the land of mines. Our vets met and joined the vets of Vietnam for years before either of the governments got on board.

This is just one large story about the seeds of wholeness being accessed by people that have experienced major trauma and moral injury. This is part of their journey towards wholeness. We are a creative people. My prayer is that we continue to find ways to let these seeds of wholeness grown and flourish as we continue to assist our vets. It can be done. Despite the horror, it is within our grasp. Blessed Be. Amen.

References

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